



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 31 Eanáir 2023

Tuesday, 31 January 2023

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: For more than 30 years, the State and successive governments have ripped off hundreds and thousands of elderly citizens and their families by unlawfully charging them for nursing home care. Despite consistent, repeated legal advice that those charges were illegal, the Government continued to force vulnerable people to pay up. This created real financial hardship and pushed many into poverty as they struggled to afford the charges.

At the weekend, we discovered in the *Mail on Sunday* that successive governments to this very day operate a secret, calculated legal strategy to stop those who are illegally charged from getting their money back. That was last night confirmed by a Government spokesperson. Instead of the State and the Government owning up to this horrendous treatment of elderly citizens, successive governments have pursued a heartless legal and political strategy, one designed by governments to draw out cases they knew they could not win, to exhaust people's ability to fund their legal challenges and then to settle for significantly reduced awards, all the while keeping things hush-hush. Governments did this knowing it would hit the least well-off families the hardest. We are talking about people forced to work beyond retirement to pay for their parents' nursing home fees. We are talking about pensioners left with a weekly pittance on which to live after paying the charges for loved ones' care. We are talking about families fearing they would go without food, clothes and the basic necessities after forking out these fees. Life savings and pensions have been wiped out, homes sold and elderly people pushed to the breadline, all in a desperate scramble to pay charges that were illegal and the Government knew to be illegal. Then there is the biggest scandal of all - a carefully designed, reviewed plan to prevent these people from getting their money back. That is the reality of this scandal, yet government after government persisted.

The Taoiseach has claimed this is complex. There is nothing complex about the Government ripping off elderly people. There is nothing complex about devising a legal and political strategy to cover your tracks. The truth is that this heartless strategy has been agreed and re-

newed by every Government and Minister for Health, including the Taoiseach, up to the present day.

Yesterday, the Taoiseach went on the radio. He claimed he was never party to devising or agreeing this legal strategy and tried to distance himself from it, but that is not true. A memo from 5 May 2016, also published, states clearly that the strategy was agreed and overseen by the Minister, which was the current Taoiseach. Is that not the case? Not alone did he know about it, but his colleagues, the Minister, Deputy Harris, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the now Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin, knew about it. Let us not play games. Dúirt an Taoiseach nár aontaigh sé leis an straitéis seo. É sin ráite, is léir gur lean gach Aire Sláinte, le blianta beaga anuas, an Teachta Varadkar san áireamh, leis an straitéis seo chun bac a chur ar na daoine sin a gcuid airgid a fháil ar ais.

Does the Taoiseach still claim he knew nothing of this strategy? Does he still claim that colleagues in government knew nothing of it? It is clear to me that all documentation and correspondence relating to this secret legal strategy must now be published. Will the Taoiseach commit to that?

The Taoiseach: This is an historic issue that dates back to the 1970s. I do not know the full facts of it and I doubt that anyone else does. The Minister for Health has sought advice from the Attorney General and a detailed written briefing from his officials. The Attorney General is also preparing a report for Cabinet for next Tuesday, which we will publish thereafter. Until such a time as we receive those detailed written briefings, there is a limited amount we can say on the matter because we need to establish the facts, although the Deputy seems to know them all already. Once the facts have been established this will be subject to statements in the House and it would also be appropriate for Department of Health officials to make a presentation to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health. It has been confirmed that the policy and legal approach predated July 2011 and has been followed since then. Successive Attorneys General and Ministers in multiple Governments, and senior officials in the Department of Health, would have considered the matter and it would appear that they advised in a consistent manner on the issue.

This matter has been grossly misrepresented, including by the Deputy just now in a very irresponsible way. The Deputy's claim that people in private nursing homes were illegally charged is not correct and her claim that this was confirmed by a Government spokesperson last night was just made up. The strategy was to defend the cases relating to private nursing homes on several grounds, in particular that medical card holders did not have an entitlement to free private nursing home care. It was never the policy of the Government nor the intention of the Oireachtas to create such an entitlement. Even today people with medical cards, for one reason or another, either choose or are forced to avail of private healthcare and social care; they do not get a refund, not even now. A limited number of individual cases were settled over the course of ten years, where there were complicating factors. No case ever proceeded to a hearing and if it had, the State would have defended its position and had bona fide defences prepared.

In the case of public nursing home charges, a scheme was put in place that was widely publicised and €485 million was paid to former residents and their families. This sum was considerably less than the estimate of €5 billion put on the potential liability in 2011 by the Department of Health. It was made clear at the time that this would not extend to people who were in private nursing homes. I want to reassure the House that this is not a current issue that impacts any current nursing home residents or any residents in recent years. Since 2009 the nursing home support scheme, the fair deal, has provided a legal basis for individuals to make contributions

towards their public or private nursing home costs.

On my role, in 2011 I was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. I was Minister for Health from the summer of 2014 to the summer of 2016, which was six to eight years ago. I must have been briefed on it. The Ministers who went before and after me were briefed on it so I must have been as well but I cannot tell the Deputy when, by whom, in what depth or detail or whether it was written or verbal. Until I have access to documents from that period I cannot answer that question definitively and I do not have any access to documents from that period, but I have sought them. What I can say is that the policy and strategy was devised and agreed prior to me becoming Minister for Health. I do not know if I was specifically asked to sign off on it being continued but if I had been asked I would have. This was a sound policy approach and a legitimate legal strategy by the Government at the time, by previous Governments, and by Governments since. All Ministers, from 2005 onwards, at all times acted in good faith, in the public interest, in accordance with official advice and in accordance with legal advice from the Attorney General and that is exactly how they should act.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In fact the Taoiseach acted in bad faith, as did his colleagues, his predecessors and, it seems, his successors. The Taoiseach has confirmed to the House that he was wrong yesterday; that he knew about this strategy and that he had been briefed. Can he confirm that other members of the Government - the Ministers, Deputies Simon Harris and Helen McEntee, and the Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin - were similarly aware of this strategy and were briefed?

Will the Taoiseach also respond to my other question on the publication of all of the documentation surrounding these issues? These documents need to be published as a matter of urgency and publicly scrutinised.

On the issue of who was briefed, were the Ministers, Deputies Harris and McEntee and the Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin, briefed? Was anybody else briefed? Who did the initial memorandum go to in 2011? The Taoiseach stated yesterday that he believed it was to four people. Can he identify who they were and can he confirm that all documentation will, in fact, be published?

The Taoiseach: I cannot confirm who was or was not briefed over that period of time. I am sure individuals will do that as they can, based on their recollections.

In relation to documents, we are assembling those documents now in the Attorney General's office and the Department of Health. I have not seen them. I have seen one or two but certainly not all of them. When we have assembled them all we will put any that we can into the public domain. That will be the right thing to do. We will not do it in a drip-drip fashion, which is what is happening in the newspapers at the moment. In my view, that is creating a false impression.

The allegation here is very clear. It is that four or five Governments, four or five Attorneys General, any number of Ministers and former Ministers, some of whom are now in the Government and some in the Opposition, and dozens of officials all conspired to deny people refunds they were entitled to. That is as far-fetched as it sounds. It is not what happened.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome the fact that the Taoiseach has indicated that the report to Cabinet next week will be published - that is a good thing - and also that he has agreed with my proposal that the Joint Committee on Health be fully briefed by the Secretary General. It

would also be helpful if there were people there from the legal section in the Department.

In 2005, when the Travers report into illegal charging for nursing home care was published, it blamed “systematic maladministration” in the Department of Health. The report detailed how an illegal charging regime had persisted for nearly three decades and stated that there were shortcomings at political level in “not probing and questioning” this charging regime. At the time, the current Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin, was Minister for Health and Children. He maintained he had never been briefed on the issue, a contention that was hotly disputed by the then Secretary General, Mr. Michael Kelly.

Fast forward 18 years and it appears we are again being told that Ministers failed to question or probe this issue. We are told a briefing note in 2016 stated, “it has been agreed by the Minister and the AGO [Attorney General’s office] that settlements are made within the range of 40% to 60% of the capital value of the claim and on the best terms possible.” The Taoiseach was the Minister who was briefed at the time that note was prepared. Yesterday, on “The Pat Kenny Show”, the Taoiseach was quite categorical, stating he was never party to devising or agreeing a legal strategy in relation to nursing home charges. That was not the claim. The claim was that the Taoiseach went along with it. I take it from what he is saying today that he accepts that he went along with this strategy.

On Newstalk yesterday, the Taoiseach also said the State has always disputed any liability when people were placed in private nursing homes. This may have been the public position but was that really the case behind the scenes? The legal strategy suggests it was not that clear-cut. It stated that cases should be settled as soon as discovery was sought. In 2017, we are told, a briefing document that was provided to then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, and then Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for older people, Deputy McEntee, stated: “Discovery would carry very significant risks and should therefore be avoided.” The implication of that seems clear. There were clearly documents within the Department that could expose the State to liability if they were made public.

The Government has now conceded that the legal strategy revealed by the *Mail on Sunday* does, in fact, exist but it said it predates 2011. That was the statement from the Government last night. Can the Taoiseach tell us when this strategy was first devised? Does he accept he was made aware of it? When was he made aware of it? A more significant issue for all of the Ministers during that period is whether the Taoiseach or any of those Ministers ever questioned this legal strategy to determine if it was fair and if people were unfairly penalised for being denied access to nursing home care.

The Taoiseach: As I mentioned, the Attorney General has been asked to prepare a report on the matter for Cabinet next week and that report will be published. There will also be statements in the Dáil next week. As I think the Deputy acknowledged on the radio this morning, it is reasonable that Ministers should have a bit of time to put all of the documents together because this goes back a long way. There have been no new cases in over ten years, although many have been settled more recently. As the Deputy suggested earlier, this is something I am sure the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health will want to look into.

As I mentioned in terms of my own role, I was Minister for Health from 2014 to 2016, which is six to eight years ago. I must have been briefed on the matter. Ministers before and after me were briefed, as were the junior Ministers, but I cannot tell the Deputy when or by whom, in what depth or in what detail or whether it was written or verbal. Hopefully, I will be

able to find that out when documents are gone through in the Department of Health.

The policy and strategy were derived and agreed prior to me becoming Minister for Health. I do not specifically know if I was asked to sign off on continuing them but, as I said, if I was asked, I would have done so because this is a sound policy approach and a legitimate legal strategy by government. I would ask what the alternative was to this policy approach and legal strategy. The alternative would have been to open up the scheme to people who had attended private nursing homes, even though we did not believe they had a legal entitlement to any refunds. That would not have been right. Governments have a duty to protect the taxpayer. They also have a duty to protect the health budget and make sure it is spent on healthcare and not on refunds. We also have a duty to be fair to people and to be just, and I acknowledge that. It is very clear, however, that the State had strong defences in regard to this and that people who had medical cards, just as now, are not entitled to refunds for private care.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Is the issue not that successive governments penalised medical card holders who needed nursing home care? That was the question I asked earlier. Throughout that entire period of 30 years, did no Minister ever say, “Hang on, why are we not providing medical card patients with proper care when they need it?”. Does the Taoiseach accept that fundamental to this entire issue is the fact that there is no legal entitlement to public healthcare? We talk about, and have always talked about, eligibility for care even though in many cases that care is not provided. Is it not the fundamental issue that there is no legal entitlement to public healthcare in this country, irrespective of a person’s circumstances? There is no legal entitlement in the way in which there is a legal entitlement to social welfare. Is it not time we addressed that issue?

The Taoiseach: That is a fair point and what the Deputy says is true. There is no universal legal entitlement to public healthcare or social care in Ireland and there was not at the time-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There still is not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There was no legal entitlement to charge.

The Taoiseach: There was no legal entitlement there and people who claim there was are incorrect. Things were changed in 2009, long before I was a Minister - I was in opposition, in fact - when the fair deal scheme was brought in. Certainly by the time the Government was formed in 2011 and by the time the fair deal scheme was set up in 2009, there was a scheme in place to provide nursing home care on a universal basis to people. There was also a compensation scheme that was established by the previous Government and its Minister for Health, Mary Harney. That compensation scheme was put in place for people who attended public nursing homes. This matter relates to people who attended private nursing homes and the view of the State was that their medical card did not give them an entitlement to refunds for private care, just as it does not do so now. Even if it had, it would not have been a case of just going to the nursing home of their choice and then asking the Government to pick up the bill. There would have had to have been some scheme in place. That is the defence the State had.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It was because of a failure to provide public nursing home care.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I want to raise a very important matter that was brought to my attention again at my clinic in Scott’s Hotel on Saturday by a deputation of parents of children with special needs, our special children who are now young adults. The question is about the lack of adult respite services in County Kerry. How is it acceptable that there is only one adult

respite house in Kerry to service the whole of Kerry and part of Cork? Parents in certain places are having to travel a round trip of over two hours to drop off their sons and daughters and collect them in the evening before dropping them to their day services. Last year, parents were told there were more than 80 people waiting on a list to get into respite houses. Members of the group I met on Saturday have been waiting more than two years without any services. This is totally unacceptable. Most of these young adults availed of children's respite service for years but as they turn 18 and 19 years of age, there is nothing for them at the most vulnerable time in their lives when they are leaving school and moving into adult day care services. They are growing up and becoming young adults. It is causing a lot of distress to these parents.

I want to explain this to the Taoiseach in a very human way. When I was with this group, this deputation, on Saturday, and I know every Member of the House will understand what I mean, I could see a tiredness in their eyes and a weariness in them. All they are looking for is respite. They are more than willing to and capable of keeping their special child at home in their own environment. They want to do that and they will do that in the best way. As long as they are breathing, they will do it but what they want is respite. I am very grateful for the respite services that we got in north Kerry and for the great people on the ground locally. I recognise and thank every political contribution that was made in this regard, but we should all be pulling together. Killarney and its environs comprise a very big area. We have very special children there - I say children but I should say young adults, of course - who are turning 18 and 19 years of age. We want to be able to offer their families the respite they need. I am making this heartfelt plea to the Taoiseach and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who I know met with representatives of this group in the past. I very much recognise and appreciate her work in this field but I want to see delivery of this service in the Killarney area for these very nice families. All they want is a thing called fair play.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I acknowledge how essential respite is for people with disabilities and their families. It gives people the break they need and, in many cases, keeps people going. They would not be able to keep going if it were not for respite and I know how important that is to people. The need for increased respite, including in south Kerry and west Cork, is acknowledged by the Government. The need for additional respite across the country is reflected in the HSE service plans for 2021 and 2022 and will be in the new service plan for 2023.

The last few years have seen significantly increased funding for additional respite. This has resulted in the expansion of both centre-based and alternative respite. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will meet with community healthcare organisation, CHO, 4 on 9 February. Respite will be on the agenda, in particular the potential for facilities in south Kerry, which I know the Deputy will welcome.

Last year, an additional €9 million was provided for ten respite services for children and adults, as well as for alternative models of respite, including three additional specialist-based services, one for Prader-Willi syndrome and two to provide high-support respite for children and young adults with complex support needs. Funding for a further seven respite centres will provide approximately 10,000 more nights to 245 children and adults in a full year.

As for the plan for 2023, which the Minister of State is working on, she has secured additional funding in the budget that will provide for a range of additional services and individual packages nationally. The details are yet to be worked out; they will be in the service plan for 2023. As I said, the Minister of State will meet with the Deputy's local CHO on 9 February to

bring things forward.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I warmly thank the Taoiseach for his reply. If the Minister of State and the Government deliver respite services for the people of the Killarney electoral area and all that side of the country, I will be the first person to thank them most sincerely for it. I will use the short amount of time I have left to say a word about St. Mary of the Angels, which provides an excellent service at St. Francis Special School in Beaufort. The staff provide a great service to our special young people with intellectual or physical disabilities. I remind the Taoiseach that a political decision was taken in 2011 regarding congregated settings. I do not want to fight about this but I will remind what the Taoiseach of what this facility is. It is a wonderful facility. It was a farm donated by the Doyle family to be used as a centre for young people with special needs. There is a church, a heated pool and some lovely walks there. It is a safe environment that has everything going for it. Rather than closing it by stealth, which is what is happening because congregated settings are no longer wanted, I plead with the Taoiseach to look at reviewing the policy along with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and other Ministers. They need to consider whether we got it wrong in 2011 and should look at allowing a place like that to flourish and be there for future families. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his indulgence.

The Taoiseach: I think decongregation is the right approach. If anything, it has been happening too slowly. When congregated settings or institutions in my constituency have closed, I have seen how it can cause disruption and a lot of difficulty and nervousness among residents and families initially. When you meet them a year or two later, after they have moved into a house in a housing estate where they are integrated with the neighbourhood around them, it is amazing to see how people who were afraid about what might happen to them if they were decongregated really come on and flourish when they are in a house in the community and have a chance to interact with the neighbourhood. However, I acknowledge that one size does not always fit all. Sometimes there are centres that work very well where people are happy. We need to be open to that possibility.

Deputy Joan Collins: I share the concerns and questions voiced by Deputies McDonald and Shortall about public nursing homes but I want to raise the issue of the cost of living. A recently published Red C survey outlined some of the struggles people still face with the cost-of-living crisis. It found that 30% of people struggle to make ends meet, with young people and elderly people being hit the worst. Only 9% of people have not had to make any changes to their spending while 70% of people have had to reduce spending in the face of the cost-of-living crisis. This is the highest figure out of any of the 36 countries involved in the study. Bin charges are going up, rents are still skyrocketing, the price of groceries has gone up by 15% across the board and will not come back down, and standards of living in the country have dropped in three of the past four quarters. Women's Aid has said it has seen an increase in calls about domestic abuse, particularly relating to economic abuse. Homelessness is at an all-time high despite the eviction ban. I could not believe my ears when I heard the Minister say yesterday that homelessness was levelling off. This is cold comfort to the 11,632 people in emergency accommodation or the 90 asylum seekers sent out onto the streets last week. Inflation is still at a high of 9% while interest rates on tracker mortgages have rocketed. My recent gas bill was €780 when it was €347 this time last year with the same amount of units used. How are people on low wages supposed to pay these bills?

The economy may have grown by 12.2% but people are not feeling it. There is no reflection of growth in people's pay packets. Our economy is in no way set up to reflect this growth

in ordinary people's lives. We hear this every day in my constituency office. Those who have had it hard for a long time are being hit the worst. While the supports put in place by this Government have helped in some way, they are not targeted enough. Age Action has said time and again that social welfare payments needed to be increased by €20 in the last budget, which did not happen. The increase was €12, which was in effect a cut in people's pay packets. Age Action also called for supports to be more targeted.

The stress and hardship caused by the cost-of-living crisis are very real for many people. Many people must worry every day about how they will put food on the table, keep the lights on and keep a roof over their families' heads. The Taoiseach said there will not be a cliff edge when the cost-of-living supports end. People still need help. They are worried about losing the little help they have had and losing their homes when the eviction ban ends in April. How will the Taoiseach guarantee that there is no cliff-edge when so many people are already on one?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is fair to say that the rising cost of living is biting hard. It is affecting many people and families who are struggling to make ends meet, notwithstanding the help that has come from the Government in recent months. Inflation is slowing down and it is good to see that prices are not rising as fast as they were a few months ago, but they are still rising. That means that people are continuing to get worse off if their incomes do not rise as fast as prices are rising. We acknowledge that. It is important to say that a number of actions were taken in the past few weeks to bring down the cost of living for people which are permanent. They include the reduction in the cost of child-care, the rent credit which people can now claim back in rent payments, of €500 or €1,000 for a couple, the increase in the pension of €12 a week and the increase of €12 a week in all weekly welfare payments. Those are all permanent changes. Tens of thousands more pensioners now qualify for the fuel allowance. Income taxes are going down, which people will see in their payslips this month. There has been an increase in the national minimum wage. Most people on low pay have seen a knock-on increase, which has been broadly in line with inflation. As well as that, another energy credit of €200 per household is due in March. Many things are being done by the Government to help people with the cost of living.

As the Tánaiste and I have said, there will not be a cliff edge at the end of February. A number of measures that were due to end at the end of February are now under review. We acknowledge that we will need to do something to help people with the rising cost of living throughout the spring. We have not made any firm decisions on that. The key Ministers involved will sit down next week to look at options with a view to making an announcement by the middle of the month so that people have certainty going into March.

Deputy Joan Collins: The Taoiseach says that inflation is slowing down. It is still at a high of 8.9% or 9%, depending on who one gets figures from. People are still facing huge costs in their daily lives. The end of February is only four weeks away. The review will be in two weeks. The Government will have to come out of the box very quickly to explain what supports it will give to people. Will there be another cost-of-living double payment to assist people? A gentleman came into my office the other day who is 69 years of age. He had to have the heating on over Christmas and through the winter because his wife has a medical issue. He is facing a huge gas bill, nearly 60% higher than last year. What is that man going to do? He was nearly in tears with relation to how he is going to deal with the debt. Low-paid workers are going to feel that pressure too. Will the Taoiseach look at a mini-budget and increase social welfare payments by another €8 across the board, as Age Action Ireland has called for, and for supports to be more targeted for people who need them? I hope that what comes out in two weeks will be

effective in addressing people's cost of living. Some 30% of people are still struggling to make ends meet. They are the people who should get supports.

The Taoiseach: We need to consider a number of options. It probably would not be useful for me to speculate on the options now because it might just raise expectations. We will discuss it next week. I agree that the measures need to be targeted. It might be the case that there will still be some universal measures but, generally speaking, they need to be targeted at those who need them the most, those who are struggling the most and those on fixed incomes. I agree with the Deputy on that point. Let us not forget that it is because of the strength of our economy and because the public finances are in a good position that we are able to intervene again to help people with the rising cost of living. In other countries where different economic policies have been pursued, Governments are not able to do that. They have gone back to austerity and people are on strike in many cases. In my view, it is a simple fact that, because we pursued the economic policies that we did and looked after public finances as we have, we were able to help people in the budget that has just gone by and will be able to help people again in the spring.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):
I move:

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Protocol and arrangements for President Metsola's address to a Joint Sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas (*without debate*)
- Statements post European Council meeting of 15-16 December 2022 pursuant to Standing Order 124 (*not to exceed 130 mins, including 20 mins Q&A*)

Private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Presentation and Circulation of Further Revised Estimate [Vote 11] (*without debate*)
- Motion *re* Committee consideration of Estimates for Public Services 2023 (*without debate*)
- Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill 2022 (Second Stage) (*if not previously concluded, to be interrupted either at 4 p.m. or 1 hr and 9 mins after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later*)
- Oil Emergency Contingency and Transfer of Renewable Transport Fuels Functions Bill 2023 (Report and Final Stages) (*to be taken no earlier than 4 p.m.*)
- Central Bank (Individual Accountability Framework) Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages)

31 January 2023

- Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages) (*if not previously concluded, to adjourn 4 hours and 30 mins after the commencement of the Oil Emergency Contingency and Transfer of Renewable Transport Fuels Functions Bill 2023*)

Private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Local Ringfencing of Council Development Levies, selected by the Independent Group.

On the resumption of the Dáil on Thursday following the joint sitting for the purposes of an address by H.E. Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, the business shall be:

- Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill 2022 (Second Stage, resumed if not previously concluded) (*if not previously concluded, to stand adjourned at 5.30 p.m.*)

Thursday evening business shall be the Motion *re* Report entitled "*Report on the Summer Programme 2023*" by the Joint Committee on Autism.

Announcement of proposed arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that private members' business may be taken earlier than 6.12 p.m. and shall, in any event, be taken on the conclusion of Government business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and topical issues, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Motion *re* Protocol and arrangements for President Metsola's address to a Joint Sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas shall be taken without debate; and

3. the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the Statements post European Council meeting of 15-16 December 2022 pursuant to Standing Order 124:

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

(ii) following the questions and answers, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iii) members may share time.

In relation to Wednesday's business:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that the weekly division time shall be taken on either the conclusion or adjournment of proceedings on the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme Bill 2022, with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Motion *re* Presentation and Circulation of Further Revised Estimate [Vote 11] shall be taken without debate;

3. the Motion *re* Committee consideration of Estimates for Public Services 2023 shall be taken without debate;

4. the proceedings on Second Stage of the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill 2022, shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 4 p.m. or 1 hour and 9 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later, and the Bill shall not be resumed on Wednesday;

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Oil Emergency Contingency and Transfer of Renewable Transport Fuels Functions Bill 2023 shall be taken no earlier than 4 p.m.; and

6. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned 4 hours and 30 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the Oil Emergency Contingency and Transfer of Renewable Transport Fuels Functions Bill 2023.

In relation to Thursday's business:

1. subject to any further Resolution of the Dáil in relation to a joint sitting, the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(i) there shall be no SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1);

(ii) the proceedings on Government business shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned at 5.30 p.m.;

(iii) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall be taken either at 5.30 p.m. or on the conclusion of Government business, whichever is the earlier;

(iv) the Motion *re* Report entitled "*Report on Summer Programme 2023*" shall be taken on the conclusion of topical issues and shall, notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 10th September, 2020, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 120 minutes; and

(v) the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of the Motion *re* Report entitled "*Report on Summer Programme 2023*" until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 8th February, 2023; and

2. the speaking arrangements as provided for in Standing Order 102 shall apply to the proceedings on the Motion *re* Report entitled '*Report on the Summer Programme 2023*' and Senator Micheál Carrigy may attend and be heard during the proceedings.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: In recent days, more and more information has come into the public domain around the issue of nursing home charges. Public concern is growing. It is essential that the Minister for Health comes into the Dáil this week to make a statement

and take questions and answers. It is essential that it happens this week and we propose that.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: The Business Committee agreed this yesterday.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Business Committee met yesterday and discussed this matter.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There has been more information this morning. This issue is growing.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is nearly three weeks since the former Minister of State, Deputy English, resigned but no statement has been made in this House about the reasons for that. On two occasions, I have raised with the Taoiseach what further action he intends to take. A fortnight ago, he responded to me that party matters are separate and that Fine Gael has a party disciplinary process. Last week, he said it was a matter for Meath County Council and not the Government. Meanwhile, thousands of people across the country who gave accurate information on planning applications and were refused permission to build homes will be rightly asking what is going to happen next and asking us questions about what is to happen. Will the former Minister of State, Deputy English, be making a statement to the House? What action does the Taoiseach propose to take on this? I have raised this on two occasions and sought a response from the Taoiseach. I am raising it one final time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yesterday, the *Irish Examiner* reported that there has been a massive increase in excess deaths in the last number of weeks. It reported that in an eight-week period up to 25 January, there were 3,000 excess deaths compared with 2019. EUROSTAT, the CSO, coroners, mortuaries, undertakers and parish priests all report this massive increase in excess deaths. We have been calling for an investigation to find out what is happening. Nothing is forthcoming from the Government. We need to have a debate. These figures are incredible and they need to be analysed quickly to see what is behind them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: May I remind the Taoiseach that at the time he was signing off on secret payouts to people who had been forced to pay nursing home fees that they should not have had to pay, in order to contain potential cases being taken by other people who were entitled to refunds, ordinary people in this country were being absolutely crucified by the Government of which he was a part to pay off bondholders? The Taoiseach says he does not remember who briefed him or what the briefing was. I put it to the Taoiseach that owes it to the people of this country to find out what he knew, and when he knew it, when he was signing off. The same information is also required in respect of other Ministers. Statements are required from the Taoiseach and anyone else who was involved in signing off these payments, which were made on a condition of secrecy so that people entitled to other repayments would not be aware of them. Will the Taoiseach and the other Ministers involved in this commit to come in and clarify what they knew and when they knew it?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: My colleagues in the Rural Independent Group and I have been asking for a reasonable, calm and sincere debate about inward migration here, the issues around it and the strife it is causing in communities. I met some people from Lismore, which is a lovely heritage town in County Waterford, outside this House today. They are self-employed and retired people. They are good people. They already have 35 and they have no problem with them. They do not mind 120 more coming if they go into the old hospital that has closed down or some other buildings, but not the hotel. They were up here with Fáilte Ireland at the weekend to promote the town for tourism. Now it is being proposed to take over a hotel in the

town that has been renovated for tourism. There is a lack of information for people. It is the same in Cahir. The old Bank of Ireland, which was recently closed, and the adjoining buildings are meant to be a housing centre. There are rumours. We want to have a debate in the Chamber. The whole country is talking about it. We seem to be an echo chamber here where we cannot discuss it. We need a reasonable debate here. We need a better flow of information to ourselves and the public from the Ministers in charge of this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We need to try to work together. Ní neart go cur le chéile.

The Taoiseach: The Business Committee, I think quite sensibly, has agreed that we will have statements next week on the first matter to be raised, which goes back to the 1970s. I think it is important that people should know the facts before they make statements. Nobody wants to come in here and make a statement and then find out that something they have said is incorrect. That can happen-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----with regard to things that happened six, eight or ten years ago. Some of the people who are laughing at me are people who had to change their own declarations on multiple occasions. It is a little much. Ministers want some time to look at documents and check the records before making statements. I am here twice a week and am happy to answer any questions the Deputy wants to put to me. I think the Joint Committee on Health is going to want to look into this too. If the Deputy's inference is that I signed off on any individual payments or was involved in any individual cases, that is not the case. No Minister would have been. That is simply not true.

Regarding Deputy English-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You authorised the policy.

The Taoiseach: Deputy English has resigned as Minister of State. Anything to do with planning or enforcement law, as I have said, is a matter for Meath County Council.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They will not answer.

The Taoiseach: The internal procedures we have in our party are confidential and are internal matters, just as the Deputy's are. I know there are disciplinary matters under way in the Labour Party at the moment. I would not ask her questions about those in the Dáil.

With regard to Deputy Tóibín's question on excess deaths, I am aware that in Ireland and in a lot of countries there has been a significant increase in excess deaths this winter, even more so than was the case during the pandemic, or at least during the lockdowns. That is a matter of concern. I am going to seek the advice and opinion of the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, on it. It probably relates to the fact that RSV, influenza and Covid are all circulating at the moment, against the backdrop of reduced immunity because people were socially distancing during the lockdowns, and also because there was a lot of unmet health need during the lockdowns, which is now coming back at us but that is just my impression. I agree that it needs some further consideration and I will ask the CMO for her view on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The immigration issue, Taoiseach.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Do I even get an answer?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is there is to be a debate next week.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The week after next. We discussed that at the Business Committee.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 73; Níl, 56; Staon, 2.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	

<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Hildegarde Naughton and Cormac Devlin; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac

Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sure people will have heard very clearly that not alone had the Taoiseach been briefed on and overseen the legal strategy to frustrate those who had been illegally charged in getting their money back but that, in fact, he supports that strategy, and I assume that stands for his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris. It needs to be said that neither the Ombudsman or the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission shared the Taoiseach's confidence in the State's legal position. As a matter of fact, the strategy was to settle before discovery because the State was very concerned it was on the wrong side of the law and, indeed, the State never found what it would term a "suitable case" to go to trial on. For all the Taoiseach's bombast here this afternoon, the State and Governments of which he was a member, indeed he was a serving Minister for Health, never had the confidence to go to trial.

3 o'clock

In 2017, there were still 220 claims in the system. Could the Taoiseach tell the House how many claims there are, as of today?

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald keeps using the term "illegal charges". I will keep saying to her that we do not accept that. The Health Act 1970 does not provide free private nursing home care for people with medical cards. That is the view of the Government. We have bona fide defences in that regard. They were prepared by the Attorney General down the years.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is contested.

The Taoiseach: Anything can be contested, but the Deputy keeps making a bogus assertion which is unproven, that these charges were illegal. She can make it all she likes, but it is not the case. It is certainly unproven. All cases were not settled. In some cases, claims were settled without any payment. I do not have the up-to-date numbers, but I will ask the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to provide them for the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I asked how many cases there are, as of today, that are still live.

The Taoiseach: I do not know, but I will ask the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to provide them for the Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I wish to raise the rights of the Palestinian people, in particular their plight, given the recent formation of a new far-right government in Israel and the actions it has taken to date, many of which expressly break international law. We are seeing appalling reports about the killing of civilians, the incarceration of children, the destruction of homes, the expansion of illegal settlements and the segregation of society. All of these developments contravene the rights of the Palestinian people.

I welcome the statement from the Tánaiste last week. While in Brussels for a meeting with

EU foreign ministers, he called on Israeli authorities to pay compensation for the destruction of EU-funded buildings in occupied Palestine. That is a very important call. It is more than 18 months since the Dáil voted to condemn the de facto annexation of Palestinian land. In light of that vote, will the Government agree to take on the occupied territories Bill to ensure that Ireland shows very strong support for an end to illegal settlements and stands up for the rights of Palestinians?

The Taoiseach: I will have to consult with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Tánaiste on that. I believe one of the difficulties with the legislation was the view that it conflicts with European law that trade is the sole competence of the European Union.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is contested too.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The National Ambulance Service has been under-resourced and overstretched for years. We have an insufficient number of operational vehicles and paramedics are being forced to work dangerously long shifts due to staff shortages. It is no exaggeration to say that it is costing lives.

This issue has a particular impact on rural populations. I have constituents in west Cork who are fearful of what will happen in an emergency situation given that they live so far away from a hospital. A major issue is that the ambulances are assigned according to population rather than population and the geographical spread of an area. Places like Cork South-West are spread over a huge geographical area and people are put at risk under this policy. There needs to be a significant increase in investment in the ambulance service. Currently, west Cork is assigned one rapid response vehicle, RRV, and that is only for 12 hours out of 24. At the very least, we need a 24-hour cover rapid response vehicle as well as additional vehicles and staff.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Cairns for raising this important matter. As she knows, we are investing in the ambulance service all the time, with more vehicles, more bases and more paramedics. I acknowledge that we have taken into account both population and population density. A rural area needs more ambulances than an urban one, or at least we need to take into account both population and geography for reasons we both understand. I will mention to the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, the request for a 24-7 RRV.

Deputy Gino Kenny: My question relates to nursing home charges, which is an ongoing issue. I understand this goes back a number of decades and the information can be quite opaque, but it raises many questions regarding how the Department of Health and successive governments dealt with this issue. My question is valid and it is to be hoped the Taoiseach can answer it. There are issues in respect of families who were financially burdened with costs. Are there any outstanding liabilities that families and individuals have at present?

The Taoiseach: I am not entirely sure what the Deputy means by “outstanding liabilities”. There are still cases; some are dormant and some have not been settled. I am not sure what he means by liabilities.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Financial liabilities to families that are going through the courts. According to this document, some €5 billion is-----

The Taoiseach: Okay. The €5 billion was an estimate related to public nursing homes and not private nursing homes. A scheme was set up - I do not know when but under then Minister for Health, Mary Harney - to compensate people who were charged in public nursing homes.

The initial estimate was €5 billion. By the time scheme was developed, it came down by €1 billion. In the end, €480 million was paid out. These figures we hear, whether €5 billion, €7 billion or €12 billion, have no validity any more. They were way off the mark. However, there are still cases outstanding.

Deputy Cathal Berry: We are all aware the VAT rate for the hospitality sector is scheduled to increase from 9% to 13.5% on 1 March, which is pretty much four weeks from today. In light of last year's exceptional Exchequer returns, an additional surplus of €5.2 billion, and that something similar is expected for this year, there are many positive soundings in the media that this 9% rate might perhaps be maintained. What is the Taoiseach's view of maintaining that 9% rate? When are we likely to get a definitive decision in order that businesses and customers can plan accordingly?

The Taoiseach: No decisions have been made on that yet. We hope to make a decision no later than the middle of February so that people get advance notice. I take the Deputy's point that we are probably heading for a budget surplus again this year. We had a budget surplus of €5 billion last year but we should never forget that we also have a debt of €250 billion. It is not a debt we have to pay back but is one we have to service every year. As interest rates rise, that will become more expensive.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The men's sheds and, indeed, women's sheds in Ireland are wonderful groups of people. They do so much for people's mental and physical health, well-being and everything else. When a €2 million fund was announced in November, they were delighted that each sheds' group would get €2,000, even though they did not get much time to apply. Some of the Taoiseach's colleagues proclaimed that funding all over social media. However, there is now a problem. In Tipperary, many of these groups are associated with family resource centres, which are okay because they can claim the money. However, the stand-alone sheds cannot claim this money, which is going to the Irish Men's Sheds Association. That is no good to the people on the ground, their mental or physical health, what they do and the help they give communities. Something needs to be done. The Department of Rural and Community Development needs to tweak this funding to ensure the men's sheds that need the money get it. If they are not associated with the Irish Men's Sheds Association, they will not get their money. It is meant for the groups on the ground that have to get this money as they badly need it. They have many ways to spend it because ESB and energy costs mean they need it badly.

The Taoiseach: I was not aware that this matter was an issue. I will contact the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, about it and we will see what we can do.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Over the weekend, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, announced funding for Killybegs Harbour Centre. On the face of it, this is very welcome funding and is very badly needed. He announced €8.75 million in funding for that centre. However, in July last year, he announced €9.2 million - inflation saved a little there - and the year before that he announced €10.5 million. In 2019, an announcement of €5 million was made and in 2017 funding of €6.2 million was announced. What is the actual amount that has been allocated to Killybegs in 2022? I assume it is probably approximately €1 million or something like that, but it is a cumulate amount that is added on all the time. If that is the amount that is added, it raises further questions as to why the pier extension in Killybegs has already cost €40 million. What is the story on this?

The Taoiseach: I honestly do not know, but I think the Deputy and I are both very much in favour of investment in Killybegs. It is an important harbour. It has a lot to offer, not just in respect of fisheries-----

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Will there be investment?

The Taoiseach: -----but also in respect of offshore wind, but taxpayers' money should always be spent well. I do not know the answer to the Deputy's question but I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, to come back to him directly.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: In light of the decision by the High Court yesterday obliging An Bord Pleanála to revisit the planning application for the Galway ring road in the context of the climate action plan, it is now time to consider urgently the public transport options that are available and are presenting to us right now to ease traffic congestion in Galway city. I am thinking particularly of those commuters, just under 2,000 of them, who travel from Athenry and Oranmore into Galway city every day. In this Chamber, in September 2020, I asked the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, about an ongoing feasibility study into the double-tracking of and the improvement of frequency on those services from Athenry to Oranmore. I was told the feasibility study would produce a report in the first quarter of 2021. We are now in the first quarter of 2023 and I understand that the feasibility study has now been somehow attached to the all-island rail review, which cannot be reported on until such time as a Northern Ireland executive forms. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with the Minister and to ask him to prioritise this as a matter of urgency in order that there are genuinely alternative travel options available to people travelling into Galway city.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Much and all as I would like to let you continue, Deputy, we are way over time.

The Taoiseach: I will definitely take that up with the Minister, Deputy Ryan. He and I are both in favour of double-tracking to Galway and the development of a commuter rail service around Galway city. I do not see why it should be held up by the all-island rail review. That is not the case for Cork or Limerick, so I do not see why it should be for Galway. We will check that out. I remain a supporter of the bypass but, obviously, that is a matter for An Bord Pleanála to decide on.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The Taoiseach will be aware of the case of Bernard Phelan, an Irish citizen imprisoned in Iran. Bernard was born in Clonmel and raised in Blackrock, in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire. He was arrested on 3 October last year and is one of a number of European citizens being held in Iran. I understand that Bernard has cardiac and other medical conditions. His elderly father and his family are extremely concerned for his health and well-being. I have raised this matter with the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs but I would be grateful if the Taoiseach could raise it directly with President Ebrahim Raisi.

The Taoiseach: I am familiar with the case. It is a very sad one, and I hope Mr. Phelan is able to get back to Ireland as soon as possible. The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Micheál Martin, had a very lengthy call - I think it was nearly an hour long - trying to make the case on his behalf and to secure his release. I do not have any engagements with the Iranian Government in the diary at the moment but I will certainly make inquiries as to whether one is possible. I would be happy to add my voice to the efforts to secure Mr. Phelan's release.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, informed the

Committee on Environment and Climate Action today that electricity customers who were overcharged as a result of the large energy user rebalancing scheme will be compensated. This was a scandalous scheme that forced ordinary households to subsidise some of the biggest and wealthiest companies not only in Ireland but across the world. Last week, when I raised this with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, he defended the scheme and refused to answer my request that the excess charges be repaid. I therefore welcome the statement from the CRU, but I ask the Taoiseach to inform us as to when customers will get their money back. Will that money come from the companies that benefited from their overcharging and not from taxpayers?

The Taoiseach: I honestly do not know what the situation with refunds is, if there are to be any, so I will have to defer to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, on that. My understanding is that this was essentially like a bulk-buy discount. Somebody who buys things in large volumes will often get a lower price for them. That is not unusual. I was not aware that there would be any sort of rebate-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Somebody else is paying for it: ordinary households.

The Taoiseach: -----but I will check it out.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Over the past six months I have repeatedly raised the question of the plight of a large number of women the length and breadth of this country who find themselves subjected to extraordinary abusive situations whereby in many cases they are not allowed to meet or to see their children except by telephone. Nothing appears to be happening as a matter of urgency, but something must happen as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, this House will be turning its back on the women who are mothers who are being subjected to this treatment. I ask the Taoiseach or the Minister what action is proposed.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputy Durkan for consistently raising this issue. I will make a number of quick points. First, we will introduce the Family Courts Bill into the Seanad this week. That is a really important reform of how our courts work in this regard. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, held a public consultation on the topic of parental alienation. We are currently reviewing all the responses. The Department of Justice has also arranged for a stand-alone piece of independent research on parental alienation, which I have now received. I have also asked my Department to prioritise immediately a review of section 47 of the Family Law Act. I will keep in close contact with the Deputy.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I am sure the Taoiseach will agree that the dedicated mortgage advisers employed by the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, do a tremendous job at very little cost to the taxpayer, but is he aware that they have no security of tenure? Their contract is simply renewed annually and the practice is to tell them only at the last moment whether or not their contract will be renewed. Obviously, that is very unsatisfactory for the people doing that job. Is the Taoiseach aware also that the budget for this service was cut substantially this year? In my area the cut in real terms came to about 25%. There are 46,000 mortgage arrears cases in the country at present and interest rates are rising. Will the Taoiseach commit to put this service on a proper footing for the people who practise with these unfortunate people who are in arrears and, also, that a proper budget will be allocated towards that? This is vital and critical work and likely to become more so.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am familiar with the service. I was involved in setting it up with the then Minister, Frances Fitzgerald, when I was in the

Department of Social Protection and she was in the Department of Justice. It is a very good service. It has probably been wound back in recent years because of the falling number of mortgage arrears, but the Deputy makes a valid point that with interest rates rising we may see an increase in the number of people in arrears. I will definitely talk to my colleagues in the Government about it and see if we can have an examination done not only of further resources but also of the valid point the Deputy makes, that the people providing these services need to have some sort of job security.

Deputy Michael McNamara: A surgical hub is part of the proposed solution to overcrowding and long waiting lists in Limerick. Since Christmas, however, two newly equipped theatres in Ennis have not been used and the highly trained and expert staff who would normally work there are now diverted to general work around the hospital. In circumstances where we have surgical facilities in the mid-west which are not used, it is difficult to see how going to the expense of developing another facility will add to the solution. Will the Taoiseach find out, or does he know, what the problem is and why the existing facilities are so underutilised? The same is true of Nenagh. I am led to believe that it is because of the new protocol and that the staff have been moved to alternative work. I asked what additional resources would be provided because of the protocol last week and await a reply from the Taoiseach. We need to use the facilities we have before we talk about building other ones.

The Taoiseach: I do not know the reasons for that. I will certainly make inquiries. I agree with the Deputy's point. If we are putting additional elective capacity and theatres into Ennis, Nenagh and Croom, for example, it makes sense to use them rather than building new ones, at least in the first instance. I have heard of similar issues. The surgical hub in Tallaght, for example, has four theatres but only two operating. I am told that it is down to staffing issues, but perhaps there is more to it than that.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I asked in a parliamentary question the number of learner drivers awaiting a test date in County Carlow. On 31 December 2022 more than 1,073 were awaiting a test date. A further 955 have been issued with an invitation to book a test but have not used it within ten days. Only 316 lucky people have been allocated a test. I have been calling for increased resources for the service. The earliest test appointment in Carlow I could find using the Road Safety Authority, RSA, estimator this morning was in August. That is unacceptable. My county is a rural one. People including young students - Carlow is now a university town, which is excellent - are coming to me because they cannot get to school or into towns. Also, we need to recruit more. I know a recruitment campaign has been carried out. There were 100 permanent testers and now there are 30 extra but that is not enough. I ask that more testers be recruited and that as many tests as possible are done.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that this is a severe problem and that people need their cars, particularly in rural areas, whether it is to get to work or to college. This is a barrier we need to remove. We have managed to get on top of a few significant delays recently around passports and work permits and I am sure we will get on top of this too. I appreciate that the Deputy has reminded me of it again today.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The programme for Government commits to a better quality of life and to addressing the cost-of-living crisis. One aspect of quality of life is access to sports events. It may be of interest to the Taoiseach to know that the biggest Republic of Ireland soccer supporters network is a group called the Ballybrack Seagulls, which has had an arrangement with the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, for the last ten years under which it buys

season tickets and gets discounted tickets for young people. They are the fans we always see, even when there is not a full attendance and it may not be such a popular game. A big game with France is coming up and, interestingly, the FAI has pulled out of the arrangement it had with the Ballybrack Seagulls for ten years. Under the annual agreed arrangement, it cost €235 for a season ticket and €55 for a young person, which was discounted. The FAI has come back to the Ballybrack Seagulls and said a season ticket would cost €400 and there would be no discounts for young people. I ask the Taoiseach to ask the Minister of State with responsibility for sport to intervene with the FAI because this is letting the fans and young people down.

The Taoiseach: That definitely sounds like poor form. We need to recognise and reward those fans who turn up for those games that other people do not turn up for. I do not know all of the facts but I will let the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, know the matter was raised here and see if he can use his offices to lean on the FAI in some way.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I appreciate that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Taoiseach will be familiar with the situation regarding the drug Cariban. There was an announcement of a reimbursement fund, which was welcomed. I have been contacted by many constituents about this, and I know the Taoiseach commented on it before Christmas. Women who are struggling with hyperemesis have the choice between suffering with this debilitating condition or finding themselves in significant amounts of debt and spending large amounts of money because they cannot access it. Trying to access a consultant obstetrician for a prescription is an absurdly convoluted approach. It privileges those who have access and means many women are suffering because they cannot access the drug or are spending too much on it. I know the Taoiseach has commented on this in the past but I ask him to give the House an update on any discussions the Government has had with the HSE and the Irish Pharmacy Union on coming up with a more workable approach.

The Taoiseach: I am afraid I do not have an update on this matter since we last spoke but I appreciate that it is an enormous burden on a pregnant woman to have to fund this medicine herself. Hyperemesis gravidarum is a serious illness. This issue slipped off my agenda a little in recent weeks but I will ask my office to take it up again with the HSE and see if we can move things on.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to make a point of order. In his response to me earlier on the Order of Business, the Taoiseach suggested there were disciplinary matters under way in the Labour Party.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I ask the Taoiseach to withdraw that comment. I have listened back-

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----and there are no disciplinary matters under way in the Labour Party. I can assure the Taoiseach of that and I thought I misheard him earlier. I ask the Taoiseach to correct the record.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

The Taoiseach: If that is the case, I am happy to withdraw.

Commission for Future Generations Bill 2023: First Stage

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the establishment of a body, to be known in the Irish language as an Coimisiún um Ghlúnta sa Todhchaí or in the English language as the Commission for Future Generations for the purpose of reporting to the Government in relation to the establishment of an Office of Ombudsman for Future Generations and to provide for related matters.

Anyone who has ever had a hangover will understand a little bit about borrowing happiness from the future. Likewise, anybody who has saved for a deposit, is making plans for pension provision or saving for children's college costs knows something about planning for the future. They also know that decisions they take today have the power to impact the future well-being of themselves and those close to them. We understand instinctively on a human scale how this applies to ourselves and our families but do we adequately apply long-term thinking on a societal scale in our businesses, planning and politics or are we too often drawn to solving the current crisis, sometimes in a manner that is inconsistent with our longer term goals? This kind of thinking can be extrapolated to form a philosophical school of thinking called long-termism. Like most kinds of philosophical thinking, it does not always survive exposure to the real world and it can be problematic in its most extreme conclusions. Put simply, it can be encapsulated in three sentences - future people count; there could be a lot of them; and we can make their lives better.

The issue of climate change brings this kind of thinking into sharp focus. How will future generations regard and judge us when they look at the climate consequences we are locking into their future worlds? The carbon emissions I create today will still be in the atmosphere hundreds of years from now, trapping heat, intensifying droughts and heatwaves and raising sea levels. The same applies to our treatment of the natural world. The curlew's call is becoming rarer around Tramore, where I live, my sons have never heard a cuckoo and I have never heard the corncrake. Future skies, rivers and oceans will be quieter and emptier places unless we radically change what we are doing today, and future generations will be immeasurably the poorer for it. Our democracy and, by extension, our State struggle to take account of this kind of long-term thinking. This is for two main reasons that I can see.

First, let us examine that first proposition that future people count. In a literal sense, in our democracy they do not count. Future people cannot speak, advocate or, crucially, vote. People aged under 18, the future generation we can meet and know, cannot vote. Any election strategy aimed at people who cannot vote is doomed to failure. In the strict electoral sense, these people do not count, yet morally and ethically we can feel this is not true. They must count and matter, yet our political system fails to capture that. Second, all of us sometimes struggle to make decisions that align our long-term interests with our short-term interests, be that in pension provision or in opening that second bottle of wine. Our democracy tends to create conditions that reward promises and decisions with a short time horizon. This makes planning for the long term and for future generations extremely challenging.

31 January 2023

A few countries have begun to take steps towards incorporating more long-term thinking into their decision-making processes. The Welsh Government, in particular, is leading the way. It has created a future generations commissioner, an independent and well-resourced office with the stated goal to act as guardian of the ability of future generations to meet their needs and encourage public bodies to take greater account of the long-term impact of the things they do. The work of this office is underpinned by ground-breaking legislation, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

An approach of this kind could be hugely beneficial in our politics in Ireland. For this reason, I am bringing forward my legislation, the Commission for Future Generations Bill 2023. The Bill will establish an independent commission for future generations to consider and report within 12 months on how best to set up an office of ombudsman for future generations in Ireland. The proposed commission for future generations could also make recommendations on a number of areas, including the measurement of progress of the overall well-being of our society; how best to ensure best practice among public bodies and Government Departments, while adhering to the principle of sustainable development; and the potential role of a joint Oireachtas committee on future generations.

I believe that future people count, even if I cannot meet, hear or know them, and that young people count, even if they will not count at the ballot box in the next election or even the election after that. The choices we make in the here and now must balance the needs of today with the challenges of tomorrow.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

The Taoiseach: No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

President Metsola's Address to the Houses of the Oireachtas: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):
I move:

That the following arrangements shall apply in relation to any meeting of the Dáil on Thursday 2nd February, 2023:

(a) the ordinary routine of business shall be interrupted after Questions on Policy or Legislation pursuant to Standing Order 35A, and the sitting of the Dáil shall thereupon stand suspended;

(b) at 2 p.m., the Dáil shall be enjoined with Seanad Éireann to constitute a joint

sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas in the Dáil chamber for the purpose of an address by Her Excellency Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, followed by statements;

(c) the joint sitting shall be chaired by the Ceann Comhairle;

(d) the proceedings at the joint sitting shall be as follows:

(i) the Ceann Comhairle shall make an opening statement, followed by the address by President Metsola;

(ii) following President Metsola's address, statements may be made in the following order and with the following arrangements:

(I) the Taoiseach 5 minutes;

(II) the Tánaiste 4 minutes;

(III) the leader of the Green Party 4 minutes;

(IV) the leader of Sinn Féin 5 minutes;

(V) the leaders or a representative of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, the Independent Group, the Seanad Independent Group and the Seanad Civil Engagement Group 3 minutes per party or group; and

(VI) members may share time; and

(iii) the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann shall make a concluding statement;

(e) on the conclusion of the Cathaoirleach's statement, the Ceann Comhairle shall adjourn the joint sitting;

(f) the protocol and seating plan for the joint sitting shall be as agreed by the Dáil Business Committee and the Seanad Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight; and

(g) subject to any arrangements agreed on the Order of Business, the ordinary routine of business, as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders, shall resume 30 minutes after the adjournment of the joint sitting.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Citizens' Assembly

1. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Taoiseach when it is expected that the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs will take place. [3275/23]

2. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Taoiseach the proposed running order of the citizens' assemblies. [3413/23]

3. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs will take place. [4161/23]

4. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs will take place. [4234/23]

5. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs will take place. [4369/23]

6. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the proposed running order of citizens' assemblies. [4415/23]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach the proposed running order of citizens' assemblies. [4418/23]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, together.

The programme for Government commits to establishing four citizens' assemblies on the topics of biodiversity loss, the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin, matters relating to drugs use and the future of education.

The Citizens' Assembly on local government in Dublin has concluded its work, and submitted its report and recommendations to the Oireachtas in line with the assembly's terms of reference. I met with the Chairman of the assembly, Mr. Jim Gavin, last week and he briefed me in detail on the work done. I want to take this opportunity in the House to thank him and all those who took part in the Citizens' Assembly for their participation and commitment to the task.

The Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss held its final meeting on 21 January and will submit its report and recommendations to the Oireachtas and Government as soon as possible.

Two further citizens' assemblies are committed to in the programme for Government - one on matters relating to drugs use and another on the future of education. It will be a matter for the Oireachtas to agree the timeline and terms of reference for the next assemblies.

I anticipate that the Government will shortly discuss the question of the new citizens' assembly, and will bring forward a proposal on the matter to this House in the coming weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are a number of speakers and each will have up to a minute and a half.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I thank the Taoiseach for the information that he has pro-

vided thus far on this important issue.

I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegarde Naughton, on her appointment as the new Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy. Last month, her predecessor, Deputy Feighan, reiterated the Government's commitment to holding a citizens' assembly on drugs in early 2023. Last week, the Taoiseach also confirmed that he will bring forward a proposal in the coming weeks, but we need more than that now. We need to hear a timeline and a date for the establishment of the citizens' assembly. It is almost three years since the programme for Government committed to holding this citizens' assembly and we are still no closer to a definitive date. As the Taoiseach will be aware, the Joint Committee on Justice recently undertook research on the current legal position on possession. I hope the Taoiseach can confirm today that the recommendations made in that report will inform the terms of reference of a citizens' assembly. Hopefully, that work has begun. Will the Taoiseach lay out the timeline for the citizens' assembly on drugs to take place?

Deputy Gino Kenny: My question is the same. The programme for Government stated that there would be a citizens' assembly in relation to drug use and the broader question of decriminalisation. We have waited and waited, but as of yet there has not been a date, which is disappointing. This issue has gone on for decades and the *status quo* is completely unacceptable. It is unacceptable on the basis that as long as Governments do not do anything positive, people will die. That is what we are talking about. We are talking about people's lives. I believe if we had a different approach to drug use, there would be people still living today. Most people in this country have changed their opinion in relation to maintaining the *status quo* or even going backwards. I firmly believe that the Irish public now are open to a different approach in relation to drug use. Whatever the recommendations the citizens' assembly gives, it is imperative that the Government implement them. I believe that in the lifetime of this Government, however long it takes, for the sake of people who are living today who will be dead it has to change its stance on the Misuse of Drugs Acts. It does not work.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Like the other Deputies, I urge the Taoiseach to name a date and a chairperson for the citizens' assembly. I join the Taoiseach in congratulating the chairs of the two previous bodies. We have a citizens' assembly infrastructure. It has dealt with two issues and we have two more to go. I can appreciate why it has taken some time to get here. There is a commitment in the programme for Government. That is positive. Both the Taoiseach and his predecessor have committed to having it in 2023. That is hopeful.

Along with the citizens' assembly debate, we also need to have a civic society debate. We need to ensure that organisations, such as the drugs task forces, are funded so that they can have those conversations with communities that have been impacted by drugs and with communities that have not been impacted by drugs, or believe that they have not been impacted by drugs because we know drug use is across all of society. I ask the Minister of State to engage with the drugs task forces to enable that civic society campaign in parallel to the citizens' assembly. I would ask for society, more broadly, to start to have the discussion. If you have not thought about the issue of drugs, if you have not thought about how it impacts you and your community, I ask that you start to have those discussions. By doing that, we will have an informed debate, not one based on moral judgments.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I welcome that there is a commitment in the programme for Government to hold a citizens' assembly on drugs. I am conscious that the other citizens' assemblies are unfinished at this stage. I am thinking of the one on biodiversity. Would the

Taoiseach envisage that it would have to be finished up before he would advance the other ones or can they run in parallel? I would hope that they could, and that there would not be any delay, because the Government already had the Dublin mayor and biodiversity ones running in parallel. It is important that the citizens' assembly on drugs would get up and running as soon as possible. The conversations are already taking place right across the country in communities, at dinner tables and in various places. I had the opportunity to meet with so many different groups on it. These included those on youth diversion programmes and students. The Joint Committee on Justice has also been debating the issue. I would be interested to hear if the Taoiseach has a view on its deliberations as well.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I was involved in organising, along with the Save Our Forests Save Our Lands campaign, a protest last week around the debate on Coillte's outrageous deal with Gresham House to buy up large amounts of land and forestry. The demands of that protest were strongly echoed by the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss when it expressed grave concern about the Gresham House deal. It has been said, rightly, that the Forestry Act and the mandate of Coillte need to be radically changed so that Coillte stops acting as a commercial outfit doing forestry in a way that is damaging biodiversity and instead starts to operate for the common and environmental good. The truth is that the Irish forestry model is destroying biodiversity. That is the actuality of the situation. That will be exacerbated by the Gresham House deal or any other such similar deals. I ask the Taoiseach to reconsider the Government's position that it cannot back out of the deal with Gresham House. The Government must back out of this deal because it will contribute to further destruction of biodiversity and move us further down the wrong road when we need to listen to what the Citizens' Assembly is saying about forestry in this country.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to ask if the Taoiseach will listen to the citizens' assemblies when they report. We establish them and they make recommendations on the basis of the evidence that they hear. For example, will the Taoiseach listen to the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss in the context of the Gresham House deal? Will the Taoiseach listen to them when they say that State-owned woodland should be recognised and managed as a strategic long-term national asset for the benefit of the common good? They make such a recommendation because they understand that we are in, internationally, a sixth mass extinction event. In Ireland, one in every fifth species is threatened with extinction and one in every third species of bee is threatened with extinction. We are in an absolute dire crisis. Unfortunately, the monocultural Sitka spruce model of forestry practised in Ireland means that instead of being a guardian of biodiversity, our forests have been turned into a graveyard of biodiversity. That is a direct consequence of organising our forestry for profit rather than for combating climate change and biodiversity loss. Does the Taoiseach accept he must instruct Coillte to tear up the deal with Gresham House? If he says he cannot do that, he should bring emergency legislation to the House to enable Coillte to do it. A majority of Deputies in the Dáil would vote in favour of it. The deal must be torn up and Coillte's mandate must be changed.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Two months ago the Labour Party brought forward a Dáil motion calling for a firm date to be set for convening a citizens' assembly on drugs. We are looking for a date for the establishment of that assembly. In particular, its terms of reference must ensure it addresses the central issue of how we move away from a criminal justice approach to drug use and towards a health-led approach. Permission was finally granted over Christmas for a supervised injection facility at Merchants Quay in Dublin. We still see a clear need for other such facilities in other cities and urban areas. Will the Taoiseach confirm whether there are plans to

have supervised injection facilities available, even on a mobile basis?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The case for a citizens' assembly on drugs has been made for a long time and there is an urgency around it. I support it. I wish it could be brought forward more quickly than the Taoiseach has indicated but I appeal to him to stick to the commitment and to the date as set out.

Would the Taoiseach believe me if I told him that for the past year and a half there has been no functioning drug and alcohol task force in Dublin's north inner city? Can he imagine that? It was ground zero of the heroin epidemic in the 1980s. It is still an area where neighbourhoods are ravaged by intergenerational drug misuse, abuse and addiction, and all the associated social phenomena. I have raised this issue for a year and a half. I raised it with Deputy Feighan when he was Minister of State, with the Taoiseach and with the Minister for Health. There has been a deliberate running down and disbandment of the drug and alcohol task force in the north inner city of Dublin. A report was drawn up by the outgoing Minister of State. It was submitted somewhere. I appeal for the report to be published, for the duly selected chair to be appointed and for the body to be allowed to go on with its work. I will not elaborate on the behaviour of the Department and others in this fiasco. I simply appeal that it be brought to an end.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We need the citizens' assembly on drugs to happen as soon as possible. We are looking at absolute failure. When we talk about drug use, drug addiction, the services that relate to those problems, drug criminality and drug-debt intimidation, we speak about its impact across society, which is particularly bad in working-class areas in urban settings. We need to do something different. We all accept and have said that the war on drugs has failed. We need to try something different. We need this assembly to be up and running and then we need to ensure we have the services and the interventions. We need to try something different because what we are doing is not working and we are failing multiple people. Many people are dying and I do not see anything hopeful, other than if we listen to what a citizens' assembly says and act upon it.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their contributions. I anticipate the Government will consider the question of the next citizens' assemblies in the near future. Once a decision has been taken, we will promptly bring forward a proposal to the House for debate and resolution. Subject to the timely passage of the resolution, my expectation is that the next citizens' assemblies could commence as early as April or May and should be in a position to report back to the House before the end of the year. The Government is committed to fulfilling the programme for Government commitment to establish new citizens' assemblies on matters relating to drug use and the future of education. We are keen to have them up and running before the summer recess. I can confirm that the work of the Joint Committee on Justice will inform the terms of reference, as will earlier work carried out by former Justice Garrett Sheehan's group and the justice committee previously under Deputy Stanton's chairmanship. The citizens' assembly on drugs will look at issues in the round and decriminalisation can be part of that.

The two citizens' assemblies in 2022 were run in parallel. It is possible. However, the clear advice from the chairpersons of both assemblies and the independent evaluators was that future assemblies should be run sequentially rather than concurrently. That is the best way to give each assembly the necessary space and time to undertake its deliberations without undue constraints. In response to the Deputies' questions, we will listen to what the citizens' assemblies have to say. It is fair to say we did so on marriage equality, on the eighth amendment and on the climate law, but listening to what they say does not necessarily mean adopting every recom-

mendation lock, stock and barrel.

There is some misunderstanding and misinformation with respect to the Irish Strategic Forestry Fund. No State-owned land is involved. No public land is being privatised. The land is already privately owned and most of it is under forest already. We need forests for many reasons. We need them as a climate sink, for biodiversity and for leisure but also for timber and that is where spruce and conifers are the most useful. We want to move away from using concrete and steel in favour of timber-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: We have plenty of spruce though. We have loads of it.

The Taoiseach: -----and that is why there is room for different types of forestry.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have exported loads of them.

The Taoiseach: I will take up the issue of the north inner city drugs and alcohol task force with the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. She is new to her role, but I will ensure that she is aware of it and that progress is made on it.

Cabinet Committees

8. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality will next meet. [61817/22]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee that deals with social protection will next meet. [3074/23]

10. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee that deals with social protection will next meet. [3077/23]

11. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality will next meet. [4217/23]

12. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality will next meet. [4219/23]

13. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality will next meet. [4370/23]

14. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee that deals with social protection will next meet. [4413/23]

15. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee that deals with immigration and integration will next meet. [4422/23]

16. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee that deals with immigration and integration will next meet. [4426/23]

17. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee that deals with immigration and integration will next meet. [4429/23]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 17, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on social affairs and public services oversees implementation of the programme for Government commitments in the areas of social policy and public services. The committee covers a range of topics in the areas of social policy with a particular focus on equality and integration and public service reform. Other topics covered by the committee include sport, social protection, arts and culture, public services and justice issues such as policing reform and community safety.

The Cabinet committee will receive detailed reports on identified policy areas and consider the implementation of commitments and reforms. The first meeting of the new Cabinet committee will be held shortly.

Issues recently considered by the previous Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality, which last met at the end of October 2022, include the implementation of the third national domestic, sexual and gender-based violence strategy and progress on policing reforms. In addition to meetings of the Cabinet committee, I have regular engagement with Ministers at Cabinet level and individually to discuss priority issues relating to their Departments. Meetings have also been held between my officials and officials from relevant Government Departments on a range of social policy issues.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, GREVIO, which is tasked with monitoring signatory states' implementation of the Istanbul Convention, is meeting with Irish stakeholders this week. In its submission to GREVIO, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, has called for the urgent implementation of multi-agency domestic homicide reviews. A former Minister for Justice commissioned an independent study into familicide and domestic homicide reviews a number of years ago. The current Minister has yet to progress legislation despite a commitment in the 2020 programme for Government. We know the report has been sitting on the Minister's desk since late last summer, yet there is no mention of the promised Bill in the recently published legislative programme. Multi-agency domestic homicide reviews have been in place in Britain for years. They are carried out by an independent chair with the support of a panel of representatives from statutory, voluntary and community organisations. They were introduced in the North in 2020. When will the Minister publish the study and when will we see the legislation on this?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If one were to believe the ads the Government ran about the cost of living that stated people were entitled to various supports from the Government, one would think there was a lot of support for people who need exceptional needs payments and are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. My clinic was absolutely overrun in the days coming up to Christmas with people in desperate situations and it has become worse in the new year. People are seriously struggling. People need money for food and to pay heating bills and pre-pay power. People are paying up to €10 a day for gas and so on. They simply cannot afford it. People are crying in my clinic. One of the things that is an obstacle to people getting support is that there is no longer a community welfare officer whom a person can go to see. When I asked a parliamentary question about this, I was told that there is a hotline and that people can make appointments. It is simply not true. A community welfare officer cannot be seen for love nor money at the moment and desperate people are finding it impossible to access supports they badly need.

Deputy Paul Murphy: On Saturday, there was a horrendous attack on homeless migrants living in tents in Ashtown. They were attacked using dogs, baseball bats and sticks because of

they are migrants. It is the horrifying consequence of the spread of far-right, racist, divisive and hateful ideas and organisations. Last night, far-right activists were claiming to have burnt down a building. A building was certainly burnt down, seemingly because it was potentially going to be used as refugee accommodation or for refugee education. This is going to get worse unless a significant change in Government policy takes place. Far-right activists are running amok and someone - most likely a migrant or an Irish person of colour - will either be seriously injured or killed. The Government should change its approach to housing because this is being abused by the far right. The Government should stop its divisive and discriminatory rhetoric and policy, for example towards non-Ukrainian asylum seekers.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Carlow County Council has applied for €12 million funding for conservation work on a former Presentation Convent building at Tullow Street in Carlow, which is a huge part of our cultural quarter. This is a dynamic design at the rear of the existing library building, which is too small and inadequate for the expanding services since university status was awarded to Carlow. The new build will have an enhanced local studies section, which is so important for schoolchildren and students; an impressive county archives area; a children's library; a new tourism office; and a large light-filled civic space in the centre of the building. This building is extremely important for the people of Carlow and I ask that funding for it be supplied. I know it is at stage 3 planning. I ask the Taoiseach to talk to the Minister to see what can be done.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I raise the matter of women's refuges in the Cavan-Monaghan area. Counties Cavan and Monaghan are among the nine counties not to have such a facility. I work very closely with Safe Ireland, which has done incredible work, particularly Mary McDermott, on this issue. It presented a blueprint document that all of our local authorities can work and strive towards on designing centres of domestic violence prevention and response. The blueprint gives us all a design we can follow. More importantly, I ask all the arms of the State in counties Cavan and Monaghan, including the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Tusla, to come behind our local authorities. There is a willingness to deliver it among all these great people. I ask that the push to deliver this, which is already coming from the Government, continues.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: When I chaired the special Committee on Gender Equality over the past year, the Taoiseach engaged extensively with us, as did his colleagues in government, for which I thank him. One of the committee's clear and unanimous recommendations was that referendums on constitutional changes to Articles 40 and 41 would be held to give effect to recommendations Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, of the citizens' assembly. Our committee also took the view that these votes can and should be held during 2023. The report we published in December provided a draft form of wording for the proposed amendments to see recognition for the principle of gender equality and to remove the sexist language currently in the constitutional text, referring exclusively to women and mothers as having a life and duties within the home. Our recommendations would expand the definition of "family" under the Constitution to make it more inclusive. There is a clear opportunity to hold such a referendum this autumn, which would leave extensive time for engagement and wording and for the establishment of the necessary commission. Will the Taoiseach agree to hold a referendum during this calendar year?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Government has spoken about community welfare or exceptional needs payments as a means of dealing with the cost-of-living crisis that many people are dealing with. We are all aware of many people who are waiting an extremely long time. I know of cases in Dundalk of people waiting eight, nine and ten weeks, or longer. In some cases,

we know these people are applying for exceptional needs payments to purchase white goods, for example if they have just got a council house. The delay in making such payments slows down the process of them leaving their previous house, a house that we would probably like to engage with renters and other people on from the point of view of getting them into absolutely necessary accommodation. We are dealing with multiple issues. This is meant to be a solution. We need to ensure the resources are in place, but I do not believe they are and neither do the people trying to avail of it, who are generally looking for emergency payments. We need to do something.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Most Irish people want to help those who are fleeing from war, violence or hunger around the world. Most Irish people want to be the Good Samaritan, but there is genuine concern with the Government's handling of the migration process. There must be consultation with communities. They have a right to have a say over how their areas will be developed. There must be a community dividend. Many working-class areas are already suffering from a lack of housing, GPs, school places and transport. Bringing large numbers of people into these deprived areas must be accompanied by real investment into these issues.

The asylum application process also needs to be speeded up. It should not take more than six months. Those who are not genuine asylum applicants or who have destroyed their travel documents to confuse the process must be sent home. Services that are designed to help asylum seekers, such as housing services, must also be available to Irish people in need; otherwise, the Government will divide people.

The Government is far too reliant on hotels in this system. Many communities are dependent on the tourism industry. Unless alternative accommodation is found for refugees, other than hotel accommodation, the livelihoods of many communities will be hammered in the near future.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their contributions. At the outset, reports of the attack in Ashtown near the Tolka River are very disturbing. While I cannot comment on the specifics of the case, I condemn unreservedly any incident or threat of violence against vulnerable people in our society, particularly those from migrant backgrounds. People have the right to protest but they do not have the right to do it in a way that causes others to fear for their safety or in ways that threaten public order. I sought a report from gardaí on this, which I have received but have not yet had the chance to read. They are continuing to investigate the incident. I am sure Deputies will appreciate that I cannot comment further on an open investigation.

While the number of people sleeping rough is down to approximately 91 in the Dublin region, the upward trend of people accessing emergency accommodation in recent months is of serious concern to the Government. We introduced a no-fault eviction ban, a new acquisitions programme for vulnerable households, emergency leasing of extra units and increased housing assistance payment discretion rates. We are implementing the largest social housing programme in the history of the State. We do not have the figure yet, but we think the number of new social homes provided last year will be the highest since 1975. I know that the men who were the victims of this attack have been offered shelter. One is in hospital and others are in contact with services. They were offered shelter previously but did not avail of it for their own reasons. They want to be able to stay together and that has complicated matters a bit.

Several Deputies mentioned the community welfare service. I hear what they are saying in terms of difficulties their constituents are having in accessing community welfare officers. I

will certainly raise this with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, in the coming days.

On the referendum on gender equality and on the family, I anticipate bringing forward the proposed wording. I welcome the fact that there are options but we hope to bring the proposed wording to the Cabinet before the end of this quarter. The electoral commission will be established next week. I think I am correct in saying the electoral commission will be the referendum commission, which means we do not have to go through the complicated process of establishing a referendum commission every time we have a referendum. I cannot promise that we will have the referendums this year but I would like to have them done this year. We will have a better idea in that regard in the next few weeks.

I will check with the Minister, Deputy Harris, about the timeline with regard to the homicide reviews. We have launched a new strategy to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, DSGBV. It is a five-year programme of reform, which aims at achieving a society that does not accept DSGBV or attitudes that underpin DSGBV. The strategy and accompanying implementation plan contains more than 140 detailed actions for implementation. There will be strong political oversight of implementation through the Cabinet committee on social affairs and public services, which I chair. Education and awareness raising is also a big part of the Government's fight against this form of violence. We are working on national campaigns to raise awareness, including on the meaning of consent. Some of the main actions include doubling the number of refuge spaces available in Ireland.

Deputy Niamh Smyth raised the issue of advocacy in relation to County Cavan, in particular when it comes to providing refuge spaces there.

4 o'clock

National sexual violence and domestic violence prevalence studies will be conducted at five-year intervals. There will be new legislation to provide for the introduction of the specific offences of non-fatal strangulation and stalking. Other measures include the training of front-line workers to identify domestic violence and refer victims and survivors to the appropriate services, and improving prosecutions and breaches of any and all DSGBV civil orders provided for in domestic violence and family law legislation.

The Government is also continuing to drive forward with the implementation of Supporting a Victim's Journey. We are determined that when victims of crime come forward, they will be safe in the knowledge that they will be helped, informed and treated with respect and dignity at every stage of their journey through the justice system.

We have also focused on strengthening legislation, including the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022. This wide-ranging Bill will increase the maximum sentence for assault causing harm from five years to ten.

Regarding the geographical provision of refuge spaces, we acknowledge the need for a significant increase in the provision of spaces and are committed to achieving this so that every person who needs a refuge space will have access to one. During the initial phase of work, we expect to provide 24 more spaces in Wexford, Dundalk and Navan by next year. There will be a further 98 units in identified locations in 2025 along with a further 19 additional and upgraded units by the end of the strategy period. There are also plans to have 32 safe home units operational presently with plans to expand the numbers to 55 before the end of 2023.

Dáil Éireann
Child Poverty

18. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Taoiseach his views on the creation of a new division within his Department focusing on child poverty [1634/23]

19. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on the proposed child poverty unit in his Department. [4218/23]

20. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the new division in his Department to address child poverty. [4371/23]

21. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he is considering the establishment of a new division in his Department to tackle child poverty. [4414/23]

22. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach his views on the creation of a new division within his Department, focusing on child poverty. [4416/23]

23. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach his views on the creation of a new division within his Department, focusing on child poverty. [4419/23]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 18 to 23, inclusive, together.

Our vision is to make Ireland the best country in Europe in which to be a child. The role of the Department of the Taoiseach is to pull things together and co-ordinate Government action so that it is targeted. Poverty restricts a child's opportunities. The new unit will build on what has been achieved by Government and place a greater focus on improving the lives of all children in Ireland. The aim is to have the unit established by the end of March and preparatory work is under way.

As a first step, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and I met with representatives from the Children's Rights Alliance to discuss the development of the new child poverty and well-being unit. Further work and engagement is ongoing to inform the scope and programme of work for the unit. The aim is to ensure the unit brings co-ordination as well as strategic leadership and enhanced accountability to the child poverty agenda and makes a tangible difference to the lives of children and families.

Deputy Alan Farrell: My question aimed to elicit further information and I certainly welcome what I have heard regarding a broad Government approach being needed to address child poverty. Poverty cannot be looked at in isolation and, on that basis, the inclusion of well-being is welcome.

One of the issues relating to well-being is education. Access to education is as important as healthcare. Will the new unit consider the issues children across the country have faced with regard to childhood disability networks and access to them and access to diagnosis and the supports that flow from those diagnoses?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I work with an organisation that gives out food parcels and provides meals. The uptake is a concern. I spoke to families when the double children's allowance was given out in November. Many families told me they bought food with the payment because with Christmas coming, they wanted extra food. Every week, I contact the Minister for Education to ask her to look at one school or another seeking DEIS status. This is the key to everything. I welcome the fact that 14 schools in County Carlow received

DEIS status this year, which is the highest number ever, while ten schools in County Kilkenny received DEIS status.

An Ceann Comhairle: We must get the Deputy to move to County Kildare.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Every school should be a DEIS school because under it, students get hot meals, including lunches, which is important. It is also important to mention free school books for primary schools this year. These are the things we need to do to make sure parents have enough money to pay for extra costs because of the cost-of-living crisis. I ask the Taoiseach to consider that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for the update on the new child poverty unit but we still need more detail. In particular, does he have specific objectives or targets he intends to meet in addressing the critical issue of child poverty?

Given the severe shortage of early years and childcare places, will he set up a public model of delivery for childcare that can guarantee children a place in early years education? Regarding socioeconomic discrimination, which is at the heart of this intended unit, does he support the addition of socioeconomic discrimination as the tenth ground in equality legislation as another way in which child poverty might be addressed?

Regarding access to specialist health services for children with disabilities, particularly those from families with less means, I am aware of some families having to go the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for financial assistance to pay for speech and language therapy because they cannot access it anywhere else. Other colleagues have had the same experience. Will the Government commit to refunding parents left with no choice but to pay for essential healthcare and supports such as this for their children?

Regarding access to specialist health services for children with disabilities, particularly children from families with less means, I am aware of some families having to go to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for financial assistance to pay for speech and language therapy because they cannot access it anywhere else. I know other colleagues will have had the same experience. Will the Government commit to refunding parents who are left with no choice but to pay for essential healthcare and supports like this for their children?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It goes without saying that many children are affected by the housing crisis and disability supports that are not available. Let us be clear. If we are talking about real and meaningful change in tackling child poverty, we need to look at the pathways available to many of us be they through education, apprenticeships and employment. A significant number of people are born without those supports and that scaffolding. Major early childhood supports are needed. If we do not do that, we will constantly fail a number of citizens. What we need is a multi-departmental approach to give those supports to those families and children so we can provide them with the pathways the rest of us have. Some of that is down to money, which provides opportunities that a significant number of people do not have. This is gross inequality and this is grossly wrong.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Because of the State's failure and neglect, many children are literally having their childhood stolen from them. If the new subcommittee is to be of any use, it must do tangible things about that. I will provide two examples. On Friday of next week, a working family with two teenage children, one of whom has special needs, will be evicted from their home despite the eviction ban mentioned by the Taoiseach. The family has done

nothing wrong. They have paid their rent and their taxes all their lives and they are going to be evicted from the home in which they have lived all their lives. When I go to the council or to the Minister, I am told there is no scheme for them. There is no scheme in which this family fits so they think they will be living in a car in about a week.

Another case I have raised with the Taoiseach and others for four years involves a mother, who ironically works with Tusla and vulnerable children, whose child has lived with her in emergency accommodation for four years. His mental health is on the floor. His mother does not tick any of the boxes. She is slightly over the threshold for this, there is no scheme for that and so on. These children are suffering. One group of children will be suffering more in a week and there is no scheme to help them. Will this unit intervene in cases such as that and tell the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage or another Department that children are not suffering any more; they are not going to be forced to live in a car or if they have been in emergency accommodation for four years to get the children out of emergency accommodation because their childhood is being stolen from them?

Deputy Paul Murphy: When Deputy Varadkar became Taoiseach again, he spoke about his vision to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child. The point has been made about hot school meals and the substantial impact that can have on children. Why is at least one school, and presumably others, in one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country having its entitlement to hot school meals removed? That is happening to St. Aidan's Senior National School on Brookfield Road, Tallaght. The school authorities were previously told by the Department that they were entitled to access the hot meals scheme. They made arrangements with Glanmore Foods and installed industrial ovens. The pupils completed their food orders. They have recently been informed that their school is not entitled to access the hot school meals scheme, even though it is a DEIS band 1 school. It does not make any sense whatsoever.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We once again have record homelessness figures. Nearly 3,500 children live with that trauma. I ask the Taoiseach, as his first move in dealing with child poverty, which requires dealing with poverty itself, to commit to extending the ban on evictions, which is due to run out in a short number of weeks. As a confidence-building gesture around this commitment to deal with child poverty, I ask that the damage that was done post crash, in Fine Gael's years in government, to the community sector, community development and the very supports that families, children and young people, in particular, rely on across communities, but especially in the most disadvantaged communities, be undone. We need investment and resourcing in our young people and children. That needs to happen through family supports and public services. Hot school meals and so on have been mentioned. Crucially and critically, if the Government is serious about this, it has to be done in the form of robust, resourced community development. Sadly, the Taoiseach's party in government has a record of destruction of that very infrastructure. I hope he will turn the tide on that, change direction, and invest, invest and invest. It is the smartest money the State will ever spend.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputies for their contributions. Deputy Farrell raised the children's disability network teams. They will not specifically fall under the remit of the new unit. They will fall to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, with the transfer of disability functions to her and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, which will happen on 1 March, but it is relevant to the well-being aspect of the unit's work. I hear the frustration that parents have and endure when it comes to not being able to get assessments of need and particularly when it comes to not being able to get the treatments and therapies that their children need. I had the chance in the past few weeks to spend some time in Barnardos

in my constituency and at family resource centres in Kildare and Newbridge. I recognise the good value that we get from the services they provide. It is money well spent and the return on investment is good. We will invest more in these areas in the years to come.

The hot school meals is a great programme. I am a big fan of it. I do not know the details of St. Aidan's and why it is no longer part of the programme. If Deputy Paul Murphy wants to send me the details, I will certainly have it looked into. As Deputies will be aware, the roadmap for social inclusion is our national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion. It includes a specific chapter on helping children and families with the goal of reducing child poverty and ensuring that all families can participate fully in society. The roadmap incorporates the national child poverty target identified in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the national framework for children and young people, which requires a 66% reduction in the number of children in consistent poverty by the end of 2021. We had been going in the right direction in that regard in recent years, but the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis that has followed has thrown that, which, unfortunately, will show up in the numbers quite soon.

The roadmap includes two commitments specifically relating to child poverty targets. One is to establish and report on a new target in respect of child poverty to improve Ireland's ranking from 20th to the top five for the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, SILC, reporting year of 2025. This will be the equivalent of reducing the percentage of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion from approximately 24% to 16%. The roadmap includes continued reporting on progress on the national target for reducing the number of children experiencing consistent poverty by the end of 2020 and setting a new target for the period to the end of 2025, consistent with any revised EU targets.

The aim, as I mentioned earlier, is to have the unit established by the end of March with a clear work plan. Preparatory work is under way in that regard. Further work and engagement will inform the scope and programme of work for the unit. The aim is to ensure the unit brings added value, as well as strategic leadership and enhanced accountability, to the child poverty agenda and makes a tangible difference to the lives of children and families.

The issue of a public model of childcare has been mentioned. I will have to speak to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, about that. Perhaps the right way to approach it, if it has not been done, is with the pilot of a few publicly-provided childcare facilities to see how they work, how they compare to the private sector with regard to quality, cost, reliability and so on, and perhaps take it from there.

Post-European Council Meeting: Statements

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I attended a meeting of the European Council on Thursday, 15 December in Brussels. The agenda covered Ukraine, energy and economic issues, security and defence and external relations issues. In his contribution to the debate, the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, will provide further detail on discussions on European Union enlargement and outline the priorities of the Swedish Presidency of the EU, which commenced on 1 January. I will address all other issues.

Before turning to the European Council, I would like to take the opportunity to update the House on my participation at the EU-Association of Southeast Asian States, ASEAN, summit on 14 December 2022 in Brussels. This event marked 45 years of diplomatic relations between the two regions. The summit was co-chaired by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the 2022 ASEAN chair, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. The summit was an opportunity for European Union and ASEAN leaders to reaffirm our partnership as one based on shared values and principles, such as support for the rules-based international order, respect of territorial integrity, and effective and sustainable multilateralism. Our two regional integration organisations became strategic partners in 2020. The broad agenda for the summit reflected the breadth of that growing partnership and included peace and security, connectivity and digital transition, clean and just energy transition, economic co-operation and trade, sustainable development, climate change and energy, the Covid-19 pandemic and regional and international issues. We welcomed the signing of the EU-ASEAN comprehensive air transport agreement, the first ever region-to-region aviation agreement. We also welcomed the EU-ASEAN plan of action 2023-2027, which will see co-operation over the coming period on pandemic recovery, sustainable trade, rules-based and sustainable connectivity, promoting decent work, disaster preparedness and security co-operation.

I will now turn to the agenda of the December European Council. At the European Council, EU leaders condemned the despicable and indiscriminate missile and drone attacks against civilians across Ukraine. These attacks are having a devastating impact on Ukraine's energy and other critical civilian infrastructure and their sole aim is to terrorise the Ukrainian population. In particular, these attacks are exacerbating an already critical humanitarian situation in Ukraine, in the midst of winter. Despite this, the people of Ukraine remain strong, resolute and determined that Russia will not win its war of aggression. Last December, Ireland contributed a further €25 million in budget support to the government of Ukraine to assist in dealing with expenditure, including over the winter, and to support SMEs. This funding has been made via the World Bank Trust Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. We will continue this steadfast support of Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Ireland has also consistently supported imposing sanctions in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. At the European Council, leaders discussed how to increase our collective pressure on Russia and we underlined the importance of ensuring effective implementation, and preventing circumvention, of sanctions. Additionally, leaders noted the EU's agreement to provide a macro-financial assistance package of €18 billion for Ukraine. I am pleased that the first instalment of €3 billion was made subsequently on 17 January. This package comes on top of the €6.7 billion in macro-financial assistance, which has been disbursed since Russia's February 2022 invasion.

Leaders are also committed to promoting accountability for violations of international law arising out of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Ireland is supportive of the idea of establishing a special tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression. However, there are a number of significant political, legal and practical challenges, including the immunity of senior Russian officials under international law, that need to be resolved for the idea to be realised. We need to identify options that would allow us to overcome them to ensure the effectiveness, legitimacy and credibility of any such tribunal.

On the prospects for peace, the European Council reiterated that it is ready to support Ukraine's initiative for a just peace. While the conditions do not currently exist for peace negotiations, when the Taoiseach spoke by phone with President Zelenskyy on 10 January, and

when I spoke by phone with the Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba on 13 January, we conveyed the clear message that it is up to Ukraine to determine the terms, conditions and time line for any peace agreement. We are continuing to reflect on how Ireland might best contribute to the objectives of the plan; we are already involved in many of the areas it covers, including food security, accountability and nuclear safety.

On energy, at the December European Council, we reviewed progress on the implementation of the measures in the October Council conclusions aimed at bringing improved co-ordination, stability, and predictability to the energy market. We emphasised the importance of phasing out EU dependence on Russian fossil fuels through stepping-up investment in innovation, infrastructure and interconnections, renewable energy, and energy efficiency projects. We underlined the importance of strengthening co-ordination and agreed that work should continue on: the speedy operationalisation joint purchasing, as well as an acceleration of discussions with reliable partners to secure long-term supply contracts; the efficient filling of gas storage facilities and the close monitoring gas demand reduction objectives; and the early preparation of contingency plans for winter 2023-24.

We invited the Commission to speed up work on the structural reform of the EU's electricity market, which is intended to make the market fully fit for a decarbonised energy system and facilitate the uptake of renewable energy. We agreed that the ongoing energy crisis endangers the EU's economic, industrial and technological base, requiring an ambitious European industrial policy to make Europe's economy fit for the green and digital transitions and reduce strategic dependencies.

The special meeting of the European Council on 9 and 10 February will return to economic issues. This follows our agreement in December on the need for a co-ordinated response to enhance Europe's economic resilience and its global competitiveness while preserving the integrity of the Single Market.

The Commission has been invited to conduct an analysis and to make proposals with a view to mobilising all relevant national and EU tools as well as to improving framework conditions for investment, including through streamlined administrative procedures. Work of the joint EU-US task force on the US Inflation Reduction Act is also ongoing. Europe needs a positive working relationship with the United States on the green transition; one that strengthens the transatlantic relationship, upholds the multilateral system, and builds an open, thriving marketplace for our innovators and investors. We need to avoid going down the road of a subsidy race when we face so many common challenges.

The December European Council also invited the European Commission to present, in early 2023, a strategy at EU level to boost competitiveness and productivity. The growth and innovation gap between Europe and its global competitors requires our focus.

In December, the Council took stock of the current security situation in Europe. In this light, leaders agreed to move forward to advance common procurement and joint investment strategies at an EU level. This is important in the wake of the war in Ukraine, which has put pressure on military inventories across Europe, as countries seek to assist Ukraine in its self-defence. Common procurement and capability development also have the potential to be valuable for smaller member states such as Ireland, given that we are currently embarking on an ambitious programme of investment in our Defence Forces.

The Council also took further steps to build a more secure cyberspace, with leaders supporting the creation of an EU policy on cyber defence, to be developed further over the coming months. In addition, it called for the swift implementation of the EU hybrid toolbox, with a view to countering hybrid threats and foreign interference and manipulation of information.

Importantly, the Council endorsed the political decision to increase the overall financial ceiling of the European peace facility by €2 billion. The decision sends an important signal of support to Ukraine and other partners, including in Africa, that the EU stands ready to fulfil our commitments around the globe.

In addition to a strategic discussion on transatlantic relations, which I have addressed, leaders had a strategic exchange on relations with the Southern Neighbourhood, which includes ten partner countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. I informed leaders of the tragic death of Private Sean Rooney in Lebanon and leaders expressed their condolences.

The European Council also discussed the situation in Iran, calling on the Iranian authorities to immediately end the use of the death penalty and to cease the unjustifiable use of force against peaceful protesters, particularly targeted at and against women.

The Taoiseach will travel to Brussels on 9 and 10 February for a special meeting of the European Council when leaders will again discuss developments in Ukraine, economic issues and migration.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are approaching the first anniversary of Vladimir Putin's barbaric and illegal invasion of Ukraine. It is important that we once again extend our solidarity to all of those fleeing the horrendous bloodshed. Everything that can be done must be done to bring to an end this cruel and senseless war. As a neutral country, we can play a unique role in advocating for peace and dialogue to end this war. I hope we will use our voice wisely, powerfully and consistently. It is important to impress upon European leaders the need for an escalation of talks, not of hostilities. While the initiative for a just peace sounds welcome, I have to express my alarm and concern that this war might prove to be a boon and win for the armaments industry and a humanitarian catastrophe for the people of Ukraine.

I also have to put it to the Tánaiste that blood has been spilled again in Palestine. We see Israeli aggression, Palestinian reprisal and innocent lives lost in Jenin refugee camp, in Gaza and in synagogues. This is the pattern under what is a right-wing hawkish Government. Whereas the commitment to accountability under the rule of international law and moves to punish the crime of aggression are very welcome, equally, crimes of occupation and the crime of apartheid on Israel's part need to be called out. I am extremely concerned that tensions and aggression are again building. I am concerned at the increasing illegal annexation, illegal settlements, threats of more to come, and the targeting of refugee populations. There is a clear mismatch between the insistence - correctly - on adherence to the rule of law when it comes to Ukraine and the criminal behaviour of Vladimir Putin and yet there is no equivalent standard, reckoning or accountability when it comes to Palestine and the state of Israel, which still enjoys a special partnership and relationship with the European Union. That is wrong.

For the sake of justice in Palestine but also in the interests of wider world order and commitment to the rule of law, multilateralism and a safe and secure world, Israel needs to be called out. The time for equivocating is over and the exceptionalism being applied to Israel

has to stop. I put it to the Tánaiste, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, and to his colleagues in government, that Ireland now needs to step up. We need to step up if we are to have any hope of breaking this cycle in the Middle East or ending the endless war of attrition and the endless targeting of refugee populations and dispossessed people on their own land. We have no excuse as Irish people. We know what that is. I want the Tánaiste, as the Minister responsible, and his Government, to act on that and to do so without further delay. They should apply the same correct standards as apply to Ukraine and Putin. That standard too must hold for Palestine and for Israel to end the occupation and the system of apartheid there.

Deputy John Brady: As we approach the first anniversary of the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, when war once again became an instrument of policy in Europe, I reiterate my commitment and support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and national self-determination of the Ukrainian people. Ireland must continue to offer its support to the Ukrainian people. The need for humanitarian assistance has never been greater, particularly as Russian forces continue to deliberately target civilians and civilian infrastructure. The UN has recorded casualty figures close to 20,000, including almost 7,000 civilians butchered, although it believes the real figures are much higher. Some 8 million Ukrainians have fled the country in search of safety right across Europe, while 6 million more have been internally displaced and close to 18 million people remain in need of humanitarian aid in Ukraine. Russia is deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure. In some regions as many as half the healthcare facilities have been destroyed. Millions of children have been impacted through the destruction of schools.

I re-emphasise my support for the work and investigations being undertaken by the investigator of the International Criminal Court. This is a conflict in which there have been countless documented instances of murder, torture and sexual assault of civilians. The continuing illegal transfer of Ukrainian civilians, including children, from Ukraine to Russia must be stopped. The importance of accountability and bringing to justice the perpetrators of these war crimes cannot be overstated. Every possible support must be offered to the investigators of the International Criminal Court and the continuation of the UN Black Sea grain initiative must also receive the complete support of the EU. Millions of tonnes of foodstuffs have been moved under this initiative to some 43 countries, many of which are enduring incredible suffering due to food shortages, climate change and regional instability exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine. It is imperative that access to food sources for suffering states is maintained to prevent further food insecurity and that prices are controlled to prevent spiralling costs.

I welcome comments made by the Tánaiste regarding the need for the EU to seek compensation for the habitual destruction of EU-sponsored structures by Israeli forces, including many structures and properties funded by the Irish taxpayer. It is important that the Tánaiste's words are not left to linger. He and the Government must follow up immediately with tangible action. It is long past time that Israel was treated the same as any other state that disregards international law so readily. Since the election of the most right-wing government in the history of Israel, violence has escalated. Tragically, extreme elements of that government are seeking to take advantage of recent tragedies to introduce even more punitive measures against Palestinians, while ignoring the violence of illegal Israeli settlers and military forces. Israel's security approach of mass raids, collective punishments and targeted killings is turning both Palestinian territories and Israel into a human rights cesspit.

A little over a week ago, 100,000 Israelis marched in protest at attempts by the new government to weaken the judiciary and exert more control over the supreme court. The Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has promised his right-wing allies in government that he will

annex the West Bank and restrict the Palestinian Authority, effectively imposing sanctions on Palestinian leaders. The list goes on. The question remains: what is the EU going to do to protect the rights of Palestinians? The continuing failure to act undermines the moral authority of both Ireland and the EU. We need the same political impetus and will as witnessed in Ukraine to be applied to investigations of war crimes in Palestine and other countries. Human rights must be implemented universally. They are not a pick-and-mix that one can pick and choose from. They need to be implemented universally and all perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held to account. It is long past time that the EU and this State acted. I call on the Tánaiste, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, to act immediately.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I will try to gallop through the broad list of issues that arose at the European Council meeting in the five minutes I have. Needless to say, Ukraine is the first issue. It has been the dominant issue at all European Council meetings since the barbaric invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing assault on the Ukrainian people by Russia. We need to take stock constantly of what we are doing to support Ukraine. We will not be supplying military capacity to Ukraine but one of the issues covered in the Council meeting was the provision of critical infrastructure support. Perhaps in his response, the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, will tell us exactly what Ireland will be providing. The Council has asked for such things as mobile heating stations, power generators, power transformers and high-voltage lighting equipment. These are the sorts of humanitarian and community supports we can provide. Are we doing so? The Minister of State might set out exactly what we are doing.

The Council also asked member states to intensify contingency planning for displaced persons. We hoped towards the end of last year that the dreadful onslaught against the civilian population had abated but it has intensified. Infrastructure critical to the provision of power, heat and light, as well as hospitals and schools, are being demolished by the ongoing unjustified and unconscionable attacks by Russia. We need to be able to provide for people who are displaced in that context. An EU-wide position must be clearly set out. I hope that is happening.

In respect of accountability for war crimes and support for the International Criminal Court, the Tánaiste talked about a special war crimes tribunal. It was suggested that Russian assets that have been frozen internationally may be deployed in the rebuilding of Ukraine. How close are we to achieving that? How legal is it? Where are we in that respect? It has been talked about for a long time.

Energy policy was another major topic of the Council meeting. There has been talk of finalising a new Council regulation enhancing solidarity. How will that impact Ireland? We have limited gas interconnection. Our gas interconnectors are with the United Kingdom, which obviously is not an EU member state. The issue of gas storage has also been urged upon us. There is limited capacity for gas storage in Ireland. These are common European objectives. How are they to be fulfilled in Ireland?

In respect of security and defence, the Council determined in its conclusion that the EU will take on much more responsibility for its own security. The Council has called on the Commission to present a proposal for a European defence investment programme. Where does that leave us? There is a feeling that a European defence structure is being created by stealth. In fact, it is not a matter of stealth for the many countries that advocate for and want such a structure. We seem to be going along with it in an unstructured way.

Deputy Micheál Martin: To what is the Deputy referring?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am talking about a common European defence infrastructure. When are we going to initiate the debate on exactly what our role will be in the EU's strong policy to take responsibility for its own security and cybersecurity?

I also raise the issue of the US Inflation Reduction Act, which has the unfortunate acronym IRA. It has been described by many as a serious threat to European competitiveness. I looked at the statistics relating to the relaxation of state aid rules from March 2022. Overwhelmingly, the greatest state aid came in two states, namely, Germany and France. That is distorting competition within our Single Market. We need to have a clear policy to ensure our competitiveness is not reduced because of the ability of some states to massively support their own industry.

I also raise the southern neighbourhood and Palestine. I am more profoundly concerned about the situation in Palestine than I have ever been. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu is going to be shocking in what it does. Mr. Netanyahu was bad the last time and it will be worse this time. The two-state solution seems to be disappearing. It is now an objective only sometimes to be talked about. We do not have time to do it now but perhaps we could have a debate on that matter in the House to allow us all to bring our collective thoughts to bear on what is a potential point of conflagration in the Middle East.

Deputy Seán Haughey: As everybody knows, 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of our membership of the EU. It is generally accepted that our membership has been transformative for us. It is entirely appropriate that we now take time to reflect on the past 50 years and to discuss how the EU should develop in the future. The Joint Committee on European Affairs has decided to have a series of engagements with key stakeholders in respect of our EU membership, finishing up on Europe Day in May. This will be a useful and worthwhile exercise.

Others have already spoken of the situation in Palestine. Sadly, there has been an escalation of violence in the Middle East in recent days. Tensions are running high in the region. Last Thursday, seven Palestinians were killed by Israeli troops in a raid in the West Bank town of Jenin. Palestinians retaliated by firing rockets from Gaza into Israel. There was then a shooting at a synagogue in east Jerusalem that resulted in the death of seven Israelis. That was followed by other attacks on civilians in Jerusalem and the tit-for-tat killings continue. I condemn all these acts of violence. A renewed effort is needed to restore peace in the region and to bring about a long-term political solution to the conflict. The composition of the new government in Israel, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, and his actions since becoming Prime Minister, do not give much hope for the future.

Last week, the Tánaiste, who is with us in the Chamber, attended the Foreign Affairs Council of the EU, at which a presentation was made by the Palestinian Prime Minister. The US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, is in the region at the moment, meeting with the political leaders on both sides. The situation is becoming increasingly hopeless. Israel is committed to prioritising, advancing and developing settlements in the Palestinian West Bank, including the validation of illegally built outposts and further annexation of territory. This ongoing establishment and expansion is contrary to international law. Of particular concern is the displacement which is taking place in the Khan al-Ahmar region of area E. It is now clear that Israel is by any definition engaging in apartheid on the Palestinian people through its laws, policies and practices. Numerous reports have found this to be the case, including the report by the UN special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, Professor Michael Lynk. Regrettably, these developments diminish the chance of achieving a just and lasting two-state solution. The time has come for the international community to recognise that and to take

appropriate measures in response. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be the political will to do it. I welcome the position taken by Ireland at a meeting of the UN Security Council on 19 December 2022, when, with a number of other states, we demanded that Israel immediately and completely ends all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and fully respects all its legal obligations in the region. In that context, Ireland too must continue its support to have these illegal occupations pursued by the United Nations through the International Court of Justice. The EU and the US need to do more generally in this regard. For political and historical reasons, as well as for reasons of international trade, many states are not prepared to do anything about these developments. They turn a blind eye. That is why it is so important for Ireland to continue to call out these developments and to demand appropriate action. It is also time for Ireland to recognise the state of Palestine, which is in the programme for Government. It seems to me there is never a right time to do so. Why not just get on and do it?

I understand that the issue of migration will be discussed at the next European Council meeting. Ireland, like many other EU states, is experiencing an influx of large numbers of international protection applicants and Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection, resulting in accommodation shortages. Such a crisis has not been seen in the EU since 2015 or 2016. The issue is now on the EU agenda again and is being considered by EU justice ministers. It is certainly a divisive issue. The EU's new pact on migration and asylum was first published in September 2020. It needs to be finalised as soon as possible. The Dublin regulation needs to be revisited and questions concerning persons arriving from known safe countries need to be addressed.

In regard to Ukraine, 24 February next marks the first anniversary of Russia's illegal, immoral and unjustified invasion of Ukraine. Russia was expected to take control of the country in a matter of weeks, if not days. This did not happen. We are all in awe of the bravery of the Ukrainian fight-back. Russian atrocities continue. More than 40 civilians, including children, were killed in a bombing on an apartment block in Dnipro. Russia has also threatened to use nuclear weapons in the conflict. Many states have supported Ukraine in a number of ways, by supplying weapons and military advice, giving financial aid to rebuild infrastructure, providing humanitarian aid and welcoming more than 8 million refugees on the move. Each state helps in accordance with its foreign policy and military traditions. The EU must stay the course on this. The strong solidarity displayed to date must endure.

In regard to recent developments in the European Parliament, this coming Thursday the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, will address both Houses of the Oireachtas. For the sake of democracy in Europe and the whole European project, it will be of crucial importance that the European Parliament deals effectively with recent revelations about bribery and illicit lobbying activities on behalf of Qatari interests. There have also been reports about the interests of Morocco being advanced in this inappropriate way. Has this influenced the change in approach by some EU states as regards a political solution for Western Sahara, which has led to an increase in support for the so-called Moroccan autonomy plan? One would have to wonder about all of that.

I will say a few words on the restoration of the political institutions established under the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. As we know, this is linked to the negotiations between the EU and the UK on the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol due to the actions of the DUP. With the appointment of Rishi Sunak as British Prime Minister, the mood music has become more positive. Agreement has been reached on the EU's access to the UK's customs

and IT systems. That is a good thing. It was reported in early January that the Taoiseach had admitted that mistakes were made on all sides in the handling of Brexit and that the post-Brexit protocol could be too strict. Previously, a British Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Steve Baker, made an apology for the way Brexit was dealt with by the UK. The relationship between Britain and Ireland has been reset with the appointment of Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister. I earnestly hope that an agreed solution by all sides can be negotiated in the coming weeks as we approach the 25th anniversary of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Jenin refugee camp is home to more than 22,000 Palestinians. These refugees were expelled from their original homes in 1948 during the Nakba. Last week, the Jenin refugee camp was subject to another attack which has been described as a massacre. Ten residents, including two young children, were murdered. The Israeli attack was reminiscent of a previous large-scale assault on Jenin in 2002 when Israeli undercover forces dressed as civilians entered the camp in private vehicles with Palestinian number plates and proceeded to kill more than 50 Palestinians over the space of 13 days. During last week's raid, Israeli forces in a military vehicle drove into the camp and proceeded to kill ten people, with one of the children who was killed having been run over. We know the Israelis have form in this, as the late Rachel Corrie was also killed in this manner. However, that this would happen to a small child is an imaginable horror. After unleashing the attack, the Israeli forces proceeded to shoot at ambulances so that they were prevented from treating the wounded. They fired tear-gas towards the Jenin public hospital, which then seeped into the children's ward. A fortnight ago, the President of the European Commission, President von der Leyen, said it was imperative that we maintain the positive momentum of EU-Israeli relations. I ask the Tánaiste whether he raised these horrors at the European Council meeting. If not, will he ensure he raises them at the next meeting?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: At the European Council meeting the Tánaiste discussed economic resilience. That requires investing in infrastructure. Why has the Government not included the western rail corridor project in the EU TEN-T? Only projects included in the TEN-T list of projects have access to the Connecting Europe Facility, known as the CEF fund. It is up to each country to lay out its priorities for rail, road, ports and so forth and submit them to the EU. There are two lists on this issue, the core list of projects to be completed by 2030 and then the broader list to be completed by 2050. In December 2021, the European Commission published its proposals for a revised TEN-T regulation. In this proposal the map of the TEN-T network in Ireland remains largely unchanged and the core network does not include the west. This means that transport projects in the west will have limited access to EU funding, particularly in the short term. Sinn Féin recently received confirmation that the Department will not even consider including the western rail corridor on the TEN-T network map until the all-island strategic rail review is completed. To the people of Mayo and throughout the west, this looks like a tactic to delay and frustrate, especially when projects in the greater Dublin area do not seem to need to wait for this review. Will the Minister ensure the western rail corridor is added to a core project list and is eligible for core funding? We cannot have the European Research Group, ERG, and the DUP holding up a project such as the western rail corridor. We cannot have the Government hiding behind that as an excuse not to invest in rural Ireland and not to deliver the vital infrastructure that is the western rail corridor.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Social Democrats for allowing me to use its slot. I am on record repeatedly condemning the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. I am not going to repeat that condemnation, which is without reservation. However, I will use the few min-

utes available to me to express my extreme concern that the situation in Ukraine is being used to fuel dialogue that is undermining our neutrality. This has been denied by the Tánaiste, who has unfortunately left the Chamber, and the Taoiseach, and *vice versa* when the roles were reversed. I have the most serious concerns about neutrality and how we are losing it incrementally.

Deputy Howlin said in a slightly different context that we must constantly take stock. My colleagues and I have a duty to take stock constantly of what neutrality means. That is an active policy. It does not mean standing idly by. It means positive action in promoting peace in the world. I am aghast that the voices are more and more for an all-out war between Ukraine and Russia, leading to an all-out third world war. We cannot raise our voices often enough to say this is utter, sheer madness. As a woman, female Deputy and mother, I cannot believe what we are allowing to happen in our name.

The policy of neutrality has served us very well. It has earned us respect throughout the world. Indeed, it earned us a seat on the UN Security Council. That term has now finished. We are failing to use that respect and the trust that people have in us to be a voice for peace. I am seriously concerned that the constant narrative from the Government, speakers from Government parties and various journalists is that we must speak with one voice and have consensus.

5 o'clock

That is the last thing we need in regard to what is happening in Ukraine. We need to be a voice for peace. We need to lift our voices to say that we have to stop this war, it is sheer madness and it will lead only to utter destruction.

In the context of our neutrality, I pay tribute to the courageous people who have kept up a campaign in all sorts of weather down in Shannon, at great cost to themselves. Ed Horgan and Dan Dowling were recently found guilty of trespass at Shannon Airport and ordered to pay €5,000 each, notably to the Clare Haven Refuge for women in County Clare. What is interesting is that the Circuit Court acquitted them of criminal damage charges after they allegedly damaged a US naval aircraft. The judge went on to praise both for their outstanding character, composure and dignity. She emphasised that the €5,000 was not a fine but a financial gesture, and they were ordered to keep the peace. Significantly, Ed Horgan's comment afterwards was:

We won't be celebrating today. We will be commemorating all the children killed in the Middle East – up to 1 million children – and unfortunately still being killed as we speak.

I imagine he would say the same about the children and people being killed in Ukraine, and the Russian soldiers as well.

This is about using our voice. I cannot repeat it often enough in my five minutes. I want to hear this. The Government is not speaking for us when it is joining with the big boys. It is not speaking for us when it does not criticise the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. It is worth repeating what he said when addressing Federica Mogherini, the former holder of the post. He stated:

Bruges is a good example of the European garden. Yes, Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom [and so on]...

He goes on to tell us:

The rest of the world – and you know this very well, Federica – is not exactly a garden.

In case we have any illusions, he tells us that the world outside of Europe is “a jungle”. That is the man who is High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. When he was asked to take that back, he made it worse and emphasised that everything outside is a jungle.

I am absolutely pro-European and a committed European. I abhor the military-industrial complex. I abhor what Europe is doing in our name and the outsourcing of the refugee problem. Here in Ireland, we now have a two-tier system. I do not know how anyone in this House could stand over a two-tier system of higher protection for people fleeing from the Ukraine war and lesser protection for the others. We are an absolute disgrace to stand over that two-tier system.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Paul McAuliffe: We return to the Government side. I call Deputy James O'Connor.

Deputy James O'Connor: I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, on his appointment and wish him well in that role. No doubt, it is going to be one with plenty of travel and I know he will do his very best for us.

In regard to the latest European Council summit, a number of important points were made. There was particular reference to the passing of Private Seán Rooney following his very sad death in Lebanon. I pay tribute to both him and Trooper Shane Kearney, who comes from my home parish where I am well acquainted with the family. It is good to see that he is making a recovery. Our thoughts are with them and the Kearney family, their relations and friends in east Cork, Killeagh in particular, and also Trooper Kearney's comrades in the Defence Forces. What happened came as a huge shock to us. If there is anything positive, it is that he is in good condition. It was very sad about the loss of his colleague and we remember him today in the Dáil.

Not everybody is going to agree with what I have to say but I must ask what the price of freedom is. I heard some of the rhetoric in this House today regarding the war in Ukraine. I respect that we are neutral country but it is not Ireland's decision and Ireland does not have the capacity to try to stop the conflict that is going on there. While we do have a voice on whether these hostilities come to an end, let us be realistic. It is up to Russia to do that. There seems to be no acknowledgement of that from some of the speakers who come in here complaining about Ireland's stance on neutrality. Effectively, the conflict will drag on and on until Ukraine can either defeat Russia, or Russia manages to do the opposite, which, of course, none of us here would like to see. This is a country that knows how difficult it is to obtain independence, to maintain it and to build a successful nation, which we have done for the past century. It is important that we acknowledge there has to be some level of protection of that. Something that is often lost in this House by some figures in the Opposition is that we have to do some work to try to protect that at the level of defence.

I understand a significant proportion of the European Council meeting was spent discussing defence spending and issues pertaining to the conflict in Ukraine. Unfortunately, in this country, we currently have two naval vessels tied up because we are unable to crew them. A message I would like to bring to the Government is that we need to get our own act in order. Unfortunately, I am hearing from people in the Defence Forces living in my constituency that they are continuing to struggle when it comes to pay and conditions. Another issue that is heavily affecting the Defence Forces is that in Cork in particular, where the main naval base and

home station is located at Haulbowline, there is huge demand for people who are skilled operators of ships, for example, marine engineers and people who are able to service the ships while on deployment. They are not staying in the Defence Forces due to the pay and conditions and because there are better alternatives for them in the area of Cork county and city. Pharmaceutical plants and medical device companies are crying out for these people because they are very well trained, respected and educated in their roles, and very passionate in the work they do.

The State needs to get serious about this. We are getting to a critical point where it is not going to be effective to maintain the Defence Forces that we have. We cannot afford to go backwards but this issue is being neglected, as it has been for a very long time. We have seen a gradual decline in the level of active personnel in the Defence Forces and it is also spilling over into other facets of the State, whether the Garda or other areas. I do not think we are being serious enough about this. We need to tackle the problem.

Another issue that has to be dealt with at European level, which I encourage the Minister of State to bring back to the Taoiseach, is that there needs to be much more discussion about financial relief, particularly for smaller businesses, not just here in Ireland but across Europe. European funding needs to be secured. We saw the great deal of success with which we managed to protect vulnerable businesses and industries throughout the pandemic, while economies across the Continent were very heavily impacted. Jobs, livelihoods and businesses were protected, in particular those that we needed in order to get on with life in a post-pandemic world. What I am starting to see, unfortunately, because of the drastic increase in the price of energy, the huge increases in the cost of materials, the logistical problems that stemmed from the pandemic and the consequences of the war is that many small businesses on our main streets in towns and villages across this country, and I am sure it is happening in other countries, are packing up because they cannot afford to keep going. It is appalling that we are allowing that to go unchallenged. The Government has to bring the message back to the European Union that there should be further relief and funding for small business owners across the length and breadth of the country because they have a role to play in the day-to-day life of society.

I have always been a strong believer in this. I am a member of Fianna Fáil and I regard myself as economically centre-left. The whole area of profitability around small business is important. People need to earn and make a livelihood out of running a small business. However, given the issues they are facing when it comes to the cost of inputs because of what happened in the Ukraine war and the pandemic, it is shameful to see them struggling to the extent they are. I do not think they feel they are being heard. I bring that message back to the Minister of State, Deputy Burke.

I want to highlight some degree of concern in another area. Deputy Connolly spoke at length about neutrality. I feel that our involvement in European Union battle groups is something that deserves a little more discussion in the precincts of this House. Obviously, such a move would be a huge adaptation of our role internationally in terms of the Defence Forces co-operating with other EU member states, particularly when there is an overlap with NATO. That debate has to happen here. It has to be thorough and there needs to be a national conversation on the issue. Polling shows very clearly that people's minds on this issue are not made up and they are not very much in favour of this happening, but the point has to be made. I said that I want to introduce a note of reality into the debate. In the next ten to 15 years, there will be great changes between the east and the west, between autocratic governments and democratic ones. We must do what we have to do to defend our way of life. That is just the reality.

From Ireland's point of view, I would hate to see us ever getting involved in any international conflict, but we must be realistic about where we stand at the moment. We are in a very poor position, not alone in terms of getting involved, but in defending ourselves also. I wish to emphasise the latter point. Unfortunately, within the Defence Forces - the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, will be aware of this - there are serious problems with the retention of staff. There are more serious problems with the lack of equipment. If we are serious about the conversation in the first place, pay and conditions must be addressed by the Government. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee about where the world is going over the next decade. It looks more uncertain than ever. The markets and the economy reflect that. Ireland must get serious about its own defence. We must try to remedy the situation we are currently experiencing which, unfortunately, is not very good.

Deputy Mark Ward: I note that the European Council expressed its condolences to the family of the Irish soldier, Private Seán Rooney, who lost his life while on a UN operation in Lebanon. It also expressed its sympathy to Private Shane Kearney, who was injured in the incident. I offer the same condolence and sympathy to the families of both men. I did not have an opportunity to do so before today.

I am the son of a retired soldier. My da went to serve his country in Lebanon with the United Nations force. I have spoken about my father here a number of times. I am extremely proud of my dad, but if he was standing here, he would be the very first person to say that while he was honoured to serve his country abroad and to work with the United Nations in Lebanon and other places on peacekeeping duties, he went there purely for economic reasons. Such was the poor pay in the Defence Forces when I was a child that my da would have to leave for six months or more. Even when he was home, he often had to break the Army rules and work in other jobs just to feed his family, which is bizarre, in order to supplement his poor pay, put shoes on our feet and shirts on our backs. My da was doing nixers in the Army throughout his entire 25 years of service. He worked in numerous jobs: the bar trade, security or anything that would bring in an extra few bob for the family. He did not want to do it. He would much rather have served his time in the Defence Forces and then come home to his family, but more often than not, he had to go straight from his work in the Defence Forces to a second job and sometimes he had a third job.

If we fast-forward to 2023, Irish soldiers are still going abroad for economic reasons. One young soldier in my area goes abroad every six months. He has five children and he goes away to serve with the United Nations. When he is home, his pay is so bad that he must apply for family income supplement. It is scandalous for a young man who has served numerous tours of duty abroad with the United Nations and has represented the Defence Forces in some of the most volatile places in the world that his pay is so bad that when he comes home he must sign on for family income supplement. It is high time that the Government recognised the Defence Forces and paid its members properly. Platitudes alone will not put food on the table.

There is also a problem with retaining highly trained Defence Force personnel, who are leaving in their droves. Over the years I have known a number of people who were in the Air Corps. They do not want to leave but they have had to leave because their pay and conditions were so poor that they sought out employment in private companies, which headhunts them. The training is so good and is of such a high standard that we must do everything possible to retain staff in the Defence Forces. They do not want to go to other companies or to work privately. They want to serve their country, but because of the current pay and conditions they are unable to do so.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There was an important meeting between the EU and NATO in January and an EU-NATO co-operation agreement was signed on 10 January. One of the crucial points within it is as follows:

NATO remains the foundation of collective defence for its Allies and essential for Euro Atlantic security. We recognise the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to, and interoperable with NATO.

In other words, Europe should invest more in building bigger armies, but only to support the US-led alliance of NATO. One of the outcomes of the horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the strengthening of the position of US imperialism, developing a clear hegemony over the process of European militarisation. That is part and parcel of an incredibly rapid process of militarisation taking place across the western world at this point in time. Sweden and Finland, two formerly neutral countries, have applied to join NATO and only Turkey's half-way opposition has delayed it until now. We have massive expansion of military budgets in Germany and in lots of other countries across Europe. We have the largest weapons transfer in history from western powers to Ukraine. In Ireland, one of two remaining formerly supposed neutral countries in the European Union, there has been a significant drive to abandon neutrality, to send troops to train Ukrainian soldiers alongside other European armies, to send equipment to Ukraine and to participate in the so-called Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which is described by the US Secretary of Defense as a NATO alliance.

We have massive expansion in the amount of NATO troops in eastern Europe, going from approximately 4,000 just over a year ago to more than 50,000 at this point in time. The very latest development is the sending of heavy tanks to Ukraine, Abrams from the US and Leopard 2s from Germany. There is even talk now of F-16s being sent to Ukraine. Who are the winners from all of this? It is the armaments corporations - the dealers of death and destruction. General Dynamics, which makes Abrams tanks and Stryker vehicles, reported a 15.5% increase in revenue in the fourth quarter of 2022. Raytheon Technologies, makers of the Stinger missile and Javelin launcher announced its profits had doubled in the last quarter of 2022. Lockheed Martin increased its revenues up to €15 billion for the last quarter of 2022, up 7%.

We must speak the truth. In the words of George Orwell, speaking the truth at a time of universal deceit is a revolutionary act. This is a time of universal deceit and incredible wartime propaganda in Russia but also in the west. The truth is that what we have seen is an horrific imperialist invasion by Russia of Ukraine. It is our comrades who are on the streets in Russia, in opposition to this war, who have been arrested for that. The truth is that it is the socialist left and People Before Profit who have been most consistent in our opposition to Putin, when Bertie Ahern was shaking his hand and when Tony Blair was rolling out the red carpet for him.

It is also true that what is happening at the moment is a proxy war between US-led western imperialism on the one hand and Russia on the other. In that conflict, neither side has the interests of ordinary people. Russia is looking to expand its area of influence after a period of retreat at the expense of the right to self-determination of ordinary people in Ukraine, but US imperialism in the west is seeking to hem in Russia and to prepare for a future conflict with China. It is ordinary people who are suffering. Instead of going along with the drive to war and with militarisation, ordinary people in Ireland should be raising their voice in opposition and in calling for peace. We must ring the warning bell and say that sending more and more heavy weaponry, which only goes in one direction - it is massive tanks now and it may be F-16s

in a couple of months - is a big danger to the entire world. It does not bring peace any closer; instead, it even brings the danger of nuclear conflict that threatens all of humanity.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe): The next speaking slot is Sinn Féin's but I will call Deputy Berry, if that is okay. I will then return to Sinn Féin.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I am very grateful for the opportunity to make some brief comments on the outcome of the most recent EU Council meeting in Brussels in December. I thank the Tánaiste for his background briefs to the House, which were very useful.

I welcome that the meeting's agenda was rightly dominated by the situation in Ukraine brought about by the unnecessary and illegal attack by the Russian Federation. I welcome the condemnation of the completely unacceptable missile strike and drone attacks, which specifically targeted civilian infrastructure. These were a complete war crime and a crime against humanity, and should be condemned as strongly as possible, which they have been. I welcome in particular the promotion of accountability, or at least the principle of it. I recognise that establishing a special court regarding what is going on is a difficult enterprise but it was done in respect of the former Yugoslavia, which is a very good model to work on. Will the accountability component deter these acts? Probably not, but a small fraction of them might be deterred, which means this measure is to be welcomed.

I completely acknowledge and recognise the promotion of the prospect of a just peace. However, I am very realistic about the prospects for it. I do not think the Russian Federation, particularly the current Kremlin regime, has any interest in a peaceful resolution. If it had, it would not have undertaken the journey it did 11 months ago. I welcome the principle but I am conscious of the unrealistic nature of it. Rather than a peaceful solution, we are far more likely to see an escalation in the next few weeks, probably before St. Patrick's Day, depending on the weather. We are looking at a major intensification of the fighting, which will be much worse this year than last. We do not want this to happen but we have to deal with the reality that it is the most likely scenario based on circumstances in Ukraine at present.

I welcome the call for the ending of the death penalty in Iran. What has happened there in respect of peaceful protest is outrageous and scandalous. There are kangaroo courts and extra-judicial killings of people who legitimately protested against an illegitimate regime. The fact that there was condemnation of Iran's provision to the Russian Federation of drones that targeted civilians in Ukraine is a good way to go.

On a positive note, and it is very important to finish on such a note, I welcome the European Union's engagement with its southern neighbourhood. We have a migrant crisis, which has arrived in Ireland for sure, and it is key to address the legitimate issues in the villages and towns in the countries of origin. The EU's southern neighbourhood needs to be given a fair chance through overseas assistance aid and fair trading practices so that they can improve and develop from a societal and economic perspective in step with their European cousins.

I welcome that President Roberta Metsola will address both Houses on Thursday. It is a positive step. MEPs communicate directly to their national parliaments about the European Parliament but it is always good to get a direct communication from the EU President. The fact that the next EU Commission summit on Ukraine will take place on Friday on Ukrainian soil is also a positive step.

I will finish with a question. The Minister of State may not have the details to hand but

perhaps he could follow up. My understanding is that Ireland has provided, or at least pledged, €66 million in aid to the European Peace Facility. How much of that has been drawn down? I hear very limited amounts have been drawn down so far. If it has been drawn down, what specifically has it been spent on? I ask for an itemised list of non-lethal items that have been purchased using it. I thank the Minister of State for hearing me out.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe): We will return to the Government slot. Deputy Murnane O'Connor has eight minutes.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: When the most recent EU Council meeting took place on 15 December, it was the last one that Deputy Micheál Martin attended as Taoiseach. Many of the issues discussed that day are still present today. It was so important that he participated in showing how much unity the EU has on all these issues. The Council addressed the war in Ukraine and listened to President Zelenskyy on the immediate needs and state of play. It is, therefore, important to say that there are significant issues on moving fast enough with our promises.

I ask the Minister of State to address the issue of those looking to provide services and accommodation to local authorities for our Ukrainian refugees. I know of many property owners who can accommodate refugees but, despite my interventions, still await action to arrange this. There seems to be a block in the system. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would examine the matter in order to free up the backlog. We all remain very committed to supporting Ukraine as much as we can. This European Council meeting has confirmed and reinforced the decisions in this process but we must be realistic. We are at a stage where we cannot find homes for those who need them. Many people are sleeping on the street - that issue will always come up - even though all of us are committed to helping out any way we can.

I am also concerned that in our kindness and eagerness to support refugees at this time there is a communication mishap, especially if there is any negativity. That is so important. We are here to help and to do our best. The biggest issue facing us as Deputies is that we are not being informed when refugees or those seeking international protection are coming so we can offer whatever assistance we need in order to help on the ground. It is important that we are there but, again, communication is a significant issue.

I commend the European Council on expressing its condolences to the family of the Irish soldier, Seán Rooney, at its meeting. Private Rooney lost his life while with the UN operating in Lebanon. I extend my sympathy to his family and colleagues, in addition to the victims of and those injured in the accident. Last week, the Tánaiste was adamant that those responsible for the killing of Private Rooney must be brought to justice. I totally agree with his sentiments. Carlow has a long history of sending soldiers to Lebanon. Private Rooney's untimely death was mourned in that county, as it was throughout the country.

This month, more than 200 military officers and enlisted personnel in the Defence Forces were conferred with an academic award by the South East Technological University, SETU. It was great to see the future of our peacekeeping so vibrant. It was the first SETU conferring for Defence Forces personnel. It was great to see them receive their awards in person for the first time since 2019. In fact, this ceremony was the largest annual military graduation in the State from a higher education institution. Due to the nature of their military service, some had to have their awards accepted on their behalf as some of them are currently serving in Lebanon, Mali and other locations overseas. They are doing such important work. I wish all who serve

in our Defence Forces well. I wish them safety in their jobs. I support the many calls to address the inadequate pay, pensions and conditions for members of our Army, Air Corps and Naval Service.

A recent question tabled by a colleague revealed that 591 people had left the Defence Forces and only 300 had been recruited. We have to address this and we have to ask why. When will the State implement the technical pay agreement agreed in July 2019? The EU working time directive does not apply to the Defence Forces. I hear so many stories of this and, of course, the huge number of hours. I also regularly meet Defence Forces families in my clinics, whose members earn such low wages they qualify for the State's working family payment supports. This is unacceptable. We should show our unity in this House on this matter and find solutions in order that we can support the growth of this career path for citizens who wish to pursue it.

It is important to wish everyone well today. We are so lucky that we have such great Defence Forces. It is so important that the issue of pay, conditions and proper wages will be addressed arising from today's debate.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I congratulate the Minister of State on his new role. It is a very interesting brief and I wish him well in it.

As Israel's fanatics take over its Government and shooting Palestinians becomes a national sport for the Israeli security forces, the Irish Government needs to go beyond expressing concern and condemnation. The apartheid Israeli Finance Minister recently said: "I may be a far-right person, a homophobe, [a] racist, [a] fascist, but my word is my bond." Mr. Itamar Ben-Gvir, the new Minister of National Security, who was considered too dangerous to draft into the Israeli defence forces and was convicted of incitement to racism, is now looking to bring in the death penalty. I heard the Tánaiste condemn the introduction of the death penalty in Iran. Surely the fanatical Israeli Government's calls for the death penalty to be imposed in Israel should be condemned equally and not just condemned but sanctions brought in to ensure that the Israeli Government realises that these measures are completely unacceptable. The new Israeli Government has exposed the myth that Israel is a secular, liberal and enlightened state. The new ministers have no interest in peace, equality or justice; they are more interested in hate, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their home and apartheid. Last year was the deadliest year in the occupied West Bank since records began in 2005. Last year 149 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces. That is nearly double the number killed in 2021. If the start of this year is anything to judge, the number for 2023 will exceed the numbers for 2021 and 2022 combined.

Deputy Martin Browne: I congratulate the Minister of State on his new role. Also, this is my first chance to send condolences to Private Seán Rooney's family on his untimely death.

I will focus on just two things that came out of the European Council meeting. One was the call on the Commission to present in early 2023 a strategy at EU level to boost competitiveness and productivity. That call was being made at the same time we had a Minister and a junior Minister appear before us on Committee Stage and say nothing at all about Coillte bringing in investment funds and selling off half our land to them. That has to stop and Sinn Féin has made a call in that regard. The Minister will tell us that these practices enable greater productivity on the part of our foresters. They do not. It is the complete opposite. We are driving foresters and small farmers out of the industry. I implore the Minister of State to talk to his fellow Ministers and try to reverse that decision.

Deputy Andrews talked about the situation in Palestine. I wish to address the dreadful scenes we see coming daily from the Palestinian territories at the moment. It is a continuation of the persecution of the Palestinian people that has been enabled by inaction on the part of this Government, the EU and others. They have sat on their hands and watched the daily slaughter of Palestinian people. Now we hear reports that, in addition to Israeli forces demolishing Palestinian homes, they want to build further settlements there. Israel has broken resolution after resolution and the Government must raise this, especially at EU level. Ireland was a member of the UN Security Council. We wasted that opportunity to raise the slaughter going on in Palestine.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Sinn Féin remains the only political party on this island that has produced a comprehensive policy on the rights of people in recovery. The Government has no strategic vision for those in recovery from addiction. There are countries right across Europe that have credible policies that recognise the human rights to which those who are in recovery are entitled. There is an opportunity to learn from our European neighbours, but instead we truck on and watch the community addiction sector be decimated by funding cuts, loss of autonomy and downright disrespect on the part of the Government. Many of our European neighbours have implemented the Communities That Care model. We could learn from that. We could learn how to strengthen our community addiction sector and recognise that those who are on the ground are the experts. Instead of ignoring the community and the addiction sector, let us learn from our European neighbours and many of the forward-thinking ideas they have. Let us give communities autonomy and the tools and the support to tackle addiction and to resource recovery. I believe that this issue has cross-party support and that we should work together and look at Europe and across the world to see what we can do to come together to support those in recovery and those who work with people in addiction.

Deputy Brian Leddin: First, I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, on his new position. I wish him very well in the role in the term ahead. Second, because I have not done so already, I join colleagues in expressing my condolences on the death of Private Seán Rooney. The European Council expressed its condolences at the weekend.

Coming up to a year ago - 24 February I think was the date the war in Europe kicked off - we spoke in this House in the weeks leading up to that point and none of us could quite believe what was coming. I spoke about the sabre-rattling of Putin and his regime. I just could not foresee a situation where the tanks would roll across the border and the missiles would fly through the air and start destroying Ukrainian cities and killing innocent civilians. A year on we have seen the absolute depravity of this war and it does not look like it will end anytime soon.

I wish to raise, as Deputy Berry did a few minutes ago, the issue of the European Peace Facility fund. Ireland has committed €66 million for purchase of non-lethal weaponry, that is body armour, medical bags and so on. Non-lethal weaponry could also extend to weapons to intercept missiles, such as those that came down on the city of Dnipro, or radar to intercept them. That would be consistent with the programme for Government. The relevant line reads:

Within the context of the European Peace Facility [fund], Ireland will not be part of decision-making or funding for lethal force weapons for non-peacekeeping purposes.

These would be non-lethal weapons. Ireland should do everything it can to prevent the utter carnage we see in Ukraine at the moment.

We should also look to the stores of weapons we have in this country. We have such equipment in our own military stores and could send it to Ukraine. We should actively consider that. Doing so would not contravene our neutrality. I believe that it is the morally and ethically right thing to do. We should do everything we can to help protect the civilians of Ukraine from Russia's acts of terrorism against them.

On the issue of neutrality, we are in the untenable situation where we are a neutral country but we cannot defend our neutrality. Speakers before me have talked about the importance of focusing now on our ability to defend ourselves and investing in it. The Commission on the Defence Forces report last year, the publication of which was a commitment in the programme for Government, points the way to significant, increased spending on our Defence Forces. Members have talked about the importance of pay and conditions and I absolutely agree with them, but the war in Ukraine should sharpen our focus when it comes to defence.

I was on a ferry coming back from France in March of last year. I was one of very few Irish people on the ferry. There were hundreds, perhaps more than a thousand, refugees from Ukraine on the same ferry coming into Rosslare. The television was on in the lounge of the ferry and citizens of Mariupol were watching the television and watching their city at that moment being reduced to rubble. There is nothing left of Mariupol now. I saw those citizens there. I watched with them. They were in tears as they saw their homes being destroyed. We have to continue to remember the utter devastation that has been brought to Ukraine. We cannot let this issue settle to the back of our minds. We have to keep it as a top priority for us in this country.

The flow of refugees into this country has created huge challenges for us and will continue to do so. We have had a population surge, a 7.6% increase in population, in the past five years. A lot of that is down to the good work of previous governments, including the job creation and the net inward migration. This country has got back on its feet in the past five or ten years from a very low point around 2010 and 2011, but now we have tens of thousands, 70,000 or 80,000, extra refugees on top of that 7.6% increase in the population. We are in a situation where we have not developed housing commensurate with the population increase we are seeing and with the refugee crisis on top of that we are in a dire situation with housing. I welcome the intent to revise the Planning and Development Act 2000, which the Minister of State will know a lot about from his previous role. We should be expeditious when it comes to planning. We should always be mindful of the rights of residents' groups and stakeholders, which should all be taken seriously, but we have to be able to make quick decisions and we have to build housing at a scale we simply have not done for many decades. This Government is doing that and will continue to do it but we can leave no stone unturned.

There is an argument, in the context of this increasing population and Ireland's role in taking in refugees and international protection applicants, to look again at our development plans and at the land we have around our country that is available for development. It is much harder in Dublin than it is in the city I come from, Limerick. We have a lot of land for development and we have infrastructure that can support the development of this land. I urge the Minister of State, in any engagements he has with the Land Development Agency, to point to Limerick and the vast land banks that are there. We can build high quality and high density housing near sustainable transport infrastructure and other critical infrastructure. We can take a lot of the pressure off cities like Dublin that are creaking at the seams. The reopening of the Limerick to Foynes railway line will happen by 2025, initially for freight purposes, but there is an opportunity there to develop residential settlements along the railway line in places like Raheen, Patrickswell, Adare, Askeaton and Foynes. That is a significant opportunity but the develop-

ment plan in Limerick precludes us from developing those areas. We need to go back into those development plans, even though many of them have just been agreed in the last year. We need to go back in, see what land is available and what infrastructure is there and activate as much land and residential development as we can in line with the good policies this Government already has in place in housing and development.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I wish the Minister of State every good luck and success. I compliment the Tánaiste on his recent trip abroad to our peacekeeping force in Lebanon and I acknowledge the sad events surrounding the death of Private Rooney. I think of his family and of all the peacekeepers. The reason I mentioned the Tánaiste's trip is that a constituent of mine who has a family relative out there was glad to see the Tánaiste over there meeting our troops and thanking them on behalf of all of us for the excellent work they do. They put themselves in harm's way for the good of everybody else.

I want to use the short bit of time I have to talk about energy security. We have seen what the Ukraine war has done in the massive increase in the cost of fuel and gas and what that means to us here with our energy prices. I want to highlight an anomaly in the Government's failed policies. For example, I mention the shutting down of Bord na Móna and what that has resulted in, and I am glad to bring the following matter to the floor of the Dáil. A ship came into Foynes over the weekend with biomass fuel which needs to be transported up to Offaly. It would not need to be transported there at all if we were cutting turf but now this bio fuel will need 1,750 articulated lorries to shift it out of the ship and up to Offaly. I hope they will redden the road from Foynes up there and I will tell the Minister of State why. I hope they will put black smoke out of their lorries too and I will tell the Minister of State why. They would not have to do it at all if the Minister of State and his Government had left us alone in the first instance and did not take the disgraceful action of shutting down Bord na Móna. That is the result and that is what the Minister of State, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens have done. Some 1,750 lorries are going up the road thanks to them.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too congratulate the Minister of State and wish him well in his role. He was always good in his last role. Ireland must be a voice for peace, justice and freedom. As a neutral country we should be doing everything possible to bring this horrible war to an end. It is amazing, as Deputy Connolly said earlier, how we can talk about no place else only Ukraine. As horrific as it is, there are wars going on everywhere. Clergymen were slaughtered in churches in Africa recently and there was not a word about it.

Did the Taoiseach, Tánaiste or the Minister of State raise the matter that is central to Ireland's immigration policy at the European Council meeting? It is imperative that we discuss it. The Rural Independent Group, which I am the leader of, has been calling for a grown-up and adult debate on Ireland's immigration policy for over six months. In 2022 Ireland took in over 70,000 people. We just cannot sustain this. I always said we should have capped it at maybe 25,000 or 30,000. Rinneamar ár ndícheall and in the sense of the meitheal people have helped but what is going on now is clandestine with busloads of people coming in during the middle of the night, many of whom are not from Ukraine, and it is happening in secrecy. I mention what is happening in Lismore House Hotel in County Waterford and what is happening in Cathair Dhún Iascaigh, where there are rumours. We do not get the information so I ask the Government to give us the information. The people have rallied and will rally but they need to be supported and not blackguarded. We need an adult, sensible, reasonable and respectful debate and we should not be shouted down here as we have been when looking for this debate. The whole country is talking about it and that includes every village, street and corner and we cannot have

a debate in this Chamber. It is quite absurd.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to say a few words on this, although my time is short. It appears the Government is deliberately blocking the public from having any voice when it comes to the Government's immigration policy, which is all over the place. This is clearly being dictated to us by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels and we cannot have a debate in here because we are held back from doing so.

I too want to talk about the energy policy we have. We shut down Bord na Móna in the middle of the country when we had no alternative and we have no alternative. We see that Germany, which seems to have common sense all the time about most things, is opening up its coal mines to ensure its people are warm and secure in their homes. It is doing something for its people but this Government is doing nothing only trying to ensure the people will perish with the cold. We had the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, out in the summer telling us we should not be cutting turf but I am glad that where I come from they are burning turf and they have turf to burn. I hope they will be allowed to have it for a long time because there is no alternative coming from the Government. The Government is not helping the people but it is trying to ensure that everything wrong is being done to them by stopping them cutting a bit of turf that never did any harm to anyone. When I see the smoke coming out of Dan Kelleher's chimney at 7 a.m., I am glad that he has a fire to keep himself warm because the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, would not keep him warm.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to statements on the European Council meeting. I was particularly concerned about this meeting's focus on strengthening security and defence. The European Council's conclusions support that the EU is "taking more responsibility for the EU's own security [and in the field of defence] pursuing a strategic course of action...and increasing the EU's capacity to act autonomously". The Council, during its meeting, also called for a commitment to invest in the capabilities necessary "to conduct the full range of missions and operations", including a rapid deployment capacity.

The constant focus on EU militarisation and the steps towards an EU army should be a cause for concern for everyone in this country, as Ireland is subtly being roped into this. We know it is not a cause for concern for everyone in this House but it should be for everybody in the country; there is no doubt about that. The year 2022 was a challenging time for Irish neutrality. The Government has assured us that this is not the case but many of us in opposition see the different ways in which neutrality is slowly being eroded. I have raised the concern of neutrality many times recently, however I feel that as public representatives we must do all we can to raise the concerns and interests of our constituents.

A poll from *The Irish Times* last year showed that a significant majority of people in Ireland disagreed with the statement that: "Ireland should send military aid to Ukraine, even if this affects our neutrality". Despite this, over the course of the year it seems that both the Government and the media have been adamant to shift the public's support for neutrality. Why is this? What is the reason for it? Why does the Government continue to refuse to act in the interest of its citizens? That is the big question.

At the beginning of this month, Irish representatives participated in one of the NATO military committee's meetings on NATO's strategy and war fighting concepts. Why would Ireland participate in these meetings when we are not a member of NATO? Why would we participate as a neutral country? More interestingly, why was it not even reported on?

Four EU members, Ireland, Malta, Austria and Cyprus, are neutral countries. However, the EU is forcing us into alignment with NATO. Why is this fact never acknowledged and respected at these European Council meetings? This is not what Ireland signed up for when we joined the EU.

It was also interesting that the European Council reported that the US is our foremost strategic partner and ally and we share deep and strategic ties. In what exactly is it a strategic partner? This is concerning, especially when one considers that Shannon Airport continues to be used by the US military to fuel the war in Ukraine, and in the Middle East where it is involved. This contradicts our obligations as a neutral country.

Recently Zelenskyy asked the US Congress for more money for weapons that will likely be shipped through our country. We cannot allow this to go on while calling Ireland a country of peace.

What we can do is provide a neutral voice at the negotiating table. We should encourage de-escalation and peace talks, not attending NATO strategy meetings. This island has unique experience and expertise in negotiating for peace. This is where our strengths lie. This is what we should be utilising in this uncertain and frightening time for many Ukrainians and, indeed, Europeans.

To do this, however, the EU needs to start respecting our neutral stance rather than trying to pull us into this militarisation that it is trying to force on member states. The media and the Government also need to start respecting what the Irish people want regarding neutrality, and the Taoiseach needs to start communicating this want at these European Council meetings. No doubt Europe might be pulling us one way but the Government is happily running down the road to meet them anyway regardless of the views of the Irish people.

I echo the Council's condemnation of the recent death penalty sentences pronounced following the ongoing protests in Iran. The right to peacefully protest is an important right and I am shocked and saddened at the treatment of peaceful protesters in Iran, particularly women. The introduction of a death penalty at any time, under any circumstances, is unforgivable.

I agree with the Council's calls to ensure the availability and affordability of agricultural products and fertilisers. This is an important topic. More time should have been spent addressing this than addressing security and defence at these Council meetings.

There are significant concerns regarding food security. I raised these recently. This is something that we should debate further in this Chamber rather than continuously talking and pushing on what is happening with NATO. The Government should declare what it wants to do, come out straightforwardly and say it wants to get rid of neutrality and it wants to be part of an EU military strategy, and then be open about it and have a proper debate on it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Paul McAuliffe: That concludes the statements. We will move to the questions portion. While there is no set time on the questions, I am gauging interest in the Chamber. I ask Members to be concise, to confine themselves to approximately two minutes and to allow the Minister of State two minutes to reply. The first group is Sinn Féin.

Deputy John Brady: First and foremost, I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, on his new position. This is my first opportunity to question the Minister of State on the

floor of the House and I will try to be brief.

I have a couple of questions and we can take them one at a time in the first slot.

As we approach the first anniversary of the illegal invasion of Ukraine, I want to talk about the refugees who have been forced to flee Ukraine. Some 8 million, at this point, have fled the country in search of safety across Europe. When the war broke out, in February last year, the Government said that we could expect up to 200,000 refugees to land in Ireland. There is still no plan to house the 70,000 plus who have arrived here to date. We are expecting another new Russian onslaught once spring arrives. What analysis has been carried out by the EU on the expected number of Ukrainians to flee over the next number of months and what measures are being provided to member states by the EU to help address the many needs of those refugees once they come to Ireland or other member states?

Minister of State at the Department of the Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputies for their questions and their kind comments.

First, on the temporary protection directive, 72,000 Ukrainian citizens have been welcomed into Ireland. The response has been challenging. We have seen potentially an 1,100% plus increase in Ukrainian citizens who are availing of international protection or a request for same coming into the State and we are trying to respond to provide shelter on both fronts.

In terms of a plan, we are well under way regarding a rapid build trying to provide emergency accommodation for Ukrainian citizens as well as the unoccupied homes call that is out from the local authorities, and our community call forum, which was rebranded post-Covid to deal, through the local authority network, with assisting Ukrainian citizens and drawing all the ties of the State agencies together. The Cabinet has also increased the recognition payment in respect of private homes, where we have seen so many citizens across the country step up to the mark. With regard to the community fund, we have €50 million to support communities, which have stepped up to the mark in this response, with infrastructure.

As the war escalates - we have seen horrific consequences on the ground in Ukraine - it is exceptionally difficult to say what the flow of Ukrainian citizens into Ireland will be. Through the Ukrainian embassy here and the Ukrainian ambassador, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and all the team are in close contact regarding the horrific consequences. The emergency European Council meeting next week will be to the forefront of it as well in terms of the continued response as we hit the first anniversary.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I think we have time for me to ask two different questions. I want to ask about Ukraine first.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Paul McAuliffe: We will have time for a number of rounds.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Okay.

This is my first opportunity to congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, on his new role. I wish him well in a very important role for Ireland.

I mentioned that we will not provide military weapons to Ukraine. What they have asked for is critical infrastructure. I stated the Council has asked for mobile heating stations, power generators, power transformers and high-voltage lighting equipment. Are we mobilising that?

Have we gone across State agencies? I saw some being provided by the ESB, but is there a coherent and strategic plan to respond to the cry for help for a nation that is now being battered by Russian bombardment? I refer to infrastructure to provide light and heat as there are still many months of Ukraine winter for the people to face. What are we doing about that?

To follow up on Deputy Brady's question, the conclusions of the Council stated that the member states should intensive contingency planning for displaced persons. That is what we signed-up for. In terms of our contingency planning for the next 12 months, what number of additional refugees is it based on? The Minister of State said it is hard to gauge but the Government is putting infrastructure in place for some number. What is that, and what specifically are the contingency plans the Government has?

Third, I mentioned that the Council asked the high representative and the Commission to examine the use of frozen Russian assets to support Ukrainian reconstruction. That is a splendid idea. There are tens of billions of euro of Russian assets frozen. Is it legal to sequester them and deploy them to undo the damage that Russian bombardment of Ukraine has currently unleashed on the people of Ukraine?

An Ceann Comhairle: Will we take another question or does the Minister of State want to deal with that?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We are dealing with them one at a time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Fine.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Howlin for his kind wishes.

In the first instance, in regard to the response, "Yes" is the answer to the Deputy's question in terms of the key infrastructure. President Zelenskyy, on the phone call that recently took place with the Tánaiste and Minister of Foreign Affairs, underscored the level of investment they need in their SME sector to rebuild the country, of which Ireland has provided €25 million which has been disbursed in the most recent budget.

6 o'clock

To give a flavour of some of the really important interventions on the ground, we have provided in the region of 4,000 blood bags, 10,000 bio-protection suits, 50,000 medical protection masks, 10,000 tonnes of meals and foodstuffs and more than 200 units of body armour. We have provided contained water treatment plants that have been brought out, as well as funding through the mechanism of the World Bank.

I had a bilateral conversation with my Austrian counterpart and she underscored the importance of non-lethal aid in the response to Ukraine. When she was out there with a group of European foreign affairs ministers there was, unfortunately, a bombing close by and as the first responders from Ukraine were attending that site she could see visibly the Austrian symbol on the back of the protection equipment that they had handed over. That was a very visible response and showed the effect that non-lethal interventions can have, which is very important for our country.

Regarding the plans for rapid build homes, we currently have six sites and most are on site. We are trying to increase this through the local authority network and to get more derelict properties back into use. I know the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth are working across purposes trying to achieve a significant increase but as I know from my experience over the past 12 months in the Department with responsibility for housing it is very difficult to project into the future with the huge uncertainty surrounding what will happen in Ukraine.

In terms of the twin approach with international protection, I saw a figure that in the period of January to January there was more than an 1,100% increase in international protection citizens coming to Ireland to seek asylum, which is a massive increase. It was very hard to predict a year previous to that but the State is really ramping up its response and trying to ensure we have shelter, which is very important.

The State has frozen around €1.8 billion of Russian assets that are currently in Ireland. The competent authorities are the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Central Bank of Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. I note that work is underway to see how they can re-purpose those assets in terms of rebuilding Ukraine and I understand there are legal issues at the moment as to how they may do that but they are working collectively with the EU to see what is possible to achieve that and we would support that.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will take questions from Deputy Mattie McGrath and Deputy Brady and the Minister of State will then respond.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Go raibh maith agat. I asked the Minister of State - I wish him well in his new role - if the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste or he himself had raised the issue of the huge pressure and the weight on our country from our obligations to take in, I think it is now 70,000, and the huge pressure it is putting on our systems. We are not really able to cope, quite clearly. People here have been gallant in opening their homes and community halls and groups, with a sense of meitheal; ní neart go cur le chéile. However, we have to have a pause and a bit of a break to chart out a roadmap. Did the Minister of State raise that with the Europeans or are we all the goody goodies who say to send as many as they want and we will take them? Did they asked for mercy, which is the wrong word, but some breathing space so we can try to source accommodation?

I have a question for the Minister of State, who comes from the Department with responsibility for housing. I meet people daily who have offered properties to local councils. I met one person today in Lisheen in Clonmel offering a fine property with three apartments and dealing with one of the voluntary housing bodies and the council showed no interest in it. It is the same with Lismore which has a hospital that is not used and a number of other derelict buildings. Did they have to take the only hotel they have? It is the same in my own town of Cahir where places are taken over. It is sending out the wrong message. There is a lack of communication. We should bring the people with us. Irish people will not shy from supporting people but we must challenge this.

Why we do not have a word about what is going on in Iran or in Africa where clergymen are being slain and slaughtered, and sometimes Uachtarán na hÉireann decides that it is climate change that caused this? Why do we not raise our voices on these things? The war in Ukraine is horrible, as are all wars, but it is not the only atrocity being carried out. They are horrible atrocities, do not get me wrong, but there are other areas and we seem to forget about them. I do not know what causes this, if it is colour of skin or whatever, but something is causing it that we turn a blind eye and have no interest as Europeans and as Irish people in what goes on there.

Deputy John Brady: It is really important that all perpetrators of war crimes are held to account for their crimes, for crimes against humanity, for butchery and grotesque murder of civilians in any circumstances. I welcome the EU push and the involvement of Ireland in the investigation by the International Criminal Court of all of the Russian atrocities. I genuinely welcome that and note that the Tánaiste spoke about the special tribunal that is being looked at to advance justice for all of those who have lost loved ones as a result.

However, this is a stark contrast to the approach, not just by the EU or Ireland but by the international community in relation to war crimes, crimes against humanity and breaches of international law against the Palestinian people. I note there is not the same intensity to the investigation by the International Criminal Court of war crimes perpetrated by Israel against Palestinians and that case has been open since 2019. I ask the Minister of State what actions this Government and the EU are prepared to take with regard to standing up for international law right across the board but particularly when one of the most serial violators of international law and perpetrators of crimes against humanity is Israel. What actions will this Government take? Will it finally recognise the state of Palestine? Will it implement the occupied territories Bill? Is the EU going to do anything? Will it end the preferential trade agreement with Israel or will it continue to side with the violators of international law in some circumstances? What actions will the EU take and what actions will this Government take?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Howlin will come in again.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I have a supplementary question relating to the US's inflation reduction Act which was debated at the European Council. I know that at the previous summit between France and Germany, considerable concern was raised about the impact that it potentially has for European business and European competitiveness due to the fact there is so much money to be employed in the United States to support US manufacturing. The concern is that if it is left to individual member states that obviously Germany and France have very deep pockets. I instanced where the state subsidy had been relaxed from last March and the enormous preponderance, two thirds of the state aid in the past 12 months, being deployed by those two countries. It is a distortion of the Internal Market. What is the strategy of Ireland to ensure our manufacturing and our export sector is not adversely affected by investment by states, either in the European Union itself or by the United States under the inflation reduction Act?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Members for their questions. In relation to Deputy Mattie McGrath, I understand that the Taoiseach committed to a debate on these issues in the next two weeks during today's Order of Business, if I am not mistaken. Obviously as a member of the EU we are to the forefront in meeting our international obligations to ensure that those coming, who are very traumatised and in very difficult circumstances, are provided with shelter and accommodation. That is proving a huge challenge in terms of the logistics in rolling that out but we are doing our very best to ensure we can provide a very strong response. As for Iran and the huge atrocities being carried out there, that was raised at the recent European Council meeting. The EU was united in its condemnation of the death penalty and also of the atrocities and the denial of human rights, integrity and dignity in Iran. That was to the forefront of the meeting and detailed in the communiqué issued following the meeting.

The special tribunal was raised in respect of Ukraine as well as Palestine. We are to the forefront on this and the Government has been united in our response to the atrocities taking place in respect of women, children and all people that this is happened to in Palestine. We absolutely condemn it. It has been raised on several occasions. On 3 October, the EU was to the forefront

in keeping dialogue open and condemning the atrocities and the illegal settlements in Palestine. We in the Government are united with the EU as a single force to ensure our voice is heard. It is about getting the balance in keeping the dialogue open with Prime Minister Netanyahu, to be able to achieve that.

Deputy John Brady: That dialogue has not worked up to now.

Deputy Peter Burke: With regard to Deputy Howlin's contribution, the Taoiseach was very concerned about the Inflation Reduction Act. The Deputy quite rightly referred to state aid and the beneficiaries of that, which is a massive concern for the Government. President von der Leyen said the Commission will issue a package of measures on four key issues - regulatory environment, finance, skills and trade - in the coming days as a response. Competitiveness is key to the EU and we are very much exposed to that, as the Deputy rightly pointed out. We are trying to build a close relation with the US but we must also be very mindful as to the impact the Inflation Reduction Act may have, including on the acceleration of the green economy. As to state aid and the temporary measures that were taken, we must be careful as to how they affect Ireland and how they can benefit other major EU economies. I will be to the forefront in raising this at the upcoming EU summit.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes the Minister of State's response. He may now provide his concluding remarks.

Minister of State at the Department of the Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputies for their statements and questions. I will now address further issues that were on the agenda of December's European Council meeting. At the meeting, leaders agreed to grant EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a real opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina to move forward and I support their path and the efforts they now need to undertake to deliver their programme of reforms. A new government was formed in Bosnia and Herzegovina last week. I wish President Borjana Krišto, as chairperson of the Council of Ministers, and all of her colleagues in the government every success. Ireland stands ready to support the government and people of Bosnia and Herzegovina in preparing for membership of the European Union. We will also continue to support a peaceful and secure future for all the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina through the participation of members of the Irish Defence Forces in EUFOR Operation Althea, and we were proud to have played a role in the successful renewal of the Althea mandate last November during our term on the United Nations Security Council. The opportunities afforded to Ireland as a member of the EU should be afforded to all countries that are prepared to meet the requirements of accession. Ireland will support those who wish to join on that basis.

I also welcome that the EU officially launched accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in July. This sent an important signal to the region that the EU remains serious about enlargement. In December, EU Leaders welcomed Croatia's entry into the Schengen area as of 1 January 2023, and discussed Bulgaria's and Romania's future accession to Schengen. Another important milestone was reached by Croatia on 1 January, when it became the 20th EU country to introduce the single currency. Croatia has worked hard to achieve the economic convergence required for introducing the euro, including far-reaching economic and governance reform and sound public spending policies. Croatian citizens have now joined a community of 347 million Europeans who are using the euro in their everyday lives. By becoming its 20th member, just a decade after becoming a member of the EU and barely three decades after becoming an independent country, Croatia's accession is a timely reminder of the

potential and opportunities that EU membership can unlock, and at pace.

I will take this timely opportunity to discuss the Swedish EU Presidency, which began on 1 January 2023.

At a time of historic challenges for the European Union and its member states, the Swedish Presidency programme sets out the priorities and main direction for the work of the Council in the first half of this year. These are grouped under four main headings, the first of which is security. The swift and decisive EU response to the illegal invasion of Ukraine is a manifestation of our political strength when we act collectively. The Swedish Presidency will prioritise continued support for Ukraine and its path towards EU membership. It will focus also on tackling cross-border organised crime.

The second is competitiveness. While urgent political attention is necessarily devoted to the war in Ukraine and its immediate economic impacts, strengthening Europe's economy to meet our long-term challenges must also remain an important focus. Europe's strength and global standing depend on our economic resilience, building on the dynamism of the Single Market and its influence on open global trading standards, while providing the best possible conditions for investment, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Third is the green and energy transitions. The Swedish Presidency will continue efforts to tackle high and volatile energy prices while addressing long-term energy market reform. Europe must lead by example in shaping a global response to the global climate challenge, putting its Fit for 55 agenda into action and speeding up the energy transition. Joint European steps towards independence from fossil fuels are necessary not only for the green transition, but also for our collective security.

The fourth priority is democratic values and the rule of law. Upholding the principle of the rule of law and fundamental rights is an essential element of every Presidency of the Council. The EU is based on democratic values, individual freedoms and non-discrimination. I wish Sweden every success for its Presidency term. This is a critical time in the history of our union and the ambitious programme presented by the Swedish Presidency, with the collective response to the ongoing war in Ukraine at the heart of it, provides the right basis to meet these challenges head on.

I look forward to travelling to the General Affairs Council in Brussels next Monday, 6 February. The agenda will include an exchange of views on the priorities of the Swedish Presidency, an update on the state of play in EU-UK relations, and preparation of the special meeting of the European Council on 9 and 10 February 2023. I expect the agenda for the special meeting to include economic issues and migration. Leaders will also get to discuss the situation in Ukraine.

The discussion on economic issues follows agreement in December on the need for a co-ordinated response to enhance Europe's economic strength and its global competitiveness, while preserving the integrity of the Single Market. It comes in the wake of the adoption by the US of its Inflation Reduction Act.

Discussion of migration is expected to focus, in particular, on the external dimension of the issue. Co-operation and mutually beneficial partnerships with third countries of origin and transit are important in reducing irregular migration and the numbers undertaking dangerous journeys.

31 January 2023

I conclude by again thanking Deputies for their participation in the debate. I look forward to future debates on this important topic including as we continue to mark 50 years of Ireland's membership of the European Union.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the National Cultural Institutions (National Concert Hall) (Amendment) Bill 2022 without amendment.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Mark Ward: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges:

— the commitment, dedication and hard work of staff within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), children's health services and organisations that prioritise the mental health of young people;

— the work of the Mental Health Commission in reviewing CAMHS cases, and in publishing the interim report;

notes that:

— the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly TD, and Minister of State at the Department of Health, Mary Butler TD, have allowed the waiting list for CAMHS to increase by 86 per cent since the formation of the Government in June 2020, with the number of children waiting longer than a year for a CAMHS appointment increasing by 168 per cent;

— there has been a significant reduction of inpatient capacity for CAMHS, resulting in more than 700 young people presenting to emergency departments in 2022;

— the Report on the Look-back Review into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services County MHS Area A (Maskey Report), identified 240 children in South Kerry CAMHS who were put at risk, and of those 46 who were put at significant risk in the handling of their care;

— arising from the Maskey Report, a national audit of CAMHS was launched by both the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Mental Health Commission;

— concerns were escalated to the HSE by the Mental Health Commission before the report was completed; and

— many children and young people with open cases have been lost to follow-up, with 140 “lost” cases in one team;

further notes that:

— recruitment and retention issues are affecting all aspects of the HSE workforce, including those working in mental health; and

— ineffective recruitment panel systems contribute to this staffing crisis; and

calls on the Government to:

— urgently set out a timeframe for how they intend to review all open cases across all CAMHS teams as recommended by the Mental Health Commission, with a particular focus on children and young people who have been lost to follow-up;

— implement immediate regulation of CAMHS under the Mental Health Act 2001, as a priority;

— support the Mental Health Commission in completing its review into CAMHS;

— reinstate a national Clinical Director for mental health to ensure accountability within mental health services;

— improve integration between primary care, disability services and CAMHS;

— set out a clear multiannual funding plan with which to give CAMHS autonomy in delivering quality care, and in the medium-term to extend the current CAMHS to include 18-25 year olds, to ensure that there is no “cliff edge” and no “lost” service users, and to link this new service in with adult mental health services for a smooth transition between both services;

— develop national standards for monitoring of antipsychotic medication;

— urgently implement a CAMHS waiting list reduction and management plan;

— commit necessary funding to prioritise the rapid modernisation of healthcare information systems, including individual health identifiers, an integrated waiting list management system, and a centralised referral system;

— develop a joined-up, proactive, and comprehensive health and social care workforce strategy, to increase education places and training opportunities between the Department of Health and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the HSE, Regional Health Areas/Hospital Groups, and higher education institutions; and

— legislate to prevent young people from being admitted into adult psychiatric wards.

The Government has not tabled an amendment to our motion and, therefore, I presume it will not oppose the motion. This is a tactic I will address further in my closing remarks. Sinn Féin is more interested in providing solutions than playing politics, such as the solutions to the woeful neglect by successive governments in the failure of children’s and young person’s

mental health services. Parents of young people will be watching who are desperately trying to get the proper mental health care for their children. There are a couple of parents I know in the Public Gallery to listen to us today.

I echo the Mental Health Commission report that states in some instances children and young people get excellent care from dedicated staff while under the care of the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. While this is true in some cases, it is the complete opposite for many families.

Sinn Féin's motion will ensure mental health services for children and young people are properly resourced and fully staffed and provide support when and where they are needed. The scandals in CAMHS were laid bare once more last week. The Government needs to act urgently to ensure we have services that are fit for purpose for our children and young people. Current services are not. There are serious concerns and risks for patients accessing CAMHS. This is a second report concerning children being placed at risk while under the care of CAMHS.

Where the Government has failed, Sinn Féin want to offer solutions. Early intervention is key. All children and young people deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential. Children and young people must have access to mental health services when and where they need them. Eligibility for services should be extended to 25 years of age to prevent children falling off a cliff edge at the age of 18. This was outlined in *Sharing the Vision*. The majority of acute long-term mental difficulties develop between the ages of 16 and our mental health services must reflect this. We are calling for multi-annual funding for CAMHS so it can operate and forward plan to be able to properly staff teams. We are calling for an integrated IT system to improve quality of care. It is 2023 and it shocking to the extreme that we do not have an integrated IT system for children and young people's mental health.

There is a fundamental need for greater accountability and oversight across the health service. We are calling for the reinstatement of the national director of mental health services in the HSE who would report directly to the CEO of the HSE and the Minister of the day. There has been no national director of mental health services since 2016, despite the current programme for Government containing a commitment to reinstate the position. The Minister has called for this but the HSE seems to be blocking this appointment. There seems to be a big disconnect between the Minister and the HSE. Who is in charge?

The Government must prioritise the recruitment of a youth mental health assistant director in the HSE, as promised in budget 2023. This post is essential to ensure leadership in the improvement of mental health services for children and young people but recruitment has yet to begin. Again, there is no urgency.

Sinn Féin wants to empower CAMHS to be able to respond to issues raised in the Mental Health Commission's interim report. I thank Dr. Susan Finnerty and the commission for publishing this report early. The report did not come as a shock to any family with experience of accessing CAMHS. They know too well that the Government has been failing young people as waiting lists have dramatically increased under its watch.

We must introduce national standards for monitoring anti-psychotic medication. We must develop a joined-up and comprehensive health and social care workforce strategy to increase educational places and training opportunities between the Departments of Health and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We must increase undergraduate and

postgraduate courses and training places for mental health professionals. Minimum staffing levels for CAMHS must be published so at least we have something to aim for.

Our mental health services are in crisis and we can do so much better. We owe it to our children and young people. Our young people deserve hope, solutions and mental health services that are fit for purpose. There is nothing worse than denying a child or young person every opportunity to reach his or her full potential.

Deputy Pa Daly: I welcome Valerie O’Sullivan, who has travelled from Tralee to be here. She can only be described as someone who has survived her treatment in CAMHS. Some other children in County Kerry and their parents, with whom I have spoken, must have laughed when they heard rhetoric about cherishing all children of the nation equally after, for example, scrambling around looking for a bed for their daughter with a life-threatening eating disorder. We see the physical and mental damage caused by overprescribing and over-medicating. Regarding children given anti-psychotic medication for relatively minor mental health difficulties, one child said it felt like she was in a cartoon with hallucinations and going around like a zombie when she only needed help for a sleep disorder. We see the loss of potential and the loss of family cohesion.

Since the Government came into power, waiting lists for CAMHS have increased by 86%. The number of children waiting longer than a year has increased by 168%. Coming up on the train this morning, I heard about the State strategy for defending nursing home charge claims. Last Monday week, as the news broke about the Mental Health Commission, the HSE gatekeepers, who are never slow to miss an opportunity, saw a good day to announce that it was going to carry out a full look-back review into the north Kerry cases. When looking into what was in the statement, the HSE said it was going to carry it out but that it would take what it described as a little time to put the clinical team in place. It should be remembered that this is from an organisation that said last October it would produce the north Kerry review in two weeks. The HSE said it would also need an independent expert to chair the review. We still do not have this expert. When I repeated a call for the review to stretch back over 15 years, the HSE said its priority was to review the young people currently under the care of the north Kerry CAMHS team, which is what the Mental Health Commission had already got earlier on that day, so a bit of a three-card trick was announced on that day.

I am calling for the HSE to review all the open cases, as is recommended by the Mental Health Commission; immediately regulate CAMHS under the Mental Health Act; reinstate a national clinical director to ensure accountability; most importantly, develop the national standards for monitoring anti-psychotic medication; and give us a timeframe for the review of all north Kerry cases going back over 15 years, particularly where Risperidone was prescribed. The children and people of north Kerry deserve no less than that.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank Deputy Ward for bringing forward this motion and all his work and advocacy on mental health. The motion clearly calls for straightforward reform so that resourcing is matched with staffing and services are available when and where they are needed. That is one of the key issues because my experience with CAMHS is that people have difficulty accessing the service. First, the referral can be quite daunting. They are also fobbed off in many cases.

In community healthcare organisation, CHO 5, which is the catchment area of my constituency, 314 children have been waiting more than 12 months for an appointment. These are 314

extremely vulnerable children. A recent case of mine involved a child who was suicidal, presented to their GP when they had been on the list for CAMHS for two years at that point and was told there was a drop-in psychology clinic, which was completely inappropriate. This child really needed the intervention of CAMHS. They were undergoing some level of counselling but we all know there is a difference between counselling and therapy and the very specialised intervention some children need with CAMHS. This child had to present to the emergency room in the end to get that appointment. As a public representative making representations, it was only when the appointment was given through the emergency department that the service came back to us to say there was an appointment, which I found quite cynical.

Tme and again I say in this Chamber that we are letting our children down. In a meeting today of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, we listened to parents trying to fight for the most basic services for their children with disabilities and here we are talking about children with mental health difficulties being failed. I urge all Deputies not just to support the motion; I call on the Government to ensure it is acted upon, we get the staff in place and the process is made much easier and more straightforward for parents.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend Deputy Ward on the motion. What we are dealing with this evening is years of underinvestment. This is the reality. We can see it across the entire State. CHO 1 in my area has not yet received a lookback into all these issues but I am quite confident that it will be the same as everywhere else because the experience of young people and their families has been the same. They have been let down, there are long waiting lists and those who are in the service find it to be *ad hoc*. They meet a clinical psychologist, that person is gone, a new person comes in and they must start from the beginning again. This chopping and changing is the routine they have had to deal with and it has not led to good outcomes. In fact, it has led to very poor and sometimes tragic outcomes for many families. A couple of months ago, I was contacted by a father who told me that his daughter had been brought to CAMHS, diagnosed and put on medication. He looked for an appointment for her to go back for a review of the medication which she was supposed to get after three months. She could not get an appointment. The only answer she could get from CAMHS was to go to her general practitioner, GP. She went to the GP, who said the medication would be continued but only for three more months because they were not qualified to do this. CAMHS did not have the resources to bring the child back to review her medication. That is a problem across the entire country. It is why we have many young people who have been on anti-psychotic drugs for years and have damaged their health, sometimes irreversibly. The State has to own up to having a problem with this service. The problem is that it has been under-resourced.

This is not just a matter of not having resources or not being able to find the particular qualified people to do the job. The problem is much bigger than that. It has not been recognised as something that is urgent and crucial. We all know the adage, a stitch in time saves nine, about early intervention and so on, yet in these cases, children and their families were left in distress for years before they were dealt with. The outcome of that has been continuous poor health outcomes, not just for the young person who has been visiting CAMHS, but for their families, siblings and others around them. It is an absolute mess. We need to get a grip on this. We need to implement what is in this motion and give urgent attention to this issue. It is no good talking about it any more. We need action.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The latest Mental Health Commission report into CAMHS must be a wake-up call to the Minister for Health and Government. The issue of access to mental health services for young people is not a new one. It is time for the Government to get its finger

out and look at proper solutions to fix this instead of us constantly fumbling around in the dark. The aim of this motion is to provide some solutions for the future of mental health services and to present Sinn Féin's plan for a better future for service users. The Minister and Government should come into this debate with a listening ear. My colleagues, Deputies Mark Ward and David Cullinane, are taking the opportunity to bring forward suggestions to Government to help fix the issues in the service.

We all agree that all young people in this State deserve a chance to reach their full potential and be the best they can be. They need services that are fully resourced and staffed and available when and where they need them, even in areas like education. The removal of a national director for mental health by the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, in 2016 was a poor decision. It must be reversed immediately. We all need to look at the oversight and regulation of CAMHS. We need to develop a framework around medication, particularly for long-term use, and develop standards of practice that must be adhered to and monitored.

There needs to be more in the way of joined-up thinking when it comes to staffing and resourcing of these services because they are dealing with vulnerable young people daily. It is not acceptable that young people are expected to put up with this service which is not fit for purpose.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I start by welcoming Valerie and the visitors to the Gallery for this evening's debate.

I thank Deputies for the opportunity to discuss the very important topic of CAMHS and the recent Mental Health Commission's interim report on the service. All of us on the Government side have listened closely to the views and contributions expressed and will continue to listen, including to the views of the non-governmental organisations in the Gallery. The motion is not being opposed as the Government recognises the challenges that CAMHS currently face and the value of the findings highlighted by the Mental Health Commission's interim report on CAMHS. The findings of the interim report highlight important areas where services can be improved and act as a point from which proactive activity can benefit CAMHS throughout the system.

This Government remains fully committed to the delivery of a high-quality, safe and compassionate mental health service for all, reflected through delivering our programme for Government commitments on mental health. I therefore welcome the opportunity to highlight the services and supports that are available for young people and their families experiencing mental health difficulties. It is important to me, my colleagues, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Government as a whole that young people are aware of the services that are available to them, as well as the work that is ongoing to improve CAMHS.

The Mental Health Commission's interim report is one of a number of ongoing reports and audits into CAMHS. Between them, the reports and audits arising from the Maskey report, as well as the final report from the commission, will serve to provide important information on how mental health services in this country can be improved. They will also provide an opportunity to highlight good practice throughout the system and provide the occasion to share best practice. Nonetheless, as the Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Butler, clearly indicated last Thursday evening, the findings in this interim report identify several issues which are simply not acceptable to anyone, including those providing CAMHS. Importantly, the Minister and Minister of State supported the commission in carrying out its annual thematic report into

CAMHS. As they indicated in the Dáil statements last Thursday, the Government has accepted in full the recommendations of the commission's interim report. We await the final report on all nine CHOs and welcome the role the commission plays in ensuring high standards of service provision in our mental health services.

All areas of concern identified by the commission in carrying out its interim report were escalated immediately to the HSE for immediate action and resolution, including the review of open patient cases which the HSE is undertaking. This will initially consist of a review of all open cases where the patients have been prescribed medication by their CAMHS consultant or doctor and who have not been seen in the last six months by their CAMHS team. In addition, the Department of Health will work with the HSE to immediately develop a model of care for prescribing practices in CAMHS. This review of open cases will provide assurances that these children and young people are receiving appropriate care, reflective of their current and future needs. The review will include a focus on physical health monitoring of those who are on medication.

On the interim report's recommendation for the regulation of CAMHS, it should be recognised that the need to regulate CAMHS was previously identified by the Department of Health and it is built into the provisions of the upcoming revised mental health Bill. It will empathise with young people and their families who may be worried about them receiving the care they deserve. Much good work is being done by our CAMHS health professionals across the country and, as is raised in the motion, it is appropriate to recognise their strong commitment to vulnerable young people and their families. While we recognise the challenges and concerns regarding service provision in this area, it is important to note that the majority of young people who experience mental health difficulties have access to a variety of services and supports. Of those who seek care from CAMHS teams, the vast majority also experience a positive outcome from CAMHS relating to care and recovery.

CAMHS teams receive and triage nearly 21,000 referrals annually and deliver 225,000 appointments for children and young people requiring assessment and intervention each year. Between 2020 and 2021, child and adolescent mental health services experienced a 33% increase in demand, while concurrently increasing their activity levels, seeing 21% more cases during the same period. There are currently 80 consultant psychiatrists in post working across the 73 teams. The HSE is continually working to ensure all funded positions are filled and staff are available to provide this important service. The HSE has a specific focus on supporting the recruitment and retention of staff, with a focus on optimising team capacity. To this end, a new recruitment operating model is being implemented under the direction of the national director of human resources in the HSE.

On Thursday night, Deputies referred to staffing levels against recommendations in A Vision for Change. A Vision for Change was published in 2006. Sharing the Vision sought to build on this experience and set out a more flexible approach to team development and staffing. This approach was taken to ensure that local CAMHS teams could be developed and staffed to best meet local circumstances and local service pressures. As not every CAMHS team is identical, resources are put in place to make each team appropriate for its setting and to best meet patients' needs. I reiterate that a new post of youth mental health lead at assistant national director level in the HSE and a new post of national clinical lead for child and youth mental health have been announced, with recruitment under way this week.

We had a very intense and passionate debate in the Chamber last Thursday night, with what

were overall positive contributions from all sides of the House. I remind everyone of the apt and welcome comments of the Ceann Comhairle during that debate which reflected a key point the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has always made in her role as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people, namely, that while any deficiencies in CAMHS need to be acknowledged, and addressed insofar as possible, we must always be conscious of the sensitivities and needs of those using the service. While the Government and we, as Ministers, accept constructive criticism, at the same time we must all offer reassurance to the public and instil confidence in the strong and important health services that operate here every day. A balanced and evidence-based approach is always the best way we can collectively analyse concerns and find the solutions we all seek.

At this point, it is important to correct the record. In CHO 5, the total number of persons waiting is 314, while the number who have been waiting longer than 52 weeks is 14. It is not the case that 314 people have been waiting for more than 52 weeks, as was stated earlier.

Real change in mental health has been under way in recent years and will continue through implementation of the current widely agreed policy, Sharing the Vision. There is a record €1.2 billion allocation in 2023. This means the Government has provided a significant increase in investment of some €220 million since June 2020. Importantly, dedicated funding for CAMHS is administered as part of the overall HSE mental health allocation each year. In addition, funding has been provided for two new CAMHS telehubs and a dedicated €6 million to expand the capacity of community mental health teams nationally, with a particular emphasis on CAMHS. The motion does not appropriately reflect the significant investment in our mental health services that I have outlined.

I highlight the emphasis the Government has placed on improving accessibility to mental health services for young people. Continued investment in community services continues to be prioritised. Over €80 million in funding was provided to community-based organisations in 2022. These organisations also provide important early intervention services. These services are a strong staple of mental health services for young people and provide an essential point of access to supports for those in distress or experiencing mental health difficulties. This €80 million in funding is provided to a wide array of service providers, often funded through the HSE. However, for those who do not need access to the specialist supports and services that CAMHS provides, it is acknowledged that children and their families can experience varying waiting times. Some 93% of urgent referrals to CAMHS are responded to within three days. Steps are also being taken to actively reduce waiting times. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will speak later.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The situation in Cork and Kerry is as bad and perhaps worse than in most places. There are 857 children waiting, the largest number in any CHO. Some 296 children have been waiting longer than a year. In recent days, we heard worrying news from SIPTU about serious staffing issues at the Aislinn inpatient unit at Bessborough where only 58% of nursing posts are filled. This has a knock-on affect on the staff who are trying to plug the gaps and the pressure that puts on them. In such circumstances, it is hard to blame some of the staff for wondering about their future. These staffing levels have an impact on the services that are delivered. As I said, the waiting lists are enormous.

I always make the point in these debates that these numbers are far from abstract. Children coming forward are under severe pressure and their families may be at breaking point. To get into CAMHS, a child's circumstances must be serious. The review should not look only at open

cases because there are children who were inappropriately refused access to CAMHS and others who were inappropriately discharged. I am not making that point to apportion blame - when there are huge pressures on the system cases must be triaged and decisions made - but there are children with serious mental health problems who are being refused access because of the numbers involved. I have heard an instance of the family of a child who was self-harming being told that their child was inadequately suicidal to be admitted to CAMHS. That case involved a child who was in an absolute crisis. Any review must not only take into account the children who were on the books with CAMHS but also those who did not get in to the services because of the pressure on the system and those who were discharged even though their condition was far from resolved.

Much of this comes back to staffing, as identified in the motion. The challenge is serious and we must do an awful lot better because our children and many others across the State are under unbelievable pressure. They find this very frustrating and their families are heartbroken trying to access services in which there are delays.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: When our young people and children ask for help we should be able to give them the support they need. We are very lucky to live in a society that has become far more open about mental health and mental health struggles. It is good to see a generation of young people are growing up who are willing to speak out and say when they need support. It is devastating, therefore, to see so many children failed by the very body that is meant to help them. Different issues with CAMHS have been laid bare again in recent weeks. We need to see urgent action to ensure that children and adolescents get immediate care when they need it.

CHO 2 covers some of the west, including Galway. It is deeply disturbing that in November last, there were 247 children on waiting lists in CHO 2, with 40 of them waiting over 39 weeks, including eight who had been waiting over a year. In 2023, we are all well aware that early intervention is crucial. It is heartbreaking to see children and their parents left waiting, not knowing where they are supposed to turn. It is part of a larger issue with mental health supports in Galway. Jigsaw services in the county have a waiting time of 17 weeks, the third longest waiting time in the State. It is deeply concerning that the position is so bad in CAMHS and Jigsaw.

It is important that we make clear to families and children that they should turn to these supports in their times of need but we also need to ensure we are dealing with the issues. Tuigean muintir na Gaillimhe cé chomh deacair is atá sé an chabhair a dteastaíonn ónár bpáistí agus ónár daoine óga a fháil ó CAMHS. Tá sé feicthe agam go bhfuil 247 páiste ar liostaí feithimh, le 40 acu ann níos faide ná 39 seachtain, agus ochtar acu ann níos mó ná bliain. Nuair atá a fhios againn cé chomh tábhachtach is atá idirghabháil luath, tá sé dochreidte go bhfuil sé seo ag tarlú agus is rud maith é go bhfuil daoine óga sásta labhairt faoi na deacrachtaí meabhairshláinte atá acu. Áfach, caithimid a chinntiú go bhfuil na seirbhísí ann dóibh, na seirbhísí Jigsaw agus CAMHS san áireamh, agus caithimid a chinntiú go bhfuil siad in ann an chabhair a dteastaíonn uathu a fháil.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The mental health services are in a state of flux. The full report on CAMHS published last week laid bare the facts about threadbare services, bad governance and neglect. Many factors came to the fore, including the deterioration of services, the appalling, long waiting lists and the failure to look after our young people who are in danger and need on-the-spot protection, intervention and care. We all have personal stories to tell, like the mother who came to me about her teenage daughter. She was self-harming and had suicidal ideation. This happened on a Friday night. She was offered a mattress on the floor. In another

situation, there was a young girl who had attempted suicide on three occasions in one week and was basically told there was nowhere for her to go and no placement for her, even though the team on the night concluded that she needed to be admitted and medicated. To reach out and ask for help in moments of turmoil is a measure of desperation but also bravery. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure the full suite of supports is available, with a timely, appropriate diagnosis given. This is not happening. Our young people are not receiving the duty of care they need and deserve. Recent figures show there are over 100 people on the waiting list for CAMHS services in County Wexford. The average wait time is almost a year, with some waiting longer. That is 100 families in trouble. Imagine the turmoil, upset and suffering being caused to those people and their families.

This disintegration of services is happening for several reasons. First and foremost, it is because of funding. There must be a multiannual plan to enable CAMHS autonomy in delivering quality care at source. We also need to address training issues and increase the number of graduate places for our next generation of mental health workers. Finally, we need to reinstate a national clinical director for mental health to ensure accountability within mental health services. Why was this position removed in 2016? I am sure every Deputy has stories to tell from their own constituencies about mental health services. We are appealing to the Government first to recognise the seriousness in the deterioration of CAMHS, which is happening right now, and the continuing consequential harm of the existing system, which is not fit for purpose, as stated in the CAMHS report, and is causing young people and their families to lose hope. We hope all Deputies will restore that hope and support this motion.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: My constituency of Dublin North-West is unfortunately an area with a very high suicide rate. According to statistics provided to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs in 2019, one third of young people were struggling with mental health issues. This is a very high figure, particularly as the services are severely underfunded. In the last few years, not much has improved. In fact, the provision of mental health services has gotten much worse. The pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of young people. Its impact on young people is yet to be fully understood but it is clear that there has been a significant rise in both anxiety and depression among young people, triggered by the unprecedented stresses caused by social isolation during the pandemic. Recent studies have shown that a significant number of young people are deliberately harming themselves and that many young people are experiencing suicidal ideation. Expert evidence shows that the onset of mental disorders peaks during the adolescent and early adult years and this is one of the leading causes of disability among many young people. This is why early intervention is so important.

The recent damning report on CAMHS shows that this Government failed significant numbers of children at a time when help was most crucial. If provided with properly-funded services, those children could go on to live productive and fulfilling lives, up to and into adulthood. The consequences of the failure to provide care to over 100 children and the failure to follow up on care for another 140 do not bear thinking about. These failures have the real possibility of destroying lives and creating obstacles to the future potential of these children, as well as negatively impacting on their employment prospects. These vulnerable children have become even more vulnerable because of these failures. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that many of these failed children could be condemned to a lifetime of reliance on mental health services. This is shocking and distressing for both the children and their families. If young people access mental health supports early, they are less likely to continue to experience mental health issues into adulthood. These children represent a generation of adolescents and young people who are

in urgent need of mental health treatment and who are being failed by this Government. Dual diagnosis is another area that requires special treatment and applies to young adults. Sinn Féin has put forward solutions that will ensure mental health services are properly funded and staffed and a national clinical director for mental health is reinstated.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I welcome the motion and support it. I welcome the Minister of State's response because there is a tacit acknowledgement of the challenge that faces all of us in respect of the provision of services through CAMHS. I think everybody accepts the report of the Mental Health Commission and the recommendations therein. I am particularly taken by the part of the Minister of State's speech where she refers to CAMHS teams. She said:

CAMHS teams receive and triage nearly 21,000 referrals annually and deliver 225,000 appointments for children and young people requiring assessment and intervention each year. Between 2020 and 2021, CAMH services have experienced a 33% increase in demand, while concurrently increasing their activity levels, seeing 21% more cases during the same period.

They are extraordinary figures when you think about it. They present a picture of the enormity of the challenge that faces all of us in respect of ensuring that, where somebody needs access to a service in an acute setting or on an acute basis, they have that pathway within that 24 to 48 hour period. When there is a threat to life, there are so many pathways to save a life in conventional medicine. If there is a road traffic accident, the ambulance is called, you go to the nearest trauma centre and the resources are there to save life and limb straight away. When it comes to mental health, it is just not there. It is not guaranteed to the same extent.

I have sympathy for the position in which the Ministers of State find themselves. If I was Sinn Féin I would not be making promises or guaranteeing being able to fix this because it will be a long, slow road. However, the Mental Health Commission's report is very clear in respect of the regulation of CAMHS. This has always been a key point for us. There is an inconsistency in the service depending on where people live in the country. I live in CHO 4. The figures for CHO 4, which is the Cork and Kerry region, are frightening. I raised this in a parliamentary question to the Minister for Health and got my reply on 25 January. I asked for the number of persons waiting to be seen by child and adolescent mental health services by CHO and LHO and the length of time they were waiting. There are 857 people waiting in total in the Cork and Kerry region. That is too many people. There are 296 waiting over a year in the Cork and Kerry region. This is from 25 January so that is the most up-to-date figure there is.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Yes.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: There is a glaring inconsistency between what is happening in the Cork and Kerry region and the Galway region, if I am being a bit cheeky about it, or the Waterford region. The figures are incomparable.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: You are right.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: In CHO 1, the Donegal region, there are 603 people waiting longer than 12 months whereas in CHO 2, the Galway region or the west of Ireland, there are 24. To go back to my earlier point, if someone presents to a hospital with an acute medical condition, they will get their surgery or intervention, they will get the medicine they need and they will get it pretty much straight away once they are inside the door of the hospital, primary care setting or secondary care setting. When it comes to mental health services for children and adolescents,

that same level of urgency does not exist. The point made by the Mental Health Commission on the regulation of CAMHS is important because we need that consistency of approach. The Minister of State is saying that the revised mental health Bill should make provision for that. I am not sure where that Bill is or when it is supposed to come before us - I ask the Minister of State to respond to that question - but that provision needs to be nailed down. It is not fair that the people in Cork and Kerry have to wait so much longer than people in another part of the country. We should not have that inconsistency. The service should not discriminate against people based on their geography. We all face scenarios as public representatives, Deputies and Senators, on a daily basis where families approach us.

7 o'clock

We pick up the phone to the chief officer of the CHO or whoever it might be. These are all inherently good people who want to help us. In some cases, it has taken my intervention with somebody of standing within the HSE on behalf of a family to get access to a service. Family members tell me about a young man or woman who has suicidal ideation and after my intervention, an appointment is made and the young person in question is back in the system. If the system were working correctly, it would not take an intervention by a Deputy, Senator or councillor for someone to get access to a service.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I agree entirely.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: That is wrong. There are many people out there - and I do not mean this in a patronising way - who may not have the capacity to advocate or the wherewithal to phone their local public representatives. They should not have to do that to get access to a service.

This is such a sensitive issue that one does not wish to be political or partisan about it but we are not seeing an improvement in the waiting lists, year on year. What the report of the Mental Health Commission showed us was illustrative, but it probably just crystallised our experiences, as public representatives, of mental health services. It did not tell us anything we did not already know. Many of us have been experiencing the CAMHS phenomenon for many years. I was provided with figures for waiting lists on 16 September 2022. The information was separated into people who had been waiting for an appointment for less than 12 weeks, between 12 and 26 weeks, between 26 and 39 weeks, between 39 and 52 weeks and more than 52 weeks. The total was 4,127. The figure as of 25 January was 4,293. The numbers on waiting lists are increasing. I take the point the Minister of State made that there has been a massive increase in the demand for services and that the number of appointments stands at approximately 250,000. However, we are not keeping ahead of the game and ensuring that people can get through the front door, in the first instance. It has been all of our experiences that once people get in through the front door, services start to wrap around them.

Why in the name of goodness have we spent €15 million on recruitment agencies? That money has been spent by the HSE on recruitment agencies to recruit for posts that are vacant. The Ministers of State should intervene. Taxpayers are not getting a return on their investment via the HSE. We are spending €15 million on recruitment agencies to recruit for the HSE to fill the posts that need to be filled in the areas we are talking about. That needs to be looked at. We must ask where is the value for money and the return on that investment for the taxpayer. Why are these posts not being filled?

We stand in this Chamber, week in and week out, and talk about the recruitment crisis. Is there a way to level the playing field between CHOs? Where there is some capacity in one CHO, can it be transferred to another CHO where there is an acute level of need? That could be done as we compare and contrast services. We have all now moved online. God forbid, but if I were looking for an intervention tomorrow and the service I required was in Sligo, I could have an online intervention. The tools of the trade are there to make that happen. In the interim, I am asking that we make services available to people. Even if they are made available as online resources or tools to begin with, it would be a start to ensure we level the playing field for the people I represent in the Cork-Kerry region, which has already been the subject of much controversy. We do not want any more.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome this motion. It is important that we talk about this issue until it is resolved. We seem to have been talking about shortcomings in mental health services for time immemorial and yet it seems nothing is being done to bring them up to the standard that is expected for a modern and wealthy society. Many of the problems impacting our mental health services, especially CAMHS, are microcosms of the difficulties within the health service. Those problems include the available capacity, the recruitment of staff and workforce planning. E-health is central and we know in the context of reports of poor record-keeping how important it is. There are also problems in respect of the structure and how we organise our health service. The HSE is structured in such a way as to avoid accountability in different areas. The local manager does not have to account for how he or she provided services or failed to provide them, or explain why money was not spent properly. There needs to be that level of accountability at local level, rather than having the chief executive apologise. That often happens. The chief executive comes on the airwaves to apologise for some serious failure and promises a report that we may or may not ever see. That lack of accountability has been descriptive of the situation in CAMHS.

The other issue relating to the structure of the health service was referred to by Deputy Sherlock. We have a postcode lottery. Whether a child can get access to services within a reasonable period of time is hit and miss. Children are in many cases left waiting indefinitely. That is why we need a new structure in the HSE where resources are provided on the basis of the needs of the local population. The plan is there and it needs to be implemented urgently.

Mental health services are victims of the bigger problems and issues impacting our health services and how we deliver them. It is worth reminding ourselves of the kinds of appalling figures and data we get from CAMHS. We have seen a couple of reports in the past year or so. As of 30 November, some 4,000 children were on a waiting list for CAMHS. Almost 1,000 of those, which is 25%, had been waiting for more than nine months and almost 600 had been waiting for more than a year. We all know from experience, or can imagine, that when a child has a serious mental health difficulty, the case is urgent and the child must be seen within a reasonable period of time. There are 1,000 children waiting for more than nine months for an appointment. That is an eternity in a child's life. Almost a year of childhood is lost waiting for an appointment. What happens in the meantime? What happens to the child and his or her distraught family? Families get distraught in those circumstances. What happens the child's education? What happens the child's social connections and networks? All of that is put at risk because of these long waiting lists.

We also know, shockingly, that almost half of last year's allocated health budget was not spent. Of the €24 million allocated in 2022, €11.5 million was not spent. It is unforgivable that at a time of crisis waiting lists, half the money available was not spent. That should pose a

major challenge for the Government. It should address this issue. Why has the money not been spent? Is it because we have awful recruitment procedures within the HR section of the HSE? Regardless of whether a post is in south Kerry or north-west Donegal, and irrespective of how much priority attaches to the post in the view of local management, approval for the post must be obtained from Dublin and somebody in Dublin decides whether funding will be approved. Then there is the long rigmarole of the recruitment process, with the likelihood that no people are available to fill the post. That raises all kinds of issues about the lack of responsibility by the Government, the HSE and the Department of Health in having proper workforce planning. Increasingly, we are seeing additional money being provided which cannot be spent because we do not have the intake and the graduation from colleges, and we do not have the healthcare placements.

We also know that the interim report of the Mental Health Commission found “serious concerns and consequent risks” for some patients in four out of the five CHOs on which it reported. That is a damning figure. There is no reason to think that the remaining four CHOs that have not been reported on are any different.

One of the worst aspects of the recent report of the Mental Health Commission was the question of lost case files. The interim report highlighted open cases that were lost in the system. When children’s cases are lost in the system, children are lost to follow-up care. Children can wait nine months, 12 months or more to get into a service. They get some level of care and treatment and are then lost to the service. This includes children on medication, some of whom reached their 18th birthday with no discharge or transition plan. In one team, some 140 open cases had been lost to follow-up care. Another team did not follow up with children on continuing medication for up to two years. There is negligence involved in that.

In regard to the digital infrastructure which I have referenced already, we know that the e-health strategy is eight years old. There is virtually no record-keeping in many aspects of our health service. How can a service be supervised and managed if there is no proper data collection system? We cannot monitor and keep track on what is actually happening in the services. How long are people waiting? How many people are waiting? How many staff do we have? How many vacancies are there? What length of time do children stay in the services? These are key things. I often say that what matters gets measured. If we are not measuring activity within the health service, clearly it does not matter. We have a huge problem with the lack of data collection and analysis. Services cannot be run in such circumstances.

The interim report found that five CHOs use paper-based files in this day and age. The report states that patient files were frequently disordered with little logic to the filing, and clinical notes were frequently illegible and at times were incomplete. The report concludes that without a digital patient-management system, it is difficult to see how improvements in the quality of CAMHS can occur. The business case for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform must be a priority in this regard. Key to restructuring how we provide health services is ensuring accountability. All of this money goes in but when there is a failure in the service, who is held accountable? Nobody. We get an apology – yet another apology – and a promise of a report, and nobody is held accountable. As long as a situation prevails where there are no consequences for failures in delivering services or spending budgets, there is going to be a dysfunctional system.

It is similar in regard to allocating resources. Resources are allocated on a historic basis or on the basis of what constituency happens to have a Minister. That has to end. As part of the

regional health authority structure that was recommended by Sláintecare but seems to be taking forever, not only would there be integrated care and accountability of staff but there would also be objective resource allocation. That is critical. The budget that is allocated has to reflect the level of need in the area, and not just be an *ad hoc* matter. So many of these problems relate to how we organise our health service, the lack of investment and the lack of priority being given to some of those big projects. The Minister and the entire Government need to get behind making our health service fit for purpose and fit for the modern day.

Deputy Gino Kenny: We spoke about this issue on Thursday when there was an in-depth debate about the present situation in CAMHS. I said on Thursday and I will say again that the lack of clinical oversight was the main critique of the interim report by the Mental Health Commission. Without oversight, there will be serious issues in regard to everything relating to a service such as CAMHS. I acknowledge the work that the staff in CAMHS do. They do a very good job. It is a vital service for young people in distress. Recovery is possible once they get the proper intervention. Children and young people can recover from trauma and lead fulfilling lives. That is what we all want. The lack of clinical oversight is an indictment on the CHOs that run CAMHS. Alarm bells ring for anybody with an element of knowledge about this. When children are on anti-psychotic medication for years without oversight, there is something very wrong. The lack of clinical oversight leads to problems with retention and burnout of staff. They are only human beings. It also leads to underfunding.

A good example of a service that should operate on full capacity is Linn Dara in Ballyfermot. Linn Dara is an amazing facility. It is a primary care inpatient centre for young people. However, every couple of years it has to close for a few months due to a lack of staff. That is a huge problem. It should not be closing under any circumstances. It has to close because it is extremely difficult to keep staff at the moment in our health service, particularly in CAMHS. How can we fix this? This is the most important thing. People are looking for solutions and do not want this to happen again. I hope the report, which will be finalised by the end of the year, will lay out why this happened and how it will not happen again.

The report is so serious that it warrants an independent inquiry into how this was allowed to happen and the implications for children. Children may be looking in on this debate with their parents who will ask serious questions of services that they thought could be trusted to look after children in their time of need but they were not looked after to the best standards. Once that happens there is a breakdown of trust. There are serious consequences in regard to children's mental health, families and so forth. I do not know the Minister of State's stance on this but I believe the seriousness of the interim report means that an independent inquiry should be put together on its findings now or in the future when the report is finalised.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Alan Dillon: We move to the Regional Group. Deputies Peter Fitzpatrick and Verona Murphy are sharing time.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: Last week, I spoke with a father pleading for sufficient care for his daughter's mental health. Thankfully, we got a bed for his daughter with the help of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and her team. However, this is just one of hundreds of children's stories and it highlights the lack of services available for child mental health services in my constituency of Louth-East Meath.

A lack of emergency CAMHS out-of-hours services is resulting in 16-year-old children presenting in accident and emergency. If they are lucky enough to speak with a CAMHS psy-

chologist, they are commonly recommended for residential care. However, residential care is not available on an emergency basis and children have to wait until a bed becomes available. They are being passed from pillar to post. On top of this, when a child attends accident and emergency, if they are under 16, they are referred directly to CAMHS, but if they are 16, they are considered an adult and are admitted to an adult ward. The main issue here is that despite being eligible for an adult ward, they are not eligible to access the psychological doctor in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital as that is for adults only.

This is highly contradictory yet is likely to be related to the skills gap and staffing issues I have raised in the House previously. There is a staffing shortage both in terms of consultants and in all of the therapies that are an essential part of the services. Skills gaps in teams and among the clinicians in posts that have not been prioritised have led to the CHOs having a lack of control as to the services they can provide. It seems that it has become very specialised. I often think that when services are in crisis, they get into the habit of turning cases away if they do not fit into a narrow definition of the conditions to which they are going to respond. In fact, having suicidal ideation will not guarantee access to CAMHS and, in some cases, having a disability will mean a child is likely to be diverted elsewhere.

The CHO 8 area, which includes Louth and Meath, has the second longest waiting list for these services in the country. There are 617 young people waiting for urgent attention from CAMHS and, worryingly, 245 of those have been waiting more than six months, with over 70 waiting over a year for care. I have constantly raised the issues of CAMHS waiting lists and lack of services on the floor of this House in relation to County Louth and east Meath. I have questioned why the HSE has not been able to fill an intellectual disability consultant post in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Louth and Meath and asked when one would be appointed. I raised this issue because I am aware of at least 15 families who have adolescent children with autism or moderate learning disabilities who urgently require a review. In addition to psychiatrists not being available, CAMHS will not see teenagers who have a dual diagnosis, and these adolescent children cannot be seen by the mental health team until they are 18 years old. Where are they to go to be seen?

Young people's mental health issues are escalating and becoming much more acute because they are not able to access preventative early intervention. Every child who uses mental health services has the right to appropriate care and support. Due to unacceptable waiting lists and a substandard level of care, many children are being denied this right. Most parents I speak to are just trying to focus on getting help for their son or daughter and they do not have the energy afterwards to advocate. This is why, on the back of the publication of the interim report by the Mental Health Commission into CAMHS, I and my colleagues in the Regional Group called on the Minister for Health to outline the immediate steps being taken to protect children and to ensure proper access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

I acknowledge that the new clinical leadership, especially the appointment of an assistant national director, will ensure governance, consistency and integration across mental health services. However, we need consultants and all of the therapies that are an essential part of mental health services. We need to ensure that hiring is done quickly. We need to ensure that psychiatrists are trained to work with children and trained in risk management, clinical governance and paper-based record-keeping as these are major faults highlighted at present. We have the highest rate of youth suicide in Europe. We cannot afford to wait on more reports to act; the HSE and the Government must act now.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion to allow us another opportunity to place the spotlight on the systemic failures within CAMHS. I want to refer first to something noted in the motion in regard to 140 “lost” cases in just one team, which no doubt, across all teams, adds up to hundreds of “lost” cases nationwide. If I was a patient or a parent or guardian of a patient whose case was lost somewhere among the dense overgrowth of the HSE bureaucracy, I would want answers and accountability. Has the Minister identified how these cases were lost or are the failures in the system still present which would allow the continued losing of cases? Has the Minister identified what individuals were responsible for these errors? Have policies and procedures been put in place to ensure that such errors do not re-occur? Has anyone been disciplined or held accountable for these mistakes? I hope that, in response to the motion, the Ministers of State might provide some answers to those questions but since they relate to responsibility and accountability, I am fearful that they will just become rhetorical questions that will go unanswered.

One year ago, I had the opportunity to speak on a Sinn Féin motion related to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. On that occasion, I highlighted that I believed there was a general apathy or lacklustre attitude towards the solving of these problems. To be fair, it is mainly the continuous representation from the floor that the Government took action and ordered the review. To highlight the lack of staffing, I compared it to the Luas, Dublin Bus or Irish Rail, which would be in chaos every morning if they did not have enough drivers. A schoolroom would struggle to function if it did not have enough teachers and our ambulance service would fail if it did not have enough crew members. Yet, when we do not have the right staffing levels in CAMHS, it does not hit the headlines like it would for these services.

In 2020, the Government supported the motion from the Regional Group to protect mental health services but, unfortunately, little has been done in the interim to address the issues highlighted with CAMHS. The HSE mismanagement of CAMHS is leaving vulnerable children at heightened risk of mental health difficulties. The current system is not fit for purpose. Children and their families are being tossed aside and, inevitably, some of these families will end up presenting their children to emergency departments somewhere, following an attempt to take their own lives. This is a very difficult thing to say but it is the reality of what happens when the proper services are absent. Some of the stories I have heard about our services amount, in my mind, to neglect and that must be rectified.

One thing that does worry me about this motion is the call to legislate to prevent children from being placed in adult wards. Unfortunately, with the current state of affairs, where there are no paediatric ward places available, the only option is to put a child into an adult ward. The reality has to be recognised that, regardless of how less than optimal it might be, at least care of some description, even if it is in a less than ideal setting, is surely more useful than no care at all. I have great sympathy for those who have to make these decisions in our hospitals on a daily basis and I would not like to see their job hamstrung by legislation which might prevent some sort of care being administered. While I agree with the principle outlined in the motion, it would come down in such a case to scrutiny of the detail of how that would operate in reality, or what exceptions would be made in exceptional circumstances.

The motion also calls on the Government to develop a joined-up, proactive and comprehensive health and social care workforce strategy to increase education places and training opportunities between the Department of Health and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the HSE regional health areas, hospital groups and the higher education institutions. This is crucial. We can only continue to expand mental health

services successfully if we have the proper qualified personnel to fill the roles. This starts with a long-term strategy to have sufficient places in college courses and opportunities for people to upskill in these areas. Almost every CAMHS-related issue comes back in some shape or form to staffing. Staff turnover and the inability to get staff in the first place are preventing services from operating as they should. I have highlighted that problem many times. In County Wexford we are trying to source a paediatric dietician and child psychologists. We are always just one resignation away from having to go months, if not years, without the filling of vital posts.

Yesterday, I provided the details of an eight-year-old boy whose guardians have been told that he does not meet the criteria despite being referred by his family doctor three times to CAMHS. I appreciate the Department is looking into this but the family needs a timely answer and also an answer as to who made this decision without even seeing this young man. It would mean he is on no waiting list when he clearly needs immediate attention. I am mindful of the issue that arose in the media at the weekend. I caution both Ministers of State to be mindful that not meeting the criteria does not in the future get declared as a strategy to keep numbers off waiting lists. I regard that as an intent to cause harm, and very serious indeed. It is disturbing that 15 children with eating disorders in Wexford are currently without a dietician. These are children. The two Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, and myself are parents. When we hear figures, they are figures, but these are children. They could be the children of the Ministers of State or my children, but they are all meaningful individuals who need care and attention. I put my faith in both of the Ministers of State.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. The report by the Mental Health Commission should be the line in the sand that we need in improving acute psychological and psychiatric services. Unfortunately, there is nothing in our history in terms of the response of the State to reports of this kind that gives me or others any hope in this regard. We need only to look at the “Grace” case in that regard, and in particular what happens to whistleblowers within State-run organisations who attempt to highlight systematic failures. My fear is that once the review of all CHOs is complete we will be back here again in a short time to discuss yet another scandal of this kind and magnitude. The report notes unacceptable variations in the care being delivered. Some services offer treatment for eating disorders with family-based therapy, dietetics and cognitive behavioural therapy, with ready access to inpatient beds if required, while other teams cannot offer such a service due to the lack of resources.

The report also notes that not only is there variation in the delivery of care across the country, there is also considerable variation in care within a CHO. It is difficult, as the report observes, to see this as anything except a postcode lottery for children and their families in the treatment they receive. The postcode lottery is something of which we in rural Ireland are only too well aware. Within my constituency, HSE services that deliver high levels of complex care to children and young adults with a mental and physical disability in counties Laois and Offaly are experiencing a significant staffing crisis. I have raised that in the House previously. There are also delays in the primary care centre in Birr. All of that has a knock-on effect on children. I hope there will be progress with the primary care centre very soon.

Deputy Richard O’Donoghue: The initial report on CAMHS in the mid-west looks damning, with an emphasis on the 140 children that were lost in the system. However, on further investigation, it seems that CAMHS brought this to the attention of the Mental Health Commission. A senior clinician had left the service, leaving a caseload behind him. One person leaving could result in 140 vulnerable children being left behind. That was brought to the attention of the commission in advance of the investigation. I have questions in that regard. Why did this

not emerge before the investigation? It was notified, yet 140 vulnerable children were left behind as a result of one person leaving the system.

I have a few helpful solutions to make CAMHS into a robust, positive service for mental health in all areas. I referred to 140 vulnerable children being affected by one person leaving. CAMHS is specialised at working with children, yet qualified people who are professional in the field must also be overseen to reach the necessary standard.

Resourcing is a major issue, and the problem can be fixed by additional resources. First, we must make it viable for people to go into these positions and help other children. Investment in IT and in other ways is the way forward to helping CAMHS.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion because it is pertinent to what has happened in south Kerry and now in north Kerry as well. Many young children have been damaged by the lack of proper care from CAMHS. The HSE blamed a junior doctor in south Kerry, but what is the cause of the problem in north Kerry? It seems that there is a problem all over the country. It is very clear that when these boys and girls needed attention and help, it was not there for them. I do not think it is there at present either.

I am very disappointed about that because families were and are upset that their children will never be the same again. Antipsychotic drugs were pumped into them regardless of the problem they manifested, and no time was given to them. What happened was criminal. If it was any other place, I am sure the Garda would be called in to investigate what was going on. The HSE is not at the races when it comes to dealing with young children. Why is it the case that the most of those who are waiting for attention are in Kerry and Cork and not in Dublin or elsewhere?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin very much for bringing this very important motion before the House. In recent years I have been working closely with the parents of the children who, by the HSE's own admission, were significantly harmed. It was an extremely damning report. We had interim reports recently and we are now starting to examine the service in north Kerry, following on from the results of the investigation and its outcome in south Kerry.

This is a worrying time. I acknowledge the good work that was done by sound people, such as Michael Fitzgerald in Kerry. It would be wrong not to compliment people in the HSE who have been diligent about their work, faced with an enormous challenge that was not any of their doing, but they were left trying to fix the situation and to put it right.

Sinn Féin will agree that those whom we must think about most of all in this debate are the children affected by the service they received from CAMHS in Kerry, and their parents and extended families. They are the ones whom we must worry about in the future, no one else.

Deputy Michael Collins: The lack of mental health services in Ireland is having a significant impact on people with mental health problems. Many people must wait months or even years to access services, which can be detrimental to their mental health and well-being.

Due to a shortage of mental health professionals, many children are not able to access the care they need when they need it or are only able to access limited care. The lack of mental health services can contribute to the stigmatisation of mental illness, as people may feel ashamed or embarrassed about their condition if they cannot access the help they need.

In the short time available, in addition to the problem with access for children to mental health services, I also wish to raise with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, the situation with the mental health unit in Bantry General Hospital. I asked her to intervene in this issue. The HSE told me it would appeal the successful intervention, but it appears that will not happen now and that we are going to lose beds. It is an astonishing situation that the Deputy and Senator in west Cork seem to believe that it is a good deal. It is not a good deal: it is a shocking deal for the people of west Cork. We cannot afford to lose one bed, never mind the three beds in the unit that have been mentioned. I again urge the Minister of State to do what I have previously asked her.

Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler): It is only until the end of March.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are going to lose the beds permanently. The decision has been made and it was not appealed. There has been a continuous lack of investment in the mental health unit in Bantry hospital by government after government. We are going to lose three beds permanently now because the appeal is not going to go ahead.

Deputy Mary Butler: It will not be permanent.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State should make an announcement or put it in writing that there will be no loss of beds in Bantry General Hospital mental health unit. If she does, she will be a hero.

Deputy Mary Butler: I was here last week for a Topical Issue debate and the Deputy did not turn up.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State will be the first person I will praise in west Cork if that is the case, but that is the announcement that the HSE made. I was told the HSE would appeal it, but the decision was not appealed when it went to court and now we are left in a situation where there will be a reduction in beds.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too welcome the people in the Gallery, family members and others, who are in this cruel system. I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. It is so savage. My late brother was a paediatrician of some renown. I want to also mention tonight, Professor Michael O'Keeffe, who succumbed to illness and was laid to rest at the weekend, who did so much for patients. There are many good people in the HSE, including doctors, professors, ordinary staff nurses and so on, who do tremendous work. However, there is an issue with a management that is chaotic, callous, cold and sickening, to be honest. The fact is that children, our future generations, could be left to languish. I have had families and parents in my office who have to fight - I thank those parents who are so brave - scramble, beg, scrape, and try to work and hold their marriage, family and other siblings together. Can the Ministers of State not see the blockages that are there, cut out the deadwood and allow the good people, such as psychiatrists and others, who want to treat these children do so? They should get rid of the management structures and deadwood that are costing a fortune. Reports are gathering dust, as I am sure this one will. It is sad. It saddens me and those people I mentioned. Both my late brother and Professor O'Keeffe brought patients away from the HSE, voluntarily on their own time, and treated them free of charge. They had a basic interest, as do many others, but there is too much deadwood and layers of management that have cannibalised the HSE and the Department of Health, as the Ministers of State should know.

Deputy Joan Collins: Like everyone who read the report on CAMHS last week, I was shocked by the lack of care and badly needed reform provided by the Government for some of the most vulnerable children in this country. In common with everybody I have spoken to regarding this area, I am deeply worried about the Government's plans to address the crisis. These do not reflect the urgency of the situation and do not go nearly far enough to addressing the issue adequately.

Mental health is a real issue in Ireland. We need to put real resources in place to address it. We need a national director of mental health, who needs to report directly to the CEO of the HSE. There needs to be real accountability and oversight in the system. Brilliant work is being done in CAMHS and across our mental health services but staff are overworked and under-resourced. A national director is needed to implement that brilliant work across the service, develop a strategy that can be applied across that service, and be held directly responsible when things go wrong. The position of a youth mental health assistant director needs to be recruited for immediately. The money for it is there in the 2023 budget. The Government has committed to it and in the face of the CAMHS report there is no denying the urgency of this role. The situation cannot go on and we need the people in place to react to it straightaway.

The mental health (amendment) Bill needs to be prioritised by the Government. We need an immediate legislative response to this that is focused on filling the gaps in our current system and ensure a human rights-based approach for anyone using our mental health services. The current legislation is out of line with international human rights standards.

The response needs to be more ambitious than the Government's plans. We need a commitment to have no more children or adolescents in adult psychiatric beds. We need an expansion of the CAMHS system to those aged 25 and older to reflect that most people experience the onset of mental health issues before that age and to stop the cliff edge of services ending for young people at the age of 16. A more holistic approach to care based on strategy and implementation of a real multidisciplinary approach is also needed, as is the expansion of services to provide for the missing middle, who are not accepted by CAMHS but are too high risk for other services.

I support this motion tabled by Sinn Féin. There is a deep need across mental health services, especially in respect of children and adolescents. The reform needs to be broader and more ambitious than the Government's current approach and the services need proper investment, planning and oversight.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Ward in particular for tabling the motion. The motion is practical and includes two of the recommendations in Dr. Susan Finnerty's report. It calls for the Government to accept there has to be a clinical review, and that there will be a timeline for it and when it will be completed. The second recommendation is equally important: the immediate regulation of CAMHS under the Mental Health Act. Dr. Finnerty's report has pointed out that the Mental Health Commission has "no legal power to enforce any action." The commission continues to monitor the actions taken on foot of these escalations, which I will come back to, but it has no legal power to enforce any action. That is a damning indictment.

We are here again, just over a year since Dr. Maskey's report in January 2022, which followed on from the actions of a brave whistleblower. I hope the Ministers of State can correct me, but my understanding is this doctor, Dr. Sharma, who was courageous, has been treated badly. He was sidelined and obliged to leave the country. I ask the Ministers of State to cor-

rect me if I am wrong. Is he working in Ireland? If they tell me quietly, I do not mind. My understanding is this man has suffered as a result of his courage. If that is what has happened, it is an indictment of our system. If the Ministers of State tell me I am wrong about that, I will be the first to acknowledge it.

As I said, this interim report come after the Maskey review of south Kerry CAMHS in January 2022. I should declare a particular interest. In a different life, I worked as a clinical psychologist in a community care setting for many years on three-monthly contracts. When I got a permanent, pensionable job I refused to take it because it was advertised as a community care psychologist, which was brilliant. This was in the bad 1980s but the system sought to put us back under what was called at the time child guidance, which was a retrograde step that became this entity that has proven so unsuited to the job. Children with mental health issues of a nature that determines they must go to a facility like this should not be the norm. All our effort should go into prevention and education support, which was the model in the bad 1980s, when people could walk into the health centre in Ballinasloe and theoretically get a service. We have gone backwards.

Not alone have we gone backwards, we have endangered our children. This is according to Dr. Susan Finnerty, who felt obliged to produce an interim report, although she has not completed her review of all nine CHO areas. Her concern was such that she decided to issue an interim report “because of the serious concerns and consequent risks for some patients [she is talking about children] that we have found across ... 4 out of 5 [areas]”. These concerns include the risks to safety and well-being of children receiving - or not receiving - mental health services, or receiving services they should not be receiving, such as medication that is unmonitored, the management of that risk and the lack of clinical governance. Dr. Finnerty goes on to outline all of that. She states that so far, in this review, the Mental Health Commission has “made five escalations of risk to the HSE”, and further up to the Department, as regards risk.

Quite startlingly, Dr. Finnerty states: “There were no risks pertaining to CAMHS documented within the HSE Corporate Risk Register and therefore no documented actions...” This might be seen to be in bad taste but three monkeys come to mind, where we see, hear or speak no evil. There is no risk so we will not have any action on it - that is clearly set out in the report. The symbolism of the three monkeys was not used by Dr. Finnerty, in fairness to her. The report goes on to state: “In some areas reviewed, risk management was poor, with lack of communication and lack of actions to mitigate ... a haphazard documenting of risks and minimalist generalised actions ... on the CHO ... register [and] All teams were significantly below the ... staffing levels”. She pays tribute to the good work of staff on the ground but also highlights the serious problems, including large variation in services, families who are frustrated and upset, the inappropriate use of emergency departments in local hospitals, the failure to facilitate the free movement between primary care, which is non-existent, and these specialised services.

On medication, the report states, “There was evidence that some teams were not monitoring antipsychotic medication”. There were no national standards but patients were not even being monitored in respect of international standards. There was no follow-up with appropriate blood tests and physical monitoring, which is essential. Children were lost to follow-up, which has been mentioned by many Deputies. The report states: “Of serious concern was that in some CAMHS teams children and young people with open cases, have been lost to follow-up.” There were 140 lost cases in one team and a limited desk top review was carried out to identify these children and so on. Audits of clinical practice were rarely carried out. Four of the five CHO areas that were visited used paper trails and no electronic recording. According to the

report, we appear to have breached, which is a very moderate comment, the rights of children as set out under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the State signed and ratified in 1992. The report continues:

In the CHOs that we have reviewed to date [and that is only five out of nine], it appears that this right may have been breached for many children ... [I do not think there is any “may”.] The long waiting lists, the lack of capacity to provide ... therapeutic interventions, the “lost” cases ... all point to a breach of Article 24.

Even the team on the ground that wanted to escalate risks said it was pointless because when it did so they went into a black hole and nothing happened.

There is absolutely no ring-fencing of funds for CAMHS.

Then we have a special position: the child rapporteur. It has been vacant since last July, I think. There was good news today; the Minister announced that there is a new rapporteur. Can the Ministers of State tell me why there has been no rapporteur since last July? The previous rapporteur, Professor O’Mahony, presented his annual report to the Government, pointed out that the delay in publishing these reports, after the Government gets them from him and generally, is totally unacceptable and pointed out the difficulties in attracting somebody to that post. Why was the Government not proactive? Maybe the Ministers of State can answer. I do not know.

I am not here to give out; I am here to express my outrage and upset, having read this report, that this could be happening now, on our watch, and at the failure to monitor medication. The question has to be asked: what was the role of GPs in this? Was the medication just renewed by them? The Ministers of State might elaborate on that. Each person has a responsibility, as does each Deputy, to do his or her best. Where was that with the GPs or whoever renewed the medication?

Deputy Mary Butler: I reiterate what my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, said in her opening remarks and thank all Deputies for the constructive and positive contributions to this important motion on the issue of CAMHS. I thank Deputy Ward for tabling the motion. Many of the same speakers were present last Thursday evening for three hours. We are here again today for two hours. I will be in the Seanad tomorrow. I welcome any opportunity we can get to shine a spotlight on mental health. We might be on opposite sides of the House, but I acknowledge Deputy Ward’s advocacy for mental health every week. It is important that in one of the main slots of the day we are here talking about mental health. We can never talk enough about it. I also acknowledge Valerie O’Sullivan in the Gallery and the other people who have sat through this debate from start to finish. As my colleague stated earlier, the Government and myself are not opposing the motion. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the important topic of CAMHS, and I assure all Deputies that our children’s physical and mental well-being is a priority consideration for the Government at all times. That has been reflected in the policies introduced to safeguard their well-being as well as the targeted initiatives outlined earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte.

There were questions about the mental health Bill, that is, the restructuring of the 2001 Act. That is queued for priority drafting at the moment and I will introduce it as soon as it is ready. There are approximately 140 heads in the Bill and it is complicated but it is scheduled for this session.

I wish to touch on what Deputy O'Donoghue said. He highlighted the issue of the 140 cases that were lost to follow-up in CHO 3, which encompasses the mid-west. He mentioned that there was a consultant no longer working there, with 140 files piled up. At that stage there were 3.5 consultant psychiatrists; there are now seven. Those files have now been dealt with. It just shows how easily there can be a pileup when there is not an adequate number of staff.

A couple of Members mentioned funding. We are reviewing the €11 million figure. It is likely associated with delayed recruitment to posts. Last year in the budget I allocated funding for another three eating disorder teams, more ADHD teams and a team for mental health with intellectual disabilities. It takes 12 to 18 months to recruit a full multidisciplinary team, but I reassure anyone listening that all the money for the mental health budget stays within mental health services and is not handed back or anything like that. My Department still has that money and it will be spent wisely.

As I have indicated on many occasions since becoming Minister of State, protecting the mental health of all our population, including young people, has never been more critical. The Mental Health Commission's interim report shows that despite the progress of recent years, our services can fall short. We were here 12 months ago debating the Maskey report. As a result of that report, I engaged with the commission. I knew that the commission was doing a thematic report on CAMHS and I asked it to expand it and to look much deeper. I also funded it to bring in consultant psychiatrists from Scotland and the North in order that Dr. Finnerty would have the support and the resources she needed to do it. We have five CHOs done - CHOs 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 - with four to come. We will be back here in a few months debating this, but it is important that I have these two reports coming. I have the independent reviews coming from the HSE as well, and I will have the Mental Health Commission's full report, but the two of them are working in parallel. We will have data we never had previously. There was no point in my shying away from the Maskey report. I had to try to build confidence in all the CAMHS teams. I had to give parents and children confidence. The only way I could do so was to initiate a review and an audit. That is why we are here now, 12 months later, debating this. I welcome the report and welcome equally the focus on service delivery and patient safety. I noted last Thursday that I await both the commission's final reports.

The need to act decisively and to do what is necessary to protect children using our mental health services is of paramount importance. We are immediately developing a model of care for prescribing practices in CAMHS. In the coming days I will organise a series of round tables with relevant stakeholders, including the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland. The HSE has confirmed to the Department of Health that the issues raised in the Mental Health Commission's report are being proactively acted on at national level so as to mitigate risk throughout the system as a whole and beyond the CHOs reviewed to date.

As part of the opening statement this evening, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, highlighted a significant investment that has taken place in community organisations across the country. I thank all those organisations and their staff for the incredibly important work they do every day. As has been noted, only 2% of children will need the support of CAMHS specialist services, with the majority of mental health supports for children and young people being met within the community. The €80 million provided by the Government to community organisations in 2022 highlighted that a variety of pathways are available to access mental health supports. For example, Jigsaw was allocated approximately €12 million in 2022 to provide essential supports for children. Jigsaw provided more than 2,600 appointments last year and 85 mental health workshops. Along with the significant funding to that service in the

past year, €1 million was provided to MyMind to continue to deliver free-of-charge counselling sessions to clients in more than 15 different languages. A further €1 million was provided through Mental Health Ireland for community and voluntary agencies promoting mental health and well-being. Telehealth services such as the seven-day crisis text line, 50808, also promote access to services, as do approximately 1,000 HSE-supported mental health services available through *yourmentalhealth.ie*, including further details regarding the services we fund: Belong To, Bodywhys, SpunOut, MyMind and many other State support services for young people.

We also know that technology often plays an important role in the lives of young people. The Department of Health and the HSE are determined to fully utilise opportunities offered by telehealth technologies to mitigate recruitment challenges and modernise delivery of mental healthcare. Telemedicine is a recognised part of healthcare in many parts of the world and has a history going back more than 20 years. Clinical staff are present in the room with the young person during the consultation, and initial service user feedback has been positive. In respect of telemedicine, the first consultation with the child or young person is always in person. It is something we have had to use especially in Kerry, where we have been challenged in filling the recruitment areas.

There are 500 more people working in mental health since this Government came into office, of whom 85 are working in CAMHS, but we have a lot more to do. I stress that any young person or his or her family who have concerns about their mental health or well-being should seek help without delay. Help is there, recovery is possible, and our wide range of care services provide real help that makes a tangible difference to many young people day in and day out. HSE Live is available to support any children or families with concerns arising from the interim report. Its freephone number, 1800 700 700, is open Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and on Saturdays and Sundays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

8 o'clock

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the immense commitment and contribution our specialist CAMHS teams makes to so many young people every year. We can look back at the last few years and ask ourselves how we are faced with these challenges. We have seen an unprecedented 33% more referrals to CAMHS in 2020 and 2021. We also saw an unprecedented 225,000 appointments offered to young people last year. We have seen the CAMHS teams expand their remit to include another 21% of referrals with the same number of staff, so they have been working very hard.

I have visited quite a few CAMHS teams over the past 12 months, in Kerry, Waterford, Dundalk, Galway, Roscommon and quite a few more areas and I notice that all the CAMHS teams vary. I was struck by the young people I met when I went along to CAMHS teams, especially on the day I was in Dundalk. I usually go quietly into these places because they are mental health settings. I go in on my own and I speak to the staff and I speak to the young people if they are available. I was struck by one young girl there who was exiting CAMHS after four years. She told me she had 96 appointments over the four years and she had been seen every fortnight for four years. One of the things I am particularly worried about, and I said this last Thursday as it is something I am looking into, is the rate of acceptances of referrals across the country. It is as low as 38% in some areas and as high as 81% in others. I am not a clinical person and I am told some children meet the criteria and others do not but there is a huge difference in acceptance rates and that is something I want to explore.

I thank everyone for their comments; everyone had something positive to offer and we all deal with this every day in our constituency offices. As I said, I will not be opposing this motion.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I commend Deputy Ward on bringing this important issue to the floor of the Dáil for a Private Members' debate. I thank the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, for being here. I do not say the following to many Ministers or Ministers of State but I accept the sincerity of both when it comes to this issue and their bona fides that they want to address many of the issues and challenges that have been raised here tonight. However, that does not mean they can extricate themselves from the failings that have been exposed in recent weeks, some of which came as no surprise to many families the length and breadth of the country.

The Mental Health Commission was able to establish that there was a category of children who were lost from the service, children who were registered with CAMHS and who did not receive the necessary follow-up. I reiterate the call of the Minister of State to tell people, including parents, children and teenagers who need support, to seek it. My experience from listening to people who have accessed it is that when the CAMHS system works, it works exceptionally well. It saves lives, both in terms of physical lives and in giving new leases of life to those who benefit from the service. However, the counter is also true. When it does not work and it fails children, it has negative life-changing consequences for the rest of their lives.

When we hear that the number of children waiting for an appointment in CAMHS has increased by 86% since this Government took office, with nearly 4,000 waiting for their first appointment, that is deeply concerning. When we hear that 741 people had to present themselves in an emergency room last year, that is a fundamental problem. I welcome that the Government is not opposing the motion tonight. Deputy Ward has set out in the motion the solutions and steps that need to be taken to resolve the issue, to ensure that everybody who experiences the CAMHS system has a positive experience and that their lives are changed for the better. My call on the Ministers of State and the Government is to not just not oppose the motion but to actively support it and, more important, to implement the measures within it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Every child deserves an opportunity to reach their full potential. The State ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and a child's right to the highest attainable standard of health, including mental health, is indivisible from other rights of the child. The Ombudsman for Children made that clear in 2018 in his report. He said that in the case of children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties, fulfilling this right means providing them with the mental health services they need, when they need them and where they need them. On that measurement or slat tomhais we are failing our children.

When we discuss this we need to put ourselves in the shoes of that young child, boy or girl who is sitting at home and for whatever reason feels there is nothing to live for anymore or whose anxiety paralyses them to the point that they cannot even step outside their front door. We could also put ourselves in the shoes of a family that has seen their young child blossom into a young teenager and that is struggling because they cannot support or help them and do not know how to help. We should imagine the torture of all of that but one of the other tortures is the fact that they know there is help but they cannot access it because CAMHS is not available to them. That is the reality for far too many children. Parents are sitting at home knowing their children potentially have suicidal tendencies but they are on waiting lists for months to see the specialist who may be able to work with that child and help them with their illness.

In Donegal, for example, we have 300 people on waiting lists and 100 of them have been waiting for over six months. Our waiting lists have gone up by 86% since this Government has come into place. We can have all the nice words and all the rest, and nobody in this Chamber does not want to protect those children I am talking about, but we have to recognise that the Government is failing spectacularly. One child being failed is one too many and the fact that we have lost children, as detailed in this report, is devastating, but so many individuals are lost because they are not able to get the services that can help them at the time they need them.

This needs to be fixed urgently. I commend Deputy Ward on the motion he has brought and the solutions he has advocated for. I would strongly urge the Government to take those on board. It is failing on this because the indicators are all going in the wrong direction. This is not about politics; it is about children who need help and that help is there. These teams need to be resourced, empowered and extended to 25-year-olds and I mention the issues Deputy Ward and our colleagues have raised in the past.

Deputy Mark Ward: I also want to acknowledge the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, for their time tonight and last week on this serious issue of CAMHS. I will not question their bona fides or interest in mental health but interest is not enough; we need action. I am tired and frustrated and I have listened to all the contributions and there seems to be a lack of action. My frustration is nothing compared with the frustration the people in the Gallery feel when they are trying to get the care their children and families need. I mention the many people at home who are listening and the number of people who have contacted me in recent months.

The Government has a tactic of not opposing motions but there is a difference between not opposing motions and supporting them. It is a political game and if the Government does not oppose the motion then it does not have to vote against it when it comes down to it. I want to see the solutions I spoke about in the first part of the debate put into place. By not opposing this motion the Government is admitting that it has failed. It has failed the 4,000 children who are waiting on CAMHS lists for initial assessments. When this Government came into office there were only 2,000 children on CAMHS waiting lists; that is an 86% increase. The Government has failed the 13,000 children who are waiting for primary care psychology appointments. When this Government came into office that figure was 7,700; that is a 71% increase under this Government's watch and that is not acceptable.

The Government has failed with the 14% increase in young people who are accessing Pieta House for counselling. I met Pieta House representatives during the week who told me that children as young as five are accessing Pieta's suicide and self-harm services. The Government has failed the children who are reliant on a postcode lottery for treatment. For example, there is a four-week waiting list for an appointment for a child or young person if they live in Wicklow but if you are a child or young person living in Cork, you could be waiting up to 30 weeks for that appointment, which is just not good enough. It was mentioned already that 741 children are admitted to hospital for mental health difficulties after presenting to accident and emergency departments. The report outlines this and I think there is a failure on the part of GPs because they feel they have no choice but to refer children into accident and emergency departments to get a psychiatric evaluation. They do so because they know the waiting lists in CAMHS and other services are not being dealt with. There are also children who are waiting to be admitted into specialist inpatient care. There are fewer CAMHS beds available now than when this Government came into office. Only 51 of the 72 available beds for CAMHS are currently occupied. There are a further 16 beds - I hoped the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, would mention it in her closing remarks - in danger of closing in Cork at present, according to a statement during

the week from the Psychiatric Nurses Association.

This issue regarding admitting children into psychiatric wards was raised at the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Geneva during the week and the Government responded to that committee stating that Ireland may never reach a point of no child being admitted to adult units, which shows a significant lack of ambition in this regard. We need to adhere to international human rights standards.

There were 32 admissions of children to adult units in 2021, up from 27 in 2020. Those 32 children spent 217 days in total in adult psychiatric facilities. This is Draconian and it is a violation of human rights.

By not opposing this motion, the Government is agreeing to the Sinn Féin call to legislate for this issue. I know the systems are not in place now. I live in the real world, but we have to be ambitious. We have to put services in place. We have to say that putting children into adult psychiatric facilities, whether they are 16 or 17, or younger than that, is not good enough and we must put measures in place to stop that. If that requires legislation, that is what we are calling for.

I mentioned statistics. I mentioned solutions at the start of this. Behind every one of those statistics is a child with hopes, dreams and ambitions, a child with a family who are lost with what is going on for them in trying to get the right care for their child at the right time and the right place. It is a ripple effect. As was said already, there is no greater crime than denying a child the chance to reach his or her full potential.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, did not oppose this motion. I have never pleaded for anybody in the Dáil previously but I am pleading that the Minister of State put the solutions that Sinn Féin brought forward into place.

Question put and agreed to.

^ Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions ^

Middle East

63. Deputy John Brady asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether efforts to further the search for peace in Palestine have been further hampered as a consequence of the inflammatory rhetoric and actions emanating from the newly elected Government in Israel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4613/23]

Deputy John Brady: I was beginning to think the Tánaiste had forgotten he had taken on the new role of Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Would the Deputy believe my pass would not work and I was locked in?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are no free passes here.

Deputy John Brady: As it is my first opportunity to question the Tánaiste as the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, I would like to congratulate him on taking on that role. I look forward to our engagement over the next while.

I will start off our questions with a question on foot of the new Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, taking office in an extreme right-wing Government. Unfortunately, we have seen a continuation of inflammatory language and, worse still, over 35 Palestinians being killed since the start of this year.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Mattie McGrath: This is an introduction.

Deputy John Brady: I ask the Minister whether he sees prospects of moving a peaceful dialogue forward jeopardised now as a result of this new right-wing Government.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for his kind remarks. I appreciate them and I look forward to working with the Deputy and others on these issues.

At the outset, I want to put on record again my strong condemnation of last Friday's shocking attack in Jerusalem, and to convey my thoughts and sympathies to the victims and their families.

Turning to the Deputy's question, it is Ireland's long-standing position that policies and practices of successive Israeli Governments relating to illegal settlements and their expansion, as well as expulsions, forced transfers and demolitions, undermine prospects for a two-state solution and are a major obstacle to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

We have also repeatedly underlined that long-term security for both Israelis and Palestinians cannot be achieved through the use of excessive force or by acts of violence by anyone. I was appalled by the violence during an operation by the Israeli security forces in Jenin last Thursday, resulting in the death and injury of a number of civilians. I am also very concerned by the sharp rise in settler violence in recent days.

It is imperative that all policy responses and actions are in line with international law and contribute to de-escalation. Now is not the time to double down on responses that only serve to inflame tensions. Proposals announced earlier this year to further expand settlement activities are deeply concerning. I also urge that there be no repeat of unilateral actions that undermine the *status quo* of the holy sites.

The imposition by the Israeli Government of punitive measures on the Palestinian people, following the request by the United Nations General Assembly for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, was not acceptable and should be reversed. In addition, a number of the steps proposed by the Israeli Government on Sunday in response to the terrible attack on Friday evening give rise to significant concern.

These tragic developments serve as a stark reminder of the need to break this continuing cycle of violence. The current trajectory cannot be sustained. The focus of all parties, including the international community, must be on urgent de-escalation and on the restoration of a genuine political horizon. The only lasting solution to the conflict can be through relaunching meaningful negotiations between the parties on realising a two-state solution.

Deputy John Brady: This is the most right-wing government in the history of Israel. It came to power on the back of an agenda that can only contribute to the worsening violence and to the way in which Palestinians are treated. We have seen since the start of the year that more than 35 Palestinians, including eight children, have been killed. Unfortunately, that has led, as the Tánaiste mentioned, to the killing of Israelis in Jerusalem last week. We see a ratcheting up

of tensions. That has come about following the inflammatory language and actions of the new Israeli Government. These actions should not be a surprise. In May 2021, the House adopted a resolution stating that Israel had breached international law by annexing Palestinian land, and it continues to do so. The Israeli Government has said it will go further in annexing more Palestinian land, including parts of East Jerusalem. The time for rhetoric has passed. We need action. What action are the Government and the Tánaiste, who has responsibility for foreign affairs, prepared to take now to hold Israel to account for its continuous breach of human rights and international law?

Deputy Micheál Martin: We are concerned about the situation in Palestine and about the position of the new Israeli Government, especially in the context of its attitude towards expansion. There is real concern regarding the statements that have been made, the visit to the holy site and so on. Ireland has been active on this issue at the UN Security Council over the past year and a half to two years, so much so that UN Secretary General Guterres has been appreciative of the Irish effort. At European Union level, we and like-minded countries have pursued justice and fair play for the Palestinians. The EU remains the Palestinian Authority's biggest donor. Last week at the Foreign Affairs Council, Prime Minister Shtayyeh and the foreign minister, Mr. al-Maliki of the Palestinian Authority gave a presentation. It was a useful exchange. We are pushing for a stronger relationship between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority, for an annual dialogue and an association agreement between the Palestinian Authority and the European Union in order to achieve a better balance in the context of the relationship between the EU and Israel as opposed to that between the EU and the Palestinian Authority.

Deputy John Brady: The Minister is right to be concerned about what is happening on the ground, but this has not just come about since the start of the year. It has been a systematic approach by successive Israeli Governments to displace Palestinians from their land, demolish and destroy their homes and disperse them into fragments of their land. We need to beyond the rhetoric of concern. We need definitive action from the international community, the EU and, in this instance, the Tánaiste.

This Dáil unanimously agreed to recognise the state of Palestine. Now is the time to move ahead and do that. The Tánaiste's predecessor, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, stated that recognition of the state of Palestine could only be done in tandem with a peace process. Unfortunately, I do not see that peace process coming about at any time in the near future. We need to do what we can do, namely, recognise the state of Palestine. Fianna Fáil needs to follow through on its commitment in respect of the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018. Will the Tánaiste move that legislation forward?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy is correct that the programme for Government states that the Government will honour its commitment to recognise the state of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict, or in advance of that, when we believe that doing so will progress efforts to reach a two-state solution or protect the integrity of Palestinian territory. We are working with like-minded states in the European Union on this issue. The objective is that any such decision would be taken at the optimal time to have the best impact. The context has always been to try to move towards a two-state solution and to get a proper negotiation process in place. It was interesting talking to Prime Minister Shtayyeh and the foreign minister, Mr. al-Maliki, of the Palestinian Authority last Monday. They are committed to the two-state solution. They do not want to abandon that. We must have that within our horizon in any moves or decisions we make and we must do it when it will have the most impact.

Ukraine War

64. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts he intends to make to try to prevent further escalation of the war in Ukraine in his new role as Minister for Foreign Affairs of a neutral country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4515/23]

Deputy Gino Kenny: I wish the Tánaiste well in his new role. In his role as Minister for Foreign Affairs in a neutral country, what does he intend to do to send the message of neutrality, especially regarding the conflict in Ukraine? As most people have seen, this is a brutal war carried out by a brutal regime.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for his comments and for raising this issue.

While Ireland is a militarily neutral country, meaning that we do not participate in military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements, we are not politically or morally neutral in response to Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine. Ireland strongly condemns the ongoing, despicable and indiscriminate missile and drone attacks against civilian targets across Ukraine. These are having a devastating impact on Ukraine's energy and other critical civilian infrastructure. The sole aim of such attacks is to terrorise the Ukrainian population. This exacerbates the already challenging humanitarian situation in Ukraine, where millions have been displaced, particularly in the context of a harsh winter. These attacks constitute another unacceptable escalation of the war, and civilians are paying the highest price. Those responsible must be held to account.

During our tenure on the United Nations Security Council we clearly, consistently and unambiguously called on Russia to end its aggression, comply with its obligations under international law and withdraw all its forces unconditionally from the entirety of the sovereign and internationally recognised territory of Ukraine. Ireland will continue to use its voice, including at European Union level and in relevant multilateral fora, to call on the Russian Federation to end its illegal war against Ukraine, to withdraw its forces and engage in genuine dialogue and diplomacy towards peace. We have received President Zelenskyy's ten-point peace plan and have been studying it closely. We will reflect on how Ireland might best contribute to its objectives. We are already involved in many of the areas it covers, including food security, accountability and nuclear safety. We are grateful to the United Nations and other partners for their ongoing efforts. We know there is only one way to end the suffering in Ukraine and that is for Russia to end its illegal war, withdraw its forces from the territory of Ukraine and restore peace.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I will not mince my words. I do not believe that anyone minces their words in this Chamber. Putin is a war criminal. The crimes he has committed in the past year against the Ukrainian people are tantamount to war crimes; they are akin to what Nazi Germany did to most of Europe and Russia. He has caused untold suffering to the Ukrainian people. The resistance by the Ukrainian people has been heroic to the detriment of thousands, including Ukrainian and Russian soldiers. Putin is fixated on continuing this conflict.

Alarm bells start ringing when I see NATO sending hundreds of tanks. I fear that this conflict could escalate into something that is uncontrollable. That means it could be NATO versus Russia, and that is a completely different kettle of fish.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I appreciate the Deputy's comments, and their bona fide nature,

in respect of Putin's conduct of the war. Russia must be held to account which is why Ireland supports an international tribunal to bring Russia to account in terms of the crime of aggression. War crimes are being committed. It was disappointing in the European Parliament last week that two Irish MEPs refused to support a resolution to establish such a tribunal on the crime of aggression. European Parliament Members Mick Wallace and Clare Daly went against the resolution, which I was shocked to see, while a total of 472 MEPs voted in favour of it.

As for NATO, I note NATO leaders, including Chancellor Scholz and President Macron, did everything they could to stop this war. They did not want this war. President Macron went to Moscow and pleaded with Putin not to go to war. They did not want a war. They would love for the war to end. The UN Charter affords the right to self-defence. That is what is involved here, unfortunately.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Looking at the past year and the evolution of this conflict, who knows where it will end. With continued escalation and more heavy weaponry, such as the tanks provided by the western alliance, someone somewhere will have to ask where we are going with this conflict. Is it escalation or de-escalation? All wars end but this war has the potential to escalate into a war that could go beyond the borders of Ukraine. When heavy weaponry is provided, as the US, Germany and France have done, one wonders how this war will end, where it will end, and the impact on Ireland's neutrality itself. Our neutrality has been questioned over the past year based on our stance towards Ukraine. One can look at Ireland's neutrality particularly in regard to Shannon Airport.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Please, Deputy. Féach ar an gclog.

Deputy Micheál Martin: To the best of my knowledge, the only country to question Ireland's neutrality last year was Russia. In my view, Russia has zero credibility in that regard. We are militarily neutral. We are not politically neutral. We are members of the European Union and the United Nations. The UN Charter is very strong on self-defence. Ukraine is entitled to defend itself against appalling aggression. Every major leader in Europe went to President Putin before the war and pleaded with him not to go to war, that there were better routes, such as dialogue and negotiations. If he was worried about the security architecture of Europe, it could have been resolved. Even when the war started, and as it has continued, President Macron has maintained dialogue with President Putin, as has the German Chancellor. Every effort has been made throughout this to try to get the war stopped but Putin has no interest in peace and has shown no interest in peace. He wants to annihilate Ukraine. He wants to make it a puppet regime under his dominance. He does not want a democracy alongside him.

Passport Services

65. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures being put in place to ensure that there will be no unnecessary backlog in the issuing of passports in 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4614/23]

67. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the Passport Office is prepared for the influx of passport applications for this spring and summer (details supplied). [4615/23]

Deputy John Brady: The year 2022 was an unmitigated disaster when it came to the handling and issuing of passports. It saw many families, unfortunately, missing out on their holidays due to chronic delays in the issuing of passports. What lessons have been learned from last year's mess? More importantly, what actions will be put in place to ensure people get their passport in a timely manner and that we do not see a repeat of some of the scenes from last year?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 65 and 67 together.

Last year was an exceptionally busy year for the passport service, with over 1.085 million passports issued. This represents the first time in the history of the State that over 1 million passports were issued in a calendar year. The passport service surpassed its previous busiest year of 2019, when 935,000 passports were issued. The year 2023 is set to be similarly busy. In recent weeks, there has been a marked increase in applications received, signifying that the next busy season for passports is commencing. Applications have increased from an average of 1,400 per day in December to almost 5,000 per day in recent weeks. The majority of online renewal applications are currently being processed in three working days or less.

Thanks to significant investment by the Government and the dedicated work of the passport service staff, substantial improvements were made in 2022 and full normal service was restored. All processing times for applications are in line with normal pre-Covid processing times.

In recent months, my Department has been planning to ensure that demand for passports continues to be met in 2023 with target processing times maintained throughout the year. Staffing of the passport service to respond to demand continues to be a priority for my Department in 2023 and is kept under constant review. My Department ran 15 competitions in 2021 and 2022 to address staffing needs in the passport service. New office space on the Balbriggan campus is now open and provides more than 200 additional workstations to accommodate the increase in staff numbers. The focus on intensive training and upskilling of staff in 2022 has increased the resources available that can process complex applications, such as first-time child applications.

My Department is also actively working to assign new staff to the passport service throughout the first quarter of this year. Approximately 100 successful candidates from a temporary clerical officer competition run by the Department are currently going through the Garda vetting process and will be assigned in the coming weeks and months.

The passport service's customer service hub saw a record-breaking 2,615 calls answered on Monday, 23 January. Currently, 100% of calls received are being answered. The staffing plan for 2023 aims to ensure that excellent customer service is maintained during periods of peak demand. Passport Online can be used by 97% of applicants across the world for both first time and renewal applications. The Passport Online service is four times faster than paper-based applications for adult and child renewal applications. Over 90% of applicants now apply through Passport Online.

The passport service is pursuing a digital first strategy, which promotes Passport Online as the easiest, quickest and cheapest way to apply for a passport. The focus of our current communications campaign for winter-spring 2023 is to highlight the benefits of the digital-first approach, in that Passport Online is the most efficient way to apply for one's passport. The campaign also reminds citizens to check their passport is in date.

Indications are that the campaign is having the desired impact. January application numbers to date in 2023 have increased by 24% when compared with the same period in 2022. Addi-

tionally, we have seen a 245% increase in website traffic to *dfa.ie/passports* compared to early December, prior to the campaign. The passport service's website is regularly updated to ensure that clear information is given to applicants regarding the documentary requirements for their application, including in relation to a change of name.

I am confident the staffing and accommodation measures implemented, along with other improvements, will continue to have a positive impact on passport processing times for 2023.

Deputy John Brady: First and foremost, I pay tribute to all the staff in the passport office who did exceptionally good work in very difficult circumstances. When I say "difficult circumstances" I mean the failure to prepare and foresee what was coming post Brexit. There was always going to be a surge in the number of people looking to travel post Covid and we did not have the proper people or resources in place to deal with what was a predictable increase in passport applications.

I welcome some of what the Minister said in regard to the increase in workforce, the increase in space on the Balbriggan site, as well as the online information campaign, of which we are seeing the benefits. However, there are still challenges with how first-time child passport applications are processed, in getting members of the Garda to witness the application, and the Garda contacting witnesses, which was a huge problem last year. That needs to be addressed. Will the Tánaiste touch on that? This involved witnesses via An Garda Síochána and caused huge problems. The other area is getting to talk to a real person, so will the Tánaiste tell us how many additional staff have been deployed to man the lines and the hub to respond to people's concerns?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I appreciate the Deputy's comments on the staff in the passport service. We now have 763 people working in the service, which is the largest number ever employed. We are committed to maintaining and improving that level, if we can.

The Deputy is correct. There are issues relating to the role of An Garda Síochána, which is an essential part of the verification process. There are certain passport applications that require forms to be witnessed by a member of An Garda Síochána. We appreciate the work of An Garda Síochána in that respect. It is a vital element in terms of the identity and consent verification process for the passport service.

During the peak period for passport demand in 2022, a system was established between the passport service and An Garda Síochána to verify applications in cases where the Garda signature could not be verified by calling the Garda station. This new system assisted in reducing the number of applications that were delayed due to a failure to verify witness details. During the busiest summer months, an average of 15 applications per day were verified in this manner. We are constantly looking at ways to innovate, improve and make the system more effective.

Deputy John Brady: What analysis has taken place? I asked the previous Minister a number of times about increasing capacity, that is, opening new passport offices. I appreciate that a lot of the demand is online and that is where we are trying to drive people, but there will always be the need for people to walk into a passport office. What analysis has been done regarding opening a new passport office somewhere in the State? What analysis, if any, has been done on opening one in the North? Last year saw for the first time a significant increase of more than 128,000 passport applications - new and renewals - from the North, of which 50,000 were brand new. There is a real need for a passport office in the North. What analysis has been done on

opening an additional office in the State and one in the North, where there is significant growing demand?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Of the 1.1 million, 11% were from Northern Ireland, but 90% of those were online. The approach of the Department has been digital first and to encourage and incentivise more and more people to go online because it is the most convenient, quickest and least expensive channel for applicants. People have made representations in respect of new passport offices in Northern Ireland and the west, but the online approach is working very effectively and has allowed for the centralisation of passport processing, resulting in greater efficiencies for the service and customers. The majority of passport service operations take place at the newly expanded Balbriggan campus, which now has capacity for 500 staff. Up to 90% of applicants from Northern Ireland applied for their passport online last year. There are passport offices in Mount Street and Cork, which have public counters and offer urgent appointment services. We keep all this under constant review, but at the moment, the push is towards the digital first side.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: A significant amount of time was spent in all our offices to get passports through on time in 2022. Difficulties include the Passport Office timeline differing from what is available online. I am calling for additional resources to be provided to address the backlog in processing passports. Will the Tánaiste confirm whether postal applications from 2022 are still on the system from 2022? I believe that is the case. If there are, how long will it take to clear the backlog given the number of people who are there at the moment? What is the Government going to do address the situation for people waiting on a passport since last year?

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is no backlog as such. We are meeting turnaround times. Passport applications are being processed in line with normal turnaround times. As I said, 2022 was an exceptionally busy year with more than 1,085,000 passports. This year, 2023, looks like being similar, with 61,000 passports issued to date. About 56,000 fully complete applications are in the passport service system, including 10,700 paper applications. They are not considered outstanding because they are being processed in line with normal turnaround times. There will always be people applying. The issue is how quickly we are turning them around. They are now being turned around within the normal timeframe. The turnaround time for passport applications does not begin until the required supporting documents have been submitted.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am very concerned about how many of our nurses, doctors, pharmacists and other healthcare workers are going abroad to work. It is the hopelessness I can see in them when I meet them that is the biggest issue. When is the Government going to tackle the issue of our healthcare workers leaving this country? The reason I know this is the case is because they are coming to us for help with their passport applications so they can leave this country when our health system needs them so badly. When is the Government going to tackle the problem and keep our health workers here? This comes from them coming to me for help with passport applications so they can leave the country because they see no future here with the way the health system is run.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is more a question for the Department of Health, but I would make the point that-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): The Tánaiste was Minister for Health once.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I was, once upon a time. Thousands of people are coming into the Irish health service every year. I recently attended an event relating to nursing for very sick young children and met two young nurses who had come back from Australia to work in the service in Ireland. It was a foreign NGO but it highlighted for me that the traffic is two-way. These were young Irish nurses who had been in Australia and had now decided to come back to Ireland

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: And they turned around and went back home again.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, these particular nurses are here. I accept that others go out.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: After coming home.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The health world has always been highly mobile. We must do more to attract and create better working conditions in our health service to retain staff there. That is important.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They came home for the call and now they are going back.

Brexit Issues

66. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide an update on the ongoing discussions regarding possible changes to the Brexit protocol that can assist the movement of goods between the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. [4793/23]

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Will the Tánaiste advise regarding the ongoing new revised negotiations around the Brexit protocol in terms of the movement of goods on and off the island in respect of the preservation of the open Border?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have consistently heard in my engagements with business and people in Northern Ireland that resolving issues around the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a key priority for them. This is recognised by both the EU and the UK, which are devoting substantial time and effort to finding joint solutions that address these concerns.

European Commission Vice President Šefčovič met the UK Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in London on 9 January to take stock of this ongoing technical work. They also held a follow-up video call on 16 January. On 9 January, the EU and UK reached agreement on EU access to UK IT systems. Access to these data was a key issue for the EU in building trust and providing assurance. However, both sides also noted that a range of critical issues still need to be resolved. They agreed that their technical teams would work rapidly to scope the potential for solutions.

I have been clear in my engagements with my EU and UK counterparts that it is essential we give the teams space to try to find comprehensive joint solutions. The Government fully supports the approach led by Vice President Šefčovič. I met him most recently in Brussels on 10 January and continue to keep in close contact with him.

Agreeing shared solutions on the protocol will provide the certainty and stability that people

and businesses in Northern Ireland need to take advantage of opportunities offered by the protocol, not least access to both the EU Single market and also the UK internal market, a combined market of more than half a billion people. More broadly, resolving the protocol issues will also open up opportunities for greater EU-UK co-operation, which is vital given the shared global challenges we face. I have been consistent in making the point that we should give space to the UK and EU teams to continue the discussions on the protocol in order, it is hoped, that they arrive at a satisfactory resolution to these issues.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: It is fair to say that the Northern Ireland protocol is being used for political leverage, specifically by the northern unionists, to seek concessions. It is also being used to stymie the resumption of the Northern Ireland Executive, which is holding up effective governance in the North of Ireland. This is especially noted with regard to the IMF announcement on the UK economy today. The Minister has answered part of my second question, which is whether the business community is being consulted widely about its ideas about what the softening of the protocol might mean and about the movement of goods.

On capital, is there any chance of extra infrastructural moneys coming from either the UK Government or possibly from Europe that could be made available to the Northern Ireland economy to act as an incentive to restore the power-sharing Executive?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy made some fair points in the latter part of his question. From the outset, we have acknowledged that issues have arisen in the operation of the protocol, particularly with regard to consumer goods. In my meetings with all political parties in Northern Ireland, including unionist parties, we have acknowledged that. I think Vice-President Šefčovič and the European Union have acknowledged it too. It is now a matter of the European Commission and UK Government seeing if they can resolve those issues. They are in discussions about that. The voice of business, particularly the business working group, has been heard. Over the last year, the Taoiseach and I have been in constant contact with the voice of business to understand its needs. We have highlighted its needs to the British Government in respect of certain legislative proposals that the British Government had because businesses have to make the operational details work on the ground in the end.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: We all agree that the resumption of the Executive is needed to offer hope and better governance and administration of the Northern Ireland budget and economy. What might be on offer in the shared island initiative? When I look at Derry, I see many similarities with my own city of Waterford. That city has suffered from a lack of *per capita* resourcing for its university and hospital, which is similar to Waterford. It aligns with the experience of Waterford, which has suffered because of political strategies, the interests of Dublin and the temporary government in Cork, which has denied resourcing to Waterford, the south east and the wider region. Why should Derry should consider that its place would be any better in a shared island initiative as it looks at the Government's continuing failure to provide *per capita* resourcing to Waterford and the south east?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have been to Derry in the context of the shared island initiative over the last two and a half years. People there are pleased with the shared island initiative. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership is particularly pleased. It involves all of the councils in the north west working together in harmony by leaving politics and party politics outside the door to advance the cause of the region. The A5 is in a public inquiry process. The most submissions on the all-island rail strategy came from the north west because connectivity is a significant issue for the north west. We said to the university, particularly the Magee Campus,

that we are awaiting proposals on the shared island initiative. It has submitted proposals and we have supported projects in the north west, particularly relating to research. Over €40 million has been allocated to research proposals on the island of Ireland through the shared island initiative. We stand ready to do more.

Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 65.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Middle East

68. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the new Israeli Government's policy of expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank, using the means of ethnic cleansing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2133/23]

Deputy Chris Andrews: I congratulate the Tánaiste on his new position and wish him well in his new role. The new extreme right-wing Israeli Government has made the expansion of illegal settlements on Palestinian land a priority. This, in effect, amounts to ethnic cleansing of Palestinian communities. How does the Minister view the new Israeli Government's policy of expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank using the means of ethnic cleansing?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for the question and his kind comments. Ireland's position on Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory is clear. The continued establishment and expansion of settlements is a violation of international law and is unacceptable. This position was reiterated at the UN Security Council on 19 December, which focused on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2334. On that occasion, Ireland also led a joint press statement by a number of states demanding that Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and that it fully respect all of its legal obligations in that regard. Ireland's embassy in Tel Aviv also raises the issue directly in its regular contacts with the Israeli Government, and Ireland's representative office in Ramallah has made a number of visits along with European Union colleagues to sensitive sites of concern in the West Bank, including Masafer Yatta.

It is deeply concerning that the stated intentions of the Israeli Government continue to show disregard for the clear international consensus on this issue. It is important that the international community supports the Palestinian Authority in its recourse to legal and political responses to the occupation. I had the opportunity to discuss this issue in a phone call with the Palestinian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Riad Malki, on 18 January, during which he shared his deep concern at the deteriorating situation. I also welcome that on 23 January, the Foreign Affairs Council provided an opportunity for both Prime Minister Shtayyeh and Foreign Minister Malki to raise these troubling developments with the European Union collectively. Ireland remains committed to supporting all efforts aimed at achieving a just and lasting two-state solution, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states, on the basis of international law and agreed international parameters.

Deputy Chris Andrews: The Minister acknowledged the violation of international law and said that Israel disregards international law and the views of the UN and EU. However, there are still no consequences for Israel stealing Palestinian land, for apartheid in Israel or for increasing rates of murder by the Israeli Defence Forces. The new fanatical, fascist, homophobic Minister of Finance in the Israel Government and the new racist Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, are not interested in peace or justice. They are interested in hate and in getting rid of the Palestinian communities from the land which they view as theirs. It is all very well to talk about condemnation and violation, but where is the action and determination to right the wrong that Israel commits in Palestine.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am not quite certain what the Deputy is getting at. Ireland has been very active politically, diplomatically and at all multilateral fora, whether the UN Security Council, where we have raised the issue consistently, or within the European Union, which remains the biggest donor to the Palestinian Authority and a significant donor to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA. Ireland is a strong donor to UNRWA and we give strong support internationally because we believe in fairness and in the two-state solution. The European Union is not united. There are 27 member states. We work with like-minded states in respect of the issue, particularly on trying to develop a roadmap to a two-state solution. We are one country. We have worked extremely hard as a country to do the right thing at all times, as we did recently at the UN General Assembly at the vote to seek international accountability for Israeli policies.

Deputy Chris Andrews: The point I am getting at is that the EU, for example, took clear and decisive action against Iran over human rights abuses. I heard the Minister say earlier that he disagreed with the introduction of the death penalty in Iran. The Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, is looking for the reintroduction of the death penalty in Israel.

9 o'clock

When Ireland and the EU take action against Iran over human rights abuses, why do the same standards not apply to Israeli breaches and its violations of international law? Had Mahsa Amini been Palestinian and murdered by Israeli forces, would the EU have cared? The evidence suggests it would not because hundreds of Palestinians are killed every year and there is no action. The Minister should do the right thing and introduce the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 and recognise the state of Palestine.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I think it is accepted across the board what Israel is doing and what it has done to the Palestinians. Things are getting worse with a very right-wing and racist Government.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Mattie McGrath: Brostaigh ort.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are talking about breaches of international law, annexation, apartheid, execution and murder. The Minister has said he works with like-minded states across Europe. What action will these like-minded states take? I accept the European Union will not do anything to hold Israel accountable, but on that basis there is an onus on us to stand by the Palestinian people. There must be consequences for the apartheid regime. Maybe that will be the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 and, beyond that, recognising the state of Palestine.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Deputy Andrews made the point of the comparison between Iran

and Palestine. Deputy Ó Murchú said Europe does not seem to care or act. Ireland does, though. When Shireen Abu Akleh was killed, Ireland raised the issue during our tenure on the UN Security Council. We did not stay silent on it. We called for an impartial, independent and effective investigation and, on 24 May, we organised a meeting of the Security Council on the protection of journalists. A Dáil debate on journalists and armed conflict took place on the same day. Ireland endeavours to be fair and down the middle in respect of condemnations of killings of this kind, whether it is in Iran, the occupied territories or indeed in Israel itself, where many innocent Israelis have also been killed by militants, which is also unacceptable. We want a two-state solution. We condemn the approach that has been taken. We object in the strongest possible way to the statements made by some of the new ministers in the Israeli Government in respect of the occupied territories.

Northern Ireland

69. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide an update on the latest information regarding the Northern Ireland protocol and related negotiations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4400/23]

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I congratulate the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs on his new appointment. I welcome the outcome of the negotiations by successive Ministers and our Government in ensuring there is no hard border on this island, that we protect the all-island economy, that there is unfettered access in Northern Ireland to European Union markets, that we protected the Single Market and we continue peace and stability and the good things about the Good Friday Agreement. The problem is that unionists need to be convinced. We need to go to the furthest step. The negotiations between the EU and Britain need to ensure unionism can sign up and get back into government in the North.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I appreciate the Deputy's comments and thank him for his kind personal comments. The recent political and technical engagements between the EU and the UK around the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol are welcome. While technical work is ongoing, I believe it is best to give the EU and UK teams space to find joint solutions that will address the concerns of people and business in Northern Ireland.

The Government continues to engage with all key stakeholders in this process. I had a meeting with the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak at the British-Irish Council in November and spoke to the Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly in December. I have also met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris, twice in recent weeks. The Taoiseach spoke to the Prime Minister by telephone last week. I remain in close contact with the Northern Irish political parties and other key stakeholders in the North, including businesspeople. I have made clear the Government's commitment to resolving the difficulties around the protocol and helping to ensure the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement can operate effectively. That involves concerns raised by unionists in respect of the operation of the protocol.

We also continue to engage extensively with our EU counterparts. The Taoiseach spoke to Commission President von der Leyen on 11 January. I met Commission Vice President, Maroš Šefčovič in Brussels earlier this month and we maintain regular contact. I can reassure the House that EU member states continue to demonstrate the same strong solidarity we have seen throughout the Brexit process.

We are grateful also for continued bipartisan US support for peace and stability in Northern Ireland. The recent appointment of a US special envoy to Northern Ireland for economic affairs is a welcome development. In all our contacts, I have been clear that shared solutions are the only sustainable way forward. Resolving the protocol issues would also enhance the EU-UK relationship, the British-Irish relationship and, above all, relationships on the island of Ireland.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I agree with everything the Minister said. Again, I compliment the way we are all working together in the South and in the EU. Like the Minister, however, I have met unionists and listened to them. They are exceptionally clear on the issue that there is a serious power vacuum in the North and it remains unfilled by people who support democratic politics at the moment because the DUP is not going into the Executive. I urge that we in the South go the extra mile as best we can, accepting that it is up to the European Union and the British Government to negotiate the nuts and bolts and the technical part of the agreements. After 25 years, we need to ensure the Good Friday Agreement continues to have the huge influence and the huge importance it has in the lives of people, our economies, our relationship with the United Kingdom and, as the Minister rightly pointed out, with America.

I have no doubt the answer will be “Yes”, but notwithstanding the fact that Ireland is not the key driver in the EU in the actual negotiations, will no stone be left unturned to ensure unionism will buy in and that we will have a restored Executive?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I accept the Deputy's sentiments. I am acutely aware of concerns unionism has on the operation of the protocol. I believe the EU is aware of that too and that, through meetings over the past year, Vice President, Maroš Šefčovič, has made himself aware of those issues and concerns and is anxious to respond to those concerns. We have also been very anxious to allow space to the EU negotiating team and the UK Government negotiating team. There are issues. We have acknowledged and accepted there are issues, through our meetings with unionist parties and all parties, including on the nationalist side and business-people who have raised issues around practicalities in the protocol's operation. I have always believed these issues are resolvable. We should just allow the teams to continue their discussions. There are challenges and there are difficulties, and while we should not underestimate the difficulties, we should wish them well.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: IBEC's recent report was very clear about the huge success of the economies North and South since the Good Friday Agreement and the substantial benefit peace has brought to this island and the great growth. The report compared 18 different areas in Ireland, North and South and in the UK. It made a surprising point that the greatest benefit outside London has been to people living on this island North and South. The Minister rightly points out that there has been substantial economic benefit. We need to impress more in the public domain on the benefit to the northern economy in the arguments that are being made because I do not think I hear the unionists iterating or responding to that point. They have a great opportunity. The British and European markets are wide open to them. There are substantial benefits in moving forward. I accept and acknowledge what the Minister says. We must go the extra mile for unionism if we can because the great prize is an Executive up and running, peace continuing and the vacuum no longer being there.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is important to reiterate and reassert the constitutional position of the Good Friday Agreement, that is, that the principle of consent remains intact. That is the bona fide position of the Irish Government and of all parties to the agreement. Second, in all my meetings with all parties in Northern Ireland, no one has suggested that access to the

European Union or the Single Market should cease because it is of huge benefit to exporters in Northern Ireland. Having access to both the UK market and the EU market creates opportunities. If a resolution of these issues could be reached, I think the European Union, along with the US through its new economic envoy Joe Kennedy, would be interested to see what we could do for the future economic prosperity of Northern Ireland if we can get a resolution of these issues. That opportunity should be grasped.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): I am sorry; I did not see Deputy Ó Murchú indicating earlier. I thought he was joking with me. For Question No. 70 tá an Teachta as láthair so we will move on to Question No. 71.

Question No. 70 taken with Written Answers.

Ukraine War

71. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs if he believes the Russian Federation should be designated as a terrorist state; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4332/23]

Deputy Seán Haughey: Does the Tánaiste believe the Russian Federation should be designated as a terrorist state? The European Parliament has passed a resolution along these lines. I would be interested to hear the Tánaiste's views on that matter.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Since Russia commenced its unjustified and unprovoked further invasion of Ukraine, we have consistently expressed Ireland's unwavering solidarity with Ukraine and support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. We have used our voice at the UN Security Council, UN Human Rights Council and other multilateral fora to call for accountability for international crimes committed in Ukraine. Ireland has pushed for the Security Council to hold Russia accountable, to urge it to end its war in Ukraine immediately, and to call out Russia's cynical attempts to use the Council and other UN bodies to spread disinformation.

As I said earlier, I was shocked last week that in the European Parliament, two Members from Ireland went against the resolution to establish a tribunal to hold Russia to account for the crime of aggression. It is incredible that two Irish MEPs, Mick Wallace and Clare Daly, would oppose such a resolution.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): The Tánaiste should not mention people in their absence. I have given him some latitude but even though they are MEPs-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am sorry; I thought political representatives could be mentioned.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): You have mentioned them twice.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Okay. The point is taken.

Accountability is extremely important because we have to call out Russia's cynical attempts to use the Council and other United Nations bodies to spread disinformation. Ireland voted to

exclude Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and has co-sponsored three resolutions at the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's aggression and calling for humanitarian access.

We supported the decision by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe that the Russian Federation should cease to be a member of the Council of Europe as of 16 March 2022. Ireland also submitted a request for leave to intervene as a third party in the proceedings brought by Ukraine against Russia before the European Court of Human Rights. We, along with EU partners, were one of over 40 states to refer the situation in Ukraine to the Office of the ICC prosecutor to pursue accountability for alleged atrocity crimes committed in Ukraine. Ireland has also filed a declaration of intervention at the International Court of Justice in Ukraine's case against Russia.

The term "terrorist state" is not a legally defined term in either Irish law or international law. There is no statutory power to designate a country as a terrorist state. There is no doubt, however, that Russia's targeted and indiscriminate attacks on residential neighbourhoods and civilian infrastructure are designed to terrorise the people of Ukraine. I condemn these attacks in the strongest terms.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I have a question coming up later regarding Russian accountability. Hopefully it will be reached. I asked this question following the recent passing of a resolution by the European Parliament declaring Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism. The catalyst for this resolution was, of course, the brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. There are particular concerns about the targeting and killing of Ukrainian civilians. There is also the destruction of civilian infrastructure and general breaches of international and humanitarian law. These must surely be acts of terror and classified as war crimes. What is the Tánaiste's view of the European Parliament resolution? Is this something that could be advanced at the EU Foreign Affairs Council? An appropriate legal framework would have to be put in place to do it. The European Parliament goes into detail as to how that might be done.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In my previous role as Taoiseach, we had been pursuing the entire issue of accountability for Russia. It is complex legally but it is one area where Ireland feels it can make a contribution. I outlined earlier the different decisions we have taken, for example, that the Russian Federation should cease to be a member at the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe; that we submitted a request for leave to intervene as a third party in the proceedings brought by Ukraine against Russia before the European Court of Human Rights; and that we were one of over 40 states to refer the situation in Ukraine to the office of the ICC prosecutor to pursue accountability for alleged atrocity crimes committed in Ukraine. We have also filed a declaration of intervention at the International Court of Justice in Ukraine's case against Russia. There is no doubt that the entire approach of Russia has been to target and indiscriminately attack residential neighbourhoods and civilian infrastructure, designed to terrorise the people of Ukraine. It is a war of terror that has created the migration crisis, the energy crisis and the humanitarian crisis.

Deputy Seán Haughey: The actions of the Russian Federation in recent years are quite shocking. There is the case of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Democracies are being subjected to hybrid threats. Critics of Putin are poisoned as they go about their business on city streets. Of course, there is the ongoing matter of espionage capabilities in the Russian Embassy in Dublin. On a related point, where stands the implementation of the ninth round of sanctions? Are further sanctions being considered at an EU level on Russian individuals and entities?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I agree with the Deputy's general comment about how Russia has behaved in recent years. There were many warning signs but I thought the poisoning of people in the United Kingdom, in Salisbury and London, provoked too lame a response from the West. This was an appalling public health attack, as well as the murder of individuals. It was a public health attack that put many people in the United Kingdom at risk due to the radioactive material and nerve agents and so on. It seems to me that over time, with the invasion of Crimea, President Putin felt he could get away with these things and thought the same would happen with the invasion of Ukraine, that people would not take a stance against it.

The European Union has implemented extensive restrictive measures against Russia, including through its ninth package of restrictive measures and the international oil products price cap. Europe stands ready to continue this. Compliance with existing sanctions is a stronger focus. David O'Sullivan, a former Secretary General and Director General within the EU, has been appointed as sanctions envoy to make sure sanctions are not circumvented.

International Relations

72. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide a report on his recent call with the United States Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4367/23]

119. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs his reaction to the appointment by the United States of a new special envoy to Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4213/23]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Like other speakers, I congratulate the Tánaiste and the Minister of State on their appointments. Our party has a strong record of independent foreign policy, working within the European family and working within the multilateral rules-based order. Both Deputies will bring all those values to us and we wish them the best of luck.

I ask the Tánaiste to outline his recent call with the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and to comment on the recent appointment by the United States of the new special envoy to Northern Ireland on economic affairs.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 72 and 119 together.

I thank the Deputy for his kind comments. Since assuming my new role, I have had the opportunity for constructive exchanges with both the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and the newly appointed US special envoy to Northern Ireland for economic affairs, Joe Kennedy III. During my recent call with the Secretary of State, we discussed the conflict in Ukraine as well as a number of other foreign policy issues of mutual interest. In particular, our discussion focused on Northern Ireland. Secretary of State Blinken emphasised the Biden Administration's support for the restoration of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement and the significance of the upcoming 25th anniversary.

The contribution which US special envoys to Northern Ireland have made has been greatly valued by successive Governments. I have welcomed the appointment of Joe Kennedy as special envoy to Northern Ireland with a mandate for economic affairs. This appointment also comes as we prepare to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, an agreement

which owes much to American support. I look forward to working closely with the special envoy. His role, focused on economic opportunity, will complement some of the economic work being undertaken by the shared island initiative, helping to consolidate the Good Friday Agreement through enhancing the prosperity of, and opportunities available to, all the people of Northern Ireland and the Border counties. As part of that process, Ireland's ambassador in Washington DC hosted an informal event with the special envoy last week, which included members of the Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement. I will travel to Washington DC next week for meetings with senior members of the US Administration and other key opinion formers.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: In his continued conversations with Secretary of State Blinken, I hope the Tánaiste will continue to underscore the important role the US has played over those 25 years. In many ways, the US in the past played a role as a counterbalance to the British taking a more selfish, strategic and economic interest in the North. One of the most powerful things in the Downing Street Declaration was the British Government's admission that it no longer has a selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland. It allowed many people to take a leap of faith. Unfortunately, Brexit forced Britain to have a more selfish, strategic and economic interest in the North and that has led to many of the issues we face. The US has a continuing role to play.

I also ask the Minister to impress on the Secretary of State the issue of Ukraine. The US could do far more in respect of admitting to the country people fleeing the war in Ukraine. The US often looks back and regrets the numbers it took in during the Second World War. The support the US is giving in terms of military aid and other aid, which is a matter the Tánaiste spoke to the Secretary of State about, is important but it is also important that the US also admits people fleeing the war.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for his comments. The response of the US and the White House to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has, fortunately, been balanced. That was the case when the US wanted to avoid the war. It has also done everything possible to support Ukraine in its pursuit of its entitlement under the UN Charter to self-defence. The US has done that in a way that avoids, if at all possible, escalation to a worse conflagration. I think the US has found the fine line in that regard. It has navigated a balanced approach that can lead to a better outcome, peace and the guarantee of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. As a global voice, President Biden has led as well as he could. He has led well in the face of this appalling war. Given the geography, Europe's proximity means it was always going to be the main support in terms of migration from Ukraine and people fleeing the war.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I take the Tánaiste's point. However, I think more can be done to manage the flow of migration. I have no doubt that the Biden Administration is ready to provide support.

I welcome the Tánaiste's comments with regard to the appointment of Joe Kennedy as special envoy. Senator Malcolm Byrne and I, as conveners of the US friendship group, have already spoken to the US ambassador. We look forward to engaging with Mr. Kennedy. The North of Ireland has an important opportunity to exploit the potential of both the EU and UK markets. That is a tool Mr. Kennedy will have in his bag to try to attract investment and to support businesses. It might be to the detriment of my constituents if investment is going up north but we know there are benefits to investing in communities over time. Like the Tánaiste, I welcome the appointment of Mr. Kennedy and look forward to the benefits it will bring.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for his comment and agree with him. I hope that if outstanding issues are resolved, we could create a platform for further investment in the economy of Northern Ireland. Historically, it has not done as well as other regions on the island. The cessation of violence and the Downing Street Declaration helped economic development in the North and it has improved significantly. There is, however, no doubt that maintaining access to the European Single Market and the UK market is of huge importance to the Northern Ireland economy. There can be a win-win situation if these issues can be resolved.

As the population of the island of Ireland is growing, the more seamless economic development we create, the greater opportunities there will be, North and South. I recently met representatives of InterTradeIreland. I was impressed at the increased trade between North and South, which creates jobs in both Finglas and Northern Ireland.

Foreign Conflicts

73. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs if he supports calls for a special tribunal to prosecute Russian war crimes in Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4334/23]

Deputy Seán Haughey: Does the Tánaiste support calls for a special tribunal to prosecute Russian war crimes in Ukraine? We touched on this topic in an earlier question. How does the Minister think Ireland should proceed on this question?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy. In Ukraine last July, I heard first-hand accounts from civilians of the brutality and violence visited upon men, women and children by occupying Russian forces. Where Russia's forces have been pushed back, we have seen wanton destruction and the uncovering of mass civilian graves in towns and villages.

Ireland supports initiatives to bring to account the individual perpetrators of atrocity crimes, including war crimes, committed in Ukraine since Russia's latest invasion of that country in February 2022. Ireland, along with its EU partners, was one of over 40 states to refer the situation in Ukraine to the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, ICC, to pursue accountability for alleged atrocity crimes committed in Ukraine. The ICC has jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide that have been committed on Ukrainian territory since 2013. In March 2022, the prosecutor of the ICC commenced a formal investigation into the situation in Ukraine.

Ukraine is also advocating support for the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression as it concerns Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Due to the separate jurisdictional regime for the crime of aggression, which is a separate and distinct crime to war crimes under international law, the ICC does not have jurisdiction over the crime of aggression as it relates to events in Ukraine. The establishment of the proposed tribunal seeks to address this impunity gap. Ireland supports the idea of creating a special tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression. However, a number of significant legal and practical challenges must still be resolved before this can happen. In the meantime, we welcome proposals to establish an interim prosecution office to investigate the crime of aggression as an important first step to achieving accountability for this crime.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I believe there is general agreement that there must be full ac-

countability for the individuals responsible for international war crimes in Ukraine. We have all observed Russia's deliberate targeting and killing of civilians, attacks on civilian infrastructure and threat to use nuclear weapons. The question is how we achieve this accountability. Some EU states favour the establishment of a special international tribunal. The European Parliament has passed another resolution along those lines. I do not think we should underestimate the complexity of this matter and the difficulties in gathering evidence and bringing about a prosecution. The Tánaiste said that Ireland favours the establishment of a special international tribunal. Does he also see a role for the ICC? I believe what he has said indicates he does. Is there also a role for the European Court of Human Rights or the International Court of Justice, under the Genocide Convention? There are different international bodies looking at this matter. We need to co-ordinate and decide how best to proceed as a State and within international organisations.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The principle of accountability is very important. At the commencement of and during all wars in the past, accountability has seemed a long way off and appeared an almost unachievable proposition. We should know from history that accountability can and does happen in the aftermath of terrible wars. We saw that recently in the Balkans. We must pursue those who perpetrate war and engage in the crimes in question. They must know there will be day of reckoning or, at the very least, that could be such a day in the form of international accountability. Along with our EU partners, we have referred the situation in Ukraine to the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC to pursue accountability in respect of alleged atrocities committed in Ukraine. The ICC has jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide that have been committed on Ukrainian territory since 2013. In March of last year, the Prosecutor of the ICC commenced a formal investigation in the situation in Ukraine.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I thank the Tánaiste. How will the Russian Federation be made to pay compensation for the damage it has done? Can Russian frozen assets be used for this purpose? This is a complex issue to resolve, but we should, at an EU level, look into it to see how the Russian Federation can be made to pay compensation for the tremendous damage it is doing and that it will no doubt continue to do in the coming months.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Early last year, the Estonian Prime Minister was the first to put forward the idea of utilising Russian assets that have been frozen to facilitate reconstruction in Ukraine. When this suggestion was put forward at the European Council, there was not a big take-up in respect of it. I gave support to Prime Minister Kallas of Estonia and stated that we needed to pursue the matter. Momentum since then has grown significantly, and the proposal put forward is being actively looked at by the European Commission and member states in the context that some frozen assets will be used for reconstruction in Ukraine. The damage there is enormous. Countries that conduct wars that give rise to such savagery and destruction must know that there will be penalties. The resolve of the international community has to be strong, particularly in the aftermath of conflict. It cannot be the same donors all of the time that come in and rebuild countries after terrible wars.

North-South Implementation Bodies

74. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide an overview on the shared island civic society fund he announced on 12 January 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4216/23]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Tánaiste outline the details of the new shared island civic society fund? While I welcome the capital projects, I am anxious to see a project that would facilitate civic dialogue. I welcome this initiative and thank the Tánaiste for announcing it. Can the Tánaiste report on his recent meetings with Wavetron?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I was very pleased to launch the shared island civic society fund earlier this month. The fund forms part of the Government's shared island initiative, which I established more than two years ago, and will build on all of the progress already made on infrastructure, research and community projects. Through the shared island dialogue series, we learned that civic society groups across the island would benefit from enhanced support to deepen their work with cross-Border partners on issues of common interest. The shared island civic society fund responds directly to this need. It is my intention that the shared island civic society fund will promote North-South co-operation across a range of sectors and themes consistent with the objectives and commitments of the Good Friday Agreement and support the emergence of new cross-Border civic projects. I anticipate that the fund will complement work that is already taking place on a North-South basis. It should also assist civic society organisations in establishing new strategic links.

In its first year, the fund will support organisations working on projects in a broad range of areas, including: climate and environment; community development; heritage and conservation; social enterprise; the charity and voluntary sector; and sport. The fund will provide €3 million over its first three years of operation, with up to €500,000 being made available this year. The application process is now open with full details available on my Department's website. Applications will be accepted until Monday, 27 February.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: On the shared island civic society fund, I was 20 years of age in 1997 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1997. The majority of people on this island have adult memories that do not involve the Troubles. That is a positive thing. However, it also means that we must make sure we do not forget the lessons that were learned from process relating to the development of the Good Friday Agreement, namely, ideas around parity of esteem and a shared space. The civic society fund is an important way of getting people to engage with each other. I wish to talk about young people in particular in this regard. In the past, we had programmes, such as those operated by Boston College, Co-operation Ireland, etc., that did this on a regular basis. I hope we can work with young people at the civic society forum to encourage them to understand each other and why their communities come from different places, but also to understand that they often come from similar circumstances. The political and religious context shapes their perception of each other rather than the circumstances in which they live on a day-to-day basis.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I agree with the Deputy. Applications are invited from a range of civic society community organisations, business and trade union representative groups and regional or national representative bodies. Of course, we are also including the under-represented voices of women, young people, older people, ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI+ community. Applications will have a North-South dimension. The Deputy made a point about the younger generations and the many people born since the Good Friday Agreement came into being. In the context of the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, it is vital that we try to communicate the message to a younger audience. We had a shared island dialogue with young people. Young people's perspectives are quite different from those that were prevalent during negotiations on the agreement. There is a pressing need to work with young people in the context of the future of the island.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It is funny the Tánaiste should mention applications. We are already working on one in Ballymun with some groups in east Belfast. We hope to be able to bring together young people from both perspectives and to avail of funding. I ask the Tánaiste to look favourably on that application. I am sure many other Deputies will ask him to do the same. The communities of east Belfast and Ballymun are similar in many ways. They face similar economic challenges, and the young people from both have many issues in common. The theme that is going to be proposed is the idea of how we might tackle climate change, which is a matter on which both groups can agree. I see potential in the context of so many areas. We could have sports clubs from both sides engaging with each other. When it comes to access to arts centres, we are going to take the lead on it. We hope that the idea of culture can be explored in the context of what it means. I refer to how traditional culture is defined in one way and the fact that young people might have more in common in the context of rap music or other forms of culture that are more relevant to their generation.

I thank the Tánaiste for launching the programme. I look forward to his favourable consideration of the application.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The deadline for applications for the current funding round is Monday, 27 February, so the Deputy had better get the application in. Officials in my Department are happy to engage with anyone who has a query regarding the eligibility of a specific organisation or project. Further funding rounds will be scheduled and will take account of any learnings gained from the first call for applications. Full details on the shared island civic society fund, including eligibility criteria and the application process information, are available on the Department of Foreign Affairs website.

The issue the Deputy mentioned is key. We need to share lessons relating to school completion and educational attainment in different communities, North and South. This is vital work that we have advanced through the Economic and Social Research Institute's research work on the shared island initiative. That research revealed a great deal regarding educational completion on the island of Ireland, the differences between the North and the South and how, by sharing knowledge, we can improve outcomes for young people on the island.

Middle East

76. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions he proposes to take or is willing to support against Israel following the destruction of aid supplied by the EU and Ireland to Palestine by Israeli forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4406/23]

Deputy John Brady: What actions is the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs prepared to take in order to hold Israel to account for its continuous demolition and destruction of EU-funded structures in Palestine?

Deputy Micheál Martin: As I said earlier, I am very concerned by the demolitions and evictions in the occupied Palestinian territory. Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian property and humanitarian aid accelerated in 2022, which saw a record number of Palestinians affected by demolitions, evictions and confiscations. I have been consistently forthright in voicing my opposition to Israeli settlement activity, including demolitions and evictions, in the occupied West Bank. These actions are a clear violation of international law and stand in the way of a

just, lasting and comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Ireland has been proactive in ensuring that these issues are highlighted in international fora, including during our recent tenure on the United Nations Security Council. Ireland has repeatedly urged Israel not to proceed with planned demolitions and to cease all settlement activities. Ireland has raised these issues directly with the Israeli Government, including during visits to the region. Ireland's embassy in Tel Aviv also raises these matters in its regular contacts with the Israeli authorities. Ireland's representative office in Ramallah has made a number of visits, along with EU colleagues, to sites of concern in the West Bank.

Ireland is part of a group of EU member states pursuing compensation for humanitarian structures, funded by donors such as Ireland, through the West Bank Protection Consortium. The consortium has sought compensation of over €1,170,000 in respect of confiscated or demolished assets since 2015. Ireland provided €300,000 in funding to the consortium in 2022, underlining our commitment to reducing the vulnerability of Palestinian communities living in Area C of the West Bank.

Ireland remains committed to supporting all efforts aimed at achieving a just and lasting two-state solution, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states, on the basis of international law and agreed international parameters.

Deputy John Brady: On 24 November last year, Israel demolished Masafer Yatta school in south Hebron. That was one of more than 9,257 Palestinian structures that have been demolished illegally by Israel since 2009, displacing more than 13,345 Palestinians from their lands. This is a policy of destruction, demolition, displacement and dispersal of Palestinians to the smallest parcels of land, similar to the Bantustans in apartheid South Africa. The Minister referenced the application by the West Bank Protection Consortium. That has now been going on for the past four years and not one penny in compensation has been paid. Again, words of condemnation and compensation claims are not having an effect. What is the Tánaiste prepared to do to ensure that the illegal demolition of Palestinian structures stops, and stops immediately?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Ireland is doing everything it can within its diplomatic and political capacities, particularly, as I said earlier, in multilateral fora such as the United Nations Security Council, where we have consistently raised these issues. Our position was most recently reiterated on 19 December at the meeting of the UN Security Council which focused on the issue of Israeli settlements, and we were key to getting that on the agenda. Our position is very clear: fundamentally, we believe in the two-state solution, as this House does. These settlements militate against the creation of a two-state solution and jeopardise and imperil any prospect of a two-state solution, and I want to be very clear about that. There is not unanimity or anything near unanimity of views across the EU 27, unfortunately. However, we work with like-minded EU member states to consistently raise the issue and to do what we can, through our funding programmes and through our diplomatic and political channels, to work with the Palestinian Authority to keep these issues alive.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

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 Mattie McGrath - To discuss the closure of the Corman Miloko plant in Carrick-on-Suir, and the need to bring alternative employment to Carrick-on-Suir.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss antisocial behaviour and policing in Cabra, Dublin 7.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the barriers to access to hyperemesis medication in pregnancy.

Deputy Marc MacSharry - To discuss support schemes and compensation measures for businesses, and individuals such as full-time students, who are dependent on seasonal tourism that will be adversely affected by the reduction in tourism accommodation available due to the refugee crisis.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - To discuss the publication of the report into mishandling of abuse at St. John's Ambulance.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the ongoing issues with MIDOC GP out-of-hours services in the midlands.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss a recent public letter issued by 87 health consultants on their concerns regarding conditions at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy Chris Andrews - To discuss the reduction of services from Irishtown and Ringsend primary care centre.

Deputy Michael Collins - To discuss the reduction of beds in the mental health unit in Bantry General Hospital.

Deputy Martin Browne - To discuss the status of plans to develop a 60-bed residential care centre at St. Patrick's Hospital, Cashel.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss vacancy and dereliction, and actions aimed at tackling these.

Deputy Holly Cairns - To discuss the Government response to the 25% increase in the number of people presenting to sexual assault treatment units in 2022.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - To discuss the need for a suitable ash dieback replanting scheme for Ireland.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss continued boil water notices in east Cork.

The matters raised by Deputies Mattie McGrath, Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer Whitmore and Pat Buckley have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Employment Support Services

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am glad the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, is here to discuss this issue. In recent days, the announcement that the dairy company Corman Miloko, which employed 31 people at its manufacturing plant facility, is to close at the end of June came as devastating news for the families of those impacted, and the town of Carrick-on-Suir and surrounding areas. A statement by the company said the decision was as a result of a reduction in the volume of business contracted at the facility in recent years and follows significant restructuring efforts to enable it to operate in a highly competitive marketplace.

Corman Miloko was the last of the traditional employers in Carrick-on-Suir. It has been there 70 years or more, and it is there longer than I am on this earth. Between it and the tannery in Carrickbeg, they must have had 700 or 800 jobs. Corman Miloko has an excellent workforce. I remember when they worked three shifts around the clock and the company also supported local hauliers and Glanbia tankers with a washing facility. They were a tremendous workforce and it was a good company to work for, let us be fair about it.

I know the Minister of State has been engaging and will engage further with the factory and the company. The town of Carrick-on-Suir is decimated because we do not have jobs. We have the Carrick-on-Suir Development Association, CoSDA, and the many local employers and Councillor Kieran Bourke have done Trojan work to try to keep the town going, but it is becoming a satellite town for other towns as we do not have any industry.

Tá cúpla ceisteanna agam. Has the option been explored for an alternative use for the new manufacturing plant, which is located just off the N24, in order for it to continue to have an important role in the local economy? Will a task force be established to examine the potential for job creation in this area? What efforts is the IDA making to attract foreign companies to set up operations in those areas?

I cannot emphasise enough how good the workforce have been and there have been many families I knew over the years who worked there. I hope they will be engaged in other Glanbia plants or, if not and if they prefer to take redundancy, I hope they will be well looked after because they have earned it and they deserve it. They are a good workforce.

It is a very delicate site. The front wall of the plant is only 5 m or 6 m away from the N24. At the back, just metres away, there is the newly developed Suir Blueway, which is a huge tourist attraction for cyclists, walkers, fishermen and the like. We cannot have this site go in any way into a state of dereliction. I am not giving up the ghost that we will find some other business for it, but we must maintain that site. It is a highly technical site. At one time, there used to be odours but that was all sorted out with a state-of-the-art, high-tech percolation treatment unit. It is a good plant and it is up and running. We have until June and, please God, some other use will be found for it but, if not, the staff must be supported. As I said, with Tipperary County Council and CoSDA, the plant must be put to good use and it cannot be allowed to fall into a state of dereliction.

The tannery is a distant memory in Carrick-on-Suir. Corman Miloko has given long service but this is a sore point with the people of Carrick-on-Suir, south-east Tipperary and east Water-

ford. We want to make sure this does not go the same road and that we will find an alternative, and keep a willing workforce engaged in productive work.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter and giving me an opportunity to address it. Like the Deputy, I was extremely disappointed to learn the news of this closure and my first concern goes to those workers and their families, as well as the wider population of Carrick-on-Suir straddling the Waterford and Tipperary border that so many of us know so well and have enjoyed visiting so many times.

The Department learned of the impending closure of the plant last week. Unfortunately, as the Deputy knows, Corman Miloko has experienced reduced volumes in recent years and restructuring efforts simply were not successful. The company has now begun its consultation process with all existing employees regarding a redundancy programme and it has been in touch with my Department about this. I can assure the Deputy that Tirlán and Enterprise Ireland will remain in close contact with the company, as will departmental officials, to support the workers and the company through this very delicate process up to and beyond June. I have requested that officials in my Department monitor the situation carefully and, crucially, work closely with the Department of Social Protection to do whatever we can for the employees affected.

I know this is a frightening time for the employees and their families, but it is important to talk to them about what opportunities there are and what work will be done by the Government and its agencies to help them through this very difficult process. They are the number one key priority, as well as all the related people, be they family members or the people who rely on the workers in this business second hand in Carrick-on-Suir.

At a time when there is so much job creation in the country and, in effect, full employment, it is very simple for many people to dismiss any sort of redundancy and say there are always jobs out there, but as Deputy Mattie McGrath knows better than I do, many of these people have put their entire lives into this enterprise. As he says, it was a good plant but, unfortunately, restructuring of the parent company has meant it has had to move its operations elsewhere. However, that does not mean we give up on the site or, more important, on the workers. I know that this does not make the loss any easier for those who work in the plant, but I trust it gives them some hope that the Government will put a significant effort into them as people if they want to retrain, reskill or more importantly help them get the many jobs that are unfilled in this region in the dairy and production sector. The Deputy knows as well as I do the number of companies around Tipperary and into Waterford who are keen to get high quality staff like the people who worked in Corman Miloko and gave their lives to it.

It is important to stress that we are there to support and help those who find themselves losing their job or without work to avail of training courses, financial support and mentorship. I urge everyone impacted to reach out to their local Intreo office to see what is available to them when a statutory redundancy package is offered. The Government will ensure that the package is fully compliant with the requirements Corman Miloko has to Irish law.

Deputy Mattie McGrath asked for more detail on the future use of the site. The site will go back to Tirlán, while the equipment will go to Corman Miloko, which will use it in its other operations. I have great hopes for this site. As the Deputy rightly says, it is in a perfect location in the region and in the country to attract good, high-quality investment like the 600 additional jobs Enterprise Ireland has brought to Tipperary in recent years, in addition to the surge in jobs

in Waterford.

Even though the job losses will be very difficult for many people, no stone will be left unturned to make sure new jobs are provided and, crucially, that the enterprise goes into such an important town as Carrick-on-Suir and the affected regions nearby.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for his positive reply. I hope he will engage with the administrative district members. I mentioned Kieran Bourke and the current chair, David Dunne.

There is a wonderful plant upstream, the Merck, Sharp & Dohme, MSD, facility. It is often said that foreign direct investment companies come and then go away but that company is there nearly 60 years now. It is only a few miles up the river. The Carrick-on-Suir Development Association, COSDA, is a wonderful organisation with great people involved with the business people. We have a wonderful network of schools, sporting clubs and everything else in Carrick-on-Suir. The spirit of the people cannot be questioned. They are willing to work and engage with the Minister of State in a task force with companies such as Merck, Sharp & Dohme, which helped in the past. I hope we will have a replacement plant on the site because it is so close to the road. The river is right behind it, and we got deliveries from barges long ago.

This plant has served us well. There is a dedicated workforce, some of them second generation, whose parents worked there as well. The plant precedes my birth, and I am 64 bliain d'aois. We must work sensitively with the county council, the councillors I mentioned, COSDA and companies like Merck, Sharp & Dohme and other business people in Carrick-on-Suir that have great ideas and the private employers that give great employment to people. All hope is not lost. The workers must be looked after. The plant must be kept open.

I was a bit alarmed to hear that the equipment might be moved by the parent company. Tirlán, formerly Glanbia, started off with south Tipperary farmers, ordinary people in the spirit of the co-operative society, the meitheal. We must go back and invoke that spirit again, of the late great Canon Hayes and try to revitalise this plant and get new people into it as soon as the company leaves because the wheels and cogs must be kept turning. We cannot leave it to become derelict in any way. We must work hard to try to keep it going.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I assure Deputy McGrath that hope is most certainly not lost in regard to this site and the people who have worked in this plant for so many years. We must put the redundancies that are happening in context. It is nothing to do with the efficiency of the plant itself. It is certainly nothing to do with the 31 workers who have put their blood, sweat and tears into it. Unfortunately, it is due to the decision of the parent company.

Deputy McGrath might acknowledge that this is happening at a time when the economy is growing and we, effectively, have no unemployment. We are able to invest time, as the Deputy talked about, not just into the town of Carrick-on-Suir but this specific site.

The Deputy asked for a couple of undertakings. Of course we will engage with the local councillors both in Carrick-on-Suir and over the border in Waterford. I have already had a meeting with Senator Ahearn about the issue.

Deputy McGrath mentioned Merck, Sharp & Dohme. It is convenient that I will be meeting the company next week in the Department not just about this plant but about wider issues in the south east and mid-west, where it has a lot of operations. I give the Deputy an undertaking

that I will raise this specific area and the need for reinvigoration in this area with the company when I meet it next week.

I hope I can get across that I want to work with the Deputy on this issue. I share his passion to make sure that once the statutory issues have been addressed that we get these extremely skilled people back into the workforce because we badly need them, in particular in the dairy sector. This is not like the dark old days when the shutting down of a plant like this could destroy an entire town. There are opportunities for jobs, training and, more important, for these skills to be put back into the economy extremely quickly.

I look forward to working with Deputy McGrath in the coming weeks, into June and beyond, to make sure that we breathe entrepreneurial life into the town and surrounding areas.

Child Abuse

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Since November we have waited for the publication of Dr. Geoffrey Shannon's report on his investigation of abuse into St. John Ambulance. While it is important to state that I and my party, Fianna Fáil, as well the Minister, believe the report must be published, it is more important to put on the record why Mick Finnegan, the tireless campaigner, believes this publication to be in the public interest. I welcome Mick to the Gallery tonight. He is here and listening to what I am saying. Without his bravery and tenacity in seeking truth and justice, we would not be here debating this issue.

The following is based on what Mick has said to me. He says that in the past few years a man synonymous with children's rights, advocacy and protection has painstakingly listened to many voices, including his own. He says it was thanks to that care shown and the understanding of Dr. Geoffrey Shannon that he feels strong enough to speak out to us, his representatives. He says the report into the darkest times in St. John Ambulance was commissioned by that organisation to shine a light on the truth of events. He says he knows the truth of those events: that he lives the truth every day. He says that he and thousands of others, victims of sexual abuse, cannot choose the time of the day or night to think and dwell upon what was stolen, irreplaceable, childhood and innocence. He says he never knew truth could be physically heavy, not until he and many more silent victims were once again denied a simple act of transparency to allow the truth to come out. He says he earnestly hopes that none of us ever has to carry this weight. He says he knows this House is well aware of the actual refusal, despite the words of St. John Ambulance, to release Dr. Shannon's report. He thanks so many of us who courageously spoke out to call for the release of the report. In particular, he wants to thank the President, Michael D. Higgins, for his heartfelt intervention and to quote him from a different poem in an early context:

The Prophets are weeping,
For the words that have been stolen,
From texts that once offered,
To reveal in ancient times,
A shared space,

Of love and care,

Above all for the stranger.

Mick says that today he and others feel like a stranger in their own land. The continual refusal to publish the truth of the organisation acts as a further abuse, not a historical one, but is seared into their everyday lives. He says that once again, they feel as children in the dominion of those who hold power over them and their story. He says that this House can help to remove that hold over others.

10 o'clock

He goes on to say it can insist that those great voluntary organisations, which do so much for our youth and our culture and in a major way define our country as one of the finest places to live, cease all connections with this organisation until the unaltered report is published and our citizens can see and learn from a truth that has blighted so many lives. Those are Mick's own words, which are very passionate. I am delighted to read them out tonight.

This is not the end, however. Survivors need this report to be published - full stop. There are no reasons for St. John Ambulance to do otherwise. Have we not learned that openness and truthfulness are key when addressing such issues of abuse? In addition to President Higgins, a number of parties have called for this report to be published. I put on record Fianna Fáil's call for this report to be published. As I have said many times in the Chamber regarding so many horrors in our past, survivors must be listened to. They are at the centre of this and deserve to have the report published. The Minister has written to the organisation asking that this be done. I ask him again to do all he can in his power to make sure this report is published.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I join her in welcoming Mick to the Gallery. I am glad of the opportunity to speak on the record of the House on this issue.

Reports of historical sexual abuse in St. John Ambulance in the 1990s have been highlighted in recent years by a number of Deputies and Senators. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, highlighted it when she in opposition. I engaged with St. John Ambulance in 2021 regarding how the organisation proposed to respond to these reports. Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, senior counsel, an internationally recognised expert in child protection, was subsequently commissioned by the board of St. John Ambulance in March 2021 to conduct an independent review into the handling of historical child sexual abuse within St. John Ambulance.

As I am sure the Deputy is aware, the Charities Regulator, under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development, is Ireland's statutory regulator for charitable organisations, including St. John Ambulance. I and my Department do not have a role in the governance of St. John Ambulance. Nevertheless, as we well know, abuse is not consigned to the past and it is my role in collaboration with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, to protect children now. As previously advised in my statement to this House in December 2022, the terms of reference of the review, as fully agreed by Dr. Shannon, set out that he would examine how St. John Ambulance handled past allegations of child sexual abuse. The review was also tasked with examining the current standard of child safeguarding in the organisation. Tusla is responsible for assessing any current risk to children arising from historical allegations of abuse. Tusla has liaised with St. John Ambulance regarding the progress of the review and to improve safeguarding processes within the organisation. The St. John Ambulance safeguarding statement, revised

under advice from Tusla, has now been deemed compliant by the Tusla safeguarding statement compliance unit.

I wrote to St. John Ambulance in December 2022 to enquire as to the status of the report. I received a reply from the commissioner that the report was complete, had been received by St. John Ambulance and would be subject to legal review. In reply, the commissioner noted that the survivors are understandably eager to review the findings of the report and reiterated that the board of St. John Ambulance was committed to publishing the full report immediately after the relevant legal review had taken place. The reply from St. John Ambulance further stated the board was committed to ensuring the legal review was as quick and efficient as possible.

I again wrote to St. John Ambulance on 26 January. I again urged publication as early as possible, noting that the delay in publishing this report is of great concern. Each delay in publication risks a further diminution in the trust of survivors in this process, and it is the survivors who are central to all of this. I once again reiterate and strongly urge the publication of this report and that it be made available to survivors as soon as possible.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister. It is very important, from speaking to Mick tonight, to note the work the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, have done on this matter and that they have spoken to and met with Mick regularly. That is very important and Mick has been very appreciative of it. As the Minister said, however, this is about the survivors, including Mick. This is how we now need to make sure we get this report. As the Minister said, the report was completed by Dr. Shannon in early November. It was handed over to St. John Ambulance on 28 November. That was ten weeks ago. We are now nearly three months on. I am glad the Minister mentioned that he wrote again on 26 January, which I welcome. However, it is unfair on the survivors that we have not got that report. I ask all the representatives in the House to make sure we all stand united to get that report. It is important we have support for that from all parties tonight but the situation is unacceptable. We need to get this report urgently.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Like the Deputy, I see the strong support across both Houses for swift publication of this report. I spoke in the Seanad just before Christmas during statements there on the importance of rapid publication. This review of practices within St. John Ambulance has been asked for by survivors for a long time. It is extremely important to them in their ability to seek - I do not want to use the word "closure" - a recognition of what happened to them, not only the sexual abuse itself but the manner in which their complaints to, or engagement with, an organisation that should have protected them were handled. That is why it is so important the outcome of that review is published in full and rapidly. It is also important there is direct engagement with survivors and that they are able to see directly the outcome of this report and do not read excerpts from it in media publications.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I again thank Mick for joining us this evening. I reiterate on the record of the House my call for this review to be published as soon as possible.

Medicinal Products

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. I will raise the issue of hyperemesis. As she is aware, it is a condition whereby pregnant people suffer from severe nausea and vomiting. It is very debilitating for people and can lead to many of them

ending up in hospital through dehydration or weight loss. It impacts 1% to 2% of pregnancies.

There was a campaign by Hyperemesis Ireland relating to the medication used to treat hyperemesis, Cariban, which is incredibly expensive, prohibitively so for many women in their pregnancies. It can cost up to €3,000 over the course of a pregnancy, which is a huge amount of money. Hyperemesis Ireland campaigned to make Cariban a free medication for women. It is welcome that last year the Government recognised that campaign and made that medication free and available on the drugs payment scheme. That change was brought in on 1 January this year. Unfortunately, the joy and relief that came with that was very short-lived because the reality is the system that has been set up by the HSE in order for people to avail of Cariban is causing huge problems. There are significant barriers to people getting it.

Under the current system, to get this medication, women have to register and be seen by their consultant. Their consultant has to be the one to prescribe the medication for them. As the Minister will be aware, a pregnant person will not see a consultant probably for the first 12, 13, 17 or 18 weeks of her pregnancy and, during that time, she will have to put up with hyperemesis from very early in the pregnancy and suffer greatly. We are talking about people who cannot get off the sofa because they are so sick. They potentially have to look after other children, are not able to work and are not able to afford to go the private route for this medication. I have heard from women who are not taking their full dosage because they cannot afford it. They are struggling to get to work while having other children to look after. It must be highly difficult for them to deal with. There are big problems because GPs are unable to prescribe this and you have to go to a consultant to get it. People are going to accident and emergency departments to try to get to the consultants. However, I have heard from women who have had to sit for six or seven hours in an accident and emergency department to get to a consultant. Then, when they get to the consultant, the consultant is not in a position to prescribe it for them or they may not get to see a consultant. I heard just today from someone who is 18 weeks pregnant, had her first consultant's appointment today, has had hyperemesis since her sixth week and has been paying €70 a week for that. When she went to her appointment today, she was informed that the consultants have had no contact from the HSE regarding the forms or the process by which they have to prescribe this and that they have no way of offering the hypothetical supports set out by the Government.

I think the Minister of State will appreciate that while it was a really positive thing that Cariban was made free under the drugs scheme, it is not working and there needs to be a review. Primary care and the GP should be the ones prescribing it in the absence of availability and access to consultants.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. She has given me the challenge of using an awful lot of words that are very complicated, but I will do my very best.

On behalf of the Minister for Health, I thank the Deputy for raising this topic and appreciate that it will be of concern to many women in Ireland. Hyperemesis is a severe form of nausea and vomiting during pregnancy that affects some women and must be diagnosed and treated appropriately. The Government is keen to ensure that anyone encountering this condition receives the support they need. As part of budget 2023, the Minister announced €32.2 million in funding for women's health. That included dedicated funding for Cariban, a medicine used to treat hyperemesis. As of January 2023, this medicine is now available to those women who need it. I take fully on board what the Deputy has just said; it comes with its own health warning.

Unfortunately, reaching this point has not been straightforward. Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, only medicines that are licensed and have marketing authorisation from the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority can be added to the HSE's formal reimbursement list. Cariban is not licensed and therefore cannot be added to the reimbursement list. It is instead classed as an exempt medicinal product. There are three medicines containing doxylamine-pyridoxine which are licensed in Ireland. They are Xonvea, Exeltis and Navalem modified-release hard capsules.

To date the market authorisation holder of Xonvea has not progressed the pricing and reimbursement application further with the HSE. The market authorisation holders for Exeltis and Navalem have not submitted pricing and reimbursement applications to the HSE. Therefore, to address the unmet need of patients with hyperemesis, the HSE's medicines management programme was asked to review the clinical evidence available on the unlicensed exempt medicinal product Cariban and to make a recommendation on the appropriateness and feasibility of an exceptional patient-specific process for access to the product.

Following the recommendations of the medicines management programme, an exceptional arrangement has been put in place to support the reimbursement of Cariban. Cariban is now available under the community drugs schemes on an individual patient basis for the treatment of nausea and vomiting during pregnancy where consultant obstetrician-initiated. That is the crux of the issue. While the initial prescription for Cariban must be issued by a consultant, further prescriptions can be issued by a patient's GP. Consultant initiation is the case for all unlicensed exempt medicinal products under the community drugs schemes. The HSE advises that where a drug is not licensed, the expertise of a specialist in the relevant field is necessary to ensure safe usage. If, however, a licensed product were approved for reimbursement, this arrangement could then be reviewed or revised.

The HSE therefore encourages clinicians, along with the Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the national clinical programme for obstetrics and gynaecology, and other healthcare professionals to encourage the market authorisation holders of the available licensed medicinal products, Xonvea, Exeltis and Navalem, to progress with the formal pricing and reimbursement process in Ireland.

I feel there is a process being put in place but it is not solving the problem. I have to acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, did listen to the campaign. He worked really hard to ensure we could find a solution. Unfortunately, by the time you hit 20 weeks or 18 weeks, you are probably over the worst of your sickness and you also will not have seen your consultant, so there is a problem with waiting the 20 weeks to see the consultant.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: There are a few things in the Minister of State's response that I find quite concerning. The first is that it is quite a hands-off response. It sort of says, "We have done what we can do and now it is up to the clinicians and the people suffering from this to lobby the drug manufacturers to get them to put the application in." That is not good enough. There is an issue. If, as the Minister of State says, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, recognises it as an issue, he should be looking for solutions to help women in order that the supports that were put in place in January of this year are available to people, women can access the drug for free and there is not a discrepancy between people who can afford to go privately and those who are forced to suffer alone with this.

The other thing is that the response states that "the expertise of a specialist in the relevant

field is necessary to ensure safe usage”. GPs prescribe this - it is not that they do not - and if anyone knows a pregnant woman, it is her GP. The GP is the specialist and the person with the medical and personal knowledge of the woman to enable him or her to prescribe this. I do wonder whether the Minister had any discussions with consultants when it came to coming up with the solution because it seems to me that not only does the process not work for pregnant people but it is not working for consultants either. They have not been told what they are meant to do. No consultant would have the time to have people coming in through accident and emergency to try to get prescriptions written. Consultants do not do that. It seems completely outside their area to have people come through the hospital system, through accident and emergency, to get them to write prescriptions, particularly considering the winter we have had, when hospitals have been telling people to stay away. Now we are saying that a woman who is vomiting so much that she cannot lift her head off a chair has to go sit in an accident and emergency department, in an area where respiratory syncytial virus, RSV, and everything else is going around. We are sending these highly vulnerable women through accident and emergency to beg for prescriptions from consultants who do not have the forms, do not know how to go through the process and are not in a position to prescribe the drug. It just does not make any sense.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy again for raising this matter. I said to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, before coming here that I did not know exactly what I would say in my closing statement. Having listened to the Deputy, however, and being a female who has been through three childbirths, and who was quite sick during two of them, I will be honest with her. A solution was found. Cariban was the drug, and the reimbursement was put in place. That is great and welcome and was well done. However, if you are at home lying on the couch and you are really ill, you need to go to your GP. You do not have the energy to get into the car to go sit in an accident and emergency department.

I will do one thing first. I will call on the drug companies that have the licences for Xonvea, Exeltis and Navalem to put in an application. I am not leaving it to the HSE; I am asking the drug companies to start that process. That needs to happen.

The second thing I will do is call on the GPs and the consultants to work together, perhaps using telemedicine and so on. It is unlicensed so we have to work within the rules of it. If a GP requested a prescription from a consultant initially and if he was to be able to prescribe that, that would assist in fast-tracking the delivery of it in the interim while the drug companies are putting in a reimbursement for it. I understand why the risk has to be held by the obstetrician but we also have to put the person at the centre at the end of the day and we have to think about that woman who needs assistance. While we welcome the work that has been done, a little bit of collaboration and pragmatic thinking are needed on how we can find a solution to this.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Will the Minister of State ask the Minister to review this process with the HSE?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Yes.

Water Quality

Deputy Pat Buckley: They say that they always save the best for last, so we will see. I have raised this issue in the Chamber numerous times. It is the boil water notices in east Cork, specifically in Whitegate. I want to give the Minister of State a synopsis of what is going on.

It started on 14 February 2016, so we are coming up to the seventh anniversary of these boil water notices. The following is a synopsis of press headlines on this over the years and in recent months and weeks.

One headline states “East Cork residents face years more of drinking water quality issues”. The article continues, “Residents in East Cork who have been forced to buy bottled water for over a year face another three years of water quality issues despite efforts to fast-track a solution.” Another headline states “Councillors demand action as parts of East Cork face more boil water notices for years”. The article continues, “Councillors will also demand compensation for an estimated 10,000 [we will call them] customers who are having to buy bottled water on a near daily basis.” Sinn Féin’s Councillor Danielle Twomey claimed that councillors are left in the dark about the issues. She said:

They’re stonewalling us. It’s so disrespectful to us. They only engage with us when they want planning permission.

Another headline states “The Cork villages that ‘just don’t trust the tap water anymore’”. The article continues, “Locals are frustrated that heavy rains invariably mean boil notices, buying drums of water, and taking extra care when bathing children.” Another headline states “Cork households affected by lengthy boil water notices ‘should be compensated’”. The article continues:

Unanimous support in county council for those who have suffered long-term inconvenience and agreement that they must get an alternative supply and tax credits. Hundreds of householders throughout Co. Cork should get some form of compensation for being hit with repeated and lengthy boil water notices. Cork county councillors want Irish Water to either provide an alternative supply and/or the government to provide additional tax credits to those who suffer such long-term inconvenience.

Another headline states “Boil Water Notice for Killavullen Public Water Supply Remains in Place”. Another headline states “Irish Water boil water notice reminders for Macroom and Whitegate”.

That is just a little synopsis; I could have a very large file of them compiled over the course of seven years and the boil water notices come every three to four months. I am constantly listening to people talk of their frustration and I know where they are coming from. While Whitegate is on the main road to the refinery, the surrounding areas are extremely rural, from upper and lower Aghada, Rostellan back into Cloyne and possibly back into Ballinacurra and Midleton. Even at the far side, in Leamlara, we had a boil water notice a while back.

I mention the additional cost. We are in a cost-of-living crisis and the price of everything has gone up. Energy costs for boiling water have gone up, as have the price of petrol and diesel, and frustration is borne out of these notices. I listened to a radio interview today on Cork’s 96FM and the lady who spoke said it is bad enough with everything that is going on and having to truck in and out with bottles of water but that there has been zero communication from Irish Water, only press releases. She suggested they could even put in additional recycling bays for all the plastic bottles and containers they have and that this would be some form of recognition that Irish Water was listening to them. The Minister of State has listened to the testimony from my colleague, Councillor Twomey, saying they are stonewalled. I found it difficult as well when I tried to engage with Irish Water. It has improved slightly on sewerage, but when it

comes to water it still seems to be the same press release coming out with no clarity being provided to people. There are businesses in all those towns and villages that have additional costs. This is an additional cost again and no clarity is provided. I will come back to the Minister of State to give her a rundown on this after her reply as I will be able to answer when she replies.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I am taking this on behalf of my colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of providing safe drinking water in east Cork. Safe and secure drinking water is an issue of both national and local importance. I appreciate the Deputy's concerns for those communities in Whitegate, County Cork, and surrounding areas affected by the current boil water notice. I also acknowledge the other towns and villages the Deputy referenced in his contribution.

The Deputy will appreciate that the operation of Whitegate regional public water scheme is a matter for Uisce Éireann, which since 1 January 2014 has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. In turn, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, as environmental regulator, is responsible for setting quality standards and enforcing compliance with EU directives and national regulations for the provision of drinking water. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has made enquiries with Uisce Éireann and I am informed the boil water notice currently in place for the Whitegate public water supply was issued on 29 October 2022 following consultation between Uisce Éireann, Cork County Council and the HSE. This boil water notice was issued to protect approximately 9,500 customers in Whitegate, Aghada, Churchtown, Ballycotton, Saleen, Shanagarry, Ballinacurra and areas of Cloyne. The notice was issued because of increased turbidity in the raw water. There is a history of this issue at this source as it is susceptible to raw water quality issues after heavy rainfall events. Boil water notices have been issued on Whitegate public water supply a number of times over recent years.

This is clearly not a tenable situation and it is causing severe inconvenience to those reliant on this water supply. To solve this problem and prevent it occurring again, Uisce Éireann is building a new water treatment plant to serve Whitegate and environs. In 2022, Uisce Éireann announced a multimillion euro investment that will put an end to the frequent boil water notices this community has had to endure. I am pleased to report that, in January 2023, Uisce Éireann, working in partnership with Cork County Council, submitted planning permission for a new state-of-the-art water treatment facility that will service approximately 10,000 people in the east Cork area. Subject to the planning permission being granted by July 2023, the construction contract will be signed in quarter 4 of 2023, with construction mobilised in quarter 1 of 2024. The construction work would be due for completion in quarter 4 of 2025. The EPA will ensure the new plant meets all applicable standards before this supply is removed from the EPA's remedial action list.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage's priority is to ensure people's health is protected and that adequate water is available for all consumers. We all want to see this notice lifted without undue delay, but only when the HSE and the EPA have confirmed the water supply is safe. Additional information and advice on boil water notices is available on Uisce Éireann's website or by calling Uisce Éireann's 24-hour service line. As part of budget 2023, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, secured funding of more than €1.65 billion to support water services. This includes €1.56 billion in respect of domestic water services provision by Uisce Éireann. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies throughout Ireland, including in rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our

rivers, lakes and marine area, making a significant contribution to addressing Ireland's needs.

I also take on board what the Deputy said about communication, which is a vital point in all of this. The one thing Uisce Éireann has failed to provide me details on in the note it has given me is how it communicates with the public.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I spent 22 years in sewerage and water so I know the craic on it. My area has Whitegate oil refinery, the power station and the gas station. There are alternative water sources of water and I am wondering why Uisce Éireann did not look at those as an alternative or short-term fix. One line could be tapped into the other. The area where the problem is could be blanked off and flushed and another water supply could be tapped into. That is just a suggestion.

I thank the Minister of State for the answer and I know where it is coming from and that she is only here on behalf of the Minister. However, as I have said, it is going on for seven years. In two weeks' time it will be seven years, on and off. It is worse than a light switch, and a bad one at that. The Minister of State now understands where the frustration is. People understand it takes time for progress. That is fair but the Minister of State mentioned communication, which is shocking. When there is no communication, one gets rumours. When one gets rumours, one will get no clarification. Then it starts to fester. That is when people lose faith.

I stated that there is no mention of reimbursement for the cost of buying any of the water. Many of these businesses are paying rates. I suspect the local authority is still collecting rates on it. Many of the businesses are left to their own devices. People have no information and there is no assistance. Some people feel there is no hope.

People are told there is information on the website. Many of these people are elderly. It is a rural area. One does not have top-class broadband everywhere. It does not make sense. It is necessary to go back to what we do when we go knocking at the door, to call to them the same as the postman.

What I would say on behalf of the people of east Cork is that everywhere there are boil water notices they want answers and assistance. They want clarity. They do not want constant bad news. They certainly do not want to wake up every few weeks to a press release, saying that this is the first they have heard of it again. This is not the way to treat people. The Minister of State will be aware that when one rubs people the wrong way, one is walking oneself into trouble and into a battle. I would love to get clarity on this.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank Deputy Buckley again. I appreciate the Deputy's interest in this issue.

Before I came in, I said to the Deputy that I was taking this issue and asked if I had discussed it with him previously. In fact, on mature reflection, it was Deputy Stanton who raised it previously with me in relation to Uisce Éireann.

Deputy Stanton's purpose in raising his Topical Issue matter that evening, no different from the Deputy, was that this is down to basic communication. There is a really good story here from local government. There is a really good investment piece going into that part of east Cork. However, the people need to feel that they are heard and communicated with. That is what Deputy Buckley is advocating here this evening. That is what is essentially missing from the piece.

Dáil Éireann

My script states that Uisce Éireann has established a dedicated team to deal with representation and queries from the public representatives. If I could call on Uisce Éireann - I will take it up with the Minister - I ask that it meet with the public representatives and open a channel of communication to help alleviate the frustration of people in these communities.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.32 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 1 Feabhra 2023.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.32 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 1 February 2023.