



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 28 Feabhra 2023

Tuesday, 28 February 2023

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The announcement yesterday of agreement by the European Commission and the British Government on the protocol is very welcome. It marks the end of negotiations to resolve trading practicalities. We always said that a workable and durable solution existed if both parties engaged in good faith and the necessary political will was demonstrated. The protocol represents hard-won protections for Ireland against the sharpest edge of the Tory Brexit. This means guaranteeing no hard border on the island of Ireland, protecting the Good Friday Agreement in its entirety and maintaining the all-island economy and access to the European Single Market. While all parties and sectors are now working through the detail of the agreement, it appears that these vital protections have indeed been preserved. We will, of course, be seeking clarifications on certain aspects of the agreement and I ask the Taoiseach to facilitate at least some of that process with all parties. However, it looks as though a positive outcome has been achieved for all of Ireland - for our people, our peace, our stability and our economic success. We are now at a turning point and that is very good news for business and wider society.

I wish to recognise the unified stance taken by the Oireachtas on Brexit and in defence of the protocol through these very difficult years. Such a unified stance and a shared purpose is again required to see the democratic institutions in the North restored with urgency. We also need to see the resumption of the North-South Ministerial Council. Last May, the people voted in an historic Assembly election. They voted for an Executive of progress, partnership and inclusion. For nine months, however, the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, has used the pretext of the protocol for its blockade of the Executive and the assembly. Following yesterday's announcement, there exists no justification, even by its own logic, for the DUP to continue this reckless and damaging boycott of democracy. There is no justification for the DUP to keep the Executive down while workers, families and businesses struggle with an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis and as they suffer from chronic treatment waiting lists. The vast majority of people in the North want the parties around the Executive table. They want a government up and working for them, dealing with the issues that affect their lives. The onus now is very much on the DUP to

join with everyone else in making politics work. The negotiations are over and we need to see the restoration of the Executive without further delay.

Tá fáilte mhór roimh an gcomhaontú idir an Coimisiún Eorpach agus Rialtas na Breataine ar an bprótacal. Déileálann sé leis an trádáil phraiticiúil. Caithfidh an DUP deireadh a chur lena bhac ar an bhFeidhmeannas anois díreach. Tá Rialtas a bhíonn ag obair ar son na ndaoine tuillte ag muintir an Tuaiscirt.

I am sure the Taoiseach will join with me in welcoming on the floor of the Dáil the agreement struck between the European Commission and the British Government. I am sure he will join with me in welcoming the preservation of the hard-won protections for Ireland contained in the protocol. I am sure that, like me, he is frustrated by the continued absence of government in the North. Will he urge the DUP to end its blockade of the Executive, get back around the ministerial table and join with other parties to deliver a Government for all the people of the North?

Visit of Moldovan Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before calling the Taoiseach to reply, I ask Members to join me in extending a céad míle fáilte to the members of a delegation from the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, who have joined us in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. The delegation is led by my counterpart, H.E. Mr. Igor Grosu, President of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova; and is accompanied by someone who is very well known to us, H.E. Ms Larisa Micule, ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to Ireland. They are most welcome.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí (Atógáil) - Leaders' Questions (Resumed)

The Taoiseach: I join with the Ceann Comhairle in welcoming the members of the delegation from Moldova, along with the ambassador, Ms Larisa Micule, who we all know very well, and to assure them of our continued support for Moldova's path to its membership of the EU and our support for it in everything it is trying to do now to defend its independence and its democracy from forces that would undermine it. They are most welcome.

Tá áthas orm go bhfuil socrú nua in áit idir an tAontas Eorpach agus an Ríocht Aontaithe - the Windsor Framework. Tá seans againn anois roinnt cinnteacht a thabhairt don phobal agus do lucht gnó ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas. Tá deis againn anois díriú ar an gcairdeas domhain idir Éire agus an Bhreatain agus é a neartú. Tá spás cruthaithe anois, tá súil agam, ina mbeidh an Pharlaimint agus Rialtas an Tuaiscirt in ann teacht le chéile arís agus dul i mbun a gcuid oibre. Níl daoine i dTuaisceart Éireann ag iarraidh filleadh ar fhadhbanna a bhaineann leis an am atá thart. Tá siad ag iarraidh dul chun cinn a dhéanamh le chéile i sochaí chomhroinnte.

The agreement reached yesterday between the UK Government and the EU is most welcome. I am very much *ad idem* with the Leader of the Opposition in her remarks in that regard. The Windsor Framework involves a package of legislative changes at EU and UK level, a political declaration, or rather a number of political declarations, and also amendments to the pro-

tol. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement provides for the protocol to be amended within the first four years of operation.

From our point of view, as a Government, a people and a country, I believe we can be comfortable and satisfied with the outcome. When the Brexit referendum happened almost seven years ago, we set out our main objectives, which were to ensure that there was no hard border between North and South, that the European Single Market would be protected and our place within it would not be undermined, that the Good Friday Agreement would be upheld and that there would continue to be free movement of goods and people across the Border. None of this is compromised by this new framework. More importantly, none of it was ever in question.

There will be briefings offered to the parties today or tomorrow. My office will facilitate that, and we are happy to answer any questions or give any clarifications that we can. The Tánaiste is going to convene the Brexit stakeholder group, including the wider business sector, NGOs, unions and so on, so that we can brief them as well.

I think it is fair to say that this is a good agreement for Europe and the UK. It will allow us to put relations back on a more solid footing. That is really important now because we need the UK as a partner and ally when it comes to the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, bringing inflation down and other things that are important to all of us. It could be very good for Irish and British relations as well. I believe we can build a new and close partnership, post Brexit, with the UK. I hope to develop those conversations with Prime Minister Sunak in the period ahead.

Above all, I think the agreement works for Northern Ireland. There will be no hard border between North and South, businesses will have access to both the EU and UK markets, which is an economic advantage for Northern Ireland, goods can flow freely from Great Britain to Northern Ireland through the green channel, and the same items that are on the shelves in supermarkets in Britain will be on the shelves in supermarkets in Belfast. Issues with medicines, parcels, plants, pets, packages, sweet potatoes and steel have all been resolved. Northern Ireland will be able to apply UK excise and VAT rates in certain circumstances. A serious effort has been made to close the democratic deficit through the Stormont brake mechanism.

It is fair to say that the EU has listened to the concerns of people, businesses and political parties in Northern Ireland. Those concerns have been listened to, compromises have been made and changes have been made where they were possible. I know Members are going to want to take some time to consider this agreement. The legal text is 400 pages long and people are going to want to see it and pore over it. I understand that the views of all five major Northern Ireland parties, including the DUP, are important in that regard. They will want to consider it, ask questions and issue a reasoned response. I hope, at the end of that, we will find that all five parties are able to agree to it and to support it, thus allowing the Assembly, the Executive and the North-South Ministerial Council to function again, as we all want them to.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Taoiseach for that. There is no doubt but that the certainty and progress of which he speaks is desired by all of us and, most particularly, by people in the North. It is fair also to say that Europe listened to the concerns that were raised, as it made clear it always would, and agreement and a deal have been struck.

Let us reflect, however, on the fact that the biggest concern for people in the North is that they have government. The biggest concern is that we have an Executive and a functioning Assembly nine months after a democratic election. There is now, I am sure the Taoiseach will

agree, no logic for the DUP to continue its blockade. The negotiations are over. The deal has been struck. Yes, we need to pore over the fine detail of that, but I am sure the Taoiseach will agree that we can do that work with a functioning Assembly and an Executive in place. There is now no room for further delay or prevarication. Nine months on, people in the North need their Government up and functioning. Will the Taoiseach join with me in calling on the DUP to make that happen without further delay?

The Taoiseach: I read the statement of the leader of the DUP last night and heard his interview on radio this morning. I think he has asked for a little time to consider the agreement, to pore over the text and to ask some questions. That is reasonable, and we should allow a little time and space for that to happen and for him to consult his party. That is not unreasonable. Certainly, the European Union and the British Government are happy for that to happen. We can see that there is strong cross-party support for this, not just in Northern Ireland but also here and in Britain. I hope that allows us to proceed, to open a new chapter in relations and, in particular, to allow the Government in Northern Ireland to function again, which I agree is what the people of Northern Ireland voted for. They want decisions to be made locally. Tá siad ag iarraidh go ndéileálfaidh institiúidí polaitíochta leis na ceisteanna tábhachtacha: cúram sláinte, costais maireachtála, tithíocht agus an geilleagar.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: My office is inundated with correspondence from householders and small business owners who cannot pay their energy bills. We know that there is an energy bills crisis and that the crisis is not new. Indeed, it is now 13 months since we in the Labour Party brought forward a Dáil motion on the cost-of-living crisis and energy prices.

While the situation was severe a year ago, it is intolerable now. We saw the latest Central Statistics Office, CSO, survey on income and living conditions confirm that the number of people at risk of poverty rose by 76,000 last year and that this rise was driven by an increase in the number of older people at risk of poverty. Our Labour Party representatives have been hearing from pensioners who have had to resort to taking out credit union loans just to meet the cost of their energy bills. Adding insult to injury are the unfairness and inequity of the crisis and the Government's hands-off approach, which has exacerbated that unfairness. We now see wholesale electricity prices falling but providers refusing to pass that benefit on to working families and households. All the while, companies are reaping record-breaking, eye-watering profits. Now we see that Electric Ireland is to cut small businesses' electricity bills by 10% from tomorrow. This is welcome news for SMEs, which we know are struggling to break even. Electric Ireland has also confirmed, however, that it will leave household charges untouched.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We know that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has called on electricity and gas suppliers to cut prices for everyone as soon as possible. Is making calls on providers the best the Government can do? It is simply not good enough. In December, Electric Ireland announced that it would forego some of its profits to give a €50 credit to household customers, which was welcome. However, customers are now paying approximately 90% more per unit of electricity-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Somebody in Electric Ireland is trying to get through - that is all I will say - and they will not take no for an answer. A Cheann Comhairle, you might give me a little latitude-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I will.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----given that somebody's phone has gone off. I jest. I do not think it was Electric Ireland, but you never know.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: It never answers its phones anyway.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It never answers its phones and we are hearing about that from lots of people who cannot get through to Electric Ireland so it is supremely ironic to have a phone call cutting across a critique of Electric Ireland. Customers are paying, as we have heard, approximately 90% per unit of electricity than they did in the spring of last year and families are facing massive annual bills. Where is the fairness in that? We are looking for a sense of urgency from the Government and we are looking for a sense that mere words of encouragement are not the strongest response it can provide. Previously, during Leaders' Questions, I raised with the Taoiseach the scandal of district heating companies charging ridiculous amounts, up to four times more, for energy than other households pay. I have heard the Minister say that is a matter for the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, which is not good enough. I have spoken before about the need for the Government to take the Corrib gas field into State ownership to enable us to control gas prices and reduce bills but again the Taoiseach has said such a move is beyond the Government's control. However, Electric Ireland is already in State control so, what is the excuse this time? How can the Government justify a hands-off approach when people are struggling to make ends meet? Ní féidir le daoine íoc as a gcuid billí míosúla. Caithfidh na comhlachtaí praghas an fhuinnimh a laghdú do theaghlaigh freisin.

The Taoiseach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht a cuid ceisteanna. I want to acknowledge the fact that businesses and people are facing very high electricity and gas bills, and as a result of that a lot of households are struggling, particularly pensioner and low-income households. A lot of small businesses are also struggling with very high utility bills. Mar a dúirt an Teachta, tá an costas maireachtála an-ard. Tá an praghas ar leictreachas agus ar ghás an-ard ach tá an Rialtas anseo agus tá sé ag cabhrú. As the Deputy mentioned in her question, utility bills are now very high. I meet people, including individual homeowners and business people who show me their bills, and it has been a real shock for a lot of people. In many ways a lot of those big electricity and gas bills have only been arriving in recent weeks. In the run-up to Christmas and around Christmas, people thought it might not be so bad, and then the winter bills started arriving in January and February and people got a really big shock. Unfortunately, there are more bills to come in March and April. However, the Government is acting. We have taken three major actions to help people with these high costs. First is the decision to keep the VAT rate on electricity and gas at 9% until the end of October, the lowest VAT rate we have ever had on electricity and gas. We have also decided to pay energy credits and there is still another €200 energy credit to come off people's bills for the March and April period. We have also substantially improved the temporary business energy support scheme to help businesses, farmers, professionals and sole traders with their bills so that more people can qualify, so they can get more money back and it is backdated to September, which will help a lot of people.

It is welcome that two companies so far have announced price reductions. Pinergy has announced reductions for retail customers and Electric Ireland has announced reductions for its

business customers but that is nowhere near enough. Wholesale prices are coming down and I understand that there is a lag between wholesale prices coming down and retail prices for homeowners and businesses coming down. I get that but it should not be too much of a lag. It only took a few months for prices to go up so it should only take a few months for prices to go down. We expect to see electricity and gas companies reduce their prices over the course of the coming months for businesses and residential customers.

It will not just be about polite encouragement; there is a windfall tax coming and that will be legislated for in this House and in the Seanad. That will allow us to recoup some of the profits and give them back to people in the form of reductions in bills. We have to work out the exact mechanisms around that but that is what we intend to do. We will also be saying to State-owned companies that if they make hyper profits we have the power to take some of those off them in the form of a special dividend and use that money to help people as well.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad the Taoiseach acknowledges that not enough is being done but the Government is not just a bystander in this. It is time for a more urgent sense of intervention by the Government on this issue because it seems to people nach bhfuil an Rialtas ag déanamh aon rud. The Government is not doing anything for people who are seeing this inequity. It is amounting to a quadruple whammy because we have seen the magnitude of energy providers' profits and we have seen the inertia and delay in the Government's approach to a windfall tax. I am glad that the Taoiseach has confirmed that will be introduced and that the Government is looking at the super dividend approach. However, we need to know when that will happen. The third thing we are seeing is the extortionate charges on household and, fourth, the inequity where we see reductions in wholesale prices being passed on to businesses but not to families and households. There are increasingly questions about the rationale being offered by energy companies. Electric Ireland suggested that there are hedging contracts that prevent it from moving on household bills as swiftly as it is moving on business bills, but business groups are questioning this so-called explanation and this idea that hedging contracts must necessarily lead to a time lag between wholesale price falls and reductions in bills for households. It is simply not good enough. It is good to hear the Taoiseach agree with me on the hardship that individual families and households are facing but it is not good enough that the Government is simply acting as a bystander and adopting this wait-and-see approach without acting urgently to intervene to ensure households will see the necessary reductions in their bills.

The Taoiseach: Rinne an Rialtas go leor agus beidh níos mo gníomhartha ón Rialtas sna seachtainí romhainn. The Government has done a lot and we will do more in the coming weeks. We have reduced VAT to 9% on electricity and gas. Another energy credit will be deducted from people's bills for the March-April period. We have improved the temporary business energy support scheme, TBESS, the scheme to help businesses, farmers, sole traders and professionals with their energy bills. The next step is the windfall tax. We plan to legislate for that in the coming weeks. I know that will be welcomed by the Opposition. That tax has two elements, which are a super tax on the profits made by the Corrib gas field and various distilleries, and an element of tax on the generators. That money will be recycled into reducing bills for people, which is what we intend to do. As I mentioned earlier, when it comes to a State-owned company, we have the power to take a special dividend, which is certainly under consideration.

One thing we will disagree on is nationalising the Corrib gas field. As the Deputy will understand as a lawyer and as somebody who understands our Constitution and natural justice, to nationalise something, the shareholders have to be compensated. To do so would cost roughly ten times their annual profits. It would cost many billions of euro to nationalise that gas field,

which is many billions of euro that we could not spend on other important things like education-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is a temporary emergency measure.

The Taoiseach: The temporary compensation still has to be paid and there would be a temporary delay in investment in education, healthcare and housing as a result.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Today, the Children's Rights Alliance highlighted once again one of the most shameful aspects of the utterly disastrous housing crisis, namely the phenomena of child homelessness and the impact that has on children, on their mental health and on their well-being, and how, as they put it, it deprives and robs children of their precious childhood. The figures are stark. There are now 3,431 children in emergency accommodation. That can be multiplied that by several factors if the number of children who have been in and out of homelessness and emergency accommodation over the last number of years is taken into account. A total of 1,609 families who are homeless, with family homelessness up by 44% in one year and child homelessness up by 34%. They are shocking figures and it is a shocking failure by the State to look after our most vulnerable people.

As the Children's Rights Alliance highlights, a lot of this is down to the Government's failure to control rents and the yawning gap between rent supports in the form of housing assistance payment, HAP, and other payments that the Government is willing to give and the actual level of rents. The Government has done absolutely nothing to bridge that gap to give people some prospect of being able to find an affordable rental property when at the same time it has failed to deliver the public and affordable housing that could solve the crisis. The figures are stark. In my office today, we went on *daft.ie* and checked what rental properties were available in our area. There were 20 two-bedroom properties available. The average rent for those properties was €3,100 with the cheapest being €2,250. There were six three-bedroom properties. The average rent for those six was €4,000 per month, with the cheapest being €2,995. There was one one-bedroom property which, incredibly, is being rented at €3,445. The HAP rates available to people are a fraction of those rents leaving no chance for people who are facing the prospect of being evicted through no fault of their own, or who are just looking for accommodation for themselves and their children of being able to afford those rental properties. My question is very simple. If the Taoiseach will not agree to the call we have made to address these matters over the past few weeks, will he now listen to the Children's Rights Alliance who said that he must retain the moratorium on no-fault evictions into homelessness and will he increase the rent supports available to people so that they have some prospect of affording these shocking rents if he is not willing to do what he should do, which is to introduce rent controls to make rents affordable for ordinary people?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Children's Rights Alliance for the work they do. We do not always see eye to eye but we have had very good engagement with them as a Government down the years. I am aware of its Report Card 2023, which was issued today or yesterday. To be fair to the alliance, in the round it gave the Government two As, five Bs, four Cs, four Ds and one E. We did not get two As last year and it is worth noting that the alliance has given the Government two As - one for enacting the Harassment and Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill, which protects children from some of the things that happen online, and the second for the enactment of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill, and the establishment of the Online Safety Commissioner by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. There are five Bs in other areas and I will not go into the detail of that. People can read the report for themselves. On the

issue of homelessness, the Government got a B in one category and a D-minus in the other. The B is for the development of our national youth homelessness strategy. The D-minus, which is up from an E last year but still bad, is due to a reduction in the number of homeless families. That is because, and I acknowledge this, the number of homeless families has not come down and, indeed, has increased slightly in recent months. That is not at all acceptable or desirable from the part of Government.

In terms of what the Government is doing, I can think of five things we are doing to help people who are facing high rents. We acknowledge that people are facing very high rents particularly in our cities, but not just in our cities. The first is the rent tax credit. More than 170,000 people have claimed this. It is €500 per renter, €1,000 for a couple and €1,500 for three people renting a house in a house share. It is something we can build on in future budgets if the public finances allow. The second is the cost-rental housing, which is now a reality. It started under the last Government and became a reality under this Government and we need to scale it up. I met the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, only yesterday to talk about the ways that we can scale it up. The third is the building of social housing. There were probably more social homes built last year than any year since 1975. Not in my lifetime or perhaps in the Deputy's has there been a Government more committed to building new social housing than this.

The Deputy mentioned *daft.ie* earlier. On rent pressure zones, a report from *daft.ie* pointed out shows that for existing renters, who are the vast majority of renters and who already have a tenancy, rents rose by 3.6% last year. There is also HAP, and making it available to 16,000 more families and people, by making the changes that we made. I acknowledge there is more to do in this area and we are certainly giving consideration as to what else we can do to help people, particularly by scaling up social housing and the cost-rental housing in the period ahead. The Government had not made a decision on the extension of the eviction ban. We will have to make a decision on that in the next two weeks and we said that we would. As the Deputy knows, there are pros and cons in doing so. It is not a straightforward decision.

There is a way the Deputy can help. We all accept that we cannot solve this housing crisis without more supply and we all accept that it is about more than supply, but we definitely cannot solve it without more supply. I have not objected to a housing development in seven years. I do not have the heart to do it anymore. Developments might not be perfect but they are better than nothing and they can help. Only in the past year between April 2021 and May 2022, the Deputy has objected to 1,315 new homes in his constituency alone. It is not right.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach studiously decided not to answer the questions I raised. To be absolutely clear on that particular point, in the same period I did not oppose and, in many cases, actively supported thousands and thousands of planning applications and the commencement of construction, not least in areas such as Cherrywood, which is the biggest residential development in the country, or Shanganagh, which will be the biggest social housing development in the country. I actively supported and pushed for those developments.

A Deputy: You objected. There are a few Deputies doing that.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett without interruption.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In some cases, such as co-living, I object, or I sided with students who opposed unaffordable student accommodation. What the Taoiseach did not do, in his diversionary tactics, was answer the point about whether he will continue to allow families to go into homelessness who have done absolutely nothing wrong. Is he going to let more children and families end up homeless because he decides to stand with landlords rather than the rights and needs of children and families who are faced with the prospect of homelessness?

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up now Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is the Taoiseach going to raise the rent supports that are available to people, in the absence of bringing in rent controls which should be done in order to deal with these obscene rents-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up Deputy please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----to ensure that there is some prospect for families looking for accommodation affording the rents being charged by the very developers-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----who are charging these rents? That is why I oppose some of their developments.

A Deputy: How many children are living in the developments the Deputy objected to?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I am almost astounded by the Deputy's response. Does he really think he deserves some sort of reward, or thanks, or kudos, for not opposing housing?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: For actively supporting it.

The Taoiseach: We should all be actively supporting the building of additional housing in our communities. He deserves no reward, nor thanks, nor pats on the back for not opposing thousands of new homes in his constituency, or even for supporting them. Between April 2021 and May 2022 he has opposed 1,315 new homes in his constituency. Where would those people be living now Deputy, if he had his way? However, to answer his question, we have not made a decision yet on the extension of the eviction ban. We will make a decision on that quite soon. There are pros and cons to be weighed up. As I mentioned before, 30,000 people come home from abroad to live in Ireland every year. These are Irish citizens coming home. They do not all own houses and apartments but many of them do, more than the Deputy might think, and them not being able to move back into their own houses is a problem. Also, there are people throughout the country who bought an apartment in the city for when their kids go to college. We have to take that into account as well. We will take all these issues into account.

In regard to HAP, we keep the thresholds and the amounts paid under review all the time. They have been increased in the past. It remains under review as to whether to increase them again.

Deputy Denis Naughten: When the Taoiseach resumed his current role in December he announced that a unit would be set up within his Department to focus on reducing child poverty and improving well-being in order to make Ireland the best country in Europe in which to be a child. I believe it would help if we started by improving access to necessary therapies through primary care services, including occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physio-

therapy. We have all seen the crisis in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, CAMHS, exposed by the Mental Health Commission report, but the reality is that all services for children are in crisis. Two of the most significant battles faced by parents of children with a disability relate to getting a diagnosis and after that long, tortuous process, the second struggle is the inaccessibility of regular supports. Mary and her son, David, who is in fourth class, are one example. The family had to go privately to secure a diagnosis because of the current waiting lists for a referral for CAMHS, occupational therapy referral and an educational psychological assessment. They have been forced down this road, borrowing from grandparents, because otherwise David would be in secondary school by the time he would get access to an appointment under the current public health system due to the horrendous waiting lists. His mum has now been advised that David is likely to need physiotherapy in a couple of years to assist him with his condition. Given the current waiting list this means that he needs to be put on the waiting list now in a pre-emptive move to ensure that he can have access to the services when he needs them.

However, what about the children whose parents or grandparents cannot pay for such interventions? They are at the mercy of the ever-growing public waiting lists. The State is failing in its obligation to provide the early intervention and support that these children urgently need. Investing in our children at a young age makes much more sense and allows them to reach their full potential and actively contribute to our society. We need to stop these children being effectively hidden away in a corner. In the past, that hiding may have been physical; now it is emotional as their potential wastes away while they wait and wait for access to services. These are the essential services that we must provide to help these children reach their full potential. We should provide these services as a fundamental right for all our children and I urge the Taoiseach to prioritise this within the new unit in his Department.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. On behalf of the Government, I want to acknowledge that we have a very real problem when it comes to children being able to access the therapies, assessments, treatment and counselling they need. Children are being let down.

It is not so much a matter of money or political will; both are there in abundance. There is a real difficulty in recruiting, training and retaining staff, as well as organising services in such a way that children and their needs are prioritised. Like the Deputy, I meet parents all the time who tell me about their struggles and the fights they have to go through to get the treatments, therapies and assessments their children need. It is impossible to justify because it cannot be justified. It will be part of the work programme of the child poverty and wellbeing unit being established in my Department.

As I mentioned, we are committed to reducing waiting lists. For that reason, we are increasing capacity and reforming models of care to ensure care is provided in a more timely way across all age groups. One measure being advanced at the moment is the development of community healthcare networks as part of the enhanced community care programme. Almost €200 million was provided in this year's budget to make that happen. The investment includes the development of primary care teams within 96 new community healthcare networks. Some 94 of these have been established and each serves a population of roughly 50,000. Approximately 3,500 extra staff will be recruited to make this happen. Of these, it is expected approximately 2,000 will be primary care teams, with the rest being specialist and intervention teams.

There is flexibility within the overall budget. It is estimated that €100 million of this will go

into primary care. To date, 2,500 staff have been recruited or are at an advanced stage of the recruitment process as part of the programme. Furthermore, children and young people continue to be seen in primary care through specific investments, including the primary care psychology waiting list initiative and other waiting list initiatives the Government is funding.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Late last year, 436 children in County Galway were waiting for a physiotherapy appointment, with the longest waiting time being more than three years. In County Roscommon, a further 95 children were waiting for physiotherapy, with the longest waiting time being almost one year. The picture is just as bleak for occupational therapy, where 540 children are waiting for an appointment in Galway, with wait times of more than a year in some cases. A further 115 children in County Roscommon are waiting for occupational therapy appointments, some of whom have been waiting for more than a year. Waiting lists for speech and language therapy services in Roscommon range from seven to 11 months for high-priority patients and for up to 18 months for lower-priority patients. The waiting lists are continuing to grow and our children are being left behind as a result. We must address this issue now.

The Taoiseach: The figures I have from the HSE and Department of Health indicate that we are seeing a levelling off in waiting lists. There has been an 18% reduction in those waiting for initial speech and language therapy treatment according to the latest available data. The latest available data from October indicates a small reduction in physiotherapy waiting lists of approximately 3% and approximately 6% for occupational therapy. That is pretty minor in terms of reductions in waiting lists and is not a satisfactory situation.

As I said, there is no lack of political will or money; both are in abundance. The challenge we face is in organising the services and also in making sure that we can train, recruit and retain the right number of staff. It is very much a priority stream of work for the Government at the moment.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2023 (*without debate*)

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures (*to conclude within 55 minutes*)

- Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 [*Seanad*] (Second Stage) (*if not previously concluded, to be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 6 p.m. or after 1 hour and 15 mins, whichever is the later*)

Private members' business shall be the Motion *re* the National Ambulance Service, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motions for Further Revised Estimates for Public Services 2023 [Votes 16, 23 and 34] *(to be moved together and decided without debate by one question)*
- Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 [*Seanad*] (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded) *(if not previously concluded, to be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 4.30 p.m. or after 1 hour and 40 minutes, whichever is the later)*
- Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages) *(to be taken no earlier than 4 p.m.)*
- Central Bank (Individual Accountability Framework) Bill 2022 (Amendments from the *Seanad*)
- Regulation of Lobbying (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages) *(if not previously concluded, to be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 7.30 p.m. or 1 hour after the conclusion of proceedings on the Central Bank (Individual Accountability Framework) Bill 2022, whichever is the later)*

Private members' business shall be the Motion *re* the Future of Regional Pre-Hospital Emergency Care, selected by the Regional Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 [*Seanad*] (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded)
- Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill 2023 (Second Stage, resumed) *(if not previously concluded, to be interrupted and stand adjourned at 4.30 p.m.)*

Thursday evening business shall be Second Stage of the Employment Equality (Pay Transparency) Bill 2022, sponsored by Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh.

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 Government business shall be interrupted and stand adjourned and private members' business shall be taken either at 6 p.m. or 1 hour and 15 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 [*Seanad*], whichever is the later, with consequential effect on the commencement time for oral Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications and topical issues, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;
2. the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2023 shall be taken without debate; and
3. the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the definition of crimi-

nal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 55 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(ii) 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 adjournment or conclusion of proceedings on the Regulation of Lobbying (Amendment) Bill 2022, with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Motions for Further Revised Estimates for Public Services 2023 [Votes 16, 23 and 34] shall be moved together and decided without debate by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

3. the resumed proceedings on the second reading motion on the Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 [*Seanad*] shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 4.30 p.m. or after 1 hour and 40 minutes, whichever is the later;

4. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022 shall be taken no earlier than 4 p.m.; and

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Regulation of Lobbying (Amendment) Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 7.30 p.m. or 1 hour after the conclusion of proceedings on the Central Bank (Individual Accountability Framework) Bill 2022, whichever is the later.

In relation to Thursday's business, the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that, if not previously concluded, the proceedings on Government business shall be interrupted and stand adjourned and topical issues shall be taken at 4.30 p.m., with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Employment Equality (Pay Transparency) Bill 2022, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil: Provided that in the event Government business concludes before 4.30 p.m., topical issues shall be taken on the

conclusion of Government business.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements for the week's business agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not agreed. What arrangements will be made to take statements and have a discussion on the agreement that has been struck between the British Government and the European Commission? As I said earlier, the imperative is now to restore government in the North. It is very important that we have a space and an opportunity to reflect on the agreement itself and to send out - I hope collectively - a very strong message from this Chamber that the Executive must now be restored and government resumed north of the Border.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There was a strong delegation from the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA, outside the Dáil today. Many of the Taoiseach's backbenchers came to meet them. They are being crucified by increased input costs, and the price of lamb paid to them has never been lower. It has dropped consistently over the last four months, despite what the housewife or houseperson pays for a leg of lamb in the shops or the butchers. There is huge gouging going on here and then there are all the input costs, for fertiliser, doses and everything else. We need to have a debate in the House to address this situation because these farmers cannot sustain this and we will lose many valuable farmers who work tirelessly. They want to be at home lambing today, not up here protesting but they are forced to do so.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It would be useful for the Taoiseach to outline when we will have the opportunity to have statements on the Windsor Framework. Will it be this week or early next week? It would be good to hear that being confirmed.

I also ask whether arrangements are being made for the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, to make a statement to the House. I understand he has indicated he wishes to do so in relation to planning application allegations. It would be good to hear when that is to be taken and whether the Minister of State will take questions.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Deputy Boyd Barrett raised this issue at the Business Committee. It would be good if we had statements next week on safe staffing issues in Irish hospitals. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, has said the situation is not conducive to staff safety and patient safety. It would be in the public interest to have statements on that issue next week.

Deputy Denis Naughten: A couple of weeks ago at the Business Committee, I raised the issue of the sheep industry. As the Taoiseach knows, back in 2016, I secured the introduction of the sheep welfare scheme. Since then, income for sheep farmers has reduced by 550% according to Teagasc and fertiliser costs have gone up by a further 400%. Yet, we are introducing a paltry top-up of just 20% to that welfare scheme. The industry is on its knees. I have looked for a debate on this subject at the Business Committee and I hope this will be facilitated in order that all these issues can be thoroughly debated.

The Taoiseach: In relation to the Windsor Framework, we propose to take statements on it next week. We want to give Members some time to read and digest all the documentation. We propose to set aside Government time next week for that.

In relation to the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, it is my understanding he is seeking time to make a statement today. I am not sure if the Ceann Comhairle is across that, but the Minister of State wants to make a statement at any rate and has agreed to do so.

On staff safety and sheep farmers and the problems they are facing, I think these are matters for the Business Committee. I am sure we can find time to discuss these issues, but there is Opposition time as well. Perhaps we could use Opposition time to discuss one issue and Government time to discuss the other.

Order of Business agreed to.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to return to the Children's Rights Alliance report card, which was published today. It records that some progress has been made, but the Government gets a D grade for child homelessness and a very damning E grade for youth mental health. The Children's Rights Alliance described serious failings in the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, including more than 140 children prescribed antipsychotic medications and then lost to follow-up, as "the tip of the iceberg". As the Taoiseach knows, children continue to be placed in adult psychiatric units and waiting lists for CAMHS have nearly doubled on the watch of his Government. He has failed to invest in mental health services and his policy, Sharing the Vision, has no costs and no timeframe. When will we see a real, costed plan and when will he fully resource CAMHS so that children and young people can get access to the mental health services they need when they need them?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): There were a lot of questions there. The HSE, the Government and I are fully committed to making sure the most appropriate supports are there for young people. I might put a little context on this, which does not always happen across the floor of the Dáil. A total of 21,000 children are currently receiving the supports of CAMHS. There were 225,000 appointments last year among 73 CAMHS teams working the length and the breadth of the country, but what was excluded from the report was the fact that the number of referrals to CAMHS increased by 33% over the past two years. Notwithstanding the difficulties the CAMHS teams have, they saw 21% more appointments - more children - last year. I am very conscious, every time we stand up in the Dáil and tear apart the mental health services, that €135 million was spent on CAMHS supports last year. There are 73 teams working today looking after 21,000 children. Notwithstanding the difficulties, a lot of really good supports are being provided to those 21,000 children.

The number of children in adult psychiatric units has fallen to 20 in the past year, and no consultant psychiatrist will ever take the opportunity to put a child into a psychiatric unit - we are talking about 16- or 17-year-olds - unless it is extremely necessary. I would like to talk to anyone who says putting a child into an adult psychiatric unit overnight for that child's safety so that he or she might not attempt suicide is not the right thing to do. What should we do instead, leave them out the door?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We should have the proper facilities for them. That is the Minister of State's job.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That was a ridiculous answer.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I think we will agree yesterday's Windsor Framework announcement represents a breakthrough and a chance to restore the democratic institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, and I welcome the Taoiseach's announcement that he will provide briefings to Opposition parties. I would ask that that might be done this week given the statements are to be taken, as we understand, in Government time next week. As Claire Hanna MP, a member

of our sister party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, SDLP, has said, the framework announcement can be heralded as a way forward for those genuinely interested in consensus and prosperity.

We are concerned by the tone of reception from certain quarters, even though we see a perceived improvement in relations between the Governments across the two islands. If we listen to some members of the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, the tone is jarring with the more conciliatory words that have been spoken by Jeffrey Donaldson. As one of the custodians of the Good Friday Agreement, is the Taoiseach concerned we are seeing the emergence of a hard-line unionist veto and that the Stormont brake may function to enable that sort of veto?

The Taoiseach: We will arrange the briefings with agreement by the parties to do that this week. My Department is already working on that and will probably be in touch with Opposition leaders' offices today around having those briefings.

I think we are at a very sensitive stage and I do not think anyone in this House, least of all me, wants to say anything that might jeopardise the acceptance of the Windsor Framework, so the only thing I would say is this. The Stormont brake is there, in many ways to counterbalance the consent mechanism that is already in the protocol. The protocol can be disappplied in full only by a vote of the assembly, and the Stormont brake tries to counterbalance that by having a mechanism whereby 30 members of the assembly, from two parties, can red-flag an issue with the UK Government to have it discussed in the joint committee and dealt with there, but that can be used only if the assembly is up and running. That is one thing to bear in mind, and all the more reason to have the assembly up and running.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The announcement from Electric Ireland that it was going to reduce energy prices for businesses is very welcome, particularly for those small businesses that have been really struggling with the incredible energy costs. However, we do not see the same respite for domestic users. People are getting bills through the door that they could never ever have imagined and that they are not able to pay. Electric Ireland customers saw three price hikes in a five-month period last year. They have been hit particularly hard with these price rises. Last week, the Taoiseach told the Dáil that a time would come when he would bring the energy companies in to hold them to task about the prices. I think that time has come. I ask him to commit to bringing in those companies and sitting them down to ask them when residential and home owners will see a reduction in their energy costs and make sure that it happens as soon as possible.

The Taoiseach: I spoke on this a little earlier. The next step from the Government is the windfall tax and legislating for that in the House to allow us to take some of the windfall profits from last year, and indeed this year, and to use them to help people and businesses with their bills. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, is engaging with energy companies. I will engage with them directly as well. But I would like to know, and it is not fully known yet, what their profits were for last year because what I want to be able to say to them is, notwithstanding wholesale and retail prices, hedging and all that, that these are the profits they have made and they should give some of it back.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This Saturday, the film "406 Days" about the 406 days the Debenhams workers were in dispute with the Debenhams company will premier at the Dublin International Film Festival. It has just won the festival's human rights prize. One thing it highlights is that the Celine group, made up of three US hedge funds, Barclay's Bank and Bank

of Ireland, walked away with £315 million from the liquidation whereas the workers who built the value of the company and had worked for decades were left with absolutely nothing. The vulture funds and the asset strippers walk away with all the money and the workers who built that company are left with nothing. Last December, I raised with the Taoiseach's predecessor, Deputy Michael Martin-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----the fact that €200 million debt was loaded on the Irish company by this consortium to ensure that the workers got absolutely nothing. I took the issue with the workers-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy, please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----to the Corporate Enforcement Authority. Will the Taoiseach check what report, if any, has come back from the Corporate Enforcement Authority about the tactical nature of the liquidation which left those workers with nothing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy please. The time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----and whether the law was broken in the treatment of the Debenhams workers?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I am not going to call you again if you will not adhere to the time limits.

The Taoiseach: This is a complicated insolvency involving a company based in Britain. I am not sure if the way that the Deputy described things is exactly the case. I do not know whether the Corporate Enforcement Authority has examined it fully and come to a determination on it so I would prefer not to comment on it. Either the Deputy or myself can make inquiries with the Corporate Enforcement Authority as to whether there is a case or not.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It will not get back to us.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Commitments were given in the last two programmes for Government to introduce a no-fault vaccine compensation scheme. This was promised again by the Taoiseach's predecessor in advance of the introduction of the Covid vaccine programme. My engagement on this issue with Ministers for Health has been ongoing for the last 250 months, or over two decades. When will we see this compensation scheme introduced in this State as is the case in many other countries across the globe?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. During the pandemic all available Department of Health resources were devoted to the public health response. This meant that work on a vaccine damage compensation scheme was stalled. However, a senior counsel has prepared an initial report on this for the Department. It is expected that further work on it will be advanced this year. A similar scheme exists in the UK already. It is a good model to follow and one that can provide an alternative to court which is expensive, lengthy and stressful for all.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I raise the issue of MotorCycling Ireland's insurance cover. I believe it wrote to the Taoiseach. I have seen copies of letters it wrote. A number of cycling clubs in Ireland lost the ability to obtain insurance for this season. The governing body, Of-

froad Motorsport UK, informed staff in 2022 that no insurance company would cover any of the Twenty-six Counties. The Taoiseach and I know that very many valuable and entertaining races are held all over the country. What is the difference between horse racing, greyhound racing and everything else? Those involved have been treated like second-class citizens. There is a huge spin-off for the businesses and areas involved, and indeed for bike enthusiasts, who spend money, on which they pay tax, on tyres, engines, parts and maintenance. They have written to the Taoiseach. The season should now be cranking up and they need to get the insurance. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene to assist them in getting insurance, which they have always got. Their events are run in a safe manner and are well policed and organised. They bring a great benefit to local areas.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for his question. The Department has been working with insurance companies to identify niche points of difficulty where people have not been able to access insurance. Where there are community events whose organisers work with local authorities, there may be an appetite to increase the risk profile. The most important thing is the implementation of the action plan for insurance reform, which the Government has been doing, and ensuring the reductions in the awards issued by the Personal Injuries Assessment Board are met and set, and stick with the legal profession, because these impact everybody's ability to get insurance. The Department of Justice is introducing legislation in the coming weeks to change the public liability aspect, which will have an important impact on what the Deputy is raising.

Deputy Marian Harkin: All of us are used to meeting delegations. I just spent half an hour outside the gates speaking to sheep farmers from all over, some from Sligo and others from Donegal and Mayo. It is a long time since I met such a dejected group, some of whom are at their wits' end. Many of them are on the floor and are losing money. They watch French farmers and other European farmers get up to €8 per kilogram for their ewes when they get about €6 per kilogram, knowing they are at the mercy of the factories, with no real chain of accountability. The input price is at a record high. I spoke to some men who told me it is not just that they will cut back on stock this autumn but that it is about the rows at home over no money. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine needs to come to the table immediately with an exceptional aid package. He needs to set up a proper sheep forum, just like the beef form. He needs to fully implement the 2019 task force recommendations and ensure Bord Bia steps up its promotional work.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising this really important point because this is the time of year when sheep farmers' focus is on lambing their ewes. Right now, sheep farmers throughout the country are in their sheds with their ewes wondering what return they will get for their efforts and time in the months ahead. This is a really concerning time for them. Every sector across the country in agriculture has been impacted by the really high rise in input costs created by the Ukraine crisis. That is why we intervened last year with over €90 million worth of supports for farmers. Sheep farmers were an integral part of it. Their contribution to the countryside and rural economy is really important, not only economically but also environmentally, and nowhere more than in the west.

We continue to work and monitor this situation to support sheep farmers. What the sheep farmers want more than anything is a proper price for their produce. That is why we continue to work. We gained access to the market in the US last year and continue to work on new market development. I am the Minister of State with responsibility in this area. We are working in

really important markets like China to open up the opportunities and achieve the best return for our sheep farmers.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Phase 4 of the job evaluation scheme for HSE support staff, the results of which were announced last October, provides an upgrade in salary and status for the following categories of workers, among others: caretakers, barbers, hairdressers, general operatives and even labourers. However, among those who were not upgraded and who were forced to remain within the same wage structure are laundry workers, household staff, domestic staff and cleaners. On the face of it, this seems bizarre, if not downright discriminatory. Is there any appeal mechanism for those people who are aggrieved by the decision so as to have their case reheard? Is there any mechanism whereby their case could be reopened and further considered?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I will undertake to get back to the Deputy with detail on exactly what appeal mechanisms are available.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I want to raise an issue of staffing affecting voluntary and community organisations across the country as interest in the labour activation schemes continues to drop, despite some reform initiatives last year such as those concerning Tús and the community employment scheme. Participant numbers are continuing to fall.

3 o'clock

GAA clubs, community councils and Tidy Towns organisations are all suffering from a shortage of applicants. To resolve this issue, I urge the Government to consider expanding the community employment scheme to enable Ukrainian refugees to participate by removing the 12-month signing-on period, given the shortage of applicants across the country and the influx of Ukrainians who may wish to avail of the scheme. It would also be cost-effective for the Government. It would promote social inclusion by allowing our Ukrainian guests the opportunity to engage in the workforce, improve their English-speaking skills and contribute to their local communities.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. We have carried out a number of reviews of the community employment schemes. We have changed some of the criteria, in consultation with them, to expand it and to allow them to keep workers on for longer. There have been a number of good and very positive changes in that regard.

It is almost a year since the first Ukrainian refugees came to this country. We are opening up the community employment scheme to them now. We look forward to working with them and getting them on board. This is very valuable because we can help them with job activation measures and maybe with language classes. It is a great opportunity to help them to integrate into communities. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I am happy to work with him to progress it further.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: When it comes to housing, we have a perfect storm in County Donegal. No social housing was built for approximately ten years. We have families who have been pushed into private rental across the county. There is no affordable housing taking place in County Donegal even though the income threshold is €30,000 for families. That is why we have huge numbers of young people emigrating to Australia and Canada from all across the county. When we add in the defective block crisis, we really have a profound crisis in our county; as I said, a perfect storm.

Will the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage urgently go to County Donegal, as has been requested, and meet with a cross-party delegation of councillors, including those from his own party, to talk about how Donegal County Council can help the families with defective blocks and assist the families who cannot afford to build their own homes all across the county?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): As the Deputy will be aware from the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the regulations are out. They are with the local authority. The Minister has met with various political groups. He hopes and intends to meet with residents very shortly on the mica issue in County Donegal. The Minister is very much engaged on this and wants this-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: And the councillors.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is certainly something I will take back to him. He has met various councillors. On this particular issue, however, he is very keen to meet the residents first and foremost. That will happen relatively shortly.

Deputy John Lahart: My question concerns the issue of pre-school and post-school therapeutic services for children with additional needs. It is a subject on which this Government has made great strides in the last number of years. Many parents in Dublin South-West have specifically raised the costs of paying for these invaluable therapeutic interventions because very often they have to pay for them privately. Those kinds of therapeutic interventions include play therapy, art therapy, sports therapy and animal therapy. Indeed, a group of teenage students from Tallaght Community School was in the House last week. One of them spoke specifically about how invaluable some of those therapies were to his development. There is a cost, however, which is the issue I am raising. The State is not yet covering these costs. What plans does the Government have to introduce or allocate funding that would assist parents of children with special needs to pay for these therapies?

The Taoiseach: I am not aware of any plans to cover those costs at the moment. It is not standard that we would cover the costs of private healthcare or private treatments. Sometimes we do this through the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, mechanism, for example through the cross-Border directive. If there is a prior arrangement, we can do this but we must have some checks and controls around these things. Perhaps we can give consideration to using that mechanism to pay for some people to go private in those circumstances. We would have to be careful to get that right, however, and make sure the right treatments are definitely needed and registered and all those things, which can be quite complicated.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: People who live near Dublin Airport are well used to airport noise. The Taoiseach will know this from his own constituency. However, residents in Ballyboughal, St. Margaret's, Kilsallaghan, Ridgewood and surrounding areas have been subjected to new flight paths. Houses that never had an aeroplane go over them or near them are now subjected to this daily. The attempts by the Dublin Airport Authority to address this with a new standard instrument departure, SID, appear to have been unsuccessful to date. I have been contacted by people wanting to know if the new SID has started because the noise is getting worse. I am aware that the Taoiseach has been contacted by them as well. Fingal County Council is responsible for noise regulation but has been slow to respond to the concerns of residents. Will the Taoiseach engage with the Minister for Transport to get him to instruct Fingal County Council to listen to the concerns of residents, acknowledge that efforts to date have failed to address

this issue, and ensure that the 2007 planning conditions are adhered to?

The Taoiseach: I am very much aware of the issue. Residents in my constituency in the Hollywoodrath area and The Ward are having a similar experience. I am, and I will be, engaging with the Minister on it.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I wish to raise with the Taoiseach the issue of schools in my area that are still waiting on extensions and new buildings. Earlier this month I visited St. Ronan's National School. Its existing prefabs are absolutely shocking and need to be replaced. My own secondary school, Holy Family Community School, went to tender for a new building but is waiting for the Department to sanction the approval for a contractor to begin. A transition year student, Blathnaid, who is in the Public Gallery, is with me this week. Her school, Griffeen Community College, is still waiting on a permanent building, despite having secured planning. The list goes on and on: Lucan Community College, Scoil Chrónáin, St. Thomas' National School, Scoil Naomh Áine, Divine Mercy, Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcáin, Gaelscoil na Camóige and Rathcoole Educate Together. All were promised new buildings or extensions and all were approved for funding, but all are still waiting. What reassurances can the Taoiseach give to the students, the parents and the teachers who are working on this?

The Taoiseach: We are definitely working on it. As the Deputy can imagine, I could recite a similar list for my constituency and I believe most Members in the House could do likewise. We have a massive school building programme at the moment. It is great to go into some of those new schools and see how well built they are and the level of services that are available. It reminds one of how old some of our school buildings are and how much investment we need. It is never the case that we can do every project we would like to do in any one year. They have to be timelined in the context of financial and planning constraints. We must also consider the availability of contractors because of all the things being built in the country at the moment. The Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Foley, are working at the moment to see how we can speed up capital programmes generally, and not just when it comes to education, although that is a particular area. In fairness, the Department of Education spends its capital budget every year and spends it very well.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Joe Carey): There are four Deputies remaining so I will group them together. They have 30 seconds each.

Deputy Bríd Smith: This morning, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, gave an extraordinary interview on a number of fronts, not least his guarded defence of the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. What was more worrying was his attitude to the hike in prices by Electric Ireland. He sounded like an innocent bystander, pretty much as the Taoiseach has sounded today on the same topic. The Government seems to think it cannot do anything to intervene. May I remind the Government of the Consumer Protection Act 2007, sections 61 and 62 of which would allow the Government to control prices? Will the Taoiseach comment on that? Also, is it not about time the Government started to rethink the remit and the mandate of the ESB and bring it back to a not-for-profit mandate?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Members of the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, including some from County Kerry, had to come here today to protest. They are demanding an urgent €50 million support package for sheep farmers to be funded from the Brexit reserve fund. They also want the sheep improvement scheme to be increased towards €30 per ewe and an extra €5 per ewe for the correct presentation of wool. Brexit brought untold turmoil to the

sheep sector and the ramifications are still being felt to this day. The New Zealand lamb imports are a consequence of Brexit. The weakness of sterling since 2016 is a consequence of Brexit. The importation of half a million lambs a year into the State, in carcass form and live form, is a consequence of Brexit. All they are looking for is a package to be put together to allow them to survive and to allow them to be able to continue to make a living from being small sheep farmers predominantly, up and down the length and breadth of this country. They are here demanding support and I would be very grateful if the Taoiseach could acknowledge that.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The Taoiseach may have seen videos on social media in the past fortnight showing the demolition of a family home in Newtown Cunningham as part of the existing defective block scheme. The family have had to move their children to a new school due to the inability to source rental accommodation in their own community. They are still paying a full mortgage on what is now a pile of rubble. They are also paying rent. They sent me an email with an engineer's breakdown of costs and the costs recovered under the defective blocks scheme. They already have a deficit of €19,000 on the first €50,000 of works. That is less than 70% cost recovery. So much for 100% redress. Despite the Government's chatter, the new scheme will not provide much more relief for this family. From what we can see, the trips that the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister took to Donegal were nothing more than hollow PR stunts. They failed to listen and are, therefore, bound to fail. My constituents will continue to suffer. We are sick telling the Government that the old and new schemes will not work as presently set up. When will the Taoiseach and the Government wake up to that fact?

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I wish to raise issue of the frustrations of the many folk in County Clare who are living in rural communities, such as the beautiful area of Kilmurphy McMahon. The issue is that the roads there are like dartboards. They are unsafe and they are damaging people's cars. This is hugely problematic for those living in rural Ireland who depend on their cars. The costs involved in maintaining a car are already huge and this situation is not acceptable. The Government has allocated the same amount of funding for restoration, maintenance, repairs and resurfacing this year as it did last year. That ultimately means Clare County Council will experience a reduction in resurfacing of 25% to 33%. Some of these roads have not been repaired for more than ten years and they are beyond dangerous. What do I tell these people?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their questions. In response to Deputy Bríd Smith, I am very much aware of what the Consumer Protection Act states. I am also aware of what European law states and what the laws relating to the regulation of the energy market state, all of which need to be taken into account. There are powers to regulate retail prices but there are no powers to regulate wholesale prices. That is not the process we intend to use to bring prices down, however.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Exactly. Innocent bystanders.

The Taoiseach: As regards sheep farmers, I acknowledge the difficulties they are facing. To use the Brexit adjustment reserve fund, one needs to be able to prove to the European Commission that Brexit is the reason prices are low and input costs are high. That would be a very difficult thing to prove. Unfortunately, we are finding great difficulty being able to meet the tests to draw down money from that fund. What I can say is that the Food Vision sheep group met recently with the Minister, Deputy McConalogue. All the main stakeholders were represented on the group. They have been asked to make submissions. Once received, the chairman's report and the outcome will be carefully considered by the Minister, Deputy Mc-

Conalogue, and he will continue to keep the market situation under review and see if there is more we can do to help sheep farmers.

On the families affected by mica in Donegal and elsewhere, I am aware of the issue relating to engineering costs. Deputy McHugh spoke to me about it at the weekend. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on the issue and he is giving it consideration.

On road building, I will have to come back to Deputy Wynne in that regard. My understanding is that the road budget is the same as or higher than it was last year but I appreciate that the cost of doing work is higher as well. I will revert to the Deputy on the issue.

**Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2023:
Motion**

Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2023,
copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 20th February, 2023.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.14 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.16 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.14 p.m. and resumed at 3.16 p.m.

Ceisteanna - Questions

European Council

1. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the special European Council on 9 and 10 February 2023. [7241/23]

2. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent attendance at the European Council; and the extent to which pressing issues were dealt with. [7398/23]

3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent special European Council meeting. [8118/23]

4. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the special European Council on 9 and 10 February. [8209/23]

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5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent European Council on 9 and 10 February 2023. [8634/23]

6. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the extent of any recent discussions he has had with the Ukrainian President or Ukrainian authorities, directly or at European level. [9876/23]

7. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent European Council on 9 and 10 February 2023. [9936/23]

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent special European Council meeting. [9958/23]

9. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent special European Council meeting. [9962/23]

10. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the special European Council meeting on 9 and 10 February 2023. [10253/23]

The Taoiseach: Tógfaidh mé Ceisteanna Uimh. 1 go 10, go huile, le chéile.

I attended a special meeting of the European Council in Brussels on 9 and 10 February. The agenda covered Ukraine, the economy and migration. We also touched on relations between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as the tragic earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria.

The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, joined leaders in Brussels, meeting with all his EU counterparts in groups. In my engagement with him, I reiterated Ireland's commitment to standing with Ukraine for as long as it takes. President Zelenskyy also joined us for the start of the European Council meeting. As we approached the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he thanked the EU for the assistance and support given to Ukraine and its people. In addition to expressing our commitment to Ukraine's political, economic, humanitarian and other needs, we acknowledged the considerable efforts Ukraine is making to ensure it is prepared for the opening of accession negotiations with the European Union. This is especially impressive under the exceptionally difficult circumstances it faces.

The European Council discussed the economic situation in the EU and how to ensure the region's long-term competitiveness, prosperity and international standing. We will return to this important discussion when we next meet in March.

We discussed migration, focusing in particular on the external dimension, where we agreed on the need to strengthen our external borders, engage better with countries of origin and transit and more effectively deal with people involved in trafficking and smuggling.

We expressed our deepest condolences to the victims of the tragic earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria and pledged humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering in all affected regions.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the Government's plan to implement a windfall tax. I am seeking clarity on the matter because I have been unable to get a straight answer from the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. When I submitted written questions to the Minister in December, he seemed to rule out bringing in a windfall tax on electricity companies despite the record profits. A couple of weeks ago in this Chamber he dismissed my concerns, claiming he would bring in a windfall tax on private electricity companies for 2022

profits. I again submitted a written question and received the same answer, that is, that electricity companies would get to keep the huge windfall profits from 2022 in full. Workers and families have been struggling to meet crippling electricity bills for more than a year, as the Taoiseach is aware, and electricity suppliers are now telling them they are not going to reduce prices. The prices have been artificially high because of how they were set. This allowed electricity companies to keep the obscene profits. It has been a shocking transfer of wealth from households to corporate profits. Could the Taoiseach please provide clarity? Will the Government be implementing a windfall tax on the 2022 profits of electricity companies - “Yes” or “No”?

Deputy Seán Haughey: It is great that the Taoiseach was able to meet with President Zelenskyy and express to him our solidarity with the people of Ukraine. As we know, the EU has agreed the tenth round of sanctions, which include new enforcement measures and additional reporting requirements. However, in response, the hard-hitting Belgian MEP, Guy Verhofstadt, tweeted last week that:

...the 10th sanction package is weak...as one country protects its Russian friends, another wants to go after Russian rubber, several like to keep hiding Russian Central Bank assets. High time to abolish unanimity!

I certainly would not go that far. The evidence indicates that Ireland is doing very well in the implementation of the sanctions. Is there much evidence available to indicate that the sanctions are being violated and circumvented? Should other non-Western countries be persuaded to join in the effort, or at least not be allowed to facilitate the circumvention of existing sanctions? In this regard, I would like to welcome the appointment of David O’Sullivan as international special envoy for the implementation of the EU sanctions. What is the Taoiseach’s understanding of his work to date and when will his comprehensive assessment of the position be expected?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach for his response. I ask the extent to which the earthquake and the survivors in Türkiye and Syria have been the focus of attention, with particular reference to the co-ordination of European rescue efforts and help and support to Türkiye and Syria at this very important time, given Türkiye’s support for the EU and, in fact, previous anxiety to join the EU in an effort to cultivate and improve relations in that area, which might be helpful also in relation to Türkiye’s opposition to the admission of new countries to NATO.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: In response to the European Commission’s proposals for a green deal industrial plan for a net-zero age, EU leaders called for further work to be undertaken in several areas, including state aid. It appears that leaders have limited the Commission’s state aid work to consider the procedural issues in minor temporary support. As a small member state with significant domestic supply and export opportunities in renewable energy, the Government should be directing the work of the Commission to consider how we can strengthen the commercial semi-State agencies. State rules cannot act as a blockage to Ireland’s ambition for energy security and independence. Leaders also tasked the Commission with boosting skills to meet the challenges of labour shortages and the transformation of jobs. I am sure the Taoiseach accepts that the renewables sector must be equipped with the skills base needed to succeed and support its State-led strategies, such as tailored plans for SMEs and sector-specific apprenticeship schemes. The CEO of Green Rebel has argued that the renewable energy sector has the potential to bring life back to rural communities, creating high-end jobs and revitalising towns and villages across the country. Does the Taoiseach agree that Ireland urgently needs to meet the immediate and increasing need for skilled staff in this area?

Deputy Mick Barry: Europe is rearming and the world is rearming. The International Defence Exhibition and Conference, IDEX, took place in Abu Dhabi from 17 February to 21 February. Arms manufacturers from all over the world participated and big money was made from selling the machinery of death and destruction. The United Arab Emirates signed deals there worth \$6 billion. A strong Israeli presence was reported. Russia's deputy premier was there and a Russian company displayed armoured vehicles, attack helicopters and anti-aircraft missile systems used in Ukraine. "Few things illustrate the health of the arms industry like a massive defense fair", according to CNBC News. In publicity from the organisers, one of the countries listed as a participant at the expo for the first time was Ireland. Can the Taoiseach tell us whether the Irish State was represented? Did privately-owned Irish companies or Irish-based companies participate? Finally, were arms deals signed by either or both?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I appreciate the Taoiseach outlining some of the details of the European Council meeting. There are two areas of concern for me. One is the fact that the latest round of sanctions includes further seizing of assets belonging to Russian companies and Russian citizens. How might we mobilise those resources to support Ukraine and its economy during any reconstruction, and also to support the millions of Ukrainian migrants living in EU countries right across Europe? I would appreciate it if the Taoiseach could provide any details on that. Second, I know that there are general discussions on the European economy as well. The increase in interest rates by the European Central Bank has been significant. The ECB is independent, but Irish mortgage holders have seen a really significant increase in their mortgage repayments. That will have a cap on demand. Does that necessarily relate to a reduction in inflation? Is our current inflationary spiral linked to supply or demand? Have the European leaders discussed how the increase in the interest rate will impact broader growth in Europe?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is literally not a day that goes by when we do not get further evidence of the obscene profiteering of energy companies. The latest, of course, is Electric Ireland finding itself able to reduce prices for business, but not able to do so for householders, and the fact that wholesale prices for energy have now dropped to 18-month and pre-war lows. It appears that while they were able to jack up prices to extortionate levels to crucify ordinary people, they cannot reduce the prices now that wholesale prices have gone down. Is it not long past time that the Taoiseach accepted that the profiteering can only be ended by introducing controls on prices and, indeed, by nationalising the energy sector so it operates on a not-for-profit basis and stops ripping off ordinary people who are being crushed by the cost-of-living crisis?

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to return to the question of what the EU discussed in relation to migration. I know the meeting was prior to the tragedy that happened in the Mediterranean, where at least 62 people, including a month-old baby and twin toddlers among 12 children, drowned coming from countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. We know that the accurate number of deaths recorded in the Mediterranean Sea cannot be ascertained, and that between 2014 and 2018, in a four-year period, about 12,000 people who drowned were never found. My question for the Taoiseach relates to Frontex and the role of the EU. For example, on the coast of Italy where these boats went down, the right-wing Italian Government recently passed a law preventing charities from performing life-saving rescues except one at a time. Of course, it is impossible for those charities, all of which are privatised, to operate in that strait. Frontex, the European agency for sea and rescue services, no longer has a role to play in preventing people from drowning and the EU pays over millions and millions to countries like Libya to keep people on their shores. Yet, they are still coming and they keep drowning. When is the EU going

to reinstate a sea rescue operation to avoid such horrendous, inhumane and barbaric incidents as we have just witnessed off the Italian coast?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their questions. In relation to the windfall tax and energy prices, the windfall tax proposal, which is at an advanced stage and being developed by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Minister for Finance, derives from EU law in this area. My understanding is that it has two elements. The first is a tax on gas and oil product producers in Ireland, of which there are not many but there are a few. There is also a tax on generators. The tax raised on generators will be used to bring down prices for businesses and householders. It will apply to profits made in 2022 to be taxed in 2023, and profits made in 2023 to be taxed in 2034. Generally, profits are taxed the year after they are made. That is the principle that will be applied, as I understand it. I do not think that nationalising the energy sector is a good idea. At the outset, it would involve paying a large amount of compensation to the shareholders and owners of those companies. People might argue that this will be recovered after ten, 15 or 20 years, but, certainly initially, it would involve a significant financial outlay and a big cost to the taxpayer, which would not be recouped for a long time, if at all. I am not sure if countries have ever tried to experiment with running energy systems on a not-for-profit basis. I think it was attempted in communist countries between the 1920s and the 1980s and what they suffered as a result was a lack of investment, shortages, blackouts and so on. I am not sure it is a model we would like to experiment with here, given it did not work in-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The ESB is run on a not-for-profit basis.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The ESB, founded in the 1920s, is run on a not-for-profit basis.

The Taoiseach: No. The ESB works as a State-owned enterprise-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: It put the lights on everywhere in the country.

The Taoiseach: -----and has a profit remit. I think what we are talking about is a model that was tried in the Soviet Union and places like that, where it did not work out so well.

In response to Deputy Haughey's question, like him, I do not support removing unanimity when it comes to sanctions. Unfortunately, there is evidence of circumvention, not particularly by EU countries, to the best of our knowledge, but by some countries that are located around the EU. We see that there are unusual changes in trade flows and trade statistics that indicate that circumvention may be occurring. That reminds us that Russia does have some friends out there, notwithstanding what it has done, and there are some countries that have no choice but to be Russia's friend for various reasons. This is a serious situation. I also welcome the appointment of Mr. David O'Sullivan as the special envoy for sanctions.

Deputy Durkan asked about the terrible earthquake that happened in Türkiye and Syria and the appalling human consequences. On behalf of the Government, I wrote to President Erdoğan to express my most sincere condolences on the loss of life and the destruction that occurred as a consequence of the earthquakes. Our thoughts are with all those who have been affected by the earthquakes and their aftershocks. We are providing €10 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of Türkiye and north-west Syria. That is being done through the UN's humanitarian fund for Syria, the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies and Irish NGOs working on the ground, including Concern and Goal. I extend my condolences to Goal and the families and friends of all Goal workers who lost their lives in the earthquakes. The situation in Syria is of

particular concern, given the civil war there, and Ireland and the international community will work through the UN to ensure a speedy provision of aid to the parts of Syria that need it most.

Deputy Paul Donnelly asked about state aid. I agree with what he said about skills and the need to make sure we have a pipeline of people who have the skills to work in the renewable energy sector and to help us to build those windfarms and to deploy all those solar panels. Let us not forget, though, that they are often the same people we are asking to build and to retrofit all the houses and to build the metro, and there are only so many people who can do so many things. That is a challenge we face-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: Let the migrants work.

The Taoiseach: -----trying to do so much at the same time. I support, as the Government does, the appropriate use of state aid, but we should never forget that state aid is ultimately taxpayers' money given to businesses. Small countries like ours will never be able to compete with big countries when it comes to the amount of state aid they could give their companies. That is why we always need to be careful about that. If the state aid rules are relaxed too significantly by the European Union, the amount of state aid that France, Germany or Italy can afford to give its companies will dwarf what we can give many times over and we will find ourselves at a competitive disadvantage. We will give our companies state aid just so they can catch up, not so they can compete and grow. That is a big problem and always has to be borne in mind.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, Deputy Barry referred to the arms industry. Let us be under no illusion that the war in Ukraine is a windfall for the arms industry, which will make a fortune out of the fact that there is a war happening in Europe. That is not just the arms industry in the west; it is the arms industry all over the world. We live in a dangerous world, and countries such as Ukraine get attacked and other countries face hybrid attacks. That is why countries have to be able to defend themselves and to buy the equipment to do so. Deputy Barry referred to an event in the UAE. I am not aware of that event. To the best of my knowledge, there was no Government involvement in it, but I could be wrong about that. There is a defence and security industry in Ireland, and it is an industry that has a role to play. It is often involved in the space industry, protective armour, robotics, artificial intelligence and things like cybersecurity. Unfortunately, we live in a dangerous world where even peaceful countries such as Ireland that do not want to spend a fortune on defence have to spend money on defence because we could be attacked, perhaps not in the way Ukraine is being attacked - I highly doubt that would ever happen - but hybrid warfare is a reality now, particularly when it comes to cybersecurity.

Cabinet Committees

11. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [8624/23]

12. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9599/23]

13. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9672/23]

14. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on

health will next meet. [9745/23]

15. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9746/23]

16. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9812/23]

17. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9923/23]

18. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9937/23]

19. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9959/23]

20. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9961/23]

21. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9963/23]

22. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [10252/23]

The Taoiseach: Tógfaidh mé Ceisteanna Uimh. 11 go 22, go huile, le chéile.

The Cabinet committee on health met on 13 February and is due to meet again on 27 March.

In addition to meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet committees, I meet Ministers individually to focus on different issues. I meet regularly with the Minister for Health to discuss challenges in the area of health and the Sláintecare reform programme.

The primary aim in 2023 is to improve access, outcomes and affordability for patients, and that is what Sláintecare is all about. We are committed to expanding the core capacity of our acute hospitals with more health professionals and more acute hospital beds. Over the past three years we have added approximately 1,000 hospital beds, more if community beds are included, with further additional beds planned for this year and next. We aim to increase our public health and social care workforce by 6,000 this year. We already have 6,000 more nurses, doctors, dentists and midwives than we had three years ago.

A strong pipeline of capital projects is being developed by the HSE and the Department of Health, including several new hospital projects and significant new facilities in existing hospitals.

Budget 2023 includes €443 million in funding to treat tens of thousands of people on waiting lists and to reduce the waiting times faced by all. Our multi-annual approach to reducing and reforming waiting lists resulted in an overall reduction in the number of patients exceeding the maximum Sláintecare waiting time, that is, roughly three months, by 11% in 2022. The number of people waiting more than three months for treatment fell by 11% in 2022, at a time most countries are experiencing big increases in the number of people waiting more than three months for treatment or to see a specialist.

The enhanced community care programme continues to develop healthcare at a more local level. The programme, which is investing €240 million in community health services, is easing pressure on hospitals and more acute settings.

Work is progressing on the establishment of six new regional healthcare areas, RHAs, and elective care centres and surgical hubs in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. We are also making high-quality healthcare more affordable for people at a time the cost-of-living crisis is affecting everyone. For example, last year we removed inpatient charges for all patients under 16, and this year we will remove them for all patients over 16.

We are also widening eligibility for the GP card, which will allow many tens of thousands more people to see their doctor without having to pay.

Additional eligibility initiatives include €10 million set aside for access to IVF treatments in Ireland for the first time; the expansion of the entitlement to free contraception to women aged 26 to 30; €5 million for oral healthcare for children up to seven years of age; and a reduction in the drugs payment scheme threshold, that is, the maximum amount any household has to pay for medicine every month, to €80.

Our health service has profound challenges. That was particularly evident during the difficult winter period but we have responded and expanded capacity dramatically in recent years. We are treating more people than ever before, with better outcomes than ever before. Ireland now has one of the longest life expectancies in the European Union. It continues to increase and is well above international averages. We also continue to see reduced mortality rates for stroke and most cancers. We also see positive trends in health-maintaining behaviours.

We will continue to advance these reforms under Sláintecare in 2023 and 2024.

Deputy Alan Dillon: One of the most pressing projects in County Mayo is the long-awaited extension to the emergency department, ED, at Mayo University Hospital. The ED was initially built to cater for 20,000 patients. It now sees more than 40,000 annually, and that number is growing. An extension to the unit has been promised for the people of Mayo for the past ten years. Following a recent HIQA inspection in August 2022 at Mayo University Hospital, long-term action to address the shortcomings in national standards to protect service-users from the risks of harm associated with the design and delivery of healthcare will not be taken until 2025, with a new accident and emergency department and an advanced medical assessment unit planned. I ask that the HSE and Department of Health work together to see how we can fast-track these type of projects on an accelerated programme in order to protect people's lives, improve outcomes and deliver healthcare in a modern and fit-for-purpose facility.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The opening of the Children's Health Ireland, CHI, urgent care centre at Connolly Hospital was hailed as a major milestone in the new children's hospital project. The walk-in service providing urgent care for children with minor injuries and illnesses was a critical component of the new service, not just in providing immediate care but in taking the strain off CHI at Temple Street and CHI at Crumlin and the new children's hospital, when it finally opens. As the Taoiseach knows, CHI has inexplicably and suddenly withdrawn the walk-in service. Parents now have to log on to a website and triage their children online, after which they might get appointments at Connolly Hospital or they could be directed to CHI at Temple Street. This approach completely defeats the core purpose of the CHI service. I know that parents have been in contact with the Taoiseach about this because they are worried that

they will not be able to get GP visits if their children are sick or injured and they are unlikely to go onto a website to get medical attention, which will put the ambulance service under further strain. Moving healthcare online also excludes sections of our population from accessing it, and we noticed this during Covid. Accenture's most recent digital index report found that computer use was split according to socioeconomic status, with only 39% of those in the lower socioeconomic groups using computers daily. Was the Minister for Health informed of this closure of services and will action be taken to reinstate the walk-in services in CHI at Connolly?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Taoiseach for giving his view. When the Cabinet subcommittee meets again, will it discuss medicine shortages? This is an issue that has been constantly raised with me and it is challenging for patients throughout the country. Pharmacists are finding that while there would have always been some medication shortages, the breadth and number of medications that are in short supply this year is much more unusual and hugely overwhelming. A recent survey of Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, members found that over 60% found that there were 40 or more medications in short supply. This is not just prescription medications but also over-the-counter medications. This means that if you take a common lotion for eye care, for example, which was out of supply for several months, you are required to get an alternative by going to a GP, and that is adding to the burden on GPs. Will this be discussed and will a plan be put in place, such as the serious shortage protocol they have in the UK? What kind of measures can be put in place to deal with this?

Deputy Mick Barry: Some 10 million people living with AIDS do not have access to life-saving treatment. Not a single monkey pox vaccine has been sent to Nigeria or the Democratic Republic of Congo, where monkey pox has been endemic for more than 50 years. There are still huge global inequities around access to Covid vaccines. The World Health Organization pandemic treaty is being drafted to address the massive inequities in the global distribution of life-saving medicines exposed by the Covid crisis. The Government played a shameful role when it bowed to the demands of the pharmaceutical industry on the issue of the TRIPS waiver during that crisis. Will the Government play the same role or will it play a more honourable one this time? Will it prioritise the needs of vulnerable people globally over the profits of the big corporations?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In December 2022, Ireland had the highest excess mortality rate since the start of Covid. Ireland had the fourth-highest level of excess mortality in the whole of the European Union for that month. During Covid, at a time when there were fewer excess deaths than in December 2022, the Government's response was to stop people travelling more than 2 km from their homes, close schools and stop people attending the funerals of loved ones. In that time the Government stopped people from going to work and making a living and it prevented them from being with their families, even when they were dying. We should compare and contrast that with now, when there are more deaths. I raised this with the Taoiseach in the Dáil in recent weeks and the full extent of the Government's response was that the issue would be raised with the Chief Medical Officer. Why is the Government so silent about mortuaries filling up at this moment in time? What has it done to investigate what is happening in real time so that something can be done about it?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: In April 2016 I asked an oral parliamentary question in the House about a proposed primary care centre for Tullow in County Carlow. I was told "The HSE proposes to deliver the primary care centre for the Tullow, Rathvilly and Hackestown area using the direct/own-build mechanism." The HSE said its capital plan would fund the centre. Following several parliamentary questions in six years since, the HSE told me that

Tullogh was the only place identified for the centre. Last year then I was told it was to begin in quarter 4. I am still waiting to be told where the centre is to go and I hope the Taoiseach can tell me. Recently I met a crowd of people in Borris, County Carlow, which is also in urgent need of a primary care centre. That is a rural part of Carlow and it is so important that we have these facilities in rural areas. It would help to stop the crowds at the accident and emergency departments and people could be treated in these centres. I ask the Taoiseach to make this a priority.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I know the Taoiseach will share the frustration of many parents of children with different abilities as they wait for assessments of need and then interventions, treatments and therapies. One of the real difficulties in delivering that service is the level of vacancies for the posts. In CHO, 9, my CHO, we have a vacancy rate of 35%. It is difficult for any service to deliver if 35% of posts are empty. Will the Taoiseach outline what the Government strategy is on recruitment for posts in this sector and what we can do to ensure that parents and children get the services they are entitled to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: My question follows on neatly from Deputy McAuliffe's. The Children's Rights Alliance gave the worst mark to the Government on youth mental health. You look at the chronic understaffing of child and adolescent mental health services in terms of assessments to provision of therapies, and it is all down to a lack of staffing. Then we make it very difficult for people who want to, for example, qualify with masters or doctorates in psychology, or in other allied health professions, to get qualified when they want to work in this area, because they are crippled with fees that are astronomical. Their representatives, myself and others have asked time and again why we are making it difficult for people who want to work in mental health or in health generally. Why are we making it difficult for them to get qualified by hammering them with fees for masters and doctorates? Why are we failing to pay our student nurses when they are on placement? It makes no sense when we need more people qualified in these vital areas.

Deputy Gino Kenny: The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, will ballot its members on industrial action very soon. It is doing this in pursuance of safe staffing. It has repeatedly asked the Government to intervene to take pressure off the health system and its staff. Nurses in this environment have stated that it is very unsafe. Will the Government intervene, uphold and listen to the nurses' union that this is not conducive to their staff or patients?

Deputy Bríd Smith: Shocking figures from the HSE today show us that 27% of all deaths during Covid were of people in nursing homes. It is a shocking reminder of how we failed the most vulnerable cohort during the pandemic. I, along with others in this House, sat on a special Dáil committee during the Covid pandemic, which made a priority recommendation that the State should conduct a full inquiry into the deaths of these people in nursing homes during that crisis. We are still waiting to hear news of that inquiry. That committee also examined other aspects of the State's failures when it came to caring for the elderly in nursing home settings. One startling figure that stood out was that 80% of nursing homes are privatised in this country and 20% are public. The position was the reverse only 15 years ago. The reality is that many private nursing home settings could not get qualified staff, could not retain staff and did not have medical resources to care for the people who got sick. When it came to the issue of oxygen tanks and personal protective equipment, PPE, they were totally inadequately resourced. We had a race to the bottom in respect of pay and conditions for those who worked in those nursing homes.

Will lessons be learned? Will that inquiry be held? Will the Government stop the failed

policies of privatising healthcare, particularly healthcare for the elderly? We have seen since large healthcare centres, which are privately owned and operated being opened with grandeur, with the Taoiseach and others presiding over the opening, cutting the ribbon and so on. A commitment was given to move to more localised, community-based, smaller residential settings to prevent this tragedy in future.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Joe Carey): The time for this question has expired. I seek the agreement of the House to take five minutes from the next question to use here. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This evening, Sinn Féin will table a motion calling on the Government to address the deterioration of ambulance services. This is nowhere more evident than in my own county of Mayo. The National Ambulance Service has warned that unless the Government acts, it will have insufficient resources to respond to the projected demand and the response times will continue to increase. We need to look at the coverage of the ambulance fleet, the ambulance stations themselves and the rapid deployment points to ensure that equitable distribution of services happens across the region. The challenges to our ambulance services relate to the wider healthcare system.

Mayo University Hospital in Castlebar was not compliant on ambulance turnaround times. Some 90% of the ambulances that attended the emergency department did not meet the turnaround time of less than 30 minutes. Let us imagine waiting for an ambulance and driving more than 50 miles in that ambulance on the worst roads in the country, only to have to wait in the ambulance to access emergency treatment. This is caused by the lack of capacity and bad patient flow. The same HIQA report stated the lack of beds in community and district hospitals is the main reason causing the backlog. Will the Taoiseach engage with the Minister for Health to address what HIQA has described as a significant reduction in step-down beds in district and community hospitals in places such as Belmullet, Ballina and Swinford to take the pressure off hospitals such as Mayo University Hospital?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Murchú, then Deputy Bacik. I hope they leave some time for the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The failure to deliver assessments of need and intervention therapies for families has been discussed. If we got workforce planning correct today, though I do not think we have, we would be talking about four or five years before we are able to deliver the numbers that are required. A meeting of the Joint Committee on Autism earlier was attended by representatives of the Psychological Society of Ireland, the Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland and the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists. They spoke about a need for themselves and all the stakeholders in the HSE to be involved in a forum or discussion to review both the assessment and the means of intervention to provide best practice as best we can at this point. I know the Chair is going to request that the Taoiseach meet with these three groups. What does the Government propose to deal with these specific issues and what does the Department of the Taoiseach intend to do?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yesterday, I had the pleasure of visiting Sligo to meet our local representatives, Nessa Cosgrove in County Sligo and Bernie Linnane in County Leitrim. As part of our meetings, we met staff and management in Sligo University Hospital. Some of the issues they raised with us are common throughout the health service and are a concern to all those working in front-line healthcare provision. They include issues with waiting lists and delays

in the delivery of the necessary infrastructure, which includes a new unit to provide more beds in Sligo, which I understand will not come onstream until 2025, despite having been promised for a long time. We also heard of issues with staff recruitment and retention and difficulties for staff recruited from overseas in finding accommodation locally in Sligo and in other towns and cities around the country.

I will table a parliamentary question on another matter that was raised with me concerning healthcare, which is the need for a review of the use of data collected in hospital laboratories around Ireland and what safeguards are put in place relating to data protection.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has little time for a response but can reply as best he can.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that a huge number of Deputies have asked important questions. I jotted them down as quickly as I could. Eighteen Deputies asking three questions each comes to nearly 60 questions. I will try to answer as many as I can as best I can in the time available. Deputy Dillon raised the issue of the emergency department in Castlebar, which needs to be extended. I agree with his remarks on that. I am not sure if it can be fast-tracked but I am working with the Ministers, Deputies Donnelly and Donohoe, to see if there are particular health projects that we could fast-track, especially those involving expanding EDs or additional bed capacity. There are a number of similar projects in the west region. On Friday, I was in Portiuncula University Hospital in Ballinasloe. I visited the hospital and the emergency department. It is a good ED but it is really small for one that takes 30,000 patients every year. It also needs an expansion. It is good to see the additional 50-bed block and 12-bed additional isolation ward are under construction.

On the urgent care centre in Connolly, Deputy Paul Donnelly and I share a constituency. He will know, as I do, that it is a really good facility and has been a big addition to paediatric healthcare in the area. It has dramatically improved the experience of urgent care for children in west Dublin, Meath and north Kildare. The same goes for the centre in Tallaght. There is a new online booking system. It has been brought in because of a massive increase in the number of attendances, way beyond what was ever intended. It is for a trial period. I do not know if it will work or not. I did not particularly like it when I heard about it. It is a decision it has taken for a trial period. It may work for some people. They might have a kid with a high temperature or minor injury and they would rather get an appointment in three hours than sit in the waiting room for three hours. It might work for some people but I take the point that the Deputy made about people who are digitally excluded and who might not be used to using computers. It may have the perverse or unintended effect of just increasing attendances in Temple Street down the road, which we want to avoid. We will see how it goes. If it works, it works, and if it does not, it does not.

Should I continue?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach might as well. We will take the time from the next group.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Aindrias Moynihan asked about shortages of medicines. He acknowledged that these are not unique to Ireland and have happened in the past but it is worse than I have ever seen it, anyway. I am told that alternative treatments are available for every product that is currently in short supply. Shortages of certain paracetamol, Amoxicillin or

penicillin products relate to individual line items and do not represent an entire portfolio. Unexpected surges in demand such as we have seen take time to resolve as the industry increases production to bring the supply chain back to normal. Medicine supply continues to improve.

The Department of Health is engaging closely with all stakeholders in working to mitigate the current immediate shortages. The Department has analysed products currently listed as short and can confirm that the reimbursement price is not the root cause of the shortage for any of these products. The increased notifications of shortages in recent months directly relate to the increased demand due to the winter surge. The Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, is working with all marketing authorisation holders to increase supply. It will continue to offer regulatory flexibility to suppliers where possible. The HPRA has secured additional stock for many items that are in short supply. The HSE has issued several memos to prescribers and pharmacists, including clinical advice and up-to-date information on available products. A dedicated web page has been developed to allow prescribers to check what is available to supply at the moment.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have ten minutes for the next group of questions. I will stop the clock for a minute. There is a problem when so many questions are grouped with facilitating Members who want to make lengthy statements. I might ask the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform to look at this and see how we could make it more efficient.

4 o'clock

The Taoiseach: I think I or my office may be partially to blame as we are the ones who do the grouping.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

The Taoiseach: In fairness to Deputies, on this occasion the questions were on topic but sometimes they are totally unrelated to the group.

Constitutional Amendments

23. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for constitutional amendments. [8210/23]

24. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for constitutional amendments. [9598/23]

25. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for constitutional amendments. [9875/23]

26. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for constitutional amendments. [9938/23]

27. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for referendums, including the referendum on housing committed to in the programme for Government. [9960/23]

28. **Deputy Brid Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for referendums, including the referendum on housing committed to in the programme for Government.

[9964/23]

29. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for constitutional amendments. [10247/23]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 23 to 29, inclusive, together.

Various proposals for constitutional reform are currently under consideration. Some arise from the programme for Government and others from the work of citizens’ assemblies, the Joint Committee on Gender Equality, and others such as the EU agreement on a unified patent court that arise from legal requirements. While no final decisions have been made as yet on the timing for the holding of referendums, the Government is keen to progress matters expeditiously and attaches a particular priority to gender equality issues.

Regarding housing specifically, the Housing Commission established in December 2021 will bring forward proposals for the wording of the referendum on housing by July of this year for the Government and the Oireachtas to consider. The recent establishment of the Electoral Commission, which will replace the Referendum Commission, among other things, will help to streamline the conduct of referendums.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to ask the Taoiseach about two of the referendums he referred to. First, on the housing referendum, we are anxious to see that take place as soon as possible to enshrine a right to housing in the Constitution. I note the Taoiseach indicated that the wording has not been received but that he expects to receive wording from the Housing Commission by July of this year. That is welcome but we hope to see speedy progress after that.

Turning to the gender equality referendum, this is a topic that is particularly close to my own heart and it is a priority for all who served on the Joint Committee on Gender Equality which looked to take forward the great work of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality. I am delighted to hear the Taoiseach say he is giving priority to that referendum on gender equality. I remind him that our unanimously agreed cross-party report published in December came up with a specific set of wordings for the three changes necessary to give effect to the citizens’ assembly recommendations to provide for gender equality in the Constitution, to delete the sexist language relating to women and mothers and replace it with gender neutral language that values and recognises care, and, crucially, to expand the definition of family beyond the marital family. We came up with the wording, which I sent to the Attorney General’s office, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister with responsibility for equality, Deputy O’Gorman. I ask the Taoiseach to commit to holding that referendum as soon as possible, preferably this year. The committee previously sought for it to be held in 2023. We need the gender equality referendum. It is long overdue and given that we have now come up with a wording that received cross-party support, we ask that the Taoiseach give it particular priority for this year.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the Taoiseach’s response that the referendum on housing is coming. Will he consult the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage to seek its opinion on the proposed wording? A constitutional right to housing will not guarantee every person in the State a home but it would place an important legal obligation on current and future Governments to progressively realise that right through their policies, laws and budgets. A referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution will also provide an opportunity for a national conversation about the meaning and place of a home in our society. This conversation must make its way to the child poverty unit to be established in

the Department of the Taoiseach. Ultimately, the housing crisis can only be resolved through large-scale public housing provision, proper regulation of the private rental sector and progressive activation of the private sector. Does the Taoiseach believe the referendum on the right to housing could be held before the end of the year?

Deputy Mick Barry: Local authority water assets and staff were due to be transferred over to Irish Water, Uisce Éireann, on 1 January. It is now 28 February and this has not happened. This is something worthy of public comment, in my opinion. What happened? Water workers across the country rebelled against the framework document which outlined the path to the transfer. The four trade unions that represent water workers have now opposed the document, throwing everything up in the air. Workers will not transfer over until two conditions have been met. The first is that their pay and conditions up to and including retirement be guaranteed, whether they transfer over or choose to be redeployed within their local authority instead. The second is that a date be set for a well-worded referendum to keep water in public ownership. When will this referendum happen?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the announcement today regarding the appointment of a chair of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use. I also welcome the early date of 14 April for its first meeting. While it is very unlikely a constitutional amendment will be required as a result of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, it will make recommendations. I am conscious that we are midway through the Government's term. Has the Government plotted out where those recommendations might fall in terms of the timeline between now and the end of the Government's term?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach be a bit more precise as to when the constitutional referendum on housing will take place and what exactly it will propose? If we have such a referendum, will it be matched by a willingness on the part of the Government to make use of it? One of the purposes of having such a referendum is that we could do things such as introduce rent controls, do something about land hoarding and speculation and protecting tenants rights, all of which the Government is not really willing to do. In fact, most of the time the Government seems to be hell-bent on allowing developers to charge obscene rents and, judging from the earlier conversation we had, promoting the right of developers to put in planning applications for totally unaffordable developments that they often do not build and which actually take up land and labour that could be used to develop public and affordable housing. Will the Taoiseach match the commitment to have a referendum with actually taking measures to challenge the profiteering by corporate landlords, speculators and land hoarders and prioritise instead people's need for affordable housing?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their questions. I will start with the proposed referendum on housing. The first step is for the Housing Commission to present its wording to the Government. That has not happened yet and we expect it will happen no later than July. There will then be consideration by the Government. Deputy Paul Donnelly asked if we will consult the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and we will absolutely do that. That will be part of the process of consultation. I anticipate the referendum will happen during the term of office of this Government but I think we need to be realistic about it too. I heard Deputy Boyd Barrett ask if it would allow us to do something about tenants' rights. We have done a lot on tenants' rights.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It has not stopped them from being evicted.

28 February 2023

The Taoiseach: One will hear stories, which I often hear, of people who have not paid their rent for two years using their rights to stay *in situ* even though they have not paid the rent for two or three years.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Loads of people who have done nothing wrong are being evicted.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please do not interrupt.

The Taoiseach: There are already a lot of tenants' rights and there will be more. We have the rent pressure zones, compulsory purchase orders and fast-track planning and we have had eviction bans. There has been no constitutional bar on doing any of that. Private property rights in Ireland are subject to the common good so I think the question is misframed. What is it that a housing amendment would allow us to do that we cannot do already? That is a different question because it is very clear we have been able to do all of those things within the existing constitutional framework.

In relation to the referendum on gender equality, I recognise the committee for the very good work that it did. I had a chance to read the report in full in the past few months and I was pleased to see we were given different options for the wording for the referendum. The matter is with the Attorney General at the moment. There has been some engagement with NGOs recently around the best timing for that referendum as well. I want to make sure we are properly prepared for it. It will probably require two amendments, one in relation to equality and another in relation to care. That is probably where it will land but we hope to bottom that out in the next few weeks.

In relation to the referendum on water, we do not have a date for it yet. It is committed to but I want to give everyone reassurance that there are no plans whatsoever to sell off or privatise Irish Water. It is not the policy of any party in this House and in any case it is prevented by legislation.

To respond to Deputy McAuliffe, we anticipate the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Policy will report by the end of the year, thus allowing us to consider its recommendations in early 2024.

European Union Directive: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 19th December, 2022.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle and the House for facilitating this motion. On 21 February, the Government approved the request of the Minister for Justice, Deputy Harris, to seek the approval of the two Houses of the Oireachtas to opt in to this European Commission proposal, which relates to the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures, which are more commonly known as sanctions. At present, different EU member states have different ways of dealing with sanctions breaches. In Ireland and many other member states sanctions violations are a criminal offence, but in some member states they are dealt with administratively. The European Commission wants to bring in a common approach at EU level to sanctions breaches and has put forward a proposal that will harmonise criminal offences and penalties for any violations. This proposal sets out common EU rules which will make it easier to investigate, prosecute and punish violations of restrictive measures in all member states alike. While the proposed regime is more broadly based, Russian aggression towards Ukraine is ongoing and adds a greater imperative to ensuring that EU restrictive measures are fully and consistently implemented. There must be consequences for the violation of EU sanctions. The ongoing situation in Ukraine makes this proposal an urgent and important one.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the EU has adopted a series of sanctions against Russian and Belarusian individuals and companies. Efforts to implement and enforce these sanctions have brought to light the challenges of identifying assets owned by those subject to sanctions who hide their assets across different jurisdictions through complex legal and financial structures. Those who wish to conceal their assets are helped by existing legal loopholes, as the related criminal law provisions vary across member states. The inconsistent enforcement of restrictive measures undermines the EU's ability to speak with one voice.

The main objectives of this proposal are to ensure that all member states are defining the criminal offences for violating EU sanctions in the same way; to make sure that all member states have effective, dissuasive and proportionate penalties in place for sanctions violations; to foster cross-border investigation and prosecution; and, lastly, to improve the operational effectiveness of investigating, prosecuting and punishing sanctions violations. One of the key elements is defining the kinds of sanctions violations that will now constitute criminal offences. These include making funds available to those subject to sanctions; failing to freeze funds; facilitating entry into or transit through an EU member state; providing certain legal, financial and advisory services which have been prohibited; and trading in goods and services when this has been prohibited. Circumventing an EU restrictive measure will also be made a criminal offence. This includes bypassing or attempting to bypass restrictive measures by concealing funds or concealing who the funds belong to. The proposal also introduces a shared basic standard for penalties so that there will be consistency throughout the EU in how people convicted of sanctions violations are punished.

The legal basis of this proposal is based on Article 83(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. As this is a measure under Title V of the Treaty, Protocol 21 applies and Oireachtas approval under Article 29.4.7° of the Constitution is required for Ireland to opt in to the measure. The view of the Office of the Attorney General was sought and the legal advice received has confirmed that there is no constitutional impediment to Ireland opting in to this directive. Naturally, given the importance of this issue, the Minister's officials will continue to participate actively in the negotiations at working party meetings and engage with other Departments and agencies to ensure the final text of the directive works well for Ireland and the EU as a whole.

While this directive is an important part of the EU's response to Russian aggression towards Ukraine, it is part of a range of actions under way at EU level. The sanctions adopted in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine are the most expansive and hard-hitting sanctions in EU history. Ireland has consistently supported the adoption of these measures. With the adoption of a package on 24 February marking the one-year anniversary, EU member states have adopted ten major packages of measures since the invasion. The three aspects of the tenth package are additional listings, sectoral measures and enforcement measures. The package contains approximately 100 new listings of military figures, political institutions, propagandists, additional Russian banks and other supporters of the Kremlin. Iranian, Belarusian and Syrian entities will also be added to the sanctions list.

On the sectoral side, the package includes additional export bans worth more than €11 billion on technology and goods critical to the Russian economy and the war effort, as well as on dual-use and advanced tech goods. The import ban list was also expanded. On enforcement measures, there are now additional reporting requirements, including an obligation on member states to report on any Russian public assets that they hold. This ties into discussions on the possible use of Russian assets to fund the reconstruction of Ukraine.

The impact of the sanctions adopted depends on their full and effective implementation. The new measures to strengthen reporting requirements and tackle circumvention in the tenth package are particularly welcome and the work of the new international special envoy for the implementation of EU sanctions, David O'Sullivan, will also be instrumental in combating the circumvention of EU sanctions by third countries. Ireland has been consistent in advocating for a maximalist approach to sanctions since the start of the war. Ireland will support the widest possible measures and to date Irish financial institutions have already frozen almost €1.8 billion of Russian funds. Ireland is playing a strong part in the EU-wide response to Russia's actions. Supporting this proposal is another demonstration that Ireland stands in solidarity with our EU colleagues in putting in place measures that robustly respond to such aggression.

The Government has no hesitation in commending this motion to the House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is interesting that nobody else is here for this debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: I see two colleagues present.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A couple of people are interested then. It is difficult to know what to say about this motion because on the face of it, a motion that calls for consistency in the implementation of penalties for breaching sanctions adopted by the EU seems reasonable. We should have consistency if we make a decision, on principled grounds, to impose penalties or restrictive measures on a particular regime or group of individuals because we feel collectively they have done something wrong. It seems reasonable to have a consistent approach. The problem is that we do not have a consistent approach. We have an inconsistent approach which, when unpacked, reveals cynicism and double standards.

Senator Frances Black introduced a Bill calling for sanctions on trade between this country and the illegal settlements of the apartheid state of Israel on the West Bank. It was passed by this House but the Government made sure it will never become law. It is the case with not only the Irish Government but also the major European powers because they do not want to sanction Israel. In fact, in many cases, they want to support Israel and give it impunity for war crimes, crimes against humanity, illegal occupation, what is essentially internment of Palestin-

ians, including young people, and for the illegal and criminal siege of Gaza. They do not want to impose sanctions even though, under international law, they would be entirely justified if not morally obliged to do so. No sanctions were imposed. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the UN special rapporteur on the Middle East all say there should be sanctions against Israel for war crimes, crimes against humanity, apartheid and the siege of Gaza. Yet, there are no sanctions and, in fact, the opposite is the case. Major European powers, including Britain, Germany and others, give Israel arms and weapons and the EU gives it special trade status. It did it favours for breaking international law. Apparently, the European Union has found its moral compass when it comes to Ukraine. All of a sudden, the European Union is a champion of self-determination and opponent of illegal occupation. Undoubtedly, Putin is engaged in an illegal criminal war and occupation, war crimes and all of that. We must have sanctions, but not, apparently, against Israel for doing exactly the same thing for decades with European support. Where is the moral compass and consistency? There is, of course, none whatsoever.

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, where was the call for sanctions? To be honest, I would not have supported a call sanctions, even though some did at the time, because I do not blame the American people for what George Bush did in Iraq, but where is the consistency?

Deputy Thomas Pringle: They are the good guys.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are the good guys. That must be it. When they bomb people to bits and kill a million people in Iraq, it is different because they are the good guys. When European countries arm the Saudi dictatorship so that it can carry on a war over exactly the same period of time as Putin has been at war with Ukraine, we say not a word. There are no sanctions and we continue to trade and have meetings with it. There is not even talk of sanctions. Apparently, we need consistency according to this resolution.

To me, it is the biggest load of hypocrisy I have heard in my life. When there is a bit of moral consistency, maybe we could take this stuff seriously.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for his contribution.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on whether we should transpose an EU directive on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of restrictive measures into Irish law. I am happy to support the motion for a number of reasons. I am, in principle, in favour of sanctions as an alternative to violence, provided those sanctions are targeted not at the ordinary people in these countries but rather regimes, palaces, oligarchs and senior decision-makers.

An integral part of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy is that it can safeguard and promote EU values abroad. These are universal human rights, not just western human rights, and involve equality, the rule of law, democracy and all of the rights in that family. The Russian and Belarusian situation at the moment is a classic example. Of course the sanctions are not perfect, but are they depriving Russia and Putin's war machine of resources, funding and technology? They absolutely are. Are they the sole answer? Of course not, but they are making a positive difference.

My concern is very similar to that of the EU, namely that there are very easy methods of circumvention. The whole idea of the directive is to tidy and tighten up the inconsistent application whereby some countries regard breaches of violations of the sanctions as merely administrative, rather than criminal, issues.

I welcome the recent establishment of the EU task force on freeze and seize, which involves the confiscation of assets. The Minister of State mentioned that €1.8 billion of Russian and Russian associated assets have been seized in this jurisdiction. Perhaps he could indicate in his concluding remarks whether the Government has a plan for that money. A lot of countries are considering not just freezing but also seizing assets and keeping the money in an escrow account for the redevelopment and reconstruction of Ukraine post conflict.

The objectives of the directive are straightforward. First, it harmonises the approach, for which there is a sound legal basis, improves and fosters cross-border co-operation and prevents the aiding and abetting of people circumventing the sanctions regime. I welcome the motion. I am in favour of transposing the directive into Irish law. I ask the Minister of State to comment on the question of seizing or freezing the €1.8 billion to which I referred.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The implementation of the new restrictive measures has shown the complexity of identifying assets owned by those subject to sanctions who hide their assets across different jurisdictions through complex means and financial structures. Those who wish to conceal assets are helped by existing legal loopholes as the criminal law provisions relating to the breach of EU sanctions vary between member states. This is the problem.

We are now a full 12 months into the war and I understand eight different sets of sanctions have been introduced. The intent may be good, but the sanctions are not effective. As I have said, we are all over the place. This directive is meant to ensure effective, dissuasive and proportionate penalty types and levels for criminal offences relating to the violation of EU restrictive measures. Are they having any impact? Are they having the desired effect with regard to oligarchs and people who have ingenious ways of transferring funds and moving them elsewhere?

The directive also proposes to foster cross-border investigation and prosecution. Surely to God that already exists as things stand. We are a year into these economic sanctions and the war. We are coming to the table very late. It is like closing the stable door when the horse is in the Curragh, which is in the Ceann Comhairle's constituency. There is an old adage about closing the door after the horse has bolted. We need to be more effective and engaging, pony up with people and tell them we have proper mechanisms or else it makes a folly of the sanctions.

Deputy Michael Collins: Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the EU has adopted a series of sanctions against Russian and Belarusian individuals and companies. The implementation of restrictive EU measures has shown the complexity of identifying assets owned by those subject to sanctions who hide their assets across different jurisdictions through complex legal and financial structures. Those who wish to conceal their assets are helped by existing legal loopholes as the criminal law provisions on breaches of EU sanctions vary across member states.

The inconsistent enforcement of restrictive measures undermines the EU's ability to speak with one voice according to the European Commission. People who enter this country should have some type of documentation that identifies who they are. We are strict with our own laws when it comes to people who have resided here for years, yet we let every person who is running from war and, in some cases, from where there is no war, into Ireland without any identification.

An athlete representing Ireland wants to compete in the European games but cannot get his foreign birth registration expedited in order to represent Ireland. He has been living and working in Ireland for years. Another person who is also supposed to be representing Ireland

cannot get a foreign birth registration expedited in order to represent this country, yet we have no problem handing out identification documents and welfare to people who have nothing to do with Ireland and, in some cases, could cause a serious danger to us. One of the biggest hitmen in the world resided in Ireland, something we did not realise until he was extradited recently, and correctly so. I understand most people coming into the country are genuine, but surely when our own people who have been working here for years cannot get passports it is a strange and frustrating situation.

With regard to penalties for legal persons, the proposed directive requires member states to provide for criminal or non-criminal administrative fines, exclusion from entitlement to public benefits or aid, exclusion from access to public funding, including tender procedures, grants and concessions, and may include other penalties.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Pringle, after which I will go back to Deputies Kenny, Ó Ríordáin and Catherine Murphy. This will be a concession and is not to be taken as custom and practice.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on this important proposal. Last year, the Commission proposed to add the violation of EU restrictive measures to the list of EU crimes and the proposal that is being put to us today is for a directive on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures.

Before I speak about this, I have to agree with Deputy Boyd Barrett. We contrast the European Union's reaction to the absolutely wrong invasion of Ukraine with how the Union treats Israel, the destruction of Palestinians, Palestinian property, villages and lives, even during this last week. There is also the reaction to Saudi Arabia in Yemen. It is contrasting and the only option that can be seen is that Israel and Saudi Arabia are the good guys and Russia are the bad guys. That seems to be the way it is. Is that the way the European Union going to work from now on? Maybe they should put a clear list up there, so we will know that when one government kills people it is okay and when another government kills people it is wrong. That seems to be what is going on here.

Before I speak to this measure, I would first like to point out that, to my knowledge, the proposal was still ongoing while this debate was starting. It was actually on the agenda for discussion of the justice committee today. Luckily enough, it flew through in a flash because there was no discussion on it. I had been here in the Dáil and was a couple of minutes late getting to the justice committee meeting, and it was gone. At least that part has been rubber-stamped for the measure to go through. These things should probably be taken to a meeting. I understand that this motion requires a resolution of the Dáil. It is coming through the Dáil today so it will be put into force.

The Attorney General found there was no constitutional impediment to Ireland opting into this directive, but noted a few areas that would need to be considered from a transposition perspective, including the provision under article 3 which criminalises the breach of a travel ban. The text of this directive is still being negotiated, with the most recent meeting between officials taking place only yesterday. Yet, we are putting through the adoption today, which is disappointing. It is disappointing that we are debating the proposal today given this and it is very concerning that we are trying to push approval for it through before the deadline next week, without proper debate. The reason given by the Department for rushing this through is

that: “not opting in under Article 3 of the Protocol would present risks in terms of Ireland’s reputation and the perception of Ireland’s commitment to the international sanctions regime”. Let me be clear, that fear of repudiation and perception are terrible reasons to rush a decision on any proposal, never mind important proposals such as these, of which we do not yet know the full implications.

I would now like to speak to the proposal itself. I absolutely condemn the horrendous acts by Russia towards Ukraine and my thoughts go out to all those suffering from the violence of the past year. I also understand the implementation of a series of sanctions against Russia to demonstrate our condemnation. All EU countries have been in favour of these restrictive measures and therefore I would like to know the reasoning for adding the violation of EU restrictive measures to the list of EU crimes. It seems extreme to me when every country is actually in favour of this and has been implementing sanctions already. I personally question the use of sanctions and their effectiveness, but there is no doubt that all European countries have been supportive of them by choice. I do not see why it would be necessary then to force this support and to threaten countries with criminalisation if they do not agree to it. It is unnecessary, extreme and controlling.

This proposal has the potential to foster mistrust and resentment between the Union and member states who have happily supported sanctions until now. Criminalisation is not the answer and it is for this reason that I am very wary of this motion and do not support it. Instead of focusing on unnecessary criminalisation, the focus in Europe should be on facilitating negotiations and a ceasefire. It should be on promoting peace, which is the very first of the European Union’s listed aims and values. We will see how that goes as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will now go back to Deputy Kenny, then Deputies Ó Ríordáin and Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his indulgence on this. The proposal is to bring us into line with European countries in regard to those who would fall foul of the various sanctions regimes that have been brought in. I support that and I understand where that is coming from. I do have certain reservations about it as well. The rushed nature of it is something we should try to avoid in the future in any of these situations.

A year ago Russia invaded Ukraine. The Russian aggression there has been immense, extreme and has caused a huge humanitarian catastrophe for the people of Ukraine who have been scattered across Europe. Many of them have come here to Ireland and they are very welcome here. I listened to the radio this morning and it was said that there are more than 1 million Ukrainian people in Germany and over 1.5 million in Poland. Sometimes we think that an awful lot of people have come here. While many people have come here, when compared to many other countries, we need to recognise that we are playing a small part. Yet, it is a very important part and an important role that we play.

The issues in regard to sanctions and using sanctions as a means of putting pressure on the Russian regime are important and can be used effectively and efficiently. However, we have to be careful that this does not have a detrimental effect on ordinary Russian people and they are not the ones to suffer from this. It has to be targeted at the people in the higher echelons of the Russian Government, such as Putin and those around him, as well as the oligarchs and the huge wealth we see them display. In Russia, in effect, a new model of imperialism has developed over the last number of decades. It is an extremely fascist and repressive state and that needs to

be recognised and acknowledged.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue of other states that are equally repressive and fascist, but which we do not treat with the same sense of urgency. That is something we should all reflect on. It is certainly something Europe needs to reflect on, particularly in its attitude towards what happened in Yemen over the past number of years, as well as with what happened to the Palestinians and the Israeli situation. We need to correct ourselves in regard to these double standards which continually come up in respect of all that. With that said, it is important from a European perspective that all members of the European Union have the same sets of standards and rules in place in this situation, and hopefully in others as well, where sanctions can be put in place. The same rules should be put in place for them.

A lot of money passes through the International Financial Services Centre. There are many shadow companies and various other institutions and regimes. We have to be vigilant about how they can be used to benefit some of these very wealthy oligarchs that are very close to the people who are causing such terrible devastation across all of Europe.

I want to go back for a moment to some of the comments that were made about the people who come to Ireland and indeed about the many Ukrainians who have come here. They are very welcome and will hopefully be an asset. They already are an asset to many communities and, hopefully, they will be an asset to more communities across the country. Reference was made to people who come here without passports. It is important to point out that over 40% of refugees across the world leave the countries they come from without a passport. They cannot get one and that is why they travel. In many cases, they have to get false passports and documentation in order to travel on to the countries they need to go to. In most jurisdictions, it is a worse offence to have false documentation than it is to have no documentation. Therefore, they turn up and say they have no documentation. That is often what happens and that does not mean these people are somehow or other trying to cheat the system. It actually means the system they have come from is so defunct and so terrible that they were forced into that position. It is important to recognise that.

The primary issue we have to deal with here is what has happened over the last 12 months and the huge upheaval that has caused across Europe, which is something we all have to take seriously. Of course, this is the first time in decades and almost the best part of a century that Europe has been the centre of this type of situation where we have seen a war of this nature visited on people. However, it is not unusual for these proxy wars to be happening on other continents and in many cases it has been European countries that have been in the shadows in respect of all that. We in Europe do not have clean hands when it comes to all these situations. That clearly needs to be recognised.

I want to finish on this point because I respect that I was late for the debate and I do not want to over-indulge. The primary thing we need to get right is that there needs to be consistency. There needs to be consistency with how we treat all these situations, or else we will not have any credibility in regard to any of them. That is what Europe needs to get its head around. I was at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe last week in Vienna, where there were huge debates by representatives from all the countries. Representatives from almost every country were united in their condemnation of what Russia is doing and indeed of what Belarus is doing in supporting them. Indeed, representatives of many of the countries in attendance, in particular ones that are former colonies themselves, smiled and nudged one another when they heard certain states being so vigorous in their condemnation because they have short

memories when it comes to how some of those countries had treated many of the countries that were represented in the room.

We need to get this right. We cannot live in the past. We have to step over all that and look to a future where there are firm laws and rules by which we will all abide, but also firm laws and rules we all recognise we have an obligation to drive home to ensure every country will be part of that. It cannot be just for the select nations we decide are, as one Deputy said earlier, the good guys rather than the bad guys. We need to lose that idea and move forward.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I appreciate the Ceann Comhairle's indulgence. Many of us were attending a meeting of the Joint Committee on Justice when we realised we were running late for the debate.

We regret the fact the debate is being slightly rushed. It is an especially important debate given that at the heart of what we are discussing in the context of the motion, which the Labour Party supports, is the very nature of the EU. It is central to many of the debates that have been happening in this country over recent years, not least relating to the Ukrainian war and the EU's response to it, which is the central point of this motion, but also to the very basis of the EU, a debate with which we in Ireland have been struggling because of Brexit, as well as to our defence of being a member of the EU, how the EU has assisted us as a member state and how the EU has been the greatest peace project in post-Second World War Europe. It is part of that understanding of our place in the world and in the EU that we have an historical and moral obligation to accept those fleeing that conflict into this country, as has been mentioned.

It is incredibly hypocritical and quite nauseating to hear voices in Ireland and even in this Chamber who would second-guess the intentions of those who come into this country. There are estimates of up to 55,000 Irish people living illegally in the United States, so it is remarkable how we change the language we use when we describe the Irish in the US as undocumented but those who come here seeking protection as somehow illegal. We need to check ourselves a little in respect of our hypocrisy regarding our own history of travelling all over the world by different means, often without the correct documentation. We overstayed our welcome and that is why there are Irish names all over the place, in every jurisdiction and all over the world. We need to remind ourselves of that.

In November 2021, before the invasion, Deputy Howlin of the Labour Party brought forward the Magnitsky Bill, which would have a major impact in freezing the assets of Russian war criminals. That is something the Government should have taken on board much more speedily. It has been on the Order Paper of this House since November 2021 and we feel strongly that the Government should move on it.

As was mentioned by other Deputies, the EU has stature and an ethical backbone only when it deals with all international conflicts in a similar manner. It is hypocritical not only for Irish people to question those coming here but also for the EU to bring forward sanctions against Russia without having a similar perspective on conflicts such as that waged by Israel on the Palestinian people. I grew up in Ireland during the South African apartheid regime and we were united, as a country and in the international community, regarding what had to be done about South Africa. It was frozen out of cultural and sporting exchanges and there were heavy sanctions, as advocated by Desmond Tutu and others. Apartheid was finally done away with and freedom reigned in South Africa. That will happen in Israel only when that country no longer feels it has friends in the EU and the United States, and there is an ethical absence there. There

is a massive contradiction between how we are, justifiably, dealing with the Russian scenario and how we are allowing an apartheid regime to reign uninhibited in Israel, which is quite happy to see men, women, children and journalists die. It behaves in a manner that is absolutely consistent with what happened in South Africa before the 1990s.

While we will support the motion, we feel that the EU, of which we are a proud member, needs to deal with other international conflicts in a similar vein to how it deals with that in Ukraine. If we were to exert that power in respect of what is happening in Israel and Palestine, we might get successes and our international reputation would be greatly enhanced.

Debate adjourned.

Visit of Scottish Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before calling Deputy Catherine Murphy, I ask Members to join me in extending a warm céad míle fáilte to a delegation from the Scottish Parliament, who have joined us in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. They are led by the convener of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, Mr. Jackson Carlaw, MSP. You are all very welcome.

European Union Directive: Motion (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 19th December, 2022.

- (Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Malcolm Noonan).

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating the inclusion of those of us who were late for the debate. It is far from ideal that the debate on the motion is being rushed, but we will support it.

Last Friday, 24 February, was a grim milestone, marking one year since Putin's invasion of Ukraine. I had the opportunity once again to show the support of the Social Democrats to the hundreds of mostly Ukrainian people who had gathered outside the General Post Office, GPO. Russia's invasion and its ultimate goal of annexation are not solely a physical attack but also an attack on Ukraine's status as a sovereign nation in complete violation of international law. Not only is civic infrastructure being targeted, including hospitals, schools and houses, but civilians have been tortured, sexually abused and murdered in huge numbers. More than half of all

children in Ukraine have been forced from their homes, which is staggering. The lasting consequences this war will have for generations of Ukrainian people are difficult to fathom. People have lost their livelihoods, homes, communities, childhoods and loved ones. The true scale of the suffering inflicted on the Ukrainian people will not be clear for years to come. When this war ends, and it will end, countless issues will remain to be addressed, such as the prosecution of war crimes, reparations and funding the cost of rebuilding Ukraine. The sanctions against Russia are not likely to end soon. They were put in place for clear reasons, namely, to deny Russia the ability to fund and arm its invasion and to make it abundantly clear that there is an economic cost for illegally invading a sovereign state.

The *Business Post* reported recently that despite the severe sanctions that have been placed on trade with Russia, the trade figures between Russia and Ireland have been hardly impacted at all. Exports from Ireland to Russia for the first 11 months of 2021 amounted to €559 million, while the figure for the same period in 2022 was €519 million. I have to query why this number has remained static. A large portion of the trade between us and Russia comprises exports from Aughinish Alumina. That plant is operated by Rusal International, which is controlled by the Russia-registered En+ Group. Mr. Oleg Deripaska, a Kremlin-linked oligarch, holds a stake of about 45% in that group. Despite claims early last year that Aughinish was going to separate from its parent company, nothing has happened, to my knowledge, and I would welcome the Minister of State's comment on that. Earlier this month, Ukraine confiscated more than 300 assets linked to Mr. Deripaska and Rusal, including a large alumina plant, under its own domestic sanctions. Will the Government explain why we are taking a different approach? Allowing individuals or companies to get away with violating sanctions is insulting to people throughout this country who have seen their energy costs sky-rocket over the past year. The European Commission has stated, "In practice, very few individuals or legal persons responsible for the violation of union restrictive measures are effectively held accountable". Every member state has to be proactive in enforcing these sanctions, freezing and seizing assets, and closing every possible loophole. If sanctions are to work, they have to cut off the finance that fuels the war. The spiralling fuel costs as a result of these sanctions have underscored just how insecure our energy supply is, and have highlighted that energy we can develop at home, namely renewable energy, is the necessary path for our climate and for national security.

I also want to refer to the double standards in the application of sanctions. I support the points made by Deputy Boyd Barrett. This has shown how sanctions are not consistent and we have to look at the cause and affect of the arming of Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen, for instance, and the impacts we see every day on the Palestinian people. It is really important not only that we say this here but also that the message on this glaring inconsistency goes to our European partners.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): On behalf of the Minister for Justice, Deputy Harris, I thank the House for facilitating the motion today. I will try to respond to some of the Members' queries before I sum up.

Consistency was mentioned by a number of Deputies. This directive will ensure that there is consistency across all EU sanctions through the shared definition of criminal offences so it is not limited to the sanctions on Russia. It is important to make that point.

It is unfortunate that Deputy Michael Collins chose to use his speaking time to make a point about international protection applications and people coming into the country without

documentation. As Deputies Kenny and Ó Ríordáin have rightly pointed out, many are fleeing conflict and are fleeing very difficult situations. It should be noted that we treat everybody fairly in this country and we try to do so. It is unfortunate that he used his time to raise that point here today.

On some of the specific points raised by Deputy Boyd Barrett, I have addressed the consistency issue. Ireland does not unilaterally impose sanctions. That is true of all sanctions, not just those related to Russia. We do implement sanctions, including UN sanctions collectively with other EU member states.

Deputy Berry raised the €1.8 billion in frozen Russian funds. That fund is frozen but not yet confiscated. Discussions are ongoing at EU level on what is a legally complicated matter in relation to the possible confiscation and use of the funds, for example for the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war has ended. The Commission's freeze-and-seize task force co-ordinates effective cross-EU implementation of the sanctions adopted against Russian and Belarusian individuals and entities. Again, there is a cross-departmental international sanction committee chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs so work is ongoing on that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath asked if sanctions are an effective tool. Yes, they are. This is a war of attrition, in which Russia is trying to grind Ukraine, partner countries and the EU down. That is why we need a consistent partnership approach. Above all, we need unity. That is what we are doing with this approach.

Similarly, Deputy Pringle mentioned the time in relation to the debate and the negotiations and peace talks. Under current circumstances, Putin does not want peace and certainly not on the terms that have been put forward to date. It is critical that we continue to exercise this pressure. Separately, Deputy Kenny spoke about the funds. It is about consistency of approach. I note Deputy Ó Ríordáin's point about Deputy Howlin's Bill of November 2021.

I wish Deputy Catherine Murphy all the best as she stands down as co-leader of the Social Democrats. I mentioned the cross-departmental international sanctions committee, which is chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and co-ordinates the domestic implementation of sanctions in Ireland.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, with Russian aggression against Ukraine ongoing, the EU wants to ensure that restrictive measures are fully implemented and the violation of those measures does not pay off. I have outlined the new measures included in the directive that we have come here today to discuss. I also gave an overview of the measures included in the tenth package of EU sanctions, which was agreed on 24 February. Since the start of the war, Ireland has been consistent in advocating for a maximalist approach to sanctions. First and foremost, sanctions deprive Russia of the funds and technology that it needs to continue fighting. The impact of sanctions on the Russian economy has been significant. Russia's GDP fell in 2022 alone, in some reports by up to 4%. It will likely continue to shrink this year. The EU's export restrictions have already created a technological lag, which has reduced productivity in many sectors of the Russian economy, including its military sector. This economic decline also minimises Russia's ability to wage war. EU sanctions aim to incentivise behavioural changes. The sanctions adopted to date deliver a clear message to President Putin and all those who support and finance this unjust war that their actions have consequences.

In terms of using frozen Russian assets to fund the reconstruction of Ukraine, Ireland has

expressed openness to exploring proposals. However, it is important to be clear that this is legally very complicated. Current conversations are focused on using immobilised public funds, meaning money deposited by the Russian Central Bank in EU countries. We are not aware of any such deposits in Ireland. A new *ad hoc* working group has been created in Brussels to discuss this further.

In view of the gravity of the situation we are currently witnessing, it is vitally important that all necessary measures are taken to ensure that those who attempt to violate sanctions are dealt with robustly and consistently across the EU. This directive is an important part of those EU-wide efforts. Ireland opting into this proposal will ensure that we are at the table with our European partners and can be involved in the detailed discussions. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 [Seanad]: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time”.

I am pleased to present the Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 to the Dáil today. I want to begin by thanking my predecessor as Minister of State at the Department of Finance with responsibility for credit unions, Deputy Fleming, for his work on the Bill. Under his stewardship, the Bill completed its passage through the Seanad in December 2022.

Although I have been Minister of State with responsibility for credit unions for just a brief period, I have already engaged well with the sector. I have met with the Irish League of Credit Unions, ILCU; the Credit Union Development Association, CUDA; the Credit Union Managers Association, CUMA; and the national supervisors forum, NSF. I have also met many individual credit unions over the past two months. I am very encouraged by the discussions I have had with credit union managers, directors and representative groups. I have met staff and volunteers who are eager for change and for credit unions to reach their potential. I look forward to continuing these engagements throughout my time as Minister of State.

I would like to take this opportunity to issue a challenge. I ask that collectively, we set a vision for where the credit unions can be a decade from now. The reputation of credit unions could not be stronger, but I believe the sector needs to have a strategic vision of where it wants to be in ten or 15 years, and how that will sit *vis-à-vis* other developments in financial services and fintech in particular. The vision for success can only be achieved through greater collaboration and co-operation between credit unions. I have every confidence that this challenge can be met and that Irish credit unions can continue to be vibrant and community-focused pillars of society that serve their members in a complete way in the financial services sector.

The pace of change in financial services is relentless, as can be seen in the rapid growth of fintech and digital banking. Change and technical development is exponential. A new and different set of players is continually connecting with customers and potential customers in a range of new and different ways. There is great opportunity for credit unions to harness new

technology to broaden their membership and to grow lending.

5 o'clock

Indeed, many have already begun to do so. However, I believe all credit union members should have access to the full services of community banking, regardless of size. This Bill will help the credit union movement to meet this objective and grow as the key provider of community banking as envisioned in the recently published retail banking review.

The Bill before us is the output of the policy framework review, which was a commitment in the programme for Government. The review involved the holding of over 50 engagements with stakeholders, involving more than 60 credit unions either individually or in groups. Additionally, representatives of many more credit unions were met at conferences throughout the country. I have had the opportunity to participate at such a conference already.

Officials at the Department have analysed over 100 proposals for legislative and regulatory change. They continued to do so following the publication of this Bill and its passage through the Seanad. We continued to receive suggestions and amendments from both the Central Bank and the sector until recent weeks. Therefore, there is ongoing collaboration on the Bill. This Bill is the product of that collaboration. I pay tribute to everyone in the sector for the work.

Credit unions, as we all know, are a key component of Irish life. They are social, community-based organisations providing vital financial services. I have seen at first hand the importance of the sector, as Deputies across the House will have done. Credit unions are the largest providers of personal unsecured loans, a lifeline for many families in moments of difficulty. They hold about €17 billion in savings and €5.5 billion in loans and serve 3.5 million members. There are approximately 200 credit unions, with over 400 branches, across the State.

Challenges arising from the negative interest rate environment have abated materially recently. This gives the credit unions a different opportunity, perhaps with a more positive tailwind going forward given the structure of their assets and loans.

The credit unions are co-operative, not-for-profit organisations. They are governed by over 2,500 volunteer directors and board oversight committee members, whose objective is to pursue the economic and social goals of members and wider local communities. This role is even more important given the withdrawal of Ulster Bank and KBC Bank and the closure of many bank branches around the State. Credit unions have a loan-to-asset ratio of just 28%, or €5.5 billion, of their €20 billion assets. This is far too low and is a strategic risk to the sector.

It is important that credit unions continue to develop plans for lending in the community, such as loans to small businesses, agri-lending, retrofit loans and mortgages, in a safe and cost-effective way through collaboration. However, it is crucial that credit unions extend their loan book to mortgages, including more substantial mortgages, and become a competitive force in the Irish mortgage market for their many members. This can be achieved through collaboration.

I am delighted to see the development of a sector-led credit union mortgage task force and look forward to the outcome of this group's work. It is clear that credit unions are engaged and ready for this opportunity. This is a promising start to an ambitious but really necessary programme of work and collaboration for the sector. Collaboration does work.

More than 75 credit unions now provide current accounts and debit cards and make up

more than 10% of all new current account openings. Approximately 57,000 credit union current accounts were opened in the first ten months of 2022. All this is supported by two collaborative ventures. These are member owned and provide back-office support for the delivery of common products.

It is important that we acknowledge the challenges the sector faces while at the same time responding to them as a Government and explaining how the Government and, more importantly, the sector can address them and, hopefully, take advantage of the opportunities that arise through the changes being made by this Bill.

The Bill includes 56 sections, amending the Credit Union Act 1997. The explanatory memorandum sets out which of those amendments are policy, technical or consequential. It is heavily technical amending legislation, and it is the first substantive credit union legislation since the 2012 Act. The sector has changed a great deal in the past ten years. There are now fewer credit unions, but those remaining are much larger and provide a far greater range of products and services. The average asset size is now roughly €100 million, the largest being above €500 million.

Arising from the consultation with the sector, several important issues were identified. First, if a member's local credit union does not provide a current account, he or she cannot join a credit union that does, nor can the credit union introduce the member to another credit union. While the common bond may appear to protect from competition from other credit unions, it does nothing to prevent competition from banks or non-banks. The common bond should not be a barrier to members accessing the widest possible range of financial services. We need to reflect on this, and the Bill provides the opportunity to do so.

Second, while a local focus is a great strength of the credit union sector, it can lead to fragmentation. In many areas, there are multiple products, price points and varying terms and conditions. This makes it almost impossible for the sector to market itself as a nationwide option to consumers. This Bill contains measures to address these issues.

Collaboration is bolstered by allowing for corporate credit unions, a new type of regulated vehicle. Corporate credit unions are credit unions whose members consist of other credit unions.

The Bill will amend section 43 to clarify that credit unions can invest in ventures supporting credit unions. Enhanced governance is supported by including the option of making the manager a member of the board, in line with best practice in corporate governance; a reduction in the minimum number of board meetings to six per annum; a mandatory review of policies every three years, rather than annual, as at present, and the removal of the requirement for the board to review procedures; a reduction in five administrative issues to be mandatorily approved at board level; four amendments to streamline the work of the board oversight committee; and a provision to allow credit unions to seek deemed consent from members to receive the annual accounts by electronic means. The latter could save significantly on print and postage costs.

Member services are improved by providing flexibility to the common bond in four aspects: to allow for referral of members to other credit unions to provide a service not provided by the referring credit union; to allow for loan participation; to allow more businesses to be members; and to allow credit unions to lend to certain public sector entities designated by the Minister. Section 38 is amended to allow the Minister to set a maximum interest rate, currently fixed at

1% per month. To fully take advantage of this legislation, the sector must work together to lessen fragmentation, provide strategic vision and leadership and drive business-model change, as so many credit unions have already begun to do.

There are three non-legislative policy actions that I believe will make work easier for credit unions and enhance their engagement more broadly. First, the Central Bank, the Credit Union Advisory Committee, CUAC, and the Minister will have a memorandum of understanding to improve co-ordination on policy matters while respecting regulatory independence. Second, the Central Bank has agreed to introduce an enhanced engagement protocol with credit unions. Third, we have amended the terms of reference of a stakeholder group to widen attendance and enhance transparency with the sector. These are all pretty sensible changes that are in progress.

The core elements of the Bill come directly from detailed engagement with the credit union sector, supported by research from the CUAC. I have also sought feedback from or taken the opportunity to seek feedback from organisations such as Women's Aid, Men's Aid and Safe Ireland in regard to financial abuse training for credit union staff. By that, I mean policy around the third strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has to be reflected in every Department. Credit unions are in contact and have many members, and their staff are in contact. Financial abuse is a key part of coercive control, as we understand it, and it is incumbent on every Department to ask what it can do by way of a contribution to eradicating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I have simply used the Bill as an opportunity, a moment of reflection, to engage with the credit union managers' association and staff of credit unions to ask them for their views on where financial abuse is occurring or not within credit unions, on what more we can do to identify it, and on what training might be helpful or appropriate. Many credit unions have already done training, with Women's Aid in some cases. Is there a way in which we can enhance the protection of the community more broadly, even if it is simply through providing training to staff and directors of credit unions? That implies a significant number of people in every community. It is a contribution that the Department of Finance and the credit union sector can make to the broader Government strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

To return to the technical part of the Bill, we have received significant feedback on the current draft of the Bill, both from the sector and the Central Bank. This is helpful and appropriate. I will be tabling amendments on Committee Stage in the Dáil based on that feedback. I am happy to discuss with Deputies the feedback from all the representative bodies and the Central Bank. That will strengthen the crucial proposals in the Bill to support credit unions to collaborate and grow their membership, and also to broaden their range of services for members.

There are some new provisions – this relates to the amendments – in regard to matters not previously raised during the policy review that we are now considering based on the second round of feedback. We will take time to ensure all of that feedback is properly considered from policy and legal perspectives. I look forward to debating this Bill with Deputies throughout its passage. I look forward to a constructive debate on it and I commend it to the Dáil.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo. I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of Sinn Féin with respect to the Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022. At the outset, I commend the hard work that has been sustained over many years of the credit union movement to advance reforms that will allow our credit union sector to grow.

We all know in this House and further afield that credit unions are trusted. They understand

what makes and strengthens communities. The credit union movement has a long and proud history in Ireland, North and South. This is demonstrated by the fact that we have one of the highest rates of credit union membership on this island. It is testament to the skill and dedication of the staff at the heart of that movement.

There are more than 204 credit unions in the State operating from more than 400 locations. It is a movement that places people above profits and prioritises members, not shareholders, and is embedded in our community. Credit unions provide so much to our communities and economy. They can do so much more, but only if they are supported and not held back.

Currently, all credit unions provide saving accounts, products and consumer credit, with many developing capabilities to provide current account and mortgage lending products. Others are expanding into SME lending and this can be empowered to thrive and increase the footprint in the financial services market.

The financial service landscape is undergoing rapid change. In this changing landscape, credit unions can and must be enabled to strengthen their footprint and impact in the sector. The retail banking review was an opportunity to take stock of that change and navigate a way forward. The review recognised that credit unions could play a greater role in the provision of retail banking products and services in the coming years. It also concluded that the credit union sector should be given the opportunity to transform into a community-based provider of universal retail banking products and services, and that the credit union sector has the capacity to provide additional competition in the banking market at scale.

The programme for Government committed to enable the credit union movement to grow as a key provider of community banking. This sentiment has been expressed many times over the years but without tangible results. The conclusion of the retail banking review and the commitments and success of the programme for Government must be delivered.

I want to recognise the perseverance of the credit union movement over many years to secure the legislative reform that would unlock its potential. The Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022, which is the first substantive credit union legislation since 2011, is an outworking of that work.

I will now turn to the main provisions of the Bill. The legislation contains 56 sections in total. I will restrict myself to some of the key proposals within it. We often speak of the important role credit unions play in our communities. It is a unique role that no other bank can replicate. This is tied up in the voluntary ethos that underpins the movement, something that is not referenced in the existing Act.

Section 4 of the Bill will include a new object in section 6 of the Act to promote and provide support to co-operative groups and voluntary associations, recognising the role credit unions play in hopefully providing a spur to further reform and action to support them. A key proposal of the legislation is the establishment of corporate credit unions. Currently, every credit union is a separate entity, each with its own board and management team. They have been prohibited from sharing business. While prohibited here, corporate credit unions exist in other countries, allowing them to achieve economies of scale and engage in activities that are simply not possible for individual credit unions. It is well recognised that even the largest credit unions do not have the capacity or scale to develop certain opportunities on their own. Credit unions are already collaborating to increase their offering. For example, we see that 69 credit unions

are providing current accounts through collaborative models. We have three other vehicles that have been approved to support up to €900 million in lending to approved housing bodies, recognising the opportunities that collaboration presents to the credit union sector and the broader economy.

Sections 3, 5, 6, 7, 44 and 56 include provisions to provide for the establishment of corporate credit unions and that is an important step. An issue that has been frequently discussed is the interest rate ceiling of 1% on credit union loans. The justification for interest rate caps is strong, primarily to protect borrowers by safeguarding the affordability.

The interest rate ceiling applied to credit unions was reviewed by the Credit Union Advisory Committee in 2017. While underscoring the importance of the interest rate caps to safeguard consumer welfare, the committee recommended increasing the current rates from 1% to 2%. It is important to reflect on why this recommendation was made, the reason being that increasing the interest rate ceiling will provide credit unions with greater flexibility to risk-price loan products and in so doing may create the opportunity for new product offerings.

It should also be noted that this issue was examined in the report on interest rate restrictions for low-income borrowers by academics at University College Cork, UCC, on behalf of the Social Finance Foundation. The report was concerned with the ultra-high interest rate charged by moneylenders, which is something I sought to address through the Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill. The report recommended a reduced interest rate cap for moneylenders together with an increase in the interest rate ceiling for credit unions so as to increase credit union participation in consumer lending. The motivation behind an increase in the interest rate ceiling is to offer credit unions flexibility and increase their product offering.

Section 19 of the Bill allows the Minister, after consultation with the advisory committee, to increase the interest rate ceiling by order. I would add that an increase in the loan interest rate ceiling does not mean that credit unions are required to raise their loan interest rates. They could apply their own rates within the parameters allowed under the interest rate ceiling.

One of the greatest strengths of the credit union movement is that each credit union is member owned. That underpins its ethos, with credit union serving their members rather than transacting with customers. A feature of each credit union is the common bond and that is based on a social connection to the credit union. It could be based on connections such as an area in which someone lives or works or, indeed, his or her occupation.

In 2017, the Credit Union Advisory Committee considered the common bond and options to change the current arrangements. While opinion on this issue is not unanimous, the advisory committee recommended changes to allow credit unions to introduce business to other credit unions, although it did not specify what changes. In this regard, the Bill provides flexibility to the common bond in four key areas. First, it will allow credit unions to refer their members of other credit unions to provide services that they themselves do not offer, and for credit unions to provide services to members of other credit unions that do not provide them. Second, it will allow for loan participation between two or more credit unions. Third, it will allow for more businesses to be members of a credit union and fourth, it will allow for credit unions to lend to public sector bodies, as designated by the Minister.

The Bill also provides for several other measures. These include enhanced governance with measures aimed at allowing a greater focus on strategic planning by the board of directors.

Provision in this regard includes reducing the minimum number of board meetings from ten to six per year and reducing the number of administrative issues that must be approved by the board of directors.

I want to end by acknowledging the work of the credit union movement and its engagement with the Department of Finance in drafting this legislation. The outworking of this legislation must be the commitment made in the programme for Government to support the credit union sector to allow it to grow. Currently, we know the credit union sector is only lending one quarter of the €20 billion of assets it holds. That is a wasted opportunity. What is the prize? The prize is to establish an environment in which the full potential of the credit union sector can be unlocked. We will listen to and work with the credit union movement to improve the legislation with regard to the amendments that will be brought forward on Committee Stage and ensure that the core objectives of this Bill are realised.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I welcome the fact that we are having this discussion on the Credit Union (Amendment) Bill 2022 and, indeed, the work credit unions are doing at the moment and continue to do. It is very important, of course, that we listen to what the credit union sector has been saying regarding the powers and ability it has. I have a particularly keen interest in the issue and I have been quite vocal about the reforms this sector needs to help it not just survive but thrive.

I am a proud member of my local credit union and I have had a long-term interest in this sector. I chose this subject for my master's thesis and I have long had an interest in it. I recognise the even greater importance that credit unions can take on, especially in light of a commercial banking sector that is highly concentrated at this moment in time and is struggling to introduce changes.

Credit unions function a bit like the community banking model and the not-for-profit banking sector, albeit with certain differences. Credit unions are highly valued by their members and by the communities in which they are located. They have continually enjoyed the significant trust of their members. When we consider the banking crisis, the credit union sector did not cause the latest banking crisis, yet many of the regulations that were brought in following the crash treated the credit unions as if they did. The sector has long called for changes that would allow it to fulfil its greater potential to access different credit markets here.

I am glad to see the first major legislative change for the credit union sector since the 2012 Act. There are some good provisions in this Bill. A number of the recommendations that came out of the strategic banking review, which the credit union movement fed into, are positive. I will not go through all of them but I will address a few, particularly those that relate to interest rate regulations, new governance proposals and lending and other business creation provisions.

With regard to interest rate regulation, the new maximum rates that can be charged on loans is welcome. They will provide added security for their members. Credit unions are moneylenders. In fact, the original motivation for establishing the credit union movement was to stop moneylenders and, therefore, credit unions have not been known to charge overly usurious rates to their members, but there is no harm in having additional protections here. On the proposal around new governance structures, I believe the options are constructive. There are provisions to provide a new governance structure for appointing the chief executive officer, CEO, as a board member, and to reduce the number of annual meetings to six. Each credit union is its own organisation. Some may choose to opt into this and others may choose to opt out. In my

experience, many credit union board members are volunteers who care passionately about their organisations. They may feel that six meetings annually is not sufficient, but what they do in that regard is a matter for them and I believe the correct thing to do.

On the new provisions around inter-credit union lending and business creation, I am aware that has been long sought by the movement. It would allow one credit union to provide a loan to another or have one refer business to another. This would help to drive commercial activity and credit to members. The ability to establish these corporate credit unions, following the US model, will help the movement get more involved in the largest consumer market, namely mortgages. A corporate credit union would, in effect, serve as a kind of credit unions' credit union. It would be a group of credit unions that would come together for what would become a vehicle, perhaps for mortgage lending. This is something they have long called for and it is an issue I raised regularly in the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach. I struggle to understand why we have waited for so long to do this. It is no secret that there is a lack of competition at the moment within the banking sector. Allowing credit unions to come more involved in mortgages would help to provide more competition.

I want to point out, however, one missed opportunity, which I have raised several times previously at the finance committee. I am referring to credit unions' capital requirements. Irish banks have some of the highest capital requirements in the EU due to the legacy of the banking crisis, but credit unions have even higher requirements, despite them not being the ones who caused the banking crisis. I believe we had an opportunity to restore the setting of these requirements to primary legislation as we had done before the 2012 Act. As I understand it, this is something the Government has decided to leave as a matter for the Central Bank. I believe the rationale for turning the matter over to the Central Bank is that it would be more responsive to changing market dynamics and that it could effect changes faster than amending the principal Act. I have seen only a kind of slow process progress in this regard and it seems that the Central Bank has been far more cautious. The credit union sector has long talked about this. Representatives feel the sector has been stymied over the past decade because of poorly targeted regulation. They want to see the setting of requirements restored to primary legislation. Does the Minister of State believe that this is a missed opportunity, and that it is something we can discuss at greater length at committee level?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, for the opportunity to speak on the Bill. Sinn Féin will support this Bill and we look forward to working with the credit union movement to make any amendments necessary to improve it further.

I am glad the legislation has been forthcoming as part of the programme for Government commitment to review the policy framework within which credit unions operate, and to enable and support the credit union movement to grow. It is important that the credit union movement can grow as a key provider of community banking in the State. It is, therefore, essential that we use this legislation to achieve this.

As the ILCU stated in its letter to public representatives regarding this legislation:

Credit Unions are not simply an alternative to banks. They are a model of community banking that can deliver a much wider range of services and an alternative financial platform.

We can be rightly proud of the high levels of credit union membership. This is due, in no small part, to the massive work done by those who work and volunteer in the credit union movement, but it is also a massive credit to the mummies of Ireland. I imagine that a lot of people opened their first credit union account like I did, which was on the advice, by which I mean on the instruction, of my mother. It gives kids a really good habit. Credit unions are local, they are right there in the heart of the community, you get brought down by your Mam the first time to do it, and then you are on your own and part of the credit union movement. This is a great testament. They are very welcoming and very open but it is the mummies of Ireland who deserve a bit of a pat on the back for this.

The sector is not looking only for improvement in how things are currently done; they are seeking transformative change to maximise the potential of their movement. Credit unions are cornerstones of our communities. Many of us drew down our first loan from the credit union to buy tools for an apprenticeship, books for college, our first car, to go on our first holiday or, as in my case, to buy the first stick of furniture for a first house. They are trusted, they are visible and they understand what makes and strengthens a community. For eight consecutive years, credit unions have maintained the top spot at the Customer Experience Insight Awards, CXi, for best customer experience. As was alluded to earlier, they are on the front line in dealing with issues of financial abuse and coercive control in the context of domestic abuse and of elder abuse. Given that credit unions are local and in our communities, they are aware of and keep an eye out for people, and they are not just doing the job. They are doing the job well. They hold this position among Irish people because they treat their customers and members with respect and they respond to their needs and their individual circumstances.

With more than 300 credit unions across the island, one in every two people has a credit union account. There is a bit of work there for mummies to do still. It is a co-operative movement that places people above profits, benefits its members not shareholders and is embedded in our communities. Let us contrast the ethos of the credit union movement with that of commercial banks. Issues such as the tracker mortgage scandal or the attempt to close branches during the Covid crisis show how commercial banks often do not have the interests of their customers and communities at heart. The credit union movement stands in contrast to this. Credit unions are visible, they are responsible and they are accessible.

Credit unions provide people with affordable and ethical loans to meet the needs of their members yet, to date, the full power of the credit union movement has not been harnessed. It has been held back by a failure of Government to unleash its potential. It is long past time to unlock the potential of the credit union movement, not just for domestic customers but also for business customers. As a State, we need our credit unions to grow, expand and thrive. That is what this legislation should reflect. As it is currently constituted, it will need to be amended to ensure the credit union movement can realise its full potential. We support the Bill and its aims but we want it to go further. We will work with the credit union movement to ensure this legislation is as effective as possible. We all want the same thing in this. We want the credit union movement to thrive.

Deputy Ged Nash: Like Deputy O'Reilly, I probably have my Mam to thank for introducing me to the credit union. In some ways, I have never looked back. I have maintained my old account there, as I am sure many have. At around the same time, I opened an Ulster Bank account and got my Henri Hippo savings device, if I can call it such. I may not have my Mam to thank for that, it may have been the powers of TV marketing. I wonder where we should hand those back to when Ulster Bank retreats from the market in the coming weeks. In any case, I

am pleased to contribute to the debate and to provide the full backing of the Labour Party for this significant legislation. First, I will declare an interest. Like Deputies Farrell and O'Reilly, I am a member of a credit union. That is not unusual and I join with probably more than half the population of the island who are credit union members. I have no doubt the majority of Members of these Houses are members of credit unions.

The credit union movement is very much part of Ireland's story. It is part of our history. For people of my class, credit unions are the financial institution of first, and often only, choice. We should never underestimate the importance and value of the opportunity credit unions provided to buy a first car, assist people like me to go to university and enable people to develop a modest home extension. All these small contributions have had transformational impacts on people's lives individually, and collectively on communities throughout the country. I heard it said many years ago, including by my parents, that the banks - the pillar banks, as we know them now - only welcomed the business class and professionals. That was true to a large extent. Credit unions, however, were and are for us all.

My political hero, John Hume, who founded the Social Democratic and Labour Party, was president of the ILCU at the age of 27. As a democratic socialist, he knew the importance of access to credit at affordable rates from a member-based body based in the community and in which all members had an equal share, regardless of who they were, how much they earned or the amount they had on deposit. The movement is informed by the best principles of the co-operative movement. The Bill strives to ensure that those principles that have served the movement well are very much at the centre of the legislation and will continue to inform the development of the credit union sector. It now has more than 3.6 million members and €20 billion in assets. The demands placed on credit unions have become increasingly diverse. Members want more widely available services and their credit unions to be more responsive to the complex needs of the membership base in what is a much more sophisticated and complex economy than when the credit union movement first emerged. The Bill should and can achieve that. It has the balance right.

The Minister of State will not mind me saying that great credit is owed to her predecessor, Deputy Fleming, for marshalling the Bill to this point and for the extensive engagement he undertook, along with departmental officials, with credit union representative bodies in the past two to three years. I acknowledge the briefing on the details of the legislation provided earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, for Opposition Members.

The Bill provides a legislative foundation for the long-awaited establishment of corporate credit unions, the enhancement of member services by allowing credit unions to refer members to other credit unions and participate in loans of other credit unions, for example, and an increase in the maximum monthly interest rate on credit union loans, from 1% to 2%. It also aims to support enhanced governance through a range of amendments. One of the important aspects of the amendments relating to governance is the opportunity to appoint chief executives or managers of individual credit unions and branches to the board without the requirement to have an election. That makes sense from governance and day-to-day management points of view. Some of the other aspects relating to corporate governance will allow managers to manage, as I stated at the meeting earlier. There are some very experienced managers in the credit union sector now. They are well qualified and subject to rigorous and robust regulation. It is positive that they be enabled to become members of boards.

The Labour Party supports the Bill in a spirit of co-operation. As has been referenced, all

Deputies received a letter yesterday indicating that the ILCU backs the legislation but would be interested in working with us all, including the Minister of State and those of us in opposition, on appropriate amendments on Committee Stage to ensure the Bill meets all its objectives. One of the main aims of the Bill is to allow for the movement to ensure credit unions fulfil their potential as bigger and more substantial actors in the community banking space and in retail banking more generally. We all want that to be made a reality because competition in the Irish retail banking market is beyond dire. With the withdrawal of Ulster Bank and Permanent TSB not yet of the scale to challenge, although it is seeking to build all the time, we are left with AIB and Bank of Ireland. This, combined with the frankly baleful absence of a commitment to look seriously at the Sparkasse model of regional community banking has resulted in what is, in effect, a duopoly in the Irish retail banking landscape. That has been an unfortunate feature of the sector for some time and the situation is only going to get more critical with the exit of Ulster Bank in the coming weeks. The banking review I had been seeking for a long time made it clear that the credit union system has a major function in having more market share and allowing greater competition. There is no doubt there is a greater appetite for risk now among credit unions, especially the larger ones. That is indicated in all the research.

We do have the bizarre situation that some credit unions can offer mortgages as a product while others cannot. There is €20 billion in assets in credit unions at present and the loan ratio is 28%. That is abnormally low for any financial institution and I understand it is historically low in the context of credit unions and, therefore, there is significant potential, even in the space of mortgages, for more lending if credit unions are enabled to collaborate and co-operate to do so. The provisions of the Bill relating to the establishment of corporate credit unions and the changes to the area of the common bond seek to address those kinds of practical issues for credit union members and the movement. Changes in this area will allow credit unions to share risk and continue to be prudent and responsible in their lending policies.

In some ways, credit unions have been preparing for this day for many years. It has been the direction of travel in amalgamations and greater collaboration where possible, albeit within a restrictive and restricted framework and regulatory structure. There is now approximately half the number of credit unions that there were pre crash but we should not read too much into that because the reality is that they have more assets now and, although there is a smaller number, there is less fragmentation and they are larger. Their membership is growing all the time, and that is a good thing.

In March 2018, changes were made to the ways in which credit unions could invest. Since then, they have had the ability to invest €900 million in total to approved housing bodies but it seems only a handful of such investments have taken place. More can be done in this regard. I hope the Bill, when passed, will give the credit union movement increased confidence to take on that kind of risk and invest in addressing Ireland's most fundamental social and, arguably, economic challenge. When credit unions are enabled to make these kinds of investments to develop public housing through approved housing bodies, they are investing in the future of their members. I encourage them to increase their activity in that regard. I hope the legislation gives credit unions increased confidence to do just that. They should invest in these kinds of approaches and interventions that, although expensive, give a long-term return and help to create a social and public good.

I turn to the issue of interest rates. There is currently a cap of 1% on the interest rate that can be charged. The legislation foresees the cap being raised to 2%. It seems from reading material provided by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service that there has been a lively

debate within the credit union movement on the question of the interest rate cap. The interest rate that applies to credit unions in Britain, for example, is a maximum of 3%, while it is 1% in Northern Ireland. I believe this issue relating to the interest rate and, indeed, the efficacy of the legislation more generally, should be kept under review. The Minister of State should consider undertaking a review of the operation of the Act, especially specific provisions such as the new interest rate cap of 2% in perhaps three or five years. She will know that it is normal and regular for legislation to include a provision to undertake frequent reviews of its efficacy. I propose that such an amendment be introduced on Committee Stage. I am happy to work with her on developing that fairly straightforward amendment.

Earlier, I referred to changes to the operation of the board to allow, as I described it, managers to manage. That is a positive in a fast-changing environment. It is also positive that the issue relating to the frequency of meetings of boards has been addressed and that there will be a requirement to have six board meetings a year. That is not too onerous and does not place too large an obligation on voluntary credit union board members. We know that in voluntary organisations throughout the country, it is difficult now to get as many people as we would like involved because of the time obligations and the commitment involved. Onerous responsibilities are placed on directors of credit unions. We should allow highly-qualified and highly-regulated credit union managers to manage. That board should not necessarily be involved in the minutiae of the day-to-day management of credit unions, though they do have important fiduciary and corporate responsibilities. That remains, of course, but we need to get the balance right.

In conclusion, we support the legislation. We will work with the Minister of State on the necessary amendments to make it more robust and responsive. We would appreciate the opportunity to see her commitment to the undertaking of frequent reviews of the operation of the Act and certain provisions, especially the question of the loan cap. What we need to focus on all the time is the growth of the credit union movement, its efficacy and its utility for people across the country who may be in need of banking services. It all revolves around the idea of stakeholder banking, not shareholder banking. It is about making sure that people have a stake in their credit union and a stake in society so that their financial institution of choice - in this case the credit union - is responsive to their needs and can develop and grow in what is a very complex economy at present. Fundamentally, this is a important legislation. It is landmark legislation and we need to get it right. I look forward to working with the Minister of State on developing it further through Committee and Report Stages.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I congratulate my constituency colleague on her elevation and welcome her to the House in this forum. I also welcome and support this Bill. Local credit unions are at the heart of our communities. They play a critical role in supporting the local economy and they are more important now more than ever. The Minister of State will be aware that in our own area in the constituency of Dún Laoghaire, Core Credit Union, and its branches in Monkstown and Blackrock, do superb work. They are very much engaged with the local community.

I support Government policy to expand credit union services and products, and to provide greater accessibility. The legislation will enable greater collaboration through the ability to establish corporate credit unions. It will enable wider availability of products across the movement through changes to the common bond. It will give credit union boards a greater focus on strategic issues through practical governance changes. A strong, resilient and collaborative credit union movement can take advantage of the opportunity afforded by banks withdrawing from Ireland and from branch closures. This legislation will help the credit union movement to

grow as a key provider of community banking in the country. As we all know, it is an issue that has been debated for many years in this House. My party, Fianna Fáil, has been campaigning for such changes over the past number of years. To help credit unions seize this opportunity, it must be a priority to have this Bill passed by the Houses of Oireachtas as soon as possible so that the changes can take effect.

The Bill, which was passed by the Seanad in December, represents the culmination of two years of work led by the previous Minister of State with responsibility for financial services, credit unions and insurance, Deputy Fleming. During his tenure, he held more than 50 stakeholder engagements and met with more than 60 credit unions either individually or in groups, and many more at events. In total, in excess of 100 proposals, including all proposals submitted by sector representatives, for legislative and regulatory change were carefully considered. During a consultative round table in March of last year, the provisions of the Bill were supported by representative bodies at the meeting. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, and his staff deserve great credit for their work on preparing the Bill and I am sure we all express our appreciation for their efforts.

One aspect of the Bill relates to improving member services. Currently, credit union services can be somewhat of a lottery. If a member's local credit union does not provide a current account or mortgage lending, he or she cannot join a credit union that does, nor can the credit union introduce the member to another credit union, though it can introduce a member to a bank or non-bank. While the common bond may appear to protect a credit union from competition from other credit unions, it does nothing to prevent competition from banks or non-banks. The purpose of the amendments relating to this objective is to increase the flexibility of the common bond and allow for practical improvements to help credit unions increase competitiveness and deliver a greater range of services to more members. These amendments are seen as a step towards ensuring accessibility to services for all members regardless of their common bonds and they are welcome. They will help people access the day-to-day services they need. I also welcome the other provisions of this Bill and I look forward to the legislation being implemented as soon as possible.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the opportunity to contribute on the Bill and I wish the Minister of State in her new role. There are many positive aspects to the Bill but, as she said, I would like to see a vision for where we would like to see the credit union movement go for the next decade or so. Undoubtedly, credit unions are an integral part of every one of our communities. We all know the important role that they play in serving the community. My own credit union in Mullingar was the main sponsor for the Fleadh Cheoil last year. There was no monetary gain for the credit union but it saw the benefit of having the Fleadh Cheoil in Mullingar, it ponied up and was the main sponsor, when many of the main hospitality businesses did not provide the same level of funding when they were the ones that reaped the greatest reward.

I will focus on Mullingar Credit Union and its five sub-branches in Kinnegad, Rochfortbridge, Casltépollard, Longford and Lanesborough. Deputy Flaherty might focus more on that area. In that area to which I referred, the credit unions have 60,000 members. Of those, 35,000 or so are active members. It is fair to say that from a personal lending perspective, the credit unions probably have the market saturated. Some 40% of personal lending goes through the credit union. There is little capacity to increase on that. However, there is capacity to increase in the area of mortgage provision. Under the current regulations, the local credit unions can only provide, on average, 90 mortgages for a membership of 60,000 and an active membership of 35,000. That simply is not good enough. That is a failing. It is something that we should

seek to increase because that is an area where credit unions could do more. Another area is business lending. With Ulster Bank pulling out of the market, credit unions can only offer an overdraft of €5,000 and they can only lend up to €25,000 without a five-year business plan. Plasterers, electricians or carpenters cannot borrow €25,000 to buy a van without providing a five-year business plan. That makes no sense in today's terms, because they can go down the road and get finance online. That is another area where there is capacity for the credit unions to do more.

Credit unions are totally out of sync with banks in respect of capital requirements. There is a 10% capital requirement. Our local credit union invested €30 million with the Central Bank last year and it had to put €3 million aside because of that. One would imagine that the capital in the Central Bank is very secure and there would not be a need to put another €3 million aside. It is in no way risk-weighted. The risk-weighted capital requirements were promised in 2012 by the Central Bank and have yet to be provided. That needs to happen fast.

Finally, the six credit unions to which I referred have €360 million invested. Of that €360 million, €350 million is invested offshore, or if not offshore in other jurisdictions. That does not make any sense at a time when the credit unions should be investing in the provision of social housing and the green transition. There is, however, not enough incentive to do that and we need to address that also.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There will be a significant amount of agreement on the credit union movement, the absolutely necessary services it provides and the huge link it is in the community infrastructure. Everything needs to be done to ensure its future growth. The programme for Government states that the Government will "Enable the Credit Union movement to grow as a key provider of community banking in the country". That is what we need to ensure. The Irish League of Credit Unions welcomes this legislation, but we have a body of work to do. I think there will be a need for the Minister of State and the Government to look at the proposals that will come on Committee Stage from stakeholders and the Opposition, from the point of view of ensuring we give the credit union movement the facility to offer these added services, whether mortgages or loans to businesses, and any other changes that are required.

We welcome the idea of the corporate credit union and the ability to operate together and to collaborate. To some degree I was worried when governance structures were changed, which in some cases meant we technically lost small, localised credit unions, whether rural credit unions or credit unions that were operating in estates, sometimes in estates where there was a huge level of disadvantage and need. They were at times able to provide short-term funding to people who found themselves in terrible conditions or sets of circumstances. We all know where those circumstances can sometimes lead, for example, where they relate to moneylenders, people under severe pressure or a debt someone's kid or grandkid has run up. While I might not always welcome the repayment of those debts, the fact is that the credit union was always there when nobody else was there.

We are all aware of the huge amount of finance dealt with by the credit union movement. I think of Connect Credit Union and Dundalk Credit Union. The latter has stepped up to the mark in respect of the St. Patrick's Day parade, which at one stage, before Louth County Council put money into it, looked like it might not necessarily have happened. As I said, however, the credit union, as normal, stepped up to the mark.

If Members are being absolutely clear in their declarations of involvement, I will say I am

no longer a member of Connect Credit Union on the basis that it changed its governance situation and looked for ID and such and I may have failed to hand mine in on time. I say that just to ensure that everything is above board.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the Bill, in line with the Irish League of Credit Unions, as an important first step to achieving a policy framework that allows the credit union movement to strengthen and to grow. I repeat its calls that the Bill needs substantive amendment on Committee Stage to realise the policy and core objectives intended. Credit unions have long been a vital part of people's lives in this country. They offer much-needed services to communities all over the country and have long been a central part of community, rural and regional development. Credit unions were set up by the community and for the community and I support any movement that gives ordinary people a real, material say over how their communities and areas develop and grow.

Credit unions fulfil another important function. They are an important alternative to the financial sector that caused the disaster of the crash in 2008. We saw the total failure on offer from the big private banks and their drives for maximum profit for their shareholders at the expense of everyone else. This country saw a decade of austerity because of the financial sector in this country and internationally. We saw our public services cut to ribbons because of it. There is a real need for a strong alternative to the greed and fraud uncovered by the 2008 crash and the tracker mortgage scandal and everything that came with it. I believe that credit unions offer that. They offer a place where people can know that their money is safe and a place that will not bring the country down around their heads like the profit-at-all-costs banks did. Credit unions offer real services run in a reliable and people-focused way.

I support any measure that strengthens and grows the community-run, not-for-profit sector of our banking system. The problem is that the policy and regulatory system in which credit unions exist was never set up to support them. We have seen a massive reduction in the number of credit unions, from 415 in 2010 to 210 in 2022. The majority of that decrease is due to the amalgamation of different branches, but when put in the context of hundreds of bank closures and hundreds of post office closures, it just adds to the massive reduction in services across the country. With banks removing face-to-face services from communities all over the country, credit unions and post offices have never been more important. I have no problem with growing and strengthening credit unions, but smaller branches are an important part of life for thousands of people across the country. Far more needs to be done to ensure that smaller credit unions have the supports to survive and to continue to provide those vital services for their communities. People need those smaller branches and services. "Bigger is better" is not always right, especially in banking. We saw that in 2008.

Recently, I was in touch with an executive of a local credit union in my constituency. He said one of the biggest problems they are having is that they are being totally snowed under by financial regulations coming through the Central Bank and the EU. The problem is not necessarily that those regulations themselves are restrictive; it is that it is extremely costly and time-consuming to work out which of the hundreds of laws and regulations apply to credit unions and which do not. That puts a large burden on the resources and services of credit unions. It also requires higher and higher paid roles, requiring more and more expertise, which is quickly becoming prohibitive for smaller credit unions. How is a small local credit union in a rural area or an urban area supposed to find and afford somebody with expertise to shift through those hundreds and hundreds of regulations? One of the most simple but most effective reforms the Government could bring forward would be to instruct the Central Bank to use its significant

resources to publish a list of laws and regulations that apply to the different functions of credit unions. That would take the burden off the small local credit unions which provide essential and vital services to communities in Ireland. I intend to make an amendment on Committee Stage in that regard.

I support credit unions. I should declare as well that I am a member of a credit union that is amalgamating with another public sector credit union, possibly in the near future. I support this Bill as a first step to the reform the credit unions need and should get. The strength of credit unions in Ireland is a massive opportunity to develop a strong not-for-profit banking sector and to get away from the greed and the drive for profit at all costs in the rest of our banking sector.

I will end by stating that I have for a long time supported a public banking system with post offices and credit unions called for by the public banking forum as an alternative to commercial banking.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I have been highlighting the importance of community banking for some time and have called on the Government to expand the remit and authority of our credit unions to provide community banks. Credit unions are an important part of Irish society and many families rely on them to provide loans for family essentials such as cars, education and house repairs. There is a trust between families and credit unions, a trust that has been lacking with banks for a long time. At this point, banks are too far removed from local communities and communities' wants and needs.

6 o'clock

I welcome the Bill's intention to expand the services of credit unions and encourage further community development. The community aspect is what makes credit unions unique and successful and we should ensure we protect this community focus going forward. It is for this reason that I cautiously welcome the Credit Union (Amendment) Bill. There are many positive aspects to the Bill and I recognise the extensive consultation process that took place during its drafting. As was noted by the Irish League of Credit Unions, however, there are aspects of the legislation that require amending.

I fear for the future of credit unions and I fear the vision the Government has for community banking. The key proposals in this Bill include providing for the establishment of corporate credit unions, enabling credit unions to share resources and opportunities, and allowing credit unions to refer lending business to each other and participate in loans to other credit unions. I understand that there are definite advantages to this but I fear that an amalgamation of multiple credit unions may take away from the community aspect of local people working in the local credit union and giving loans and advice to other locals and businesses. There is an importance to this, not just for local jobs but also for ensuring appropriate funding. The point of a credit union is that it is supposed to be specific and distinctive to the community it serves. A community's needs are unique and constantly changing and the amalgamation of credit unions would shift focus from specific community needs. Credit unions are co-operative, not-for-profit organisations whose objective is to pursue the economic and social goals of members and local communities and it should stay that way. We should facilitate credit unions in maintaining their business model. We should not force them to amalgamate and join together. I am a member of Killybegs Credit Union. A county-wide credit union would not have the same effect or benefit. We may as well join a bank as join a county-wide credit union.

To give an example, when I approached a bank in Killybegs recently seeking a loan I was told I could not apply for a loan in the branch but had to ring Dublin to apply. Is that the way we want to go with the credit unions as well? When I rang the bank in Dublin and asked for a loan I was told the bank would ring me back. That was five months ago and I am still waiting for a call back. That is the kind of banking service we have now and it is wrong. If I want a loan, I can walk into the credit union, talk to a neighbour and tell that person what I need the loan for. They will discuss it with me and tell me what the repayments are. A couple of days later, I will have the loan. The credit union meets and decides if someone will get a loan. We will lose that from all of our credit unions, which is wrong.

I agree that it should not be the case that credit unions are only lending €5.5 billion of their €20 billion in assets. For this reason, I welcome the intention in the legislation that credit unions develop plans for lending in the community, for example, by providing small business and retrofit loans and engaging in agri lending. However, this does not have to be done through collaboration. Individual credit unions, when given the necessary support, are well equipped to handle this development. Each credit union should be given equal power in handling its lending in a community.

It also seems that the intention of the Bill is for credit union managers to have more power and their boards to have less. The legislation provides for the option of making the manager a member of the board, reducing the minimum number of board meetings to six per year and reducing the number of administrative issues to be mandatorily approved by the board. I would like to know what the reasoning is behind this move as it will be detrimental. I would also like to know what the ultimate aim is regarding credit unions. Is it the intention to make them into a type of bank? We should avoid this scenario at all costs. Perhaps the Minister of State will explain what the thinking and rationale are behind this and why we are pushing the credit unions to amalgamate and join together across the country.

I understand that with the closure of KBC Bank and Ulster Bank, and the closure of many bank branches throughout the country, particularly in rural areas, there is space for more banks. However, this should not be used to turn credit unions, or An Post for that matter, into banks. An Post and credit unions provide a personal and customer-specific service. Banking on the other hand has almost completely turned into an online service in which a computer determines the customer's banking abilities. We need to discourage this type of impersonal banking and protect what few personal services we have left these days.

Last year, the previous Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, while speaking to this legislation, stated: "While the common bond may appear to protect a credit union from competition from other credit unions, it does nothing to prevent competition from banks or non-banks". Competing with banks should not be the intention of the credit unions, however, and I would question this thinking. The intention of credit unions should be to serve the people, not the markets. The banks clearly only service the markets and they do not care about customers. To give an example, I am still waiting for a call back about my loan and I am sure there are thousands of others in the same position.

Credit unions in my constituency of Donegal are invaluable. My constituents rely on community banking to access loans that mainstream banks would not even dream of considering them for. There is no doubt that they are invaluable institutions. There is room for them to evolve, however, and this Bill is a significant step in doing that. I support those aspects of the Bill, but again I stress my concern about the future of credit unions and what the Government

envisions for them. I hope they are valued for what they are and the services they provide to our communities, particularly those in rural Ireland.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: As this is my first time speaking to the Minister of State in her new role, I congratulate her and wish her the best of luck. I welcome this Bill, which is the first significant legislation for the credit union sector in 12 years. It follows through on a commitment in the programme for Government to prioritise credit unions. I am reasonably happy that the Bill, in its current format, reflects much of the significant dialogue that is taking place between the credit union movement, the Minister of State, her predecessor, Deputy Fleming, and Department officials. There is much to be pleased with in the Bill, which is an important first step for the credit union movement. I and, no doubt, many other Government Deputies will remind the Minister of State this week that there is still some work to be done on it. I am satisfied that we can deliver these necessary improvements and modifications on Committee Stage. I welcome that the Minister of State indicated she would be taking some amendments on Committee Stage. That would be greeted with universal agreement by anybody listening in on this debate.

Like all other speakers, I am deeply aware of and in tune with what the credit union represents throughout the community. We have a vibrant and strong credit union movement in County Longford and it is at the forefront of its local community. We are passionately proud of it and determined to ensure it has a lasting place in the hearts of our community. I know the Irish League of Credit Unions is engaging extensively with the Minister of State's office and officials with a view to delivering possible amendments on Committee Stage. These proposals are in line with the positive support for this sector that was set out in the retail banking review. I know this is one of the first Bills the Minister of State has dealt with. She will be most determined, as all of us will be, to ensure we get it right. We will also seek to ensure we place the credit union movement on the correct footing to be an overwhelming force for good and an all-empowering force for growth and opportunity in all our communities.

From the earliest days of this Government, we have made strong commitments to the credit union movement. The programme for Government delivered for the first time a dedicated Minister of State with responsibility for credit unions, an office the Minister of State before us proudly holds. I know she will do that with distinction, while hopefully delivering for the credit unions in this Bill. I do not want to over-emphasise the outstanding asks from the credit union movement as I am aware that its members believe credit unions are getting a fair and balanced hearing in the discussions with the Department. I stress, however, that any proposals will only improve the proposed legislation and allow the credit unions to deliver on all of their objectives for the betterment of our communities. Everybody in this House, regardless of politics, is agreed that we want to see the credit unions grow as providers of community banking in this country. That is clearly set out in the programme for Government.

We need to move on from the notion that our credit unions are merely an alternative to bank because they are not. Rather, they are a network of credit unions representing a proven model for the delivery of community banking that can, and undoubtedly will, deliver a wide range of services and a truly alternative financial platform. Improving the *status quo* is simply not good enough. This legislation needs to be tweaked to allow the delivery of a transformative change that will allow credit unions to follow through on the commitments they have made and which they know can deliver a better and more sustainable business model for them in all our communities. It is my earnest hope that their voice will be heard and the legislation amended accordingly.

As I said, I welcome the Minister of State's gambit in her opening statement that she is willing to take amendments on Committee Stage. I am sure that will be widely applauded by the many credit unions that are doubtlessly following this debate.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This Bill is the first substantive credit union legislation since 2011 and a first step in delivering the commitments in the programme for Government for credit unions. They have been waiting for that for a long time. That said, the Bill will require substantial amendments if we are to get this legislation for this vitally important sector and make the most of the wonderful national and community asset that our network of credit unions presents us with. The credit union has been held back for over a decade by policies that have regulated the sector. The policies were designed for large banks in the wake of the financial crash and the bankruptcy of the country.

Credit unions have been crying out for reform to allow them to extend the loans, particularly for mortgages, businesses and agri-businesses. That is particularly important in rural areas in Mayo. We badly need competition in these areas. The credit unions can perform that role. I would also say that we need a different approach in these areas. Credit unions have the potential to be a genuine community banking system. They have 3.5 million members across the State and there is real potential in that the credit unions hold over €16 billion in savings and only hold over €5 billion in loans. Unlocking the credit union potential to issue loans and using their community relationships could address the issue with traditional pillar banks and adequately finance small businesses. That local knowledge is invaluable.

While I am here, I commend all of the volunteers in the credit unions that I know across Mayo, with the nearest one to me being Belmullet. Castlebar, Westport, Ballyhaunis, Achill and all of the other credit unions are embedded in the communities. They offer a wonderful service. In many cases, people would not have a car or very basic things that they need if not for the credit unions. It is time to set them free from the stranglehold of regulation that they have had to put up with over the years. They are probably one of the sectors which has been the most prevented from fulfilling its potential. I look forward to the credit unions fulfilling that potential and performing the role that I know they can perform in all these communities. We have to remember the volunteers' time and hours across the country. I acknowledge it and thank them all for the work they have done over the decades for credit unions and members in the community. When the doors were shut on many people across this State, the credit unions had their doors open. What they can do in future is even better than they have done in the past.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): 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 Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss the recruitment crisis facing Carlow and Kilkenny's children's disability network teams.

Dáil Éireann

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the need to ensure speedy payment of providers of accommodation to Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the need for improved bus services in Fingal.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss supports for fixed-income pensioners who are not entitled to social welfare.

Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the challenges faced by the North Dublin Muslim National School.

Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss efforts to reduce energy costs for consumers.

Deputies Dessie Ellis, Paul Donnelly - to discuss the Connolly Hospital Children's Urgent Care Centre moving from an emergency department to an appointment-only care centre.

Deputy Steven Matthews - to discuss the position regarding the rollout of free solar panels to all schools.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss the future accommodation of Blessington Community College.

Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss rising homeless in Dublin.

Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the delivery of affordable housing in Cork.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the crisis in trolley numbers at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the need to tackle littering and fly-tipping, especially in rural areas and on country roads.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss Employability Service West Cork.

The matters raised by Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív, David Stanton and Louise O'Reilly have been selected for discussion

National Ambulance Service: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

commends the tireless work of frontline paramedics and operational staff in dealing with increased demand without proportional resource increases;

notes that:

— 80 per cent of life-threatening incidents should be responded to by an ambulance within 19 minutes, as per the Health Service Executive's (HSE) own standards;

28 February 2023

— average ambulance response times have lengthened by 50 per cent since 2019, by an average of 9 minutes, going from 18 to nearly 27 minutes, and up to 33 minutes on average in the South-East;

— State-wide response times for life-threatening callouts (Clinical Status 1 – ECHO: Patients who are in cardiac or respiratory arrest) within the 19-minute timeframe have decreased from 80 per cent in December 2017, to 76 per cent in December 2019, to 65 per cent in December 2022, and as low as 59 per cent in the West in December 2022; and

— State-wide response times for life-threatening callouts (Clinical Status 1 – DELTA: other life-threatening incidents) within the 19-minute timeframe have decreased from 54 per cent in December 2017, to 49 per cent in December 2019, to 30 per cent in December 2022, and as low as 19 per cent in Dublin in December 2022; and

further notes that:

— the National Ambulance Service (NAS) currently has circa 2,000 paramedics, and their workforce plan lays out a need for more than 1,300 more paramedics by the end of 2024, and a need to double the staffing composition to more than 4,000 by 2026;

— the NAS needs more than 3,000 paramedics in only four years to meet these targets and account for retirements and staff turnover;

— the NAS has warned that if these targets are not met, performance will continue to decline and the NAS will have insufficient resources to respond to the projected demand, and as a result, 19-minute performance would be considerably less than 40 per cent;

— only 209 new staff started with the NAS in 2022, of which 181 were patient and clinical care staff;

— since 2019, the National Ambulance Service College has commenced training for just 472 new recruits to the three-year Paramedic Studies programme, less than 160 a year;

— the NAS has said that “recruitment efforts are being surpassed by service demand”, and Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB) have said “demand for ambulances is continually identified as being far in excess of DFB capacity”; and

— according to paramedics, as many as half or more shifts run into overtime, with 12-hour shifts often lasting 15 hours or more, leading to low morale and widespread burnout and occupation-related mental health difficulties among paramedics, which is damaging the attractiveness of the career and recruitment and retention in the NAS;

furthermore, notes that:

— in 2022, the average off-loads or hospital turnaround time in Dublin hospitals was 39 minutes, with 16 per cent of incidents having a turnaround time in excess of 60 minutes, according to DFB;

— in 2020, the comparable average turnaround time was 29 minutes with 6 per cent of ambulances experiencing off-load delays in excess of 60 minutes; and

— neither the HSE nor the NAS collate or report this data, as confirmed in a reply to parliamentary question 515 answered on 24th January, 2023;

condemns:

— the fact that the Government has not implemented the proposals agreed by Dáil Éireann on foot of a Sinn Féin motion on the NAS on 16th November, 2021, which the Government did not oppose;

— the failure of the Government and Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly TD, to support our frontline paramedics to manage demand for emergency services and improve performance; and

— Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly TD, and his Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael colleagues in Government, especially the Minister for Finance, Michael McGrath TD, and the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, Paschal Donohoe TD, who chose not to provide the necessary fiscal resources in Budget 2023, which in turn is leading to burnout of frontline paramedics and has increased risk for patients due to increased response times; and

calls on the Government to:

— urgently publish a multi-annual capacity and workforce plan to meet the needs of the NAS and DFB to 2026 and 2030;

— urgently review the adequacy of the spatial distribution and coverage of the ambulance fleet, ambulance stations and rapid deployment points to ensure an equitable distribution of services across regions, reduce reliance on overtime and long shifts, and reach response time targets;

— provide more hospital beds to improve ambulance turnaround times and admit patients to hospital in a timely manner;

— rapidly advance specialist paramedic grades and expansions to primary and community services, in particular those relating to improved use of technology in hospital admission avoidance, community paramedicine, chronic disease management, and integrated care programmes for older people, to improve hospital avoidance and reduce the strain on emergency services; and

— expand mental health supports for the NAS and DFB workforce, including access to counselling and psychiatric services where appropriate, and address outstanding recruitment and retention issues which are a barrier to increasing employment.

In proposing this motion, I start by commending the tireless work of ambulance paramedics and those on the front line, many of whom I have spoken to over the last number of weeks in preparation for this Private Members' motion. We had a healthy discussion at the Joint Committee on Health with the National Ambulance Service and Dublin Fire Brigade last week. Some 80% of life-threatening incidents should be responded to by an ambulance within 19 minutes, per the Minister's, HSE's and HIQA's standards. The reality is that the average ambulance response times for life-threatening call-outs have lengthened by 50% since 2009, by an average of nine minutes, going from nearly 18 minutes to 27 minutes, and up to 33 minutes on average in the south east.

State-wide response rates within the 19-minute timeframe for the echo life-threatening call-outs, which, as we know, are for patients who are in cardiac or respiratory arrest, have decreased

from 80% in December 2017 to 76% in December 2019, 65% in December 2022, and as low as 59% in the west of Ireland in December 2022. The State-wide response rates on time for the delta life-threatening calls, which are all remaining life-threatening calls, have dropped from 54% in December 2017 to 49% in December 2019 and 30% in December 2022 and, horrifically, as low as 19% in Dublin in December 2022. Dublin Fire Brigade was clear that the reason for this is a lack of capacity on one hand and, on the other, more lengthy wait and turnaround times at hospitals, with ambulances parked outside hospitals, waiting to disembark patients but being unable to because there are not enough beds.

The National Ambulance Service has about 2,000 staff. I have spoken to the Minister previously on this because we tabled a motion on this last year and recommended that the Minister and Government do certain things, which they simply have not done. As we know, we need to increase massively the capacity in the National Ambulance Service. The workforce plan that the National Ambulance Service has put in place states that it needs to recruit 1,300 more paramedics by the end of 2024 and that we have to double the capacity, which means an additional 4,000 staff by 2026. That is a huge increase that has to be met. The training places are simply not keeping pace at all. The National Ambulance Service stated, “recruitment efforts are being surpassed by service demand”. We are not even standing still, never mind increasing the capacity, which we need to do. This is a critical area which the Minister is falling short on. We know that we need to double capacity over the next five years. It has been clearly set out in the capacity review. I do not see any of those targets realistically being met. When it comes to life-threatening call-outs across the State, average wait times are going up.

I mentioned the wait time for life-threatening calls in the south east. The average time last year was 33 minutes for the entire year, from when somebody makes a call to when an ambulance arrives. This includes those who are in serious cardiac arrest. The Minister will also know that the south east is the only region that does not have 24-7 emergency primary percutaneous coronary intervention, PPCI, yet it has the highest wait times for life-threatening calls for the National Ambulance Service. That is absolutely unacceptable and needs to be dealt with as part of increasing capacity in the service generally. The National Ambulance Service told us that the average off-load or hospital turnaround time in Dublin last year was 39 minutes, with 16% of incidents having a turnaround time in excess of 60 minutes, and that this was a substantial increase on previous years. When one looks at all the metrics and data, we are seeing people waiting longer and that capacity simply is not being put in.

The Minister needs to publish a multi-annual capacity and workforce plan. That needs to be matched with increased training places and a sense that we are actually going to achieve that plan, because the current plan, in my view, will not be achieved. One has to look at spatial and regional distribution and at the west, north west and south east, where wait times are particularly high. We know we need more beds in hospitals. It will certainly help if we can have more beds so that ambulances do not have to be parked outside hospitals for as long as they are. We need to advance rapidly specialist paramedic grades and to expand primary and community services. Finally, we also need to ensure that there are proper supports for those who are in the service, because the ambulance paramedics I speak to are overworked and doing much overtime. As the Minister knows, it is a stressful job, with difficult situations and difficult call-outs which they have to respond to. They deserve our support too. The Minister has to do much more on this issue.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend Deputy Cullinane for tabling this motion. I commend the staff in our National Ambulance Service for the significant, tireless work they do across

the length and breadth of the country. In the north west, this has been an issue for decades. In isolated rural areas the wait times for ambulances have gone through the roof. We see what the averages are but averages can sometimes disguise particularly long individual cases. People have waited an hour or an hour and a half for an ambulance in some instances.

Dynamic deployment is at the core of this. It has been a disaster for people. When we hear of dynamic deployment we think of NATO manoeuvres in the South Pacific but that is not what it means. It means that an ambulance based in Carrick-on-Shannon will be called to south Roscommon to attend a call, from where it will then be called to Galway to attend a call and then on to Mayo to attend another call. Ambulances travel from place to place around the country. It is happening everywhere and local services have been depleted. We see this in areas up and down the country, yet the Government seems to be blind to it and continues with this process that puts pressure on services and has ambulances travelling up and down the country to attend calls far outside of their areas. The service is simply not adequate. There are not enough ambulances, there is no plan in place to provide enough staff for the ambulances that are available and there are not enough ambulance stations. Many of them are very rural and isolated and they cannot get to them in time.

The motion calls for a multi-annual capacity and workforce plan to be put in place immediately. That needs to happen with urgency. This issue has an impact on people. I have been contacted by many people over the years who waited for long periods. I remember a woman who had an accident in Carrick-on-Shannon. A car hit her on the road and she waited for an hour and a half before an ambulance came, yet there is supposed to be an ambulance station in the town. This causes people stress and inconvenience. It destroys their confidence that we will have a health service that can deliver for people.

At Sligo University Hospital and every other hospital in the country queues of ambulances build up outside as patients wait to be admitted because the emergency department is clogged up. The Minister needs to take this seriously and treat it with urgency.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Emergency health services in Dublin are at breaking point. Front-line paramedics and operational staff have kept the ambulance services running with their tireless work but they have not been properly supported by this Government. The National Ambulance Service is not able to do its job to the level we need because it does not have the capacity. People now wait more than 20 minutes for an ambulance in Dublin and the east coast. The average response time is now 22 minutes but I know of cases in my constituency where people waited for an hour. Delays in hospitals also cause ambulances to be delayed outside hospitals in Dublin for anything from 40 minutes to one hour. The Government and the Minister have failed to support our front-line paramedics to keep up with the demand for emergency services.

The situation is now scandalous. All the figures show that our health services are going in the wrong direction. The crisis is clear to see in our hospitals as well. The average wait time in the emergency department at Beaumont Hospital in December was 17 hours. Elderly people aged over 75 years were forced to wait for more than 17.5 hours, on average, more than 2.5 half hours longer than in 2019, with people spending time on trolleys, chairs, in corridors and in corners. The Government must get its act together and implement Sinn Féin's plan to fix our emergency service and better support our paramedics, nurses and doctors. The Minister for Health should urgently publish a multi-annual capacity workforce plan to meet the needs of patients and improve the ability of the National Ambulance Service, the ambulance service in Dublin and our hospitals.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome this motion and the debate on this important issue. This is a very important issue, particularly in rural areas where people tend to live more remotely and further away from hospitals. Like every other Deputy, I am contacted by constituents every now and again who are frustrated and annoyed because they have contacted an ambulance and have waited and waited for it to arrive. This causes great distress. People call ambulances when they are in need.

Sometimes people are not aware of the way in which ambulances are deployed. An ambulance base may be located only down the road but that is not to say the ambulance is there. In my area, the ambulance could be in Galway, Sligo, Mayo or somewhere else well outside the county. This is particularly problematic where the local base only has a single crew. This is one reason the motion's call for an urgent review of the coverage of the ambulance fleet is so important. This review is key, especially in areas where there is just one crew in place. In my home county of Roscommon, for example, the ambulance bases in Loughglinn in the west of the county and Boyle in the north of the country both have single crews. This puts huge pressure on the teams in both bases. The areas of Boyle and Carrick-on-Shannon are under particular pressure and when they are under pressure Boyle and Loughglinn are under increasing pressure. Yet, it appears that, rather than providing additional supports, nothing is happening.

There is a serious staffing crisis in the midlands and that is having a knock-on effect, especially in County Roscommon. This issue has been raised with me many times. For this reason, the call for a workforce plan set out in the motion is also very important.

Response times for life-threatening incidents in the west have worsened. They are now 26 minutes on average and, as my colleague noted, one often hears of people waiting for much longer. I spoke to a paramedic earlier today. His 12-hour shift last night was to finish at 7 p.m. He and his crew finished five hours later, at midnight. This happens all the time right across the board. There is a massive reliance on overtime and shifts running over is practically the norm now. Paramedics can only sustain that for so long and they should not have to. They are facing burnout. This is a serious concern which needs to be dealt with. The motion should be implemented urgently.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I add my voice to thanks and commendation to the tireless workers from the National Ambulance Service and our paramedics. It is very clear that lives are being put at risk because of the Government's failure to resource the National Ambulance Service and support our paramedics. The HSE's own standards provide that 80% of life-threatening incidents should be responded to by an ambulance within 19 minutes. In the midlands, that response time has increased by 53% to 29 minutes since 2019. Every ambulance region is further away from meeting the targets that it was in 2019 and this trend needs to be reversed. The outcomes must improve and that needs a multi-annual capacity and workforce plan to meet the needs of patients and improve the ability of the National Ambulance Service to do the job we are asking it to do.

The ambulance service is under serious strain and pressure and this is exactly what the paramedics have said would happen for years at this point. The service has approximately 2,000 paramedics and its own workforce plan lays out the need for more than 1,300 additional staff by the end of next year. It needs to double the staffing complement to more than 4,000 by 2026. The Minister should do the maths. Only 181 patient and clinical care staff started in 2022 and the college has started to train just 472 new recruits since 2019, which is less than 160 per year for a three-year programme. We need to double the number of paramedics in training and

engage with qualified paramedics who no longer work in the ambulance service to try to bring them back. Paramedics are burning out. They are absolutely exhausted and that is what makes retention critical to meeting these targets. However, retention plans will fail unless there are more paramedics in general to share the burden.

I have read the amendment tabled by the Government which refers to the established number of alternative care pathways. The Minister failed to mention the record overcrowding and growing waiting lists. He mentioned that parts of the country are not yet seeing improvements. Which parts of the country is he willing to sacrifice?

Deputy Réada Cronin: Most of us have a story about how brilliant our ambulance paramedics and personnel are. They are the men and women we hope to never meet but when we need them we want to see them as quickly as possible. I know my local ambulance base in Maynooth very well. I campaigned about it having its hours cut during the austerity Government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party in 2012. Ever since then Maynooth and the surrounding towns of north Kildare have no ambulance operating from the Maynooth base every Thursday from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. If an ambulance is requested in our area during those hours on a Thursday it has to come from further afield, from west Dublin or Tallaght. It has even come from as far away as Cavan. This has drastically increased response times and as the Minister is aware, response times are critical in cases of acute emergencies.

As a result of the ambulance cuts some of us got together to found the Maynooth community first responders in my town a few years ago. The local ambulance personnel in Maynooth were of great support to us, along with the National Ambulance Service, NAS. I pay tribute to our ambulance personnel, both the front-line paramedics and the operational staff in Kildare North for what they do. They are certainly not valued by the Minister for Health and his Government. That is what they say to me. That failure can be seen in the way our ambulance personnel cannot respond in the way they wish to and as HIQA recommends that they should. The target is that 80% of life-threatening emergencies should be responded to in 19 minutes. We are simply not meeting that target. As already outlined by our health spokesman, an Teachta Cullinane, the Government neglect of this essential service has seen that percentage fall through the floor. The NAS says it needs to double its staffing complement by 2026. It also needs to increase paramedic personnel by more than 1,300 paramedics in that same period. We know, because we listen. In the last budget, the Minister did not listen to NAS. It told the Minister it wanted a multi-year capacity and workforce plan. This is what we are calling on the Minister to provide in this motion. It needs this in order to plan for the future, to meet the emergency health needs of citizens throughout the State. The Minister has to start looking after the people who matter.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I commend the professional and compassionate manner of those in the ambulance service in particular in Dublin where I had a number of interactions with them over the past few years in regard to family members. They are absolutely brilliant. During Covid-19, the care, attention and compassion they showed in how they dealt with people is a testimony to the gift they have. What they want to do is save lives. However, there is frustration. There is stress and they are stressed themselves. They can see the solutions but they are not getting the answers. This Government and the last Government have failed them because the solution has been outlined quite clearly. There is a need to address the fact that ambulances are stuck at hospital accident and emergency departments where in many cases the turnaround is slow. Also, there are not enough vehicles and not enough recruitment. They cannot get to problems that arise. When an old woman falls on the street and cannot get up, and neighbours think she is having a heart attack or a stroke they are told to leave her, not to move her, then

40 or 50 minutes later an ambulance comes. It would have been easier for me or some of the residents to put that woman on my back and walk to the hospital. I would have been there more quickly, but we are told to leave her. That is an old woman on the cold road in the middle of winter. The fire station is 300 yards away but has no ambulances because they are stuck in the hospital or because there are not enough of them nor enough crew. We have the figures about how bad it is becoming. We cannot continue in that vein because lives are being lost. Lives are being lost because we do not have enough ambulances or crews. Something has to change. The change has to be proper investment and a proper recruitment drive.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“notes:

— the vital role played by the National Ambulance Service (NAS) in Ireland’s public health service;

— the vital role played by the NAS throughout Ireland’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic;

— that ambulance services have been experiencing a significant increase in demand in recent years with a record 389,764 emergency ambulance calls received from the public in 2022, a 6 per cent increase on the number received in 2021;

— that the Government invested a record amount of over €200 million in the NAS as part of Budget 2022, and this represented an overall increase in NAS annual funding of approximately €30 million since 2019, with a further record investment for the NAS being allocated as part of the 2023 Health Service Executive (HSE) National Service Plan;

— that NAS staffing levels have increased from 1,933 whole-time equivalent (WTE) in 2019 to 2,125 in 2023, a 10 per cent overall increase in WTE, with further expansion of this workforce expected in 2023;

— the significant progress made under the previous NAS strategy ‘Vision2020’, to commence the transformation of the NAS from a conventional emergency medical service to an agile and responsive mobile medical service, and to enable patients to be treated at the lowest appropriate level of acuity;

— the significant modernisation and development of the NAS operational fleet of vehicles, including critical care ambulances, emergency ambulances, intermediate care vehicles, rapid response vehicles and a range of specialised support vehicles;

— the establishment of a number of alternative care pathways, designed to treat patients at the most appropriate level of clinical need, in the right care setting, while avoiding the unnecessary use of emergency resources where there is no medical requirement;

— the development of the NAS clinical hub ‘hear and treat’ service at the National Emergency Operations Centre, the pathfinder ‘see and treat’ model of care, and the establishment of the NAS Intermediate Care Service, which undertakes low

acuity inter-hospital transfers to help free up frontline emergency capacity;

— the expansion of the successful Medical Assessment Unit (MAU) pathway pilot project, first trialled in North Cork and Mallow General Hospital in 2022, to the MAUs in Ennis, Nenagh and Roscommon;

— that the MAU pathway results in patients receiving medical treatment in a hospital closer to their home, reduces patient presentations to emergency departments and releases ambulances more quickly to respond to other emergency calls;

— that the NAS has developed a Human Resources People Plan 2022 – 2025, to further support staff retention, and the overarching purpose of this plan is to enhance employee experience, optimise the NAS working environment and meet expectations of health policy in Ireland;

— the Department of Health and the HSE are working to finalise a new NAS strategic plan to 2031, and this plan will facilitate a strategic organisational redesign and continued focus on key priorities including alternative care pathways, specialist paramedic roles and progress towards meeting capacity requirements and performance targets; and

commends the NAS for recent improvements in response times, noting:

— the key performance indicator is for 80 per cent of all ECHO (life-threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest) emergency responses and 50 per cent of all DELTA (other life-threatening incidents) to be responded to within 18 minutes and 59 seconds; and

— the latest figures for January 2023 from NAS show that 77 per cent ECHO and 48 per cent DELTA were responded to within the target time; and acknowledges that certain parts of the country are not yet seeing the improvements in response times that are required, and commits to on-going support for the HSE and NAS in investment and reform, to ensure targets are met both nationally and regionally.”

I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the delivery of emergency care by the NAS. Deputies will be aware that in parts of Dublin, ambulance services are provided by Dublin Fire Brigade and my comments this evening apply to both groups of healthcare professionals, both Dublin Fire Brigade and the NAS. I meet with ambulance staff throughout the country. I am always impressed by their professionalism, their passion and dedication to providing the best possible care to their patients and by their fierce pride in the NAS. The women and men of our NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade were some of the heroes of Ireland’s Covid-19 response. They were regularly first on the scene with teams for testing, patient isolation, treatment, transport, vaccines and much more. In recognition of this and in response to it the Government recently sanctioned an additional rapid response force for the NAS of 200 healthcare professionals.

Our healthcare professionals in the ambulance service also deserve great credit for the improvements being seen throughout the country in regard to response times and new services. The Sinn Féin motion would have you believe that our NAS professionals are failing in their jobs, that they are failing to improve services for patients, to get to patients quicker, when nothing could be further from the truth. Our ambulance teams are responding quicker. They are ar-

living with highly trained emergency medical technicians, paramedics and advanced paramedics. They are providing new services including access to nurses, doctors and health and social care professionals. Last year the average response time was 25 minutes. In January this year they had that down to 22 minutes. Last January, out of 30,000 calls, 35 people waited more than 2 hours. That is 35 people too many, but it has fallen from last January to this January from 35 people to 30 people. Last January 114 people waited more than 1 hour. Again, that is too many. However, this year the ambulance services brought that down from 114 people to 81 people. They are absolutely committed to bringing those numbers further and further down.

The target for echo calls, that is cardiac and respiratory emergency responses, is that 80% of those calls be responded to within 19 minutes. Last year they were at 71%. This January they are up to 77%. That is very close to their 80% target. The delta call target, which is the other emergency calls, is that 50% be responded to within 19 minutes. Last year they were at 43%. This January they were up at 48%. As people working in the ambulance service will confirm, January is often the most difficult month of the year.

Sinn Féin acknowledges none of this in its motion. It says nothing of the improvements that our healthcare professionals are making to response times. It says nothing of the upskilling and advanced training of ambulance crews and nothing of the new services being rolled out. It gives no credit to our ambulance workers for the invaluable progress those healthcare professionals are making.

The Government has a different view. The Government acknowledges and supports the progress being made. We are investing in our National Ambulance Service at record levels and we salute those working in our ambulance service for using the funding with which they have been provided to improve response times, to expand the workforce, to modernise the fleet, to upgrade the bases and to provide new services for patients.

There is more progress to be made. Some parts of the country are not seeing the national response times that are needed. Many bases throughout the country need to be upgraded. We need to expand further the workforce. Deputy Kerrane quite rightly pointed to a workforce recruitment challenge in the midlands. I have discussed this in recent days with the director of the NAS and the service is aware of those recruitment challenges. It is aware that there is regional disparity. It is focused on bringing standards up across the country. In light of these various challenges, some time ago I asked the director of the NAS to develop a new strategy. The HSE board reviewed the draft plan in the past two weeks and it is now with my Department. The plan provides a path for ongoing investment, growth and modernisation with patients always front and centre.

Years ago, as we all know, the ambulance service was concerned mainly with getting patients to hospital. We now have a service that is clinically led, deploying highly trained crews onsite. The new plan seeks to continue this journey and evolve from a emergency response service to a mobile medical response service. The ambulance service is now treating more patients over the phone, at the scene and in their homes. These are patients they would have had to bring into the emergency department in previous years.

Last year, the Government invested €200 million in the National Ambulance Service, an increase in funding of around €30 million since 2019, with additional funding being allocated on top of that this year. Staffing has increased by nearly a fifth since 2016. Is more needed? Yes it is. Do we need to train more paramedics, advanced paramedics and emergency medical

technicians, EMTs? Yes we do. Do we need to address some of the regional recruitment challenges? Absolutely we do.

Additional clinical capacity in the national emergency operation centre, NEOC, in Tallaght has introduced new care pathways which are very good to see. These “hear and treat” and “see and treat” pathways allow the ambulance service to assess and treat many patients at the lowest appropriate level of care. Additional investment in the NEOC clinical hub means that a growing number of callers who are clinically triaged do not require transfer to hospital. Since October 2020, nearly 50,000 patients have been treated through this new pathway, 19,000 of whom did not need to go to an emergency department.

The pathfinder model has been rolled out in Tallaght, Limerick and Waterford. Additional sites are currently being identified for this year. The service aims to ensure individuals aged over 65 can avoid a visit to a busy emergency department, where clinically appropriate. The National Ambulance Service is assessing over the phone whether it is appropriate to send out a team that might include an occupational therapist or physiotherapist. It is engaging with the patient in his or her home and is able to tell a patient it does not need to bring him or her in, but instead needs to provide supports in the home. People are being made stable and treated at home, and are linked into the new specialist teams in the community.

Another recent initiative developed by the ambulance service, in collaboration with hospital groups, has been the medical assessment unit pathway. This was trialled in Mallow General Hospital in Cork last year. It has been rolled out in Ennis, Roscommon and Nenagh and we are considering more sites to roll it out in later this year.

Substantial funding has been allocated to increase the number of student paramedics training at the National Ambulance Service College. The recruitment programme last year was successful, with an intake of 135 students on the BSc programme in paramedic studies.

Colleagues will be aware that we are in the middle of a fundamental shift in how healthcare is delivered in Ireland. Over the past three years, we have built a new enhanced community care service comprising 96 primary care teams, 94 which are now in place. There are 60 specialist teams supporting older people and those with chronic diseases. There is a new modern network of primary care centres with enhanced supports for GPs, including direct access to diagnostics. I, and, critically, the National Ambulance Service believe they are well positioned to play a major role in this fundamental shift in how we deliver care. Its proposed plan, which we are reviewing at the moment, has a vision for the ambulance service playing an ever greater role in treating patients in the community and in their homes, in particular focusing on the elderly population where it will be able to add more and more care and treat people at home and in the community.

The Government is committed to supporting the National Ambulance Service as it grows and innovates. I want to acknowledge again that there is work to do. It is by no means all perfect. We and those working in our service are acutely aware that people are still waiting too long for an ambulance and that there are recruitment issues in some parts of the country. Some of the ambulance bases are, quite frankly, not fit for purpose and we investing in rebuilding them. Progress is being made at pace. Response times are getting better. The workforce is expanding.

Deputy David Cullinane: That is not true.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: New services are being delivered. I want to finish by again acknowledging that all of this is happening through the tireless efforts, dedication and professionalism of the men and women working in our ambulance services.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The simple fact of the matter is that, as Minister has acknowledged, the ambulance service is under huge pressure. Nobody outside of the Chamber would ever criticise any of the workers. In fact, we have all been exceptionally supportive of them and that is why they have engaged with us on this matter.

When a person fell ill recently in this building, I called the ambulance service at 11 a.m. At 4 p.m. I received a call from the ambulance service and from Dublin Fire Brigade to apologise and I was asked whether we still needed an ambulance. I had a conversation with the service and was told it was stacked up by the dozen. That was in Dublin, which is not a rural area. There is a fire station five minutes' walk from here. That was the call I received at 4 p.m.

This is one of many first-hand experiences we have with the ambulance service. My mother was left waiting for hours for an ambulance. She lives in East Wall and the Mater Hospital is only up the road. These are the experiences we are talking about. There are dozens of other experiences from people in the Chamber and throughout the State.

We have had extensive conversations with Dublin Fire Brigade, DFB, regarding the recruitment and retention of firefighters and paramedics. Any firefighter who is a member of the ambulance service will tell us quite clearly not only that there are not enough staff, but also that there are not enough ambulances.

Today I raised the change in the children's urgent care centre from a walk-in service to an appointment-only service. One of the biggest issues parents in Dublin West are talking about is the fact that this decision will put huge pressure on the ambulance service. People cannot get appointments for GPs and will now have to go online to make an appointment for an urgent care service in the children's department in Connolly Hospital. We are heaping more pressure on people and parents, in particular. As someone who has used the children's hospital on many occasions, I know that when a child is sick a parent will not go online and self-triage, which is what the system involves. A parent will call an ambulance and go straight to Temple Street.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Sinn Féin commends the tireless work of the front-line paramedics and operational staff who keep the ambulance service running without proper support from the Government. In a National Ambulance Service plan presentation, the service stated it has an urgent need to recruit additional staff as recruitment efforts are being surpassed by service demand. Dublin Fire Brigade has said that demand for ambulances is continually identified as being far in excess of capacity.

The National Ambulance Service currently has 2,000 paramedics and its workforce plan lays out the need to double the staffing composition to more than 4,000 by 2026. It also states that the ambulance service needs more than 1,300 more paramedics by the end of 2024.

SIPTU, not Sinn Féin, has said the National Ambulance Service is at breaking point. Increasing numbers are attending accident and emergency departments across the country which has severely impacted turnaround times, with crews having to wait hours on end to hand over their patients because of a lack of beds, as was the case in Drogheda when 13 crews were left treating patients in the back of ambulances as no beds were free. In my county of Meath, Navan is being bypassed and people are very concerned that they will wait hours to be admitted to

Drogheda or Connolly hospitals.

Last month, paramedics in Navan said most runs were going to Drogheda with few or none staying in Navan. Having been seen by a consultant, patients were then sent back to Navan. That seems outrageous and must add to the ambulance service's workload. We need extra beds in our hospitals so that patients can be admitted in a timely manner which will, in turn, improve turnaround times. We need to more than double the number of paramedics in training and engage with qualified paramedics who are no longer working for the ambulance service to try to bring them back. Paramedics are burned out and exhausted, which makes retention critical to meeting these targets. Retention plans will fail unless there are more paramedics to share the burden.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Too many aspects of our health service are failing. In my city, the emergency department in University Hospital Limerick, UHL, is under significant pressure, as are mental health services, particularly youth mental health services. According to the *Irish Examiner* today, 700 patients in Limerick, Nenagh and Ennis had operations cancelled in the past six weeks alone. Other challenges facing our hospitals in terms of capacity and staff retention are also facing our ambulance service. Everywhere we look there are challenges and at every turn, the Minister has fallen far short in addressing those. Like far too many of our health professionals, our ambulance staff continue to do tremendous work with limited resources and with limited support from the Government.

The paramedics and the operational staff deserve tremendous credit for their performance and the reality is there is just not enough of them. Regardless of what figure you look at, it seems that the trends are going in the wrong direction. Response times have increased by 50%, with the national average response time to call-outs now standing at 27 minutes. The ambulance service has advised that it urgently needs to recruit staff as demand for its services is increasing. The ambulance service employs 2,000 people and its workforce plan advises that this needs to be doubled by 2026. Scotland, which has a similar population to Ireland, has 5,000 people employed in its service. Our ambulance service has been run into the ground over the last ten years and this is showing as average response times and patients' experiences have worsened. The unavoidable reality is that emergency call-outs are taking longer because the ambulance service is understaffed.

I have met the NAS and unions representing their members with our health spokesperson, Deputy Cullinane. They explained to us that paramedics are burnt out and totally exhausted. The ambulance service spent €18.8 million on overtime in 2021, with two thirds of paramedics working significant overtime every month. There is an urgent need to address training places for paramedics and invest in ambulance services to recruit and retain paramedics. Without an uptick in recruitment, we simply will not meet the 2026 target of doubling the current NAS staffing levels. The problems in our hospitals are contributing to the issues in our ambulance service. The offload times in hospitals are being prolonged and this is contributing to the capacity and staffing issues in our hospital workforce. The number of people being treated on trolleys in my local hospital, UHL, stands at 1,561 for the month of February, which is a truly shocking figure. In February, an average of 82 people on trolleys every single day was recorded. The accident and emergency department at UHL cannot cope with the influx of patients, with an average of 240 people presenting daily. The causes of the crisis in our health service are multi-faceted and this Government shows no sign of being able to deliver. The staffing response times in our ambulance service are putting patients at risk. Our trolley crisis is putting patients at risk.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Our health service is in crisis, our hospitals are under pressure and our staff who are working in the ambulance service are under severe pressure. We commend the work they do but they need support. We need the capacity in the plan for the Government. I thank the *Dundalk Democrat* for dealing with this issue:

As many as 163 ambulances dispatched to non-cardiac life-threatening emergencies in Louth in 2022, took longer than one hour to get to a patient, shocking new figures have revealed. The figures are almost four times the number of calls which took longer than an hour to respond to in 2021. National Ambulance Service guidelines state that an ambulance should aim to arrive at the scene of an emergency non-cardiac incident within 19 minutes. However, 163 patients were forced to wait longer than an hour for an ambulance to arrive last year, according to information released to the *Dundalk Democrat* under the Freedom of Information Act. The longest wait time for a non-cardiac life threatening incident in Louth in 2022 was four hours and 50 minutes, with 'Volume of Work' given as the reason for the lengthy delay. Life threatening calls are split into two categories: Delta/Red (non-cardiac or respiratory arrest life threatening calls) and Echo/purple (life threatening calls relating to cardiac or respiratory arrest). In total, 111 Delta ambulance calls were logged as taking over one hour to arrive at their destination due to the 'Volume of Work'; 37 were delayed due to 'Distance Involved'; 'Other' was logged as the reason for delay in eight calls; while four cases which took over an hour were logged as 'Slow Crew Mobilisation'; with two further delays logged as 'Difficulty Finding Location'; and the remaining case logged as 'Slow rate of Response By Crew.'

I will detail the overall figures, as cited in the *Dundalk Democrat*:

62 people experienced a response time in excess of 60 minutes and less than 75 minutes. 40 experienced a response time in excess of 75 minutes and less than 90 minutes. 17 experienced a response time in excess of 90 minutes and less than 105 minutes. 13 experienced a response time in excess of 105 minutes and less than two hours. 31 experienced a response time in excess of two hours.

I will leave it at that. The Minister has gone into some explanation of the improvements that have been made. There would want to be a hell of a lot of improvements to ensure next year's figures are not the same or worse.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Deputy Cullinane and Sinn Féin for bringing this motion and this issue for discussion before the Dáil again in their Private Members' time.

Before I get into the motion itself, I would like to pick up on what the Minister said about the many things that are being delivered, including a national "modern network of primary care centres". When will we get a primary care centre in Swords in Fingal? It is the largest town in Ireland without one. It serves a growing population of more than 60,000. We are no closer to having a primary care centre than we were when a former Fine Gael Minister for Health put up posters all over the constituency saying he was going to deliver one. We are the largest town in Ireland without one, to add to us being the largest town in Ireland without a rail link. We need it. There are children's disability network teams, CDNTs, that need to be housed in modern facilities. Our primary care centre is Beaumont Hospital, and that is not appropriate. It puts undue pressure on an already stressed accident and emergency unit and hospital in Beaumont.

I welcome the equity the Minister showed at the beginning of his contribution when he said

his comments this evening apply to both NAS workers and DFB workers. It is important to acknowledge, at least in a Dublin context, that we have both services and that they have quality workers and workforces. However, both are under massive pressure. Both require the investment and the resources this motion speaks to, although the NAS is the focus of this motion. While the Minister's response to the motion was robust, it still did not speak to the main charge of the motion, which is that we do not have a workforce plan for the NAS that will deliver the 1,300 additional paramedics who are needed by the end of 2024. They will just not be delivered. We need to double the staffing composition to more than 4,000 by 2026, which is a very short period of time. The NAS needs more than 3,000 paramedics in only four years. That is just not going to happen if we maintain the current recruitment levels associated with current recruitment drives.

We have seen reports on this issue and it has been discussed before the health committee. Every local newspaper all over the country and all the national media have highlighted on many occasions the wait times that are being experienced. The trolley crisis still has not ended because there are between 550 and 600 people on trolleys each day. At the peak of the crisis, in early January, one ambulance crew spent its entire shift at the accident and emergency unit of a Dublin hospital. That is something that nobody could stand over. These are the realities faced by this workforce, which is under intense pressure and is under-resourced. The investments and resources that are coming its way are not meeting the demands of an ever-growing population.

Today, SIPTU has unequivocally called for support for this motion, as well as the motion that will be before the Dáil tomorrow. While we can all articulate political support in this Chamber, SIPTU has said that the appropriate first step would be the implementation of the independent review of NAS roles and responsibilities, which dates back to 2018. Its members and HSE management have called for the implementation of the review in order to assist with alleviating the crisis in ambulance services. These are the practical things that the unions are calling for in this area.

The Minister mentioned the echo and delta calls in his response to the motion, but they are still not meeting the targets. We have the figures that have been reported and the Minister has come back with figures that are slightly higher. However, they are still not meeting the target and we are still not confident that is the trend. We hope it is, and we hope it meets and exceeds the target. However, given what we are seeing in terms of the throughput of people going into training and coming into the workforce in this area, we are not confident that meeting and exceeding the target will be a trend. It gives us in opposition no joy whatsoever to say that.

In relation to the Dublin Fire Brigade, we really need to get a handle on this. Most people in politics speak in support of the DFB. The support at local authority level from local authority members is incredible, and that is where the majority of the funding for the DFB service comes from.

7 o'clock

Nevertheless, a recent report by Dublin City Council stated no additional funding had been secured from the HSE towards the cost of the Dublin Fire Brigade EMS in 2022 or 2023. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has made €8 million available towards the cost of the service in 2022, in addition to €1.9 million, or just over 50% of the unfunded cost of the service, towards payroll costs, and there is no commitment to maintaining this funding in 2023. There is agreement between the two agencies and the two Departments

to establish an HSE-DCC joint ambulance service delivery task and finish group, to be chaired by the chief executive of DCC and the national director of acute operations in the HSE, to see whether the outstanding service delivery and funding issues can be resolved.

They need to be resolved. Successive Ministers for Health and HSE management continue to express public support for the involvement of DFB in the provision of emergency ambulance services but continue to starve that very service of the funding it requires. When we speak of why we need a strong Dublin Fire Brigade as well as a strong National Ambulance Service, it is because we need a strong paramedic service. The end users of these services are people who are sick, and in many circumstances, critically ill. They do not really care who turns up, whether that is a NAS or DFB ambulance. They just want one to turn up quickly and for the paramedics in those vehicles to have been trained and be skilled, as they are. There are not enough them, however. We are not bringing enough of them onstream and they are not being supported.

We cannot allow this continued uncertainty in the provision of the service by Dublin Fire Brigade to continue. We need certainty. The fire brigade is a trusted service the people of Dublin value and hold dear to their hearts. We need proper action to ensure that service will be sustained and that the investment needed in the NAS, as set out in the motion, will be delivered.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I welcome this timely motion from Sinn Féin, which we support strongly. I pay tribute to the staff of the NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade for the essential work they do, which is a matter of life and death. That work is made significantly more difficult, however, due to the severe shortage of staff, vehicles and infrastructure generally.

At last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Health, the scale of the crisis in ambulance services was laid bare. The gap between demand and capacity is widening and this requires an urgent response from the Government because lives will, undoubtedly, be lost. The newly published response time figures should act as a catalyst for change because they simply cannot be defended. Last year, only 72% of life-threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest cases were reached within the agreed time of 19 minutes, which was eight percentage points off target. For other life-threatening illness or injury, only 41% of cases were reached within that key 19-minute period, representing nine percentage points off the target figure. As outlined in the motion, the average ambulance response time has lengthened by 50% since 2019. That is a shocking figure. As for hospital turnaround times, the figures supplied by DFB are just as worrying. The average turnaround time for Dublin hospitals was 39 minutes, up ten minutes from 2020, while 16% of incidents took more than one hour to turn around, again a ten-minute increase on 2020.

This steep dip in performance must be reversed urgently. The situation is especially bad in some parts of the country, including the west, parts of the south east and Dublin city and county. In Dublin, for instance, serious questions hang over the governance structure of ambulance services and, unfortunately, that is borne out by the figures. Last year, Dublin Fire Brigade sought assistance from the NAS more than 63,000 times, only to be told no ambulance was available on 76% of the occasions. That is a truly shocking statistic. No ambulance was available 76% of the times DFB requested one.

Earlier this month, Paul Cullen of *The Irish Times* examined this issue in great detail, and his work has been helpful in this regard. He had to jump through hoops to get his hands on the 2016 Brady-Flaherty report, almost seven years after its completion. It still has not been published. What is the delay for that? Just today, I requested it. It has been known for a long

time that there are serious problems here, and two people with expertise in the area were recruited to carry out a study on that. The study was completed in 2016 and its publication was blocked. Why was that the case? There is no point in doing these things unless we are going to learn from the expertise that has been brought in. It is unforgivable that the report has not been published. I hope it will be made available now, given it was finally released under freedom of information, FOI. It required an appeal to the Information Commissioner for Paul Cullen to get his hands on it. It should be published now.

I tried to get to the bottom of this at last week's committee meeting but none of the representatives of NAS or DFB could say when the report would be made publicly available. All they could say was they understood it was jointly owned by the HSE and Dublin City Council. That, frankly, is not good enough. We need more than piecemeal information. Will the Minister enlighten the House about this? Why has the report not been published and when does he intend it will be? We should not have to chase this. The people of Dublin and their elected representatives deserve to know the full scale of this problem. After all, it is their lives that are being put at risk by suboptimal ambulance provision.

We need to find out where the logjam exists. Is it in the HSE or the local authorities or, more likely, is it in the two parent Departments, namely, the Departments of Health and Housing, Local Government and Heritage, given they are the bodies that hold the purse strings? Those Departments must take ownership of this problem and take responsibility for guaranteeing people that there will be a properly functioning ambulance service. As I said, it is a matter of life and death and we cannot afford not to fund those services properly.

I appreciate that a task and finish group has been established and met for the first time only last week, but we have been told it will be another six months before it finishes its work. In the interim, we need to know what steps the Government is going to take to increase service provision and improve governance. We need answers to that now and we cannot wait any longer. These problems have been highlighted for more than 20 years. The Government has had the report since 2016. We need answers now. The problems have existed for two decades. They are not new; they have just worsened under successive Governments.

It is clear the vision of healthcare outlined in *Sláintecare* should be the guiding principle for reform, but political will is needed to get that up and running at a proper pace. Alongside scaling up the capacity of the ambulance service, alternative models of care, located in the community outside overburdened emergency departments, are an essential part of that reform. While I recognise progress has been made on putting in place alternatives to acute hospitals, it is terribly slow. There are significant problems with the recruitment of staff and with alternative services being available, not least out of hours. A reference was made earlier to Blanchardstown and the urgent care arrangements there, which are getting worse. Now, appointments have to be made. It was supposed to be an alternative to the overcrowded children's hospitals but now there are problems there. This needs to be dealt with on a whole lot of different fronts. Both the NAS and DFB detailed a number of initiatives that they are keen would be fully implemented but there appears to be a lack of joined-up thinking. A case in point is the ridiculous situation surrounding UL paramedic graduates. Last month, I raised this with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I raised it again at last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Health. However, I am still at a loss to understand why this has not been resolved to date. Every year the UL students are sent abroad to complete their one-year internship because the NAS does not have the capacity to take them on. That is a crazy situation. There is a dire shortage of staff and students are in UL doing the course, yet they cannot

get clinical placements in the NAS. That is just nonsense. It does not make any sense whatever.

To make matters worse, once these students have completed their internships, most of the graduates find it difficult, if not impossible, to secure employment with the NAS. I have received a number of emails from UL graduates since January. They are justifiably frustrated with the current application process. I understand work is underway to resolve the internship issue, albeit late in the day, but I see no evidence that the NAS or the Department of Health is dealing with the application issue. We are told that 3,000 additional staff are needed, yet we are freezing out a whole swathe of graduates who would be very well qualified to take up employment. The central issue seems to be with the application process and in particular, phase 1, which is a multi-choice questionnaire. According to a submission to the health committee, in the past seven years 405 Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council, PHECC, registered paramedics completed the multiple-choice questionnaire but only 75 passed. That is a mere 18%. Of those, 56 got onto the employment panel to await a job offer for which the average time was a staggering 300 days. As of last November, only 37 had been offered a post. That is a no-brainer. That needs to be dealt with urgently.

I ask the Minister to please prioritise the whole question of resources, deal with the issue in UL and ensure that there is an adequate supply of ambulances. We cannot afford to let this go on any longer.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. I thank friends and comrades in the NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade for talking to me in the last while and sharing notes with me. I am proud to say that I have got to know a lot of them very well over the last few years, particularly since I was a councillor. DFB was and still is run by the council. It is still underfunded. It always has been. I forget the year, but at one point the city manager, as he was then called – he is now called the CEO, which is a set of words that should not be lost on anybody and indicates that the city is run as a sort of company rather than for the services of the people – was trying to move away from the provision of the ambulance service and the Dublin Fire Brigade service because it was so expensive. A service like that is expensive and should be and must be expensive if it is to be good, of high quality and the staff are to be well trained, well paid and well looked after and if it is to respond to the emergency needs of the citizens, both of the cities and the rural towns and areas in the country.

The NAS is similarly way underfunded and understaffed and workers in that service have had quite a long struggle to get trade union recognition for the National Ambulance Service Representative Association, NASRA. We have been in this Chamber arguing for that trade union recognition for them and got a motion passed that the Government would seek to discuss this with the HSE so that it would recognise NASRA's rights and talk to the workers and recognise their role in all this. In the meantime we had Covid and now we have a crisis in the delivery of the ambulance service. What I find interesting in how the workers view this is that they recognise that while they are underfunded, under strain and understaffed, this is intrinsically linked to the crisis in the health service, etc. because, they say, even if the ambulance service was fully staffed tomorrow, there would still be a failure insofar as there would be a lack of GPs, bed capacity and nurses and there will always be backed up queues for the services when ambulances arrive at emergency departments. If the ambulances were at full capacity, inevitably they would be left waiting outside emergency departments in the current climate and result in stagnant response times. This is compounded by the failure of the Government and the Department to fully resource the service, particularly in rural Ireland where many of the hospitals that closed have left a void and it takes much longer for ambulances to reach the point where they

should be able to deliver a patient safely.

I want to talk for a minute about the work that they do. My brother was an ambulance driver and a paramedic. Unfortunately, he is gone from this world quite a long time but every year they write to the family and ask us to go to the annual mass. I am not into religion but I do go to the mass out of respect for him and the workers. It is quite impressive to see how proud they are of what they do, of the service they deliver, of the job and the employment they have and the comradery between each other and for each other and for the patients that they look after. In that sort of a job that sense of solidarity and comradery is important to have because as they say themselves, the sort of sacrifices they put up with, particularly when the service is under pressure means they consistently put their own welfare to one side; they often work for five, six or more hours after shifts are finished; they repeatedly skip meals and rest times; and they sacrifice family events and their life-work balance and ignore their own mental and physical health needs. This applies not just to the National Ambulance Service but to the paramedics and the men and women of Dublin Fire Brigade as well. They shoulder the burden of the criticisms of the community and when people cannot get an ambulance and they are waiting for ages for one, what they see is the ambulance driver and the paramedic, not the Government or the Minister for Health and those in the Department who are failing to deliver a service for the community. I, therefore, welcome this motion. We fully support it and we would like to request again that the Government act on the motion that was passed without opposition some time ago in this House, the details of which I can send the Minister, particularly where it states that the Government should act on talking to the HSE to push it to discuss the question of trade union recognition with the branch of the psychiatric nurses union, known as NASRA, which has been trying to get the recognition that it deserves for ten years.

Deputy Mick Barry: I want to pick up on the point at which Deputy Smith left off. More than 500 paramedics in the National Ambulance Service have chosen to join the National Ambulance Service Representative Association to represent them. NASRA is a branch of the Psychiatric Nurses Association, the PNA, which is a recognised trade union with a negotiating licence.

The HSE continues to refuse to recognise the PNA and to allow it to negotiate on behalf of its ambulance membership. It refuses to recognise it for purposes of negotiations on behalf of the ambulance membership. This is despite the fact that the PNA contains within its ranks at least 30% of all NAS paramedics. This is far more than other unions recognised by the HSE as representing ambulance personnel. If it does not make the PNA the largest union among ambulance staff, it certainly makes it the second largest among the two big unions. I am surprised and a bit disappointed that the Sinn Féin motion makes no mention of this issue in its text because it is central to the points and issues that are being debated here. Why is the NAS so chronically understaffed? Why are ambulance personnel so chronically overworked? Why is there such a major shortfall in the number of ambulances available to the service compared to the numbers needed by the service and the public? The answer to all these questions is, of course, that successive right-wing Governments have failed to invest in public services at anywhere near the level needed. However, a factor in the equation has undoubtedly been a lack of sufficient pressure for real change, including by what is probably the largest union in the service recognised by the HSE. It would appear that the HSE is choosing to recognise the union that does not put it under too much pressure for change and refusing to recognise the one it fears might do so. Despite a unanimous vote by Dáil Éireann that the PNA be recognised, it is clear at the very least that the HSE is not under any real pressure from the Government on this issue.

Recognition of the PNA is not simply an issue of democratic rights, although it is that; it is also an important democratic issue. It is an issue in the sense that if we want a properly resourced ambulance service, we need to listen to those front-line personnel among those pushing the hardest for it. This union should be recognised now and the Government needs to get off the fence regarding this issue.

I do not have sufficient time available to fully develop other points I want to deal with, but let me refer briefly to a point raised by Deputy Shortall on the UL course and its graduates. The latter could be a tremendous resource for the NAS and bring great skills to the paramedic service. The fact is that obstacles are being placed in the way of these graduates to join the service when it needs 3,000 staff. That is wrong and needs to be changed. The Government should address it and feel under pressure to do so based on this debate.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: New figures from the HSE reveal that the National Ambulance Service is not meeting the response time targets for emergencies throughout the country. While it is outrageous that 62 ambulances dispatched in County Louth to deal with life-threatening emergencies in 2022 took more than an hour to arrive at the scene, I commend the tireless work of front-line paramedics and operational staff for dealing with increased demand and limited resources. These timelines are not a reflection of the work put in by NAS staff but of a service that is under-resourced and under-appreciated.

The longest waiting time for a non-cardiac life-threatening incident in Louth in 2022 was four hours and 50 minutes, with the volume of work given as the reason for the lengthy delay. On the back of such figures, the HSE has confirmed there is a significant gap between demand and capacity.

Recruitment and retention issues related to recognition, pay, resources, working hours and poor working conditions, which I have raised numerous times regarding service providers such as gardai and military staff, now apply to our National Ambulance Service providers. NASRA warns that the service is under significant strain, with pay and conditions so poor that it losing in the region of ten staff per month. Is it any wonder that under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, the paramedic profession is not even recognised as a profession? On top of this, paramedics do not even get recognition from the largest employer of paramedics within the State, the HSE. This lack of recognition limits career progression, negatively affects retention, restricts alternative pathways of care and, in the case of HSE employees, limits access to health and social care professional education opportunities within the HSE. As a result, the retention of employees within the field of paramedicine generally and within the NAS specifically is an area that needs to be addressed. Since 2019, the National Ambulance Service College brought in 472 staff who commenced training under the three-year paramedic studies programme. Of these, 55 dropped out. That amounts to fewer than 160 recruits a year. With the NAS estimating a requirement of more than 3,000 paramedics within the next four years to meet its workforce plan targets, these numbers of recruits are abysmal. Yet, this is a familiar tale.

Concurring, emergency service demand is significantly increasing. For example, the number of emergency calls in 2022 was up 15% on 2021. As the “twindemic” hit in December, 2,000 people a day were looking for an ambulance. At one stage in December, 11 ambulances were parked outside the emergency department of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, and could not leave because there were no beds or trolleys inside for their patients. Some paramedics were left waiting for five hours before their patients had a place in the hospital due to an extreme lack of planning. Ambulance crews treated patients in the ambulances; however, be-

cause they could not offload, none of the ambulances could leave and respond to other 999 calls.

The reality is that if recruitment targets are not met and demand continues to rise, performance will continue to decline and people will die. Patients have unquestionably suffered harm due to ambulance delays. Clinical outcomes are being put in jeopardy as a result of these delays, and this is the real way that this needs to be evaluated. The appropriate measures and steps need to be taken to protect lives.

We need to implement solutions within our entire healthcare system rather than put a plaster over one issue only for another to explode. For example, Cork University Hospital has dramatically improved ambulance turnaround times due to a strategy whereby, if the acute phase of care – initial diagnosis and management, stabilisation and referral to an inpatient specialty – is complete, the patient is moved to a corridor inside the hospital rather than being left in a corridor in a crowded emergency department. This has reduced the ambulance turnaround time from half a day to 20 minutes. However, it has drastically increased the workload of already-overburdened inpatient ward teams and nurses, in particular.

Another potential solution would be to treat stable medical patients who meet the agreed clinical criteria in hospitals closer to their homes, such as model 2 hospitals. This pathway would reduce patient presentations to emergency departments and release ambulances more quickly. I would push for the reopening of Louth County Hospital. There is infrastructure and capacity available immediately that would alleviate the pressures on our other hospitals and ambulance services. The Report of the National Acute Medicine Programme 2010 outlined the need for smaller and larger hospitals to operate as a single local hospital group, resulting in the downgrading of Louth County Hospital and the advised closure of the Navan hospital emergency department. However, 13 years later, it is evident that our ambulance and emergency department services are struggling.

Overall, we need to overhaul the delivery of the pre-hospital emergency care services, having better training for staff in schools and childcare facilities and an expanded role for paramedics, helping to reduce the numbers of patients attending emergency departments in the first instance. However, to succeed we need to consider the career recognition of paramedics, the recruitment and retention issues, and the training issues of paramedics and the community. We need to act now before patients die.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo ó Shinn Féin.

In fairness to the Minister for Health, I have to hand it to him for managing to deliver an upbeat speech on the current situation in the health service. It takes a phenomenal level of optimism, or maybe disconnection, to give an upbeat speech in that manner. In his response, there was an element of Comical Ali defending the Iraqi war effort while bombs were landing behind him all over Baghdad. What is happening throughout the health service is heartbreaking.

This is a record-breaking Government for all the wrong reasons. We have record-breaking numbers of people on trolleys in recent years. Last year, well over 100,000 people were on them. We have had record-breaking waiting times in accident and emergency departments right around the State, with many waiting at least 13 hours to be treated. We know this policy is actually killing people. I use that word advisedly. Often we say lives are lost because of the Government's policies, but lives are not just being lost: decisions are being made that lead to people's deaths. It is estimated that 1,300 people lose their lives annually because of Govern-

ment-related overcrowding in accident and emergency departments. It is heartbreaking to see this happen. A hundred people per month lose their lives in this country because the Government will not reform the system. It is not for the lack of money because today we also learned that the budget in the health service is 21.5% of all government expenditure. Never before has so little been achieved by a Minister for Health with so much taxpayers' money. A particular issue on which I want to focus is obviously the wait times for ambulances for people. On 6,200 ambulance call-outs last year, it took more than an hour for the ambulance to respond to life-threatening emergencies. Only in 72% of life-threatening cardiac emergencies were people reached on time. We are learning that response time is actually lengthening by 50%. There are a large number of reasons for this. I want to focus on something that none of the other political parties are focusing on, however, and that is the relationship between the crisis in the ambulance service and the crisis in accident and emergency departments. If the Government keeps closing accident and emergency departments, it will take longer for an ambulance to get to an available accident and emergency department because it will have to travel further. If we keep closing accident and emergency departments, more and more people will be forced into fewer accident and emergency departments. We have ambulances waiting outside accident and emergency departments trying to deposit their patients.

The average turnaround time in Dublin is now 39 minutes. Just before Christmas, there was a phenomenal crisis outside Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda when 11 ambulances were forced to wait to deposit their patients in the accident and emergency department. The Government and HSE turned the hospital car park into an ambulance car park. The paramedics waited for five hours to deposit their patients in the accident and emergency department. As a result of the ambulances being tied up at the hospital, no ambulances were available on the night in question in the whole of counties Cavan, Monaghan, Meath and Louth. As a result, if someone had a heart attack or stroke, it was tough luck, you had it on the wrong date. That was the situation the Government created.

How do we imagine the Government would respond to a car park full of ambulances outside the hospital in Drogheda? Would it be to have ambulances bypass the Navan accident and emergency department? We would imagine the answer to that would be "No" but that is exactly what happened in the immediate aftermath. We now have the incredible situation whereby patients are being picked up in Meath and ambulances are bypassing Navan accident and emergency department and dropped them off in Drogheda. They are triaged in Drogheda and in many cases the consultant decides to send them back to Navan for treatment. The ambulance then has to make a third journey back to Navan to bring the patient for treatment. If an ambulance is not available, the patient must be brought back by taxi but because the patient is ill, a healthcare professional has to travel in the taxi. After dropping the patient off in Navan, the healthcare professional then has to get a taxi back to Drogheda. What would be an emergency involving two journeys becomes one involving four journeys because of the dysfunction of this Government. This is leading to a crisis. I appeal to the Government to stop ambulances bypassing Navan accident and emergency department.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank all the ambulance personnel who work all over this country, including Cork South-West, for their tireless work. The level of ambulance cover available for west Cork has deteriorated to such an extent that it is now actively endangering the lives and health of residents and causing severe levels of burnout and exhaustion among ambulance and paramedical staff. That view does not come from me but from the staff themselves. When I raised this matter recently with the Taoiseach during Leaders' Questions he said he would have

the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, engage with me to attempt to address the series of concerns that were being raised. Nothing has changed, however, and people are losing their lives. The Minister did not contact me and the Taoiseach did not get back to me.

On paper, there are four ambulances serving west Cork. These are based in Clonakilty, Castletownbere, Bantry and Skibbereen. The reality, however, is that, at best, we have two part-time ambulances because the Clonakilty ambulance spends the majority of its time in Cork city and county, while the Castletownbere ambulance is routinely tied up serving parts of County Kerry. The Bantry ambulance is often held up due to the delayed transfer of patients meaning that it too is unavailable for considerable periods of time. This is creating the terrifying scenario whereby the entire west Cork area is being left without any effective cover. This often forces people into taking understandable but high-risk actions such as putting sick and injured loved ones into a vehicle because they cannot wait the length of time needed for an ambulance to arrive.

In 2013, the people of west Cork were promised a 24-7 rapid response paramedic vehicle and the necessary staff to man it. Fast-forward one decade and here we are with only a daytime rapid response vehicle, which I was informed was out of action for at least 94 days last year. This skeleton service would not be tolerated in any other area of the country and it will not be tolerated in west Cork. The Government and National Ambulance Service need to address this matter urgently before we lose the remaining excellent staff we have to exhaustion and before more lives are placed on the line because people cannot access timely care or transfer to a hospital. This is a very serious issue. It is coming from people I know on the ground, not from me. That is the seriousness of the situation. We are losing staff due to exhaustion, which is unfair.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, am in favour of this motion. This situation has gone from bad to worse. A paramedic told me at a retirement do one night a number of years ago that he left the service because of the disgraceful call-outs and the utter confusion and ridiculousness involved. He was called out one day to leave Clonmel and head for Carrick-on-Suir. When he reached Carrick-on-Suir, he was told to head on to Waterford. When he got to Waterford, he was told to carry on to New Ross and when he reached New Ross, he was told to drive on to Enniscorthy. He was almost within five minutes of Enniscorthy when he was stood down. That is a journey of 100 miles. It is the triage system that is being done over the phone, or whatever kind of triage system is being used to assess patients. He did not know that a man had fallen in the street in Enniscorthy and was waiting two hours for an ambulance. That causes such trauma and anguish.

The Minister and Ministers of State with responsibility for health should be utterly ashamed of themselves. They know better than anyone that this is going on. They just want to have the trick of the loop, however, that once a call has gone in at two minutes past nine, the ambulance is dispatched at four minutes past nine. It is a paper exercise. The ambulance could be 200 miles away. It could be going from Galway to Tipperary or Tipperary to Sligo. That is how ridiculous the practice is and it is burning out ambulances.

I salute the paramedics and their professionalism. They work long hours and then when they have almost returned home after a long shift, they get a call to go elsewhere. They are being blackguarded and bullied and their morale is being destroyed by abuse. The working time directive to give respect to people who are working in jobs is not being implemented. The system has failed utterly and so has the Government.

The Minister came in like Comical Ali - someone said he is comical every day because he answers no questions - and the Ministers of State lined up with him. I do not know what way to describe them. I better say nothing or I might end up at a tribunal. The way they are treating the paramedics is ridiculous and scandalous. Above all, they have contempt for their electorate in east Galway, west Galway, Roscommon and all over the country. It is nothing other than contempt for the people who voted for the Minister of State and Minister. I know they have got in on late counts but they will not look after the people. We need to get rid of this Dublin control. When we had local controls and when Tipperary had its own control, we managed fine and the ambulances did a good job with a timely response. Everybody was reasonably happy. Now, it is a centrally controlled disaster.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I, too, thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. Until around 2011 or 2012, the ambulances were controlled locally but then a centralised service was brought in by the HSE which operated from counties Dublin and Donegal. There were two centres in total. Since then, the whole thing has gone wrong.

Before I go any further, I want to thank all the ambulance drivers in County Kerry and our paramedics. Anything that is wrong with the ambulance service is not their fault. We have a number of ambulances in County Kerry. Let us consider what happened two weeks ago. The ambulance from Kenmare was deployed and sent to Clonakilty. It took a patient to Cork University Hospital and was sent from there to take someone to the hospital in Dungarvan. It then made a second run from Dungarvan to the hospital in Waterford. It was then delegated to go to Tipperary and finished up around Clonmel. After 13 hours' service, it was told to come back home to Kerry. In all that time, the whole district of Kenmare was left without an ambulance if something had happened. That is what is happening.

The busiest urban centres are benefitting because when the ambulance leaves the Cork hospital after dropping the first patient, the paramedics have to press a button to say they are available for work. They can be sent to Midleton, Carrigtwohill, Kinsale or anywhere. The ambulances that leave Kenmare, Killarney or wherever it may be in County Kerry are gone for the whole time they are up in Cork. The Dublin centres are benefiting and it is the places in rural Ireland and places far away in Kerry that are left behind. Those people are struggling. That system must be reversed.

I also want to speak today about our air ambulance. We must ensure it is properly funded. In the past four or five days, the air ambulance has been called to County Kerry for crashes and different things. We appreciate it very much.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on a motion on the ambulance service and, in particular, its call on the Government and NAS to urgently review the adequacy of the spatial distribution and coverage of the ambulance fleet to ensure an equitable distribution of services across regions, to reduce reliance on overtime and long shifts and to reach response time targets.

Before I make any further points, I commend our paramedics who do an excellent job. They are, however, caught in a broken system, one that is unfair and not fit for purpose. I know that many paramedics are demoralised. Among the few that are still there - many of them have left - morale is at an all-time low. We need to ensure there is fairness and that lives are protected through there being a fair and sensible system in which every region and town has its own dedicated ambulance service. That is a very reasonable ask.

I raised this very issue during Leaders' Questions in November when I highlighted that the ambulance station in Tullamore, County Offaly, had been closed a number of times for an entire day shift or night shift. This would have been unheard of previously. On top of this, despite the lack of cover in the midlands, the ambulances that are available are regularly drawn into other areas. The Edenderry crews are regularly in Dublin, Kildare or the north east. The Birr ambulance crew spends most of its time in Tipperary or Limerick. The Portlaoise ambulances are frequently in Wicklow, Kildare or the south east. In addition, the Tullamore ambulances are normally picking up the pieces in Laois, Westmeath, Birr, Edenderry and everywhere else around. This has to change to protect lives and to be fair to our paramedics.

I have also repeatedly called on the HSE and the NAS to place a renewed focus on supporting schemes that ensure greater numbers of people can act as community first responders. That could well be part of the solution here. This is particularly vital in counties such as Laois and Offaly for echo calls, which are life threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest, and delta calls, which are life-threatening illness or injury other than cardiac or respiratory arrest emergency calls.

From my experience of engaging with ambulance staff, I note that something more fundamental has gone wrong within the work culture of the NAS. We need to change this fast.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am happy to support this motion and I commend Sinn Féin on bringing it forward. Like every other part of our health services now, the ambulance service is in crisis. I wonder at this stage if it is deliberate on the part of the Government. Is it preparation for privatisation that we are seeing in such inaction across the board? It is rule 101 in the privatisation book that one runs down services so much that citizens will accept anything as a solution, including that the private operators will surely do it better, except they do not and ultimately what they do it is more expensive as well. Some people have said the problem is simply the Government trying to live within totally unrealistic budgetary constraints. I cannot figure out which is worse at the moment.

It is shocking to see that the workforce plan outlines the service will need 1,300 more paramedics to meet demand by the end of 2024. In Donegal, we need three extra ambulances and crews to meet the need we have. Killybegs ambulance station definitely needs another crew on duty. A call-out to Glencolmcille can barely meet the call-out requirements when there is a crew based in Killybegs, never mind if that crew is covering Donegal town and is based there, as often happens. Extra crews are needed in Inishowen and Letterkenny or Ballybofey.

The queuing of ambulances at Letterkenny University Hospital is continuing but now the ambulance service has employed someone to try to move them on. The hospital is unable to take patients quickly enough. The impact of this is that it delays ambulances at the hospital. Paying the cost of another officer will not solve the problem as far as I can see. The manager of Letterkenny University Hospital told a meeting recently that 70% of the ambulances were moved out within one hour - or some similar time - but the problem is the 30% of ambulances that take hours to get back and then be rostered again.

One good development to emerge over the last few years has been the community paramedic. This person diverts patients from casualty and enables many patients to remain at home by giving a higher level of care in the community. This role needs to be rolled out on a service-wide basis. It would actually save money overall for the health services. A patient who can be treated without going to casualty is the cheapest patient in the health service. One would think

the bean counters in the HSE and Department of Health would at least see that.

The Government response to the motion appears to recognise some of this but that is hard to make out from the gobbledygook. Maybe that is part of the problem. They speak in tongues and no one understands what the intention is.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion on the unacceptable situation in the National Ambulance Service, which is completely stretched across the country. The service is at crisis levels in certain areas where wait times are simply unacceptable.

Last week, Mr. Robert Morton, the director of the NAS, gave evidence at the Joint Committee on Health. When he was asked about response times and geographic locations he said:

... we conducted a demand and capacity analysis. We commissioned it in July 2021 and it reported in May 2022. It highlighted a number of key areas of deficit. To the best of my recollection, the area of greatest deficit was County Sligo and the area east of Enniscrone was the most difficult in which to mount an effective response.

That is a pretty shocking picture for those who live in that part of Sligo. Indeed, many of my constituents have contacted me over a period of time about these totally unacceptable delays in ambulance response times. I am pleased to see, however, that since January of this year, Sligo now has a three-day, two-night crew. It used to be two and two. This is a start but it is my understanding that a four-day, two-night crew is the absolute minimum requirement for Sligo. It is absolutely essential that this minimum is put in place. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for a commitment on this.

We need a community paramedic in Sligo-Leitrim. As Deputy Pringle said, there is one in Donegal. It is essential that this badly needed service is extended to Sligo-Leitrim.

I heard the Minister for Health speak earlier about the pathfinder model, which is a pilot programme. That too should be rolled out in Sligo-Leitrim. I believe it is to be rolled out in Letterkenny towards the end of this year but we especially need it in Sligo-Leitrim because of the existing deficit. Under this programme, an advanced paramedic, an occupational therapist and a physiotherapist can work with patients over the age of 65 on low-acuity calls. I put it to the Minister of State that this would help to alleviate some of the huge pressure at Sligo University Hospital, SUH. Just today, I received an email from a GP practice signed by eight doctors setting out again the stark realities of the severe pressure being placed on patients and staff at SUH. The Minister of State will be aware that towards the end of last year, more than 50 consultants at SUH signed a similar letter.

As I have said about ten times previously in this Chamber, the reality is seen in the trolley numbers in all the large hospitals as against the numbers of beds, or the bed stock, in those hospitals. Figures from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, for the first ten months of last year show us the comparisons. Cork's trolley numbers were some 10% of the bed stock; St. Vincent's Hospital trolley numbers were 10.6 % of its bed stock; University Hospital Limerick trolley numbers were about 20% of its bed stock; and Letterkenny University Hospital trolley numbers were 17.3% of the hospital's bed stock. However, Sligo University Hospital trolley numbers were 24.7% of its bed stock, which means the hospital is under the greatest pressure. Obviously, it is a long-term solution to build the new block, about which I will not go into detail today. In the context of today's discussion, ensuring that Sligo and

Leitrim were part of the pathfinder scheme would, in the short term at least, take a little pressure off the most pressurised hospital in the country. I ask the Minister of State to please bring that to the attention of the Minister.

Plans for a new ambulance base in Sligo are currently at design stage and the project will be in for capital submission early next year. It is crucial that it is approved speedily and that the base is built as soon as possible. In addition, the proposed new national college to train paramedics must be located in Sligo along with the new ambulance base, ready to start training paramedics by 2024 or 2025 at the latest. These are some of the minimum requirements we need.

We have heard from many colleagues this evening about blockages in the system. Deputy Shortall clearly outlined the crazy situation in UL. There are many other issues I wish to raise but time does not permit me to do so. I will simply once again refer to the remarks of Robert Morton at the health committee last week, when he said, “There is a growing gap between demand and capacity.” It is up to the Government to bridge that gap.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion, which highlights the completely unacceptable wait times for ambulances and the fact that not alone are targets being missed in many cases, but more of them are being missed than was the case previously. In December 2019, ambulances reached 69% of cases of cardiac and respiratory arrest within the target time of 19 minutes. That had fallen to 59% by December 2022. In other emergency cases, it fell from 54% to 43%, which is less than half. That is simply unacceptable. There are a number of reasons for it, none of which can be blamed on the excellent staff of the ambulance service and the paramedics who are doing their very best in a chaotic system.

Centralisation works badly in most services but it has had catastrophic effects in the ambulance service. Ambulances from County Clare are being sent all over the place. Last year, an ambulance was sent from Ennis to Enniskillen, resulting in there being no ambulance in north Clare. I have driven from Ennis to Enniskillen. You would not be driving up to Enniskillen and coming back down to work in Ennis thereafter. If it is not working, it simply needs to be reviewed, and I believe it is not working, despite the best of intentions.

I reiterate the point raised by Deputy Harkin and others in respect of the paramedic training course at UL. Notwithstanding that these people have been trained and could provide an excellent service, they cannot get into the NAS thereafter, largely because of a typically Irish battle of egos, it seems. That must be stopped.

We were led to believe that the protocol under which ambulances would go to Ennis hospital would improve matters. Instead of ambulances queueing outside UHL for patients to be admitted, they would go to Ennis hospital, where there would be a faster drop-off. In the first six weeks of the protocol, however, only 29 ambulances went to Ennis hospital, so that is not a panacea either. The situation needs to be reviewed.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): It is evident from the debate this evening that Members across the House share a commitment and motivation to ensure the ambulance service has the requisite support and resourcing to allow for the delivery of the best possible level of care for patients that is appropriate and timely. There is general consensus that this is achievable with an ambulance service that is appropriately resourced and structured to work as part of a wider system to meet national healthcare policy

needs. I reiterate that the Government is committed to continuing to support the NAS with the necessary funding throughout this transformative period to allow for an expansion and development of patient care services, as the Minister outlined.

The significance of the role played by the ambulance service in the delivery of care has never been more prominent. Ambulance services are evolving and growing capacity to meet the future service needs. This is most notable in the area of alternative care pathways and mobile medical services. Paramedics are at the forefront of the interface between community care and hospital services and their position offers real opportunity to effect considerable benefits for patients and the wider healthcare system.

Through the development and expansion of its suite of alternative care initiatives, the NAS will play an ever-increasing role in relieving the pressure on hospitals and aiding in the re-orientation of healthcare. It is worth reiterating the point raised earlier by my colleague, the Minister, that between October 2020 and October 2022, the NAS treated nearly 50,000 patients through an alternative care pathway. Of those patients treated, over 43%, or nearly 19,000, did not need subsequent conveyance to a hospital emergency department. The NAS estimates that in the region of €3.7 million was saved in the care of these patients as a result. These are very small numbers in the context of the wider healthcare system but the potential for further development and expansion of initiatives like the clinical hub and the pathfinder model of care could yield significant gains in terms of the numbers treated outside of emergency departments and the potential savings that could be accrued. I take on board the point raised by Deputy Harkin regarding Sligo-Leitrim and will bring it back to the Minister.

The continued implementation of Sláintecare reforms means that community-based care options will continue to expand and the NAS will be centrally involved in delivering these patient care options as conveyance to hospital increasingly is no longer considered the most clinically appropriate default solution. I emphasise to the House, therefore, the scale of reform and modernisation that has already been achieved within the NAS in recent years. Such innovations include those aimed at providing alternative pathways of care and helping to improve resource availability and response times. Although current capacity issues in the ambulance service and across the wider hospital system are certainly affecting the level of response provided, I am reassured by the significant funding commitments we have been able to make in recent years to progress initiatives and increase capacity in the medium and long term.

As noted by the Minister, a new strategic plan is currently in development. The new strategy will set out the strategic aims of the service in the coming years to enhance staff experiences, further utilise technology and update organisational structures to ensure the patient care provided is aligned with the Sláintecare goals of the right care in the right place at the right time. I hope that will consider providing that a central ambulance base deployment system would be more on a regional basis than a national one.

I will briefly address other initiatives the NAS has undertaken to improve response times and resource availability. It has established a significant number of voluntary community first responder schemes to provide a high level of initial cardiac response within local communities. A total of 275 schemes had been established prior to the outbreak of Covid, when a temporary stand down of these groups was put in place due to the pandemic response. The majority of the schemes have since returned to full operation. As stated by the Minister, a collaboration between the NAS and a number of hospital groups throughout the country has resulted in the expansion of the successful medical assessment unit, MAU, pathway pilot. This project was first

trialled in north Cork at Mallow General Hospital in 2022 to the MAUs in Ennis, Roscommon and Nenagh. This MAU pathway will reduce patient presentations at emergency departments and release ambulances more quickly to respond to other emergency calls.

Following a HIQA review in 2014 into pre-hospital emergency care services, the NAS set out to implement a number of key recommendations for improvements. One of these recommendations was to use a dynamic deployment model. Dynamic deployment allows staff at the HSE national emergency operations centre to see all available resources and prioritise their allocation to higher acuity calls that require immediate emergency response. This model represents international best practice and was highlighted by HIQA as a way to improve response times and NAS performance generally. I assure the House that the NAS has been continuously working with stakeholders to introduce changes to its ambulance deployment model which reflect the reality of current capacity challenges while seeking to reduce demands on ambulance staff. That takes on board what an awful lot of Members have stated this evening.

Ambulance services in Dublin are delivered by the NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade. There is a high level of co-operation between the HSE, NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade on day-to-day operational matters.

8 o'clock

This collaborative relationship was further strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic and efforts are ongoing to build on this co-operation to strengthen arrangements for the delivery of ambulance services in Dublin into the future. I am aware that the first meeting of a task and finish group - formed following agreement between my colleagues, the Minister for Health and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to identify an ambulance service delivery model for Dublin took place in the last fortnight. I look forward to seeing the results of the group's work in the coming months, which I am sure everyone in the House will agree can only be beneficial for the citizens of our capital.

The well-being of NAS staff is a priority both for the Department of Health and for NAS and HSE management. The NAS has developed its HR People Plan 2022-2025 to enhance employee experience, optimise NAS working environments and meet expectations of health policy in Ireland. In 2020, the NAS launched its holistic model of staff support, WellINAS, which details the range of supports available to support the well-being of staff. In 2022, the NAS was also allocated funding to strengthen 24-7 management and governance arrangements, and plans to further strengthen management, technical and business functions as part of the new service development plans for 2023.

As part of budget 2022, an additional €8.3 million in development funding was invested in the NAS. This funding was used to build upon the significant process of modernisation the NAS has achieved in recent years. Specifically, the funding provided for: increasing paramedic whole-time equivalent, WTE, staffing levels to meet identified capacity requirements in support of improved performance and service delivery goals; adding clinical capacity within the hear and treat service in the National Emergency Operations Centre to advise lower acuity patients of appropriate alternatives to hospital transfer; and implementing an organisational redesign to enhance governance arrangements and improve the NAS's ability to integrate with strategic developments across the health sector.

I would contend that notwithstanding the considerable challenges of record patient demand

outlined by my colleague, the Minister, earlier today, our ambulance services have continued to deliver a high-quality, patient-centred service, even against the backdrop of similar record levels of hospital and ED activity. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to change the way that our health services operate, and the way patients interact with our health services. Our ambulance services continue to adapt to these changes. The transformation outlined will lead to a service that is better able to deliver on the future requirements of the wider healthcare system. Despite the challenges that have been experienced over recent years, the strategic aims for our ambulance services remain clear, as does our firm commitment to delivering on them. A number of Deputies brought up the issue of UL students. I will bring that back to the Minister. I cannot, for the life of me, understand how those students in the masters programmes are not getting the opportunity to practise their profession in an environment where they are trained to do so.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to start by acknowledging the really good and hard work done every day of the week by workers in the Dublin Fire Brigade and the NAS. Despite this Government, they are holding the service together with their hard work and dedication. Even in a well-staffed service and a service where Government provides leadership - unlike in this instance - those workers are under pressure. Their work environment is naturally a pressurised one and it is made worse by the lack of leadership from the Government. Short-staffing, as the Minister of State knows, compounds the pressure that these men and women are under every day of the week. The tactic of attacking Opposition politicians is not going to work. I note that the Minister for Health is not here, but I did hear his contribution. I must say, there is something more than a little bit pathetic about trying to point fingers at Members of the Opposition and trying to twist our words. The workers in the Dublin Fire Brigade and the NAS know damn well who is on their side. They know exactly the names and, indeed, the parties of those who cut their pay when their backs were to the wall. They know exactly who imposed a recruitment moratorium from which they are still trying to recover.

On Christmas Day a relative of mine fell and hurt herself. We did not know at the time, but she had broken her hip and her femur. At 7 p.m. we called the ambulance. By 8.30 p.m., the ambulance had not arrived. We spoke to fantastic people on the line who stayed with us right the way through. They advised us not to move her but it was freezing cold and raining, and we had to move her. The woman had a broken hip and a broken leg. I drove her to hospital that night and I was terrified. My sister and I spoke to people on the phone. They did everything they could, but the resources were not there. I just want the Minister of State to know that as a member of the family who was there, it was absolutely terrifying. You do not realise how much you depend on the service until you pick up the phone. The person on the other end of the line did everything they could, but they could not dispatch an ambulance. That was the key. It was terrifying not just for me, but for all the other members of my family.

In my final moments I wish to state that men and women working in the retained fire service in Skerries and Balbriggan did medical work during Covid and have been locked out of the Covid payment because they are members of the retained service. I implore the Minister of State to discuss this with the Minister for Health to try to see if good sense can prevail in this instance.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The chief fire officer for Dublin Fire Brigade told the Joint Committee on Health last week that the combined resources of the NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade cannot meet current ambulance demands in Dublin city and county. I sat through the meeting so I know what he actually said, which seems at odds with what the Minister was saying. You would think that would be a wake-up call for the Government that there is something very wrong with the way it is resourcing our ambulance services. Dublin is a growing and expanding city and we

are simply unable to keep up with demand. Ambulances are only able to respond to less than half of non-cardiac life-threatening situations within the target time of 19 minutes. Every minute is vital in these situations. We are failing both the ambulance and fire crews, and the people who need them, by putting them in impossible situations like that.

The health committee was also told about the value of programmes like the pathfinder service, which aims to treat people, and particularly the elderly, in their own homes as a means of keeping them out of hospital in the first instance. That was mentioned by a number of speakers. I fear we are too slow in recognising the value of programmes like that and rolling them out right across the wider health service. I think the Minister of State would probably agree with me on that.

The training sector also needs to see a huge investment as, currently, we are simply not able to get enough newly trained paramedics into the system to cope with the demand and the people who are leaving or retiring. Currently, we are sending paramedics over to Britain for placement, and many of them just do not come back as they are snapped up by the NHS. If we could train more of them at home we might reduce the brain drain.

The logjam in our EDs plays a huge role in the problem. If ambulances are stuck outside hospitals while the staff inside grapple with the overcrowding and the lack of beds, then they are not on the road, heading to where they are needed to actually save lives. We need to see greater investment in training and new vehicles and we need to roll out programmes like the pathfinder service. What we need most from Government is to take the situation seriously before it gets even worse, with the harm and loss of life that we heard about. We are all agreed that we need to do more.

Deputy David Cullinane: It takes a bit of a brass neck to deliver the speech that the Minister for Health delivered earlier today. It is so full of inaccuracies and mistruths, it is hard to know where to start. I will start with the first one, where he said that the Sinn Féin motion would have you believe that our NAS professionals are failing in their job. In fact, the very first line of our motion “commends the tireless work of front-line paramedics and operational staff in dealing with increased demand without proportional resource increases”. Last week, senior personnel of the NAS and Dublin Fire Brigade told the Joint Committee on Health that demand is outpacing supply in terms of ambulance capacity, and that people are waiting longer for ambulances for emergency and non-emergency call outs.

The second mistruth in the Minister’s written statement, which he read into the record of the Dáil, is that response times are improving. I do not know what planet the Minister is on, but I will list the response times again in the Minister’s absence and let them ring loud in his ears, because he really needs to take his head out of the sand when it comes to the NAS. I am talking about the life-threatening calls, the echo and the delta calls. Let us compare them from 2019 to 2022 and for each region. In the east region, in 2019, the average response time for life-threatening call-outs was 15 minutes; in 2022 it was 22 minutes, an increase of seven minutes or 47%. In the midlands, in 2019, it was 19 minutes; in 2022 it was 29 minutes, an increase of ten minutes or 53%. In the mid-west, in 2019, it was 16 minutes; in 2022 it was 25 minutes, an increase of nine minutes or 56%. In the north east it was 18 minutes in 2019; in 2022 it was 26 minutes, an increase of eight minutes or 44%. In the north west it was 18 minutes in 2019; in 2022 it was 22 minutes, an increase of four minutes or 22%. In the south east, where I come from, in 2019, it was 21 minutes; the south east now has the highest wait time of 33 minutes, despite the fact that we do not have emergency cardiac services operating on a 24-7 basis, as

the Minister of State will know. That is an increase of 12 minutes or 57%. In the southern region the average wait time for life-threatening calls in 2019 was 18 minutes; in 2022 it was 31 minutes, an increase of 13 minutes or 72%. In the west it was 19 minutes on average in 2019; in 2022 it was 26 minutes, an increase of seven minutes or 37%. Those are all figures produced by the Minister in response to a parliamentary question. Then, when we look at the percentage of calls which were responded to in the 19-minute timeframe for both echo and delta, we see a decrease year on year from 2019.

How, then, can the Minister say in his scripted speech this evening that response times are improving? Improving from when, exactly? The evidence is there in the data which are presented to us from the National Ambulance Service and the Dublin Fire Brigade. In fact, the Dublin Fire Brigade told the Oireachtas health committee that in 2020 the average hospital turnaround time in Dublin for patients being offloaded from an ambulance into a hospital was 29 minutes, with 6% of ambulances experiencing offload delays in excess of 60 minutes. In 2022 the average offload or hospital turnaround time in Dublin was 39 minutes - it went from 29 minutes to 39 minutes - with 16% of incidents having a turnaround time in excess of 16 minutes.

We are getting data from the HSE, from the National Ambulance Service and from the Dublin Fire Brigade all telling us that the wait times are going in the wrong direction, and we have a Minister for Health who has his head in the sand and who comes in here, does not address any of the issues, does not give us any sense that there is any urgency, attacks Sinn Féin and the Opposition for tabling a motion which sets out the facts and, it strikes me, is going to go off, as he always does, with his head in the sand and do absolutely nothing. As Deputy O'Reilly said, he is not fooling anybody. He most certainly is not fooling patients, who are waiting longer for ambulances. He most certainly is not fooling those ambulance paramedics whom we praised in our motion, rightly so, for the work they do, and they are doing it on the back of huge pressures and overtime. Some in the Dublin Fire Brigade had to wait, and some are still waiting, for their pandemic bonus payments, another slap in the face they were given by the same Minister for Health. His speech today was absolutely appalling and shameful, and he should come back and correct the record of the Dáil for some of the inaccuracies and, I would argue, mistruths that were in his statement this evening.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is deferred until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Prices

56. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures being taken to ensure that energy companies reduce their prices for customers to reflect the significant reduction in wholesale energy costs; if he has met with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities in this regard; the date on which windfall taxes will be

introduced; the amount they are expected to raise; if he will support an energy price cap; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9983/23]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am disappointed the senior Minister is not here. It is not the first time this has happened. I think he has ten advisers at this stage and he does not seem to be able to line up his diary. We can reschedule these questions. They are rescheduled regularly. I am disappointed that he is not here and that neither he nor his ten advisers gave us the courtesy of telling us he would not be here.

I wanted to ask the Minister the measures being taken to ensure that energy companies reduce their prices for customers to reflect the significant reduction in wholesale energy prices.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I believe that the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications is representing his country at a meeting of European energy ministers.

The war in Ukraine has resulted in an unprecedented rise in energy prices and is a major challenge for families and businesses throughout Ireland and across Europe. This huge increase in costs for consumers has caused real hardship for many people. This is most pronounced over the winter months, when energy use is at its highest.

That is why the Government has taken sustained action over the past year, and as recently as last week, to support households and businesses to meet the cost-of-living challenges. Direct measures to reduce energy bills include the €800 in total of energy credits introduced between April 2022 and April 2023; reductions in VAT; and the temporary business energy support scheme. In addition, the Government has introduced a range of targeted supports for the most vulnerable households, once-off measures and enhancements to tax and social welfare protections.

Electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive. The market is overseen by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. As part of its role, the CRU is monitoring the implementation of the strengthened consumer protection measures that were put in place for this winter. Earlier this week the CRU extended the moratorium on disconnections of electricity and gas for a further month until the end of March. As the Deputy will be aware, the CRU is independent and accountable to the Oireachtas.

Wholesale prices reached peak levels in August of last year, when wholesale gas prices were 706% higher than in January 2021, while electricity prices increased by 463% in the same period. Although they have since fallen back from their peak, wholesale gas prices remain more than double what they were in January 2021. Retail prices, based on an estimated annual bill, are 138% higher for gas and 98% higher for electricity this January versus January of last year. The differences in the level and speed of fluctuation in the wholesale market versus those of retail prices demonstrate the supplier hedging strategies and the extent to which those strategies shield consumers against the full extent of the utterly unprecedented international energy market volatility.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: That is an incredible response. People will endure and will get on with it but they hate this idea of "we are all in it together". The truth is that we are not all in it together. People hate a double standard and they hate inequity and unfairness. The price of energy is being hiked, but at the same time energy company profits are going through the roof.

Energy companies are reporting record profits, and what do we hear from the Government? We have heard it from the Minister of State, as the latest spokesperson for the Government defending their position, explaining that, actually, they did not pass on the full price of the hikes. There is not a word about the record profits, the obscene profits, they are reporting. We have a Government that resists energy market reform, resists price caps and resists windfall taxes. There has been a U-turn but there is still a delay in that regard. We have a PSO that is deeply regressive. The Minister of State's party, including the senior Minister, who is not here, has supported and introduced the large energy user subsidy. There is a track record there of treating the energy companies with kid gloves. Has the Minister of State met them? What have they got to say? When will reductions be introduced?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: My Department will bring before the Government proposals for a windfall tax to be approved by the Cabinet in the coming weeks. Primary legislation will be required to bring that through. The measure will impose taxes on unfair profits which were generated not just by people who own oil or gas reserves but anybody generating electricity from sources other than gas who unfairly profited from the huge increase in the price of electricity. That could be wind farms or people generating electricity from solar or other sources. They will be taxed in such a way that a maximum price will be put on the amount for which they are able to sell their electricity to the grid. We were guided by the EU that that could be €180 per megawatt hour - in other words, 18 cent per unit. In fact, we will impose a cap of 12 cent per unit, and we are proposing a 75% take in excess profits from those who own oil or gas reserves. We will legislate for that in the coming weeks, and all that money will be ring-fenced for electricity consumers.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister of State a straight question and I hope he will give me a straight answer. When will the windfall tax be legislated for, when it will be introduced, what period will it apply for and how much will it bring in? I noticed that initial estimates were in the region of €1.9 billion and the lower estimates are in the region of €200 million to €300 million, which is a significant difference.

I will ask another straight question. Has the Minister or the Minister of State met the energy companies? Have they met ESB, Bord Gáis, SSE Airtricity and Energia to discuss this and insist that they pass on the price reductions? The Minister of State said himself that prices peaked in August and they have been reducing ever since but we have seen no commensurate reduction in the cost to consumers. Has the Minister of State met the energy companies and has he insisted that they pass on the reduction and do it now?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I am as eager as the Deputy to see these reductions passed on and that is why we are legislating for unfair profits. I have met the ESB and Bord Gáis and my Department continues to meet them. I am sure the Minister does as well, although I have not spoken to him on it. We will be legislating for this in the coming weeks. The amount of money that is expected to be raised is between €280 million and €600 million, a significant amount of money, and all of that money is legally ring-fenced for electricity consumers. That is only part of it. We extended the 9% rate for electricity and gas VAT last week, which is the lowest rate of VAT we have ever had on energy in this country. We have a range of welfare benefits, extra payments and then the windfall tax on top of that. A number of approaches have been taken, therefore. I see that two electricity companies have cut their rates but I expect the others to follow suit as soon as possible.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

57. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he can clarify the Government's plan to deal with recent Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, figures that show increases in CO₂ emissions in the State, and that Ireland is the worst performer in the EU, according to EUROSTAT data; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10335/23]

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Minister of State is probably aware of this but on Friday, 3 March, the climate movement will be back on the streets for the first time in a long time. I am delighted to see Extinction Rebellion and FridaysForFuture taking the climate crisis seriously and marching from Parnell Square at 12 noon to this House. I want to ask the Minister of State to please clarify for me and them the Government's plans to deal with the recent figures from the EPA that show that Ireland has a huge increase in CO₂ emissions and is the worst performer in the EU in terms of emission reductions, according to EUROSTAT.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I also am happy to see climate protestors on the street. The voices of young people are often lost and what we hear instead are the reactionary forces against any climate actions we try to bring in. To see people cheering and going out to prove they care is motivating.

Finalised emissions data for 2022 are not yet available but recent reports have indicated that Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions increased in 2021 and may also have increased in 2022 as we emerged from Covid-19 restrictions. The EPA's models for projected emissions do not take into account all policies and measures which have been committed to in our climate action plans, and these reports suggest a concerning trend, which underlines the urgency with which we must respond to the climate crisis. To reverse the current trajectory of emissions and meet our 2030 and 2050 targets, we have to accelerate the implementation of policies that will not only decarbonise our economy and improve our indigenous supply of sustainable and renewable energy but we also have to support new ways of conducting business and encouraging innovation.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, significantly strengthens climate governance in Ireland and the sectoral emissions ceilings set out a clear pathway for meeting our carbon budgets, as well as Ireland's commitment to a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030. These ceilings are reflected in the Climate Action Plan 2023, which was published on 21 December 2022. The 2023 plan builds on the 2021 plan and sets out the policies, measures and actions needed to keep us within our carbon budgets and on the pathway to a climate-neutral economy no later than 2050. I note the establishment of climate delivery task forces to accelerate and drive delivery in a number of key areas regarding our climate action including offshore renewable wind energy, heating and the built environment and sustainable transport. These will serve to support our focus on accelerating the implementation of meaningful and impactful climate action.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Far from being on target to cut our greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030, or by 5% per year, according to An Taisce, which is littered with eminent scientists on this issue, we are on track to exceed the combined ten-year carbon budget by between 23% and 36%. That is exceeding the budget and we are on track to do that. The climate movement will not be cheering the Green Party. Almost three years into its decision to prop up Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government, we are beginning to see clearly what a disaster that has been for

the climate movement and crisis. Not only are emissions rising but the spin the Government is committed to will lock in and guarantee failures.

I want to talk briefly about that in relation to electricity, which was mentioned earlier. Our demand for electricity has risen by 9% and uniquely in Europe, that is driven by the demand from data centres. We have 16 more data centres coming on stream that will be hooked up to the national grid. How can the Minister of State say we are taking climate action seriously when we are in these energy-intensive areas and using up our best energy?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: It takes all parties to solve this problem. This is not a partisan issue and it will not work if one party takes it one way. It does not work if parties condemn or denounce one another. It works if we can constructively work together. I am not long in politics but the Deputy knows that I am committed to climate action and that it is all I have thought about for most of the last 20 years. Therefore, it just bounces off me if I get accusations that I do not really care or want to do this. It is just not true and everybody who knows me or who has ever worked with me knows it is not true. Our parties and our Government are committed to climate action. We know what the different areas are that we have to work on to get there. It is not easy, it cannot be entirely done by Government and it requires the corporate sector to do its part. We have to regulate and tax the corporate sector and we have to push it into doing its part because it will not do it otherwise; it has no reason to. It also takes action from the public. It means we have to change our entire culture in order that we can carry out these things.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I did not want the Minister of State to take my criticism personally. They are political criticisms and they are criticisms of the Minister of State's party propping up a neoliberal and right-wing set of parties. Those parties are bound to fail on climate because they believe in the capitalist model of doing business and economics, as the Green Party apparently does because it voted against every measure that any progressive element of the Opposition has tried to bring in, including curbing the proliferation of data centres, to mention but one. It is not a personal criticism of the Minister of State; it is a criticism of the politics that are driving the climate agenda in this country.

That is why the young people on the streets on Friday will be demanding system change. That means changing our economic system and priorities, as well as our environmental priorities because if you do not change the economic priorities then you are going to see global banks continuing to fund fossil fuel corporations to the tune of \$3.8 trillion to explore and extract more fossil fuels. The signs on the planet are very worrying. We are seeing natural systems in the process of falling apart and these are systems that have held the planet together. The Minister of State and I know this and we have been watching this but the Minister of State is in government and I am not so I have every right to criticise him for his failures.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy has every right to criticise me and to ask questions. That is part of our system, I welcome that and I am not being defensive but we need to work constructively together to solve these problems.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Stop voting against our measures.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: What are we doing for climate action? We have four major areas: transport emissions; heating and building emissions; electricity emissions; and agriculture emissions. As the Deputy is aware, we are trying to revolutionise our transport system and we are trying to move people towards public transport. We are cutting public transport fares and

we are spending €2 in public transport investment for every €1 we spend on new roads. The Deputy knows that we have massively increased our investment in retrofitting and that the majority of our retrofitting spend goes on free upgrades for people who cannot afford it. The Deputy knows we are building more renewable energy infrastructure, including more solar and wind than was ever put on the grid, so that at some points we are generating 80% to 90% of our electricity from renewable sources. These are huge and significant changes and people notice it when they find that their bus fare is half of what it was before.

Energy Infrastructure

58. Deputy Darren O'Rourke asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures he will take to maximise delivery of solar photovoltaic, PV, systems on homes, schools, farm sheds, and community/sporting, commercial and public buildings in 2023; his targets in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9984/23]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister of State the measures he will take to maximise the delivery of solar PV systems on homes, schools, farm sheds and community, sporting, commercial and public buildings in 2023; his targets in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The microgeneration support scheme sets out the overall framework to support the growth of microgeneration in Ireland. The scheme targets 380 MW of new microgeneration capacity by 2030. This amounts to 60,000 homes and 9,000 non-domestic installations, such as small farms, businesses, schools and community groups, generating over 300 GWh of renewable electricity per annum, with the potential to abate 1.4 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent over the lifetime of the installations. The microgeneration support scheme provides support to domestic and non-domestic applicants for installations up to 50 kW. Domestic applicants can apply to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, for a grant of up to €2,400. Non-domestic applicants can also apply for a grant for installations up to 6 kW for the same grant amounts as domestic customers, of up to €2,400. These applicants will also be eligible to avail of the clean export guarantee tariff and any renewable electricity not consumed on the premises of these microgenerators is now eligible for an export payment, which further supports the investment.

The final phase of the microgeneration support scheme will involve the introduction of a clean export premium feed-in tariff to support non-domestic applicants for installation sizes greater than 6 kW, up to 50 kW. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities will consult on an implementation plan for the clean export premium tariff in 2023. Since the introduction of the microgeneration support scheme domestic grant in February 2022, the SEAI has seen application levels rise sharply, with more than 16,000 received in 2022. This is more than double the application levels seen in 2021 under the previous pilot solar PV grant scheme. While the level of interest indicates that the scheme is working, its operation and effectiveness will be kept under review and adjustments made where necessary.

My Department is also developing the small-scale generation scheme for generators above 50 kW to support the deployment of rooftop and ground-mounted solar PV in cohorts that are not as suited to other support measures, such as the renewable electricity support scheme. This scheme is expected to be launched in 2023.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: A number of points arise. There is a significantly increased ambition regarding solar energy, with a goal of 5 GW by 2025, which was announced to great fanfare, but it will take much work to deliver on that. There is significant opportunity at a smaller scale, outside of utility scale, to realise that and to bring people along and have them play their part. There are a number of key elements. We should not be entirely dependent on utility scale and I am concerned that we will end up being dependent. There is a consultation about direct lines, but it has been postponed repeatedly. It was to be delivered in the first quarter of 2023. That has not happened. When will it happen? The Minister of State finished mentioned small-scale generation policy. When will we see that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The small-scale generation scheme will be launched later this year. The Deputy asked about legislation relating to private wire, which is to allow transmission of electricity by private sector companies without using EirGrid. I will have to come back to the Deputy with details rather than offer an answer now. There is massively increased ambition for solar roll-out. It is not just for solar farms and it will not be concentrated on a small number of large corporate generators. The aim is to get it onto every agricultural shed in the country. There is significant desire among the agriculture community, with many applications from farmers. This is greatly helped by the fact that we have removed the requirement for planning permission and allowed people to generate money from their excess electricity when they are not there. Every school in the country, every hospital and every public building, as far as possible, will be covered in solar panels. We want this to be a genuine democratic system whereby everybody, insofar as is possible, gets a solar panel on their roof.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There are unnecessary barriers. It is not the Minister of State's responsibility but as I understand the targeted agriculture modernisation scheme, TAMS, 3 criteria, they are not getting paid for their excess electricity. They still cannot sell back to the grid or export. The community energy grant run by SEAI is available for businesses but there is a level of bureaucracy. We had the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment before the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action last week. It is clear that the system is not working to the degree that it should. There is need and clear cause for a technology-specific auction. A redesign of the auctions should be considered to align with the technology-specific ambition.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I want as many people to have solar power as possible so that they are taking part and have a sense that they are contributing towards climate action and generating money. I want as many people as possible to take part in this. The Deputy is right to say that the deployment of solar generation is not entirely my responsibility. TAMS is a scheme of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Putting a solar panel on the roof of every school is a Department of Education scheme. We cannot have a situation whereby everything to do with climate action is supposed to be done by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. Although I will help those Departments as much as possible, they are the ones to come back to. I understand that funding for TAMS has been greatly increased and that the scheme has been made much simpler as a result of the removal of the planning permission requirements.

The Deputy asked about technology-specific auctions. Our auctions are currently technology neutral. One can apply with any technology. I am not aware of an argument to switch to solar only or to technology-specific applications. The economic theory is that one gets the best answer by making it technology neutral. If the Deputy wants to make a proposal to me for technology-specific auctions, I will give it fair consideration.

Dáil Éireann
Climate Change Policy

59. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, report (details supplied) noting the need to reduce the national herd by 30% in order to meet climate targets; if his Department has undertaken a study to determine the impact that these proposals would have on the livelihoods of farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9816/23]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Agriculture across the country is in crisis. I do not make that statement lightly. Every year, farmers leave the land. The number of farmers is reducing throughout the Twenty-six Counties. According to Teagasc, only one third of farmers make a living out of the farm. Another third of farmers only make a living because somebody is working off the farm. A full third of farmers are currently making losses. They are in poverty or are going into debt. The threats that we will see a 30% reduction in the national herd are scaring the farming community.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I do not think anybody should scare the farming community. It is important to stick to the facts on this but also to speak honestly to farmers. The Government recently approved the first phase of the land-use review. This phase was a substantial evidence-gathering exercise, required to deliver on a key commitment in the programme for Government. A comprehensive evidence base is essential to informing Government decisions on the optimisation of our land use. Studies such as the draft EPA research report are part of this evidence-gathering process. The primary objective of the first phase was to identify gaps in our knowledge and to inform the second phase of the land-use review.

The second phase of the land-use review will build on the evidence gathered in the first phase and continue the gathering of relevant evidence to close knowledge gaps. This is critical for supporting the Government's wider economic, social and environmental objectives for land. These objectives include supporting the significant role that farmers and farm families play in the overall success of the economy and society as a whole, ensuring that we have resilient rural and urban communities, and meeting our wider environmental objectives. Proposals for the second phase are being finalised and will be put to the Government in a few weeks.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That was probably the most nebulous, vague response that we have got to such an important question in this Chamber in a long time. It is incredible that the sector which produces food for this country and is the backbone of rural communities is facing a significant cut to its livelihood by this Government. The EPA report is clear in its focus and targeting of the agricultural sector to reduce climate-changing emissions. The difficulty, as I know from farmers, is that they know change is needed but they do not want to become the martyrs of the climate change crisis in Ireland, especially when one sees Ministers jetting around the world. They do not want to be bankrupted when we see an explosion of Brazilian beef exports annually. There is a real issue with the viability of the Irish farm. The only way to make it viable is to guarantee a different price. If one wants to build bridges with the farming community, the first thing one needs to do is tell farmers that they will be able to make a living in the future.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The twin policy issues for agriculture are how we reduce emissions and sustain farming incomes at the same time. That is the challenge for our agricultural policy and where all our focus will be. The Deputy is right to say, and I am glad to hear him say, that farmers know there has to be change but that change has to be fair and it has to be explained.

We should not do it without having proper evidence. It is not nebulous to collect the right data. Agricultural emissions are much more complex than they are in other sectors. There are pluses and negatives. Obviously there are carbon storage possibilities. Farmers can do so much for the environment, either through wetting, generating electricity, or through forestry. Land use management will be absolutely critical to this. Carrying out the right scientific research is absolutely the right thing to do. The Environmental Protection Agency report was not a policy paper or a political paper but a scientific report. It did not prescribe what we should do; it just laid out its assessment of the evidence and the likely scenarios.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The trust of farmers in this Government is very low and I will tell the Minister of State why it is low. We have a supply chain in agriculture at the moment that usually consists of a farmer, maybe a factory, and a supermarket. Agriculture is enormously profitable in this country but all of that profit lands in the last two elements of that supply chain. The factories and supermarkets are making supernormal profits from produce that farmers are making, and the farmers are typically making barely above the cost of production. The prices are regularly pushed below the cost of production in beef, sheep, poultry and pigs. This Government stands over that system. We had Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Ministers literally say that it is unreasonable for farmers to expect a price above the cost of production. How can the farmers put trust in them in terms of making a living from farming in the future while that is happening and still see this train wreck coming down the line of the national being reduced? I am asking the Minister of State to take that off the table and to make sure farmers have proper funding and a proper income in the future.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: When the pandemic ended, I had a lot of opportunities to go round the country and speak to farmers. I took every opportunity I could to do that. What I took from farmers is that the drive for increased production has pushed down unit prices. It is more work for the same amount of money. Pushing up production has not worked. Fertiliser prices are a killer in that they are so high and are linked to the price of fossil fuels. The price of feed has gone up as well. While farmers' input costs have gone up, their output price is not going up in the same way. They want something different and, as the Deputy said, farmers are open to change. We have a climate action plan which has specific actions in agriculture, including advances animal efficiency through breeding, feeding and finishing; and changes to how we keep land fertile which will reduce nitrous oxide emissions from farms. We are trying to bring in a fivefold increase in organic farming to 450,000 ha. The Deputy knows we are one of the lowest countries in Europe for organic farming which does not really make any sense when one looks at the size of our country, our culture, or our disposition.

Climate Action Plan

60. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 119 of 15 December 2022, the status of the promised statutory guidelines for the implementation of local authority climate action plans, which will include the guidelines for the implementation of the local authority decarbonisation zones; the timeline for the publication of the statutory guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9910/23]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have a very specific question and it relates to the long-promised statutory guidelines we are waiting for that will form the basis on which climate ac-

tion plans will be prepared and implemented. Where are the statutory guidelines? Have they been published or are they about to be published? If not, what is the delay and when will they be published?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank Deputy Connolly for her very specific question for which I have a very specific answer. I spoke to the civil servant who issued the guidelines last Friday. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 strengthens the role of local authorities in climate action. The Act sets out a statutory requirement for each local authority to prepare a local authority climate action plan within 12 months from when the Minister formally issues a request to the sector to begin the preparation of such plans. These plans were circulated to local authorities on Friday and there will be a formal launch next month. The local climate action plans have to be consistent with the most recent approved national climate plan and will include both mitigation and adaptation measures. The Act requires that they must be updated every five years. Each plan includes a decarbonising zone which is selected by the local authority. A separate technical annex has been developed as part of the guidelines to assist local authorities with this. There are a number of sections which have all been distributed now. They are the local authority climate action plan guidelines; a technical annex on developing and implementing the local authority climate action plan; a climate change risk assessment annex; a climate mitigation assessment annex; and an annex on decarbonising zone.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: They have been completed and sent out to all of the 31 local authorities. Is that what I am to understand? There has been no fanfare at this point and nobody knows about it except the local authority management. Is that correct? However, everybody will know about it in a month's time. I welcome that they have finally been published because without them we cannot have a local climate action plan or an implementation plan. The Minister of State took exception to Deputy Bríd Smith's comment earlier. I identify with her, but not in any personal way. I do not think she meant it personally. The lack of urgency about climate action is startling. The guidelines that have now been issued have taken forever. On the decarbonisation zones the Minister of State referred to so proudly back in February 2021, two years ago to be precise, 29 of 31 local authorities have published their decarbonisation zones and nothing has happened since. Will the Minister of State comment on that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We can have all the strategies and plans in the world but they do not come to much if they are not implemented and if there is no political will. Those two ingredients are absolutely key to the difference between saying things and things actually happening. Do people want the things to happen and will they put in the work and the competence to make them happen? I have been on a local authority and I think the Deputy has probably spent time on a local authority too.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Too much time.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: She will know that there is sometimes a lot of discussions on local authorities which is not matched by action and that sometimes plans are brought forward which speak in very high terms and in noble ways about things but do not really translate into actions because the executive or the councillors themselves do not really want them to happen. For these plans to translate into actual climate action, we will need to see some bravery on the part of the councillors and the executive and we will need to see a mind shift from some people who are really stuck in the past. I am not referring to any particular local authority but I have seen it broadly across them and I am hoping for some change.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am normally constructively critical, and quite severely so, of the management in the city council in Galway but on this occasion, it did everything right. It submitted the decarbonisation zone plan two years ago and the Department has done nothing since then. I and other colleagues, I think, followed it up and we were told that it was waiting for the statutory guidelines. It has taken until last Friday to publish the statutory guidelines, so let us apportion blame justly and fairly and where it is due. Let us praise the councils, the 29 of 31, that submitted their decarbonisation zones. Is the Minister of State in a position to clarify whether 31 local authorities have now done it? Can he tell me why it has taken the Department so long? There is another question after this one and I might get a chance to elaborate on the tardiness of each Government to date and the Supreme Court judgment that forced the hand of the Government but at this point let us be fair and just. The decarbonisation plan has been sitting in the Department for two years.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We absolutely should be fair to local authorities. I do not have information for Deputy Connolly on the timeline that led to the issuing of the guidelines from last Friday; what the statutory timeline was; and what it ought to have been but I am willing to talk to the Deputy about it afterwards, if she wants to find out more information. What I am referring to with regard to local authorities is the problem where there is a lot of discussion and talk about sustainable transport, for example, but when I go out to the local authorities all they want to talk to me about are new roads. When we allocate money for retrofitting, sometimes the local authorities do not spend the money that has been allocated to them. There is a great imbalance in the amounts of money drawn down from sustainable funds for different climate action areas between different local authorities, which would make one wonder why some local authorities do not spend the money even when they are given it. I guess that is the challenge for all local authorities and perhaps the best way to do this is to highlight and champion the local authorities that are doing well.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Out of 31 local authorities 29 submitted decarbonisation plans. I have asked a very specific question. How have those plans just sat there? Have the other two local authorities, which did not submit plans, done so now? Equally significantly, has the Department now issued directions that they have until 7 March to direct the local authorities to make-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): I think Deputy Connolly has taken a third slot. Are we on another question?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: No, I did not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): Are we on the first oral question?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We are not. I beg your pardon. I was in my second minute of the priority question.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): I think we have taken that. Deputy Connolly is up next for the next oral question.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is okay.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Local Authorities

61. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide details of any analysis carried out by his Department with regard to carrying out a pilot project for local authority decarbonisation zones, in advance of the national roll-out of local authority decarbonisations zones, so that the results of the pilot project could feed into the national roll-out; if he will provide details of any engagement he or his Department has had with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9835/23]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The rules do not allow me but I should have taken the two questions together to develop this a bit more. In utter frustration then, the second question is put down because of the decarbonisation plans sitting in the Department. I asked whether it is possible to have a pilot project to learn, to roll them out and let the local authorities do their jobs, and learn from it. In my six seconds, has the Department issued the direction that it is legally obliged to issue to the local authorities, to prepare the local action plans?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 strengthens the role of local authorities in climate action. The Act sets out a statutory requirement for each local authority to prepare a local authority climate action plan within 12 months from when the Minister issues a request to the sector to begin the preparation of such plans. The Minister issued this request last Friday.

Each plan will include a decarbonisation zone which is selected by the local authority. A separate technical annex has been developed as part of the guidelines to assist local authorities with this. Decarbonisation zones are intended to be the focus for a range of climate mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity measures in each local authority administrative area and will help to identify projects which will contribute to the delivery of the national climate objective. Action 165 of the national Climate Action Plan 2019 sets out that each local authority should identify and develop plans for one decarbonising zone within its respective administrative area.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage issued a circular in February 2021 to all local authorities setting out guidance around developing the zones. Action 80 of Climate Action Plan 2021 required each local authority to integrate the development of its decarbonisation zone into its local authority climate action plan. Technical Annex D of the guidelines provides specific guidance on the decarbonisation zones.

The development of the decarbonisation zone concept in Ireland has been informed by good practice in other jurisdictions and in Ireland, including the Dundalk Sustainable Energy Community, SEC, Project 2020, the Portlaoise Low Carbon town and the Dingle Hub under the Dingle SEC. These projects and experiences can be considered to be pilot projects. They have influenced the roll-out of decarbonisation zones nationally.

As test-beds and demonstrator areas, the decarbonisation zones are themselves pilot projects. The intention is that trialling decarbonising measures in smaller areas will lead to learning and the development of good practice that will then be shared nationally. The local authority climate action plan guidelines were published last Friday. This will begin the formal process

to commence the development of the local climate plans and local authorities have 12 months to complete these.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We have clarification. The guidelines were issued last Friday. They will be made public within a month. We may have to wait another month to suit the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, presumably. A direction has also been issued to all the local authorities to prepare an action plan. Is that what the Minister of State said? I do not have the reply in front of me. Let us be very clear now because I have four pages of background here and the levels of frustration are quite high. The Minister of State still has not answered me. What was the delay for two years? Have the 31 local authorities now submitted their decarbonisation plans? Also a very quick history lesson, as the Minister of State read out, Climate Action Plan 2019 was about each local authority identifying a decarbonisation zone. That was to be for the end of 2019. The 2020 election intervened. I will resume on my second minute.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. She has a specific question about whether a legal direction has yet been issued. I have to check that. I know that the guidelines were circulated last Friday but I do not know whether they constitute a legal direction. I believe she asked for some history of how these decarbonisation zones were developed. She wants to know why we are issuing these guidelines.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am asking why it has taken up until now to get the guidelines, while welcoming them. I will not interrupt.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage issued Circular LGSM/01/2021 in February 2021 to chief executives and directors of planning which provided instructions around developing zones for local authorities. Action 80 of the national Climate Action Plan 2021 required each local authority to integrate the development of its decarbonisation zone into its local authority climate action plan. Accordingly each local authority will take forward its decarbonisation zone as a component of its local authority climate action plan. At this point responsibility for the decarbonisation zone process was transferred from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am going to try again. Has the Minister issued the direction to the local authorities to prepare their climate action plans? The Department is under a legal obligation to do that within 18 months. That 18 months is up next Tuesday, 7 March. Has that happened? If it has not happened, will it happen before 7 March?

In regard to a history lesson on the decarbonisation zones, let me put on the record that I am praising Galway City Council. In April 2021, Galway City Council submitted its application, expecting to get approval and make an implementation plan by the end of 2021. As of February 2022, one year ago, 29 of the 31 local authorities, and this is my third time to say this, had submitted applications for decarbonisation zones. Two years later, no decarbonisation zone has been implemented despite the urgency and the emergency declared, because they had to wait for the statutory guidelines that were published last Friday. We still do not know whether the legal directions have issued, as they are legally required to do.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I am not sure what the idea is of asking a question and when I give a direct answer the Deputy asks the same question again. She has asked me whether a legal di-

rection has been issued. What I told her is that I know the guidelines were circulated last Friday but I do not know whether they constitute a legal direction. I will find out and come back to her. That is really all I can say on that.

In regard to decarbonisation zones, there is a five-stage process on this: to identify and define the decarbonisation zones, set out a vision and objectives, baseline and scope to establish the emission inventory policy context on alignment; to identify and map the stakeholders; to register opportunities; to compile a portfolio of actions, projects, technologies and interventions; and then to set out the actions to be achieved and devise a strategy for implementation. This will be a distinct component of the local authority climate action plan. As a delineated area with specifically targeted interventions it will have a clear-cut focus. It will be presented in a separate chapter and section in each local authority climate action plan. That is what the guidelines sent around last Friday include.

EU Meetings

62. Deputy Niamh Smyth asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the agenda highlights of the Environment Council, to be held in Brussels on 16 March 2023. [9857/23]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Niamh Smyth. Will the Minister provide an update on the agenda highlights of the Environment Council to be held in Brussels on 16 March 2023?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The draft agenda for the upcoming Environment Council indicates that the meeting will address the following matters: a general approach on the directive amending directive 2010/75/EU on industrial emissions; general approach on the Council directive on the landfill of waste; policy debates on the regulation on packaging and packaging waste, amending regulation (EU) 2019/1020 and directive (EU) 2019/904 and repealing directive 94/62/EC; and the regulation establishing a Union certification framework for carbon removals and the directive concerning urban wastewater treatment which has been recast. In non-legislative matters there will also be an exchange of views on greening the European semester. Other items may be added to the agenda as the date of the meeting approaches. The agenda changes frequently and is available on the website.

9 o'clock

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State. In December EU environment ministers held a policy debate on a proposal for the nature restoration regulation to help recover European habitats, 80% of which are in poor condition. This was a major issue. The proposal will set specific legally binding targets and obligations for nature restoration in each of the listed ecosystems.

I want to speak to the Minister of State about a project in Carlow, the Drummin Bog project. It is a voluntary not-for-profit community education project to restore the only raised bog in County Carlow. It is situated close to the River Barrow and the historic site of St. Mullin's. It is a fabulous place. The Drummin Bog project was formed in 2016 and has to apply for a variety of grants and rely on donors for support. Will the Minister of State give us an update on funding? This is a very good project. If he does not have the information today, he might

send it to me.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. She has described a project in Carlow which involves the restoration of a raised bog near the River Barrow and the historic site of St. Mullin's and has asked for an update on that. I do not have information to hand immediately, but I will be very happy to give her an update. I would also be happy to meet her, as I am happy to meet any Deputy, and give her a briefing on the status of the project.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State. We need to make sure there is money for projects like this. Communication is important. This is a good community project. Perhaps the Minister of State would come back to me with the relevant information. He spoke about a meeting in March, which will include a discussion on a wastewater treatment plant. Perhaps he could come back to me on that. There are major issues in local authorities. There are always delays in funding. Will the Minister of State highlight that all local authorities will be given enough money for these projects?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: These projects can provide a local amenity and attraction for tourism. They preserve biodiversity and give people a sense of pride in their area. They can be part of a just transition if jobs have been lost in Bord na Móna or other organisations. Regarding wastewater treatment, I will listen to the Deputy. If she feels any projects are not getting funding, I am happy to talk to her about that. If she briefs me on that, I will come back to her.

Community Development Projects

63. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the work of the community climate action programme and engagement with local authorities to ensure uptake; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9946/23]

Deputy Alan Farrell: My question relates to the local authority community climate action programme, which was launched last year. I understand there is a new iteration of or funding stream for it. What is the status of that and has there been uptake?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. The community climate action programme will see more than €60 million from the climate action fund invested in supporting communities to run direct climate action projects and initiatives under strand 1 as well as capacity building under strand 2 of the programme. The 18 projects selected for funding under strand 2 of the programme are currently moving to implementation. This was an open call run by Pobal, worth €5 million, for education, capacity building and learning by doing projects.

Strand 1 was launched on 2 February this year, under which €27 million is being provided to all local authorities to support building low carbon communities in a considered and structured way. Of that €27 million, €24 million is being provided from the climate action fund for strand 1, which supports community and voluntary groups who want to partner with their local authority to implement climate action projects within their local area. A further €3 million is being provided by the shared island fund, which will fund similar types of projects on a cross-Border or whole-island basis, involving community groups and local authorities, in partnership with community groups and local authorities in Northern Ireland.

To encourage participation, part of the strand 1 climate action fund allocation has been ring-fenced to enable each local authority to hire a designated member of staff to implement the programme. Once in place, community climate action officers will engage with community groups on potential projects, assist them in their applications and recommend particular projects for partnership between the local authorities and community groups.

The majority of local authorities have indicated they will have a community climate action officer in place by the end of the second quarter of 2023. I look forward to seeing this important programme progressing, supported by the recruitment of community climate action officers by local authorities and by ongoing engagement with and support from my Department.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am encouraged. There is no shortage of funding for projects like this. The sum of €60 million is a lot of money for 80 projects. It is incumbent on the House, the Minister of State and the Minister to follow the local authorities closely in the hiring process because we know they have had history in the past, in particular with biodiversity officers, which have been an issue in some local authorities. It is important for local authorities to show leadership in the advice they can give to communities. That is why such a fund is so important.

The cross-Border funding allocation stream 1A relates to expenditure, 50% of which, I believe, is allocated to Northern Ireland. The Minister of State might outline whether he has a flavour of any the projects under consideration. Biodiversity improvements and food waste, in particular, are areas where local authorities should play a significant leadership role.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: As the Deputy said, there is a challenge with staffing. Things cannot happen without staffing. On the community climate action officers, the four Dublin local authorities are recruiting their officers on a regional basis. They expect to have staff in place by late April. The post is currently advertised on the Fingal County Council website, on behalf of the four Dublin local authorities, and the closing date for applications is 10 March. I encourage anybody who wants to work in the community climate action sector to apply for the role.

When local authorities have their community climate action officers in place in advance of the launch and have a query about salary costs, they should engage with my Department. There have been questions about this. The Deputy asked whether projects in the food sector and biodiversity are involved. Of course they are. I have worked with organisations like FoodCloud. There is a national food waste prevention programme which aims to reduce our food waste by 50% by 2030. All of those areas are key for us.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the information he has provided to the House. I focused on food waste because it is an area where we as a State need to make significant improvements. As I have said, I believe local authorities will play a key role in delivering on our collective climate ambitions.

The Minister of State might mention nature recovery and sustainable farming which, I believe, are part of strand 1A of the fund and will see 50% of the fund allocated to Northern Ireland. I would like to hear whether local authorities in the Border region have initiated such applications and if the Minister of State thinks those projects will be up and running by the end of the year.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. Strand 1A is open to community, voluntary and non-profit groups that want to take part. They have to partner with a local authority. As the

Deputy said, there are cross-Border projects and there have been successful connections. While the senior levels of the political system in Northern Ireland may be stuck, at local authority level we are making progress. At official level we try to establish every contact we can make so that we can continue to work with Northern organisations.

A lot of this is related to agriculture. There is a lot of fruit and vegetable farming in the Deputy's constituency of Fingal. There will be many opportunities in those areas for sustainable and organic farming, reducing food waste and a circular economy, which involves taking things that were waste products that had to be paid for and ensuring they become useful inputs for businesses.

Closed-Circuit Television Systems

64. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to improve legislation to allow for the use of CCTV for enforcement against breaches of waste and litter legislation. [9925/23]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Minister of State outline the plans of the Government has to implement the provisions of the circular economy Bill to assist local authorities in the use of CCTV to tackle illegal dumping? We know it is not the silver bullet it is often presented as, but it is an important tool for local authorities to tackle the scourge of illegal dumping in many of our communities.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy for asking this question, which is close to my heart and which I have been following closely since we legislated for it. The policy document, A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, contains a commitment to data-proof all waste enforcement legislation to ensure all available and emerging audiovisual recording equipment, including CCTV, can be used in a manner that is compliant with the general data protection regulation, GDPR.

My Department has engaged with the City and County Management Association, CCMA, the Department of Justice and the Data Protection Commissioner, DPC, to draft suitable legislation to give effect to this commitment. This legislation, amending both the Litter Pollution Act and the Waste Management Act, is contained in the Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act.

Sections 22 and 33 of the Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act require that the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, prepares and submits draft codes of practice to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications for approval for the purposes of setting standards for the operation of CCTV and other mobile recording devices to deter environmental pollution and to facilitate the prevention, detection and prosecution of both littering and illegal dumping offences. The LGMA is currently working on the preparation of these codes of practice. Once approved, local authorities will then be in a position to initiate litter and waste enforcement measures involving the GDPR-compliant use of technologies such as CCTV.

I have been in contact with that committee as it develops its code of practice. It has been working with the DPC to make sure it is compliant with the GDPR rules and I am waiting for the committee to come back to the Department for ministerial approval of its guidelines. It is

keen to have this and to have something effective. CCTV can be used for littering offences. For dumping offences, our legislation allows for body cameras and for drones to be used to catch people who are involved in more industrial and profit-motivated fly-tipping, illegal dumps and that type of activity. Therefore, the types of interventions are proportionate to the size of a crime. You do not need a drone to follow somebody who is dropping litter.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the update from the Minister of State. He referenced earlier that many of us in this House have served time on local authorities. The issue of illegal dumping was one we were all extremely frustrated with. When it was possible in Dublin City Council, sometimes when it was done at night-time or at obscure angles or when the face was covered, it did not provide the evidence that was needed. There were occasions when strong investigative tools were used by local authorities to try to find the people who carried out illegal dumping.

Across all our constituencies there are Tidy Towns groups that go out and give up their free time. In my own constituency I think of the Tidy Towns groups in Finglas, Ballymun, Meakstown and Santry, as well as the hundreds of environmental groups that operate underneath them. They need these guidelines to be issued as soon as possible. They need for local authorities to have the ability to use this technology. I encourage the Minister of State to ensure the LGMA presents this code as soon as possible.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Many Deputies are aware that there were problems in the past with obtaining evidence to get prosecutions because of challenges under privacy legislation. That is why we have to be so careful that we are ensured privacy-wise that we are compliant with GDPR law in order that we do not get challenged or, if we are challenged, that we can win those challenges. The Deputy is right that Tidy Towns groups around the country are sick of having to clean up after people who are either negligent or who are criminally making money from dumping. I spent some time in the north-east inner city with Dublin City Council's cleaning crew, so I have experienced the problems first-hand. They are going around seven days a week at 6 a.m., picking up rubbish and clearing streets. The work they do is incredible but the problems are intense. The volume of material that is being dumped is horrific. I am forming a forum of all the stakeholders, including the Department of Social Protection, the Residential Tenancies Board, the Revenue Commissioners and local activists to try to find a way to eliminate this problem.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the Minister of State's visit to the north inner city. He is welcome to come and visit my own constituency. He is right; it does go in scale. It can be a matter of a bag in a bin or it can be a matter of a washing machine and a half a tonne of a truck in a laneway. We need proportionate responses and we also need swift action in this regard. I urge the LGMA and the CCMA to present the code. Once that is done and local authorities are in a position to use CCTV legally within the frameworks of privacy legislation and so on, it will be up to use in this House to put pressure on those organisations to help us to implement the law that we facilitated.

Dublin City Council spends nearly €1 million per year. That could be spent on preventative measures and it could also be spent on many other positive projects in our community. Senator Malcolm Byrne referenced the figure of nearly €90 million being spent across the country. I thank the Minister of State for the work he has done on this project and I urge him to continue.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for the significant body of work he

and his Department have done, particularly on the passage of that Act. Deputy Leddin, who is the Chair of the committee, is present. We put in the hours too, so to speak. I wanted to take this discussion about the protocols to Fingal and to address the issue of where local authorities decline to collect dumped materials. That often happens in rural parts of north Dublin in lane-ways where the boundaries between ditches etc. are not well defined. There is clear evidence of materials being dumped, often including tyres, I am afraid to say, among other things. This area is on the fringe between Dublin city and Fingal, where landowners often have to spend an enormous amount of money removing such materials that clearly have been dumped from the public road. It is often difficult for farmers to justify the expenditure when it happens repeatedly. I am incredibly pleased to see this legislation in place and I hope the LGMA comes through with the protocols in order that local authorities can get this up and running in a legal manner.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Deputy McAuliffe is right that we need to have positive measures. This is not just about enforcement, catching people and criminality. We have a number of different schemes to promote reduction in litter. There is an anti-dumping initiative, which provides €3 million to local authorities for clean-up operations for removing illegal waste when it has been dumped, for household bulky waste initiatives such as a so-called mattress amnesty and for getting rid of sofas, as well as awareness campaigns, preventative measures and so on.

However, awareness campaigns and these types of positive measures do not work on criminals who are making a living out of this. It does not matter how many times you show them an advertisement that tells them they should not dump; they will do it unless they are caught. There is room as well for evidence gathering and criminal sanction. People who give up their free time to clean up their local area and who go out and pick things up find it galling to then go out and see a sofa being dumped in a field.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: That is why we need the two things. We need the positive things that help people do the right thing. We also need criminal sanction and evidence against people who are criminals and who are destroying our beautiful environment.

State Bodies

65. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will carry out a full review of the role and governance of Inland Fisheries Ireland, in light of recent revelations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9982/23]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister of State if he will carry out a full review of the role and governance of Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, in light of recent revelations and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: On 14 February the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, appointed Mr. Tom. Barry and Mr. Seamus Neely under section 18(5) of the Inland Fisheries Act 2010 to perform the functions of the IFI pending the appointment of a new, full board through the statutory appointments process, with the support of the Public Appointments Service, PAS. This ensures that the IFI is in a position to continue to perform its functions effectively. In addition to carrying out the core functions of the IFI, set out under section 7 of the Inland Fisheries Act 2010, the Minister has also instructed Mr. Barry and Mr. Neely to oversee the preparation of a governance

review of the IFI, to be delivered within a period of three to six months.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: To be clear, are Mr. Barry and Mr. Neely conducting the governance review or are they preparing a plan for a governance review? Could the Minister of State clarify that? What is the expected timeline for the new board to be appointed? Does the Minister of State have an indication of when we might expect to see that? What is the process by which that will be conducted? The most important aspect is the wider investigation into activities. Much has been said and reported about this. Will the Minister of State update the House on any such investigations?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The role of Mr. Barry and Mr. Neely is to oversee the preparation of a governance review of the IFI and it is their job to complete that within three to six months. The timeline for the appointment of new members to the board will be based on the availability of the Public Appointments Service to carry out that function. I cannot comment on how long that will take without asking that body, but if the Deputy reverts to me, I will give him an answer on that.

As for the broader question of the current position on the protected disclosures that have been made relating to matters relating to the IFI, all the protected disclosures are being investigated, as is appropriate, and these investigations are being carried out in accordance with the provisions of protected disclosure legislation and the established protected disclosure policies in the Department and the IFI. It would not be appropriate to comment on issues identified in the protected disclosures while those processes are under way, but any follow-up actions required on foot of them will be taken.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In regard to the sequencing, I am not entirely clear. The two gentlemen have responsibility for overseeing the preparation of a review, but will they conduct the review in that three- to six-month period? Will the Department wait for the conclusion of that protected disclosure process? Will it inform the future functioning of the IFI? Are the Minister and the Department in a position to outline or indicate that they will consider all the information and evidence that comes before those two processes, namely, the governance review and the process of investigations into those protected disclosures? As we might expect, they are very relevant to each other.

Deputy Alan Dillon: This has been an ongoing issue within my part of the country. The importance of the IFI within its remit of protecting rivers and lakes is enormous, so it is vital we get a resolution to the ongoing challenges relating to governance and accountability within the IFI. There is a significant issue relating to the withdrawal of services within the board of the IFI, but the Minister of State's response to the issues Deputy O'Rourke put to the House was very unsatisfactory. The previous board of the IFI failed to get satisfactory assurance on issues over several months and notified the Comptroller and Auditor General via the annual statements of internal control. To date, accounts have not yet been signed off for 2021. This has been raised at meetings of the Committee of Public Accounts on numerous occasions. At the moment, there is an interim measure, with two former county managers having been appointed. That is very concerning, yet the Minister of State is not giving us confidence that this is being fully addressed. Is an internal or independent investigation going on within the IFI to bring to a head the issues relating to financial and other irregularities within the agency?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Mr. Barry and Mr. Neely have been charged with carrying out this governance review, which amounts to an external review of the governance within the IFI. To

give some information on the sequencing for Deputy O'Rourke, it includes an examination of the respective roles of the IFI board and executive. It will be completed within three to six months and include an implementation plan, and the delivery of the plan will be overseen by the new board. The responsibility for the implementation of the findings of the review will be given to the incoming board, in consultation with the Department.

To respond to Deputy Dillon, I regret I cannot say more. I understand the frustration, given this is a serious situation, but, as he will appreciate, protected disclosures have been made and due process has to be followed. Having been delegated power from the Minister, I cannot come to the House and comment on what is happening in a live protected disclosure process. I cannot interfere in that process. It has to be done by the book. The entire process will be followed exactly as laid down in law.

Environmental Policy

66. Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the proposed charge on single-use coffee cups; the matters causing the delay to its introduction; the anticipated timeline for its introduction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9912/23]

Deputy Brian Leddin: I am taking this question on behalf of my party colleague Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. What is the status of the proposed charge on single-use coffee cups? What is causing the delay to its introduction and what is the anticipated timeline for its introduction?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Following the enactment of the Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, draft regulations to introduce an environmental levy on single-use disposable cups were published last October for public consultation, together with a comprehensive regulatory impact assessment. The consultation ran for a period of six weeks, providing an important opportunity for all stakeholders to make their views known. The Department received a significant volume of responses to the consultation. In total, 2,371 submissions were received for the three strands, comprising people who drink coffee, people who sell coffee and everyone else in the cup or coffee business, registering a wide range of views on the application of the levy.

A summary consultation report was published online by the Department in December and a full report, including copies of all the submissions received, will be published shortly. The submissions received are also being used to inform an SME test recommended by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, which will be published along with the results of the consultation, to show the effect of the regulatory change on businesses.

Once I have fully assessed the output from the consultation process, the regulations will be finalised, submitted to the Government for approval and signed. In recognition of the need to prepare for introducing the levy, I have committed to giving retailers at least three months from when the regulations are signed before they are applied. I will use that time to raise awareness about the levy among the public and retailers to ensure a smooth and successful introduction of the levy for retailers and consumers alike.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank the Minister of State. As he will be well aware, 200 million coffee cups go to landfill in this country every year. It is about time we did something about

that and I congratulate him on all the efforts he has made to date in that regard. I am a regular customer at the Abbey River Coffee café, located in the historic Potato Market next to Mathew Bridge in Limerick. It is a family-owned and locally run business that has been at the forefront of running a sustainable business since it opened a few years ago. It already runs a deposit-and-return scheme as part of its operations and has been offering a reduction in price on drinks when the customer brings his or her own cup. The owner has implored me a number of times to ask the Minister of State when the levy is going to be introduced. This proactive business, which wants to see progress in the area, is very keen to get on with it and to bring in a system whereby those 200 million paper cups will not go to landfill every year.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The regulatory impact assessment projected 200 million cups as an absolute minimum and estimates that the real figure could be far higher than that. I expect, as a result of the public consultation, to recommend some changes to what was in the draft regulations. I spoke to many café owners throughout the country to get their direct feedback. As well as waiting for people to come to me, I went to people to ask them what they thought. I believe a number of alternatives to single-use cups will emerge whereby customers who arrive in a café will be offered something else, whether that is a sharing scheme, a cup for purchase with a number of free coffees or a deposit-and-return scheme. People will not be left short. They will be offered something else if they have forgotten their cup that day. I expect the change will be similar to what happened with the plastic bag levy in that people will get used to it.

As for when it will happen, one thing that emerged from the public consultation was that cafés were asking for the longest possible implementation time, of one year or more, while the public was asking for the shortest possible implementation time and wondering why it could not be put in place the following day. The compromise will be somewhere between those two requests.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I welcome the Minister of State's reply. I would say there is overwhelming support among the general public for this measure. I would argue that many businesses are not pulling in the other direction. The business I spoke about in Limerick certainly wants to see progress in the area. It is just one example of thousands across the country that want to do the right thing and that are taking proactive measures. I look forward to reading the report the Minister of State mentioned. I would like to think that the vast majority of people recognise that this is the right thing to do. That 200 million coffee cups a year boils down to approximately 530,000 a day. As the Minister of State said, that is the lower end of the estimate. We need to get on top of this and move as quickly as we can.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Yes, there is great appetite on the part of the public. Surveys are showing that people want this. However, at the same time I need to make sure that it is a successfully introduced scheme and that it takes account of all the concerns that are raised by cafés which have made their submissions so I am taking time over that. There will be some changes to the draft regulations as a result of what I read. There are cafés, such as Bread 41 on Pearse Street, that have done without disposable cups for some years and that have been very successful as a result. Some cafés have led on this and have saved themselves money, not just in the cost of a cup and lid, which can be 20c or more, but also with regard to the cost of storage and waste disposal. This measure will ultimately benefit both café owners and business, as well as consumers and the natural environment, by reducing litter. Irish Business Against Litter has very clearly said that coffee cups constitute a large portion of the waste it sees when it carries out its surveys.

National Broadband Plan

67. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his Department's plans on how to connect new builds to the National Broadband Ireland, NBI, roll-out, especially if they are in the ready to connect green area; how long this process should take if a new build is in the green area on the NBI's website; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9977/23]

Deputy James O'Connor: It is great to see the level of progress in the roll-out of broadband. However, in ready to connect areas, and, thankfully, some parts of my constituency have that status, there is a lack of clarity with regard to people who are in new builds who want to get high-speed broadband connections under the national broadband plan, NBP. In particular, I refer to those in areas that are ready to connect. What is the process for a person with a new build in a ready to connect area who wants to get a broadband connection? What is the Department doing to help them? Will the Minister of State give a statement on the issue?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy for acknowledging that the NBP is progressing. More than 120,000 families in rural areas across Ireland can now have access to fibre broadband. One member of the public in Wexford wrote to me to say that she can now use her mobile home because she is connected to the network via fibre.

The Deputy's question is very specific, and it is a good one. All new-build premises in the state intervention area are covered under the NBP project agreement. NBI identifies new premises via Geodirectory updates that are added to the NBP intervention area on a quarterly basis. NBI then undertakes an assessment of the new premises and determines what is required in order for them to be connected to the NBI network in the relevant area. Depending on the outcome of that assessment process, a premises may be part of a future planned build programme or there may be additional work required to connect it if the network build has already begun. The assessment will determine the date for final connection. As an example, following an NBI assessment, approximately 500 new premises, built since the project started, will be able to place orders by 28 February. Further details are available through the NBI website, which provides a facility for the owner of any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website www.nbi.ie. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates from NBI regarding progress on delivering the network and specific updates relating to their own premises as works commence. I expect that by the end of the year every premises that has been built since the project started will be able to connect to fibre. Our contract does not provide for a short timeline on this. The contract just says that within the seven years of the project deployment you have to connect. That is clearly not good enough if you are in a blue area that seems to have been completed yet you have to wait until the end. I am in talks with NBI about getting better time lines on that but in practice they are being delivered in a short period.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State for the information provided. I acknowledge that those in areas that have had high-speed broadband roll-out through the NBP have had a hugely positive experience. There are many households, including my own, where people are working from home and also travelling to and from work. This dual model whereby people might be part of the time in their work premises and part of the time at home is going to be part of the future of working and of remote working. I do not think that full-time remote working is an option for productive work spaces in some cases. However, in some areas it

works really well and allows a more family friendly dynamic. That shows why this is important for a couple with a new-build house. I am speaking in general terms but people know what I mean. For a young couple who have just built a house or a young person who has just built their own home, getting connected to broadband in rural Ireland is super-important in the context of their work. Such people might not have the option of accessing remote working hubs.

I thank the Minister of State for some clarification on the matter. It is good news, and something I can go back to my constituents with.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy is absolutely right. The NBP is revitalising rural Ireland. It is allowing people to spend time in their home village or at their home farm, with their family, looking after somebody and they can spend time and spend money in their in their local area. It might not be every day of the week, but just the being able to go back to where they are from and spend time there is breathing new life into areas. You can see it with the new businesses that are springing up in villages around the country. Our contract with NBI states that it does not get paid until it connects people. It gets paid for each premises it connects, so it has a clear incentive. After it connects a premises, there is then a subscription revenue. That is the incentive for it to do the work, and it avoids the problem whereby somebody has not been connected and yet we are still paying. I am very grateful for that.

If the Deputy wants any details on the roll-out in Cork or in any other county, I can provide specific details if it is of use.

Deputy David Stanton: On the same topic, it could even be the same people in the same constituency. I have a young family that built a house recently. Fibre had already passed the house before they could get connected. They have been informed that it could be months before they can be connected. The house has to be surveyed by NBI before it can be connected. The houses on each side are already connected. This man wants to work from home and cannot do so. He is frustrated as to why NBI cannot survey his house in a shorter time. He is being told that NBI cannot do it. This is causing fierce frustration when it has already passed the house and when the houses on either side are connected. Can the Minister of State give us any indication as to how this might be changed?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: In this situation, the road has been connected but their house was built since the line was put in. A survey has to be carried out before the house can be connected. The constituent is frustrated by the length of time that it is taking. That is why I am going to work with NBI to agree on a procedure. At the moment, that person is not guaranteed to get broadband within months. Under the contract, they are guaranteed to get it in years. I want to make sure they are not left until the end. This is a seven-year project. A significant number of people will be getting this in 2025 and 2026, and the Deputy can imagine how frustrated they are. I will work with NBI and see how we can agree a reasonable, fair and practical way to give people an indication of how long it takes to get connected if they have built new homes in the intervention area.

Questions Nos 68 to 90, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan

91. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the ways his Department is supporting the development of fixed-bottom offshore wind infrastructure for power generation; his further ambitions and development timescales for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9953/23]

Deputy David Stanton: Will the Minister comment on reports at the weekend that floating wind generation may be placed on the long finger? Many companies are worried about this. This question is about fixed-bottom offshore wind infrastructure for power generation, and the ambitions and development timescale for same. The Minister might also address the really topical matter of the floating offshore wind turbines. There is genuine concern they are being put into a so-called phase 3, with a very long timescale. It is crucial this be addressed and clarified.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The question is on the roll-out of offshore wind turbines. Seven projects have been granted licences and are being fast-tracked under the old system. A new renewable option will be run for the next phase of projects. The projects will be will be plan led rather than developer led and concentrated in certain areas. The point of this is to speed up the development of offshore wind energy projects, which is a priority in response to the war in Ukraine. It is in line with the REPowerEU strategy, which asks member states to designate certain areas in the marine area as go-to areas where planning permission is granted more quickly with the aim of getting consents issued within 12 months. Shortly, I expect that the Minister, Deputy Ryan will bring proposals to the Cabinet to approve this approach and we will see our first phase projects being addressed.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State for his response. There is alarm because the Department has done a U-turn on phase 2 projects. Phase 2 involves the next tranche of projects to help deliver on the climate targets for 2030. The industry was assured it would include floating offshore wind projects off the south and west coasts. These have been primed by credible developers who have committed to invest considerable resources in preparing for the opportunity. Will the Minister of State confirm the current situation? Is the Government still committed to allowing the floating offshore wind developments to go ahead, as committed to by the Minister, Deputy Ryan, or has there been a change in policy? This is extremely serious for the industry.

The designated marine area plans for the delineation of zones for the projects in question should be treated in the same way as those for bottom-fixed technology. This would ensure the areas achieve go-to area status under REPowerEU enabling instruments. I urge the Minister of State and Government to clarify this urgently because it is causing considerable confusion and a lack of confidence in what the Government is doing.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Offshore wind energy is a large part of the decarbonisation process and is absolutely critical. There has been no policy change. Floating wind turbines will be pursued off the west coast because the water is too deep to support fixed-base wind farms. Those of the east and south coasts, in shallower waters, will be progressed first but there has been no change. If anything, the pace has been accelerated. We will use the shortest consenting procedure we can legally obtain while being compliant with EU law. Offshore wind energy developments will be rolled out as fast as possible, and we will continue to liaise with the industry. I speak to offshore wind industry leaders at every opportunity when I am invited and will continue to correspond with them. Their concern is misplaced because there has been no

policy change.

Deputy David Stanton: The issue concerns floating turbines versus fixed turbines.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We are supporting both floating and fixed turbines and there has been no policy change.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): That concludes Question Time. We overran the runway.

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Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Ukraine War

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thought I saw a memo from the Ceann Comhairle stating the senior Minister is meant to notify the House if not available.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We have a Minister of State.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is not what the Standing Order states. It states the senior Minister should come to the House to reply to the question. This question is for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Unfortunately, we have what we have.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I have the answer. Tá an freagra agam.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister of State has made himself available and is prepared to reply. Deputy Ó Cuív has four minutes and is using them.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Chair should report to the Ceann Comhairle that there has once again been a flagrant disregard for the Standing Order on Topical Issue matters.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I will ensure that is conveyed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Under the Standing Order, I should have been given the option of either proceeding or waiting until the Minister was available. That is the Standing Order. I do not make the Standing Orders; the House makes them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We will convey that to the Minister. The Ceann Comhairle will be made aware of that as well. The Deputy has four minutes, which is gone.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is a matter of procedure, not a matter of-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Anyway, proceed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is a year since the Ukraine war started and a flood of refugees started coming into the country. The past year has seen a huge increase in the number of asylum seekers coming here. I understand in excess of 85,000 people have come here from Ukraine and other countries seeking refuge. I commend the Government, Department and particularly the people on their response to this influx and the way accommodation has been provided throughout the State. However, I have noticed that in this country we often get the big things or polices right, as has been the case, but fail abysmally on the more detailed delivery. When people take on a burden, it is important the State pays them on time if it says it is going to pay them. The reality is the Department has failed to pay people on time and there are people who have been waiting months, perhaps with huge overheads and investment costs. This does not inspire confidence among bankers. Many of those affected depend on loans and funders. What is happening has great potential to put contractors off remaining in the system this spring and make them revert to offering holiday accommodation. This trend will be particularly acute in areas that are holiday destinations.

A very important role of the Government is always to pay people on time. Prompt payment should be adhered to absolutely. If the Department does not have the capacity to make the payments, it should farm out responsibility to those who do. My suggestion is that it asks Pobal, an organisation that is totally controlled by the State, to make these payments because Pobal was already successfully given this devolved function by two Departments in respect of the rural social scheme and Tús scheme with regard to paying the wages. It was paying a large number of wages, which was quite complex, but it did so on time and all the time. The great thing about it was that this function was delivered from Pobal's office in Clifden in County Galway, which created some very considerable and welcome employment in that neck of the woods.

I suggest that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth ensures that all centres housing refugees be paid up to date, without delay and as soon as possible. In the meantime, a clear outline of the timeline of outstanding payments should be given to each provider. They seem not to be able to get that basic information. The Department should expedite the development of a system to ensure that after that, all payments are made monthly, as they should be. Finally, the possibility of devolving this role to Pobal's office in Clifden should be pursued immediately. One should always go to people who have a proven track record that they can do the job.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine one year ago, and the invoking of the temporary protection directive by the European Union shortly afterwards, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has worked intensively as part of the cross-Government response to the Ukraine crisis.

The operational challenges brought about by responding to the conflict are significant. Our country has never experienced an influx of displaced persons like the one we have seen over the past 12 months. As the Deputy said, numbers seeking international protection have also increased, adding to accommodation capacity issues.

Overseeing provision of accommodation on this scale during this timeframe for all those

who require it remains immensely challenging. Due to the urgent need to source accommodation, the Department has contracted in excess of 43,000 beds to accommodate beneficiaries of temporary protection with more than 720 providers, including hotels, guest houses, bed and breakfast accommodations, hostels, commercial self-catering accommodation, scout halls, religious congregations and certain other repurposed settings.

The unprecedented demand for accommodation and, by association, the level of transactions involved, is significant. With more than 750 contractors paid monthly, the payments process is an operation of considerable scale. The Department is obliged to ensure that invoices are correct and while some are straightforward, many require queries to the provider and additional documentation to confirm what is owed. I am not sure if the suggestion made by the Deputy will help to speed things up in any way given the scale of the challenge we have with this.

To provide some context of the scale of the Department's payment activity, from the outset of the war to date, the Department has made in excess of 3,900 payments to a value of more than €600 million. The Department spent almost €520 million on Ukraine accommodation and related costs in 2022 alone. Of this, almost €200 million was paid out within November and December 2022, including close to 400 transactions in November to the value of €55 million and a further 475 transactions in December to the value of €143 million, which included a number of significant high-value payments. This points to the substantial ramping up of payments in recent months. In 2023 to date, 615 payments have been made to the value of €96 million.

I acknowledge that due to the quantum involved, some providers are experiencing delays in receiving payment. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is mindful of the impact and has been proactive in implementing a number of measures to substantially reduce the backlog. As was done for the backlog clearance in December, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, has doubled the resources dedicated to this task since the start of the year. That figure is currently at 20 and increasing. This has begun to make a difference.

Furthermore, the Department has just completed a business optimisation process to enable outsourcing options to be pursued and ensure internal processes are as efficient as they can be, including for all process automation. The Department has already begun outsourcing certain aspects of invoicing work to Pobal agency staff both to work directly on clearing the backlog and to engage with providers with invoicing issues. Officials within the Department have also investigated the feasibility of using other shared services options, including the team who process the housing assistance payments, HAP, payments for local authorities and other commercial providers, to consider further outsourcing and enable an enduring model, which will ensure that despite the scale, payments can be made on time. The Department will continue to dedicate internal resources in the short term to clear the backlog and will pause or delay work in other areas within the Department, where necessary.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Obviously, the money is big; one would not expect otherwise. The number of providers is relatively small, however. There are 720 providers. I do not accept the argument that there were suddenly queries. I have raised questions on behalf of a number of providers and every time I raise a question, people come back and say they will be paid shortly. They never come back and say they are sorry, they raised queries and did not get replies or they have outstanding issues that they have to get clarified. They have not said that.

I have also received many complaints from providers saying they cannot get hard information as to when they will get paid. I find it hard to believe that people have not been paid for

October and November of last year, for example, that there are outstanding queries, that those queries are not being answered and that people are ringing Deputies to find out where their payments are. As I said, the lie to that is the fact that in responses from the Department to parliamentary questions on this issue, people inevitably never raise that issue and just cite the amount of work.

I have a clear view that everybody is entitled to payment and it is up to the State to find a way to make that payment. If the Department did not have the resources, it should have outsourced it right from the beginning to relevant State agencies. I am not trying to give it to the private sector. We have plenty of bodies within the State that are used to making large numbers of payments efficiently, on time and all the time. Therefore, I hope the Minister of State will suggest to the senior Minister that he talk to Pobal. As I said, there is a particularly suitable office in Clifden. We need the jobs, the Government needs the work done and Pobal always deliver on time and all the time.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I would again stress the importance of due diligence. That is why there are queries at times. As I said, the Minister has engaged with Pobal and the team that processes HAP. With regard to the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, contracts are agreed in terms of capacity for an IPAS centre, as specified in the individual contract. Payments under the agreed contracts, inclusive of VAT, will be made every four weeks, as specified, and the Deputy mentioned that. This amounts to an all-inclusive sum in respect of provision of accommodation and all the other services outlined in the agreement. IPAS can confirm that all payments are made four weeks in advance. As of 28 February, there are currently no outstanding payments to IPAS accommodation providers.

The scale of the response and the challenges it presents extend not only to the initial provision of accommodation but also supporting ancillary systems. I have notes on the parliamentary questions and representations the Deputy made. I wish to reiterate that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is conscious of the need to expedite payments. I understand the distress and frustration that payment delays can cause providers and regret that delays remain an issue despite the Department's best efforts.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth continues to pursue improvements. I can assure the House that the Department is according this issue the very highest priority. The Department is committed to maintaining a practice of more timely payments to ensure that all those who assist those fleeing this unjust war are paid for their services.

The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, wishes to acknowledge and thank the staff in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who are involved in processing invoices. As has been mentioned, the scale is, and continues to be, significant. Many people have worked extended nights and over weekends to assist in reducing the backlog. I thank them for their professionalism, dedication and commitment to helping to process as many payments as possible.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): With the agreement of Deputy Stanton, we will move on to the third Topical Issue matter from Deputy O'Reilly on the need for improved bus services in Fingal.

Dáil Éireann
Public Transport

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I agree with Teachta Ó Cuív. I am always conscious when we raise this, and I do not mean this in a disrespectful way to the person who has turned up, that there is a rule. It is disrespectful to expect us to come in when the relevant line Minister does not. That is not directed to the Minister of State. I am very conscious that he is here and I do not mean that in a disrespectful way to him. With the assistance of the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, perhaps the Ceann Comhairle might be able to resolve this issue.

I wish to raise with the Minister of State a number of issues regarding the bus services in my constituency of Dublin Fingal. Recently, across all transport providers, including Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland, there have been a large number of issues regarding the level of service provided to the public.

10 o'clock

For the information of the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, my constituency is a commuter constituency. We are actually very massively under-employed in the place I am lucky to represent and to live. The vast majority of people who work or go to college leave my constituency to do so. They are heavily dependent on public transport. We like to avoid the car park that is the M1 in the morning if we can. Some of us can use the train but even for those who are lucky enough to be near a train station, many people still have to use the bus to be able to get into work and go to college. We have had a litany of buses cancelled at that last minute. They are disappearing off the real-time information or they are arriving late. These are only just some of the problems. I have been in constant contact with the Department and with the National Transport Authority about the necessity for services to dramatically improve for my constituents. The bus services across north county Dublin, and in particular routes No. 101, 102, 33A, and the H2, among others, are essential parts of our community and essential for our community to function. This essential service is being undermined when the buses do not show up or arrive late. The people of Fingal have a right to get to work. They have a right to get to school on time and to go about their daily business safe in the knowledge that their bus is not going to be cancelled at the last minute or disappear off the real-time information or, as was the case when I got the bus myself recently, just not turn up or arrive late as it does many times.

This week a woman contacted me about the No. 101 bus service. She waited for the 5.55 p.m. bus from Busáras but it did not appear for one hour. This left her getting the bus at 6.55 p.m., and that is a very regular occurrence for this lady. It is not acceptable. Essentially, it means that people are at panic stations all the time. They are missing meetings, or perhaps there is something that a person wants to go to in his or her own community. We are people who are active in our communities and we want other people to be active in their community, but people cannot do that if they cannot rely on the bus. Likewise, it presents a problem if a person is turning up late for childcare. If you have ever had to do it, it is absolutely mortifying. If you do it continually you send a very poor message to the people you are paying to work hard to look after your kids about where your priorities are. It is not the person's fault, they turn up, they have their money or tickets and they are ready to get on the bus but it does not turn up.

With regard to the No. 33 bus route, and specifically the No. 33A part of that, this service as provided by Go-Ahead Ireland is one of the worst I have seen. There are countless phantom buses, late buses, and non-arrivals. It has happened to me on many occasions. The No. 102 route from Dublin Airport to Sutton is used by a lot of school students. Parents and students

have told me the bus is often late or sometimes just does not show up. The students will get into trouble at school for coming in late. They will spend the day in a deficit because they have not been able to get in on time. When the bus does not show or it is late in the evening they are left waiting in the wind, the cold and the rain, or whatever the weather happens to be.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I thank the Deputy. I have noted the comments the Deputy made, as well as those made by Deputy Ó Cuív. The senior Ministers are not always available, but I have noted and will relay the comments back.

I want to explain at the outset that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport but is not involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA works with the public transport operators, who deliver the services and who have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. That said, I reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a critical role in the delivery of this goal.

To support this objective, in budget 2023, the Department of Transport secured €563 million of funding for public service obligation, PSO, and Transport for Ireland, TFI, Local Link services, up from €538 million in 2022. The Department of Transport's sustainable mobility policy, launched last year, recognises that tailored transport solutions are needed for urban and rural areas, including in the Fingal area.

The Minister for Transport is very conscious of the need to connect our people and places across Ireland by improving public transport services. To this end, the Government's vision for both rural and urban Ireland is ambitious. Moreover, a cost-efficient public transport sector, including affordable and accessible public transport services, is crucial in terms of effecting a modal shift from private to public transport. The figures in that regard are good.

I will now turn specifically to the Fingal area. The Deputy is no doubt familiar that Fingal spans the area of both the BusConnects Dublin network redesign and the services proposed under the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan. The NTA has advised the Department of Transport that there is work under way in providing additional services in the Balbriggan, Stamullen, Ballyboughal and Swords corridor, which will be developed later this year for future implementation. Additionally, the BusConnects network redesign will bring significantly enhanced services to parts of Fingal, including Blanchardstown, Swords, and the east coast corridor. TFI Local Link Louth-Meath-Fingal has also confirmed that it is working with the NTA designing new bus routes under Connecting Ireland. With more services coming in 2023 and beyond, these new routes will be transformative and have a fundamental impact on the health and well-being of communities in the area.

In the more urban parts of Fingal, BusConnects Dublin will provide more sustainable, accessible, and reliable transport options, resulting in higher quality service. By revitalising public transport and providing safe active travel routes, the project represents a necessary modal shift away from private transport. To date the NTA has submitted planning applications to An Bord Pleanála in respect of six of the core bus corridor schemes, including the Ballymun-Finglas to city centre scheme, and expects to submit applications for all remaining schemes by the end of quarter 2 of 2023.

It must be noted that industry-wide challenges with driver recruitment continue to pose a challenge. This is being closely monitored between the NTA and the transport operators and the launch dates continue to be kept under review to ensure that the transport operators are operationally ready to introduce the new services.

I am aware the Deputy is very passionate about and interested in accessible public transport as an issue in representing her community. The Department of Transport and its agencies are progressively making public transport more accessible for people who are disabled, including in rural areas, by ensuring that new infrastructure and services are accessible from the start, and also by retrofitting older infrastructure and facilities. It goes without saying that the provision of accessible, integrated and sustainable transport is critical for all members of society, and especially those in vulnerable situations, including people with disabilities and older people.

Again, I note the points made by the Deputy about the routes Nos. 101 and 33A.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Before I respond, I must acknowledge and thank Deputy Stanton for swapping his slot with me.

In his contribution, the Minister of State has said that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options and that public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. I am not being smart, but I would genuinely like the Minister of State to go down and stand at a bus stop in my constituency and say that to people as the buses disappear off the real-time information.

I understand that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, is not responsible for drafting the timetables and, notwithstanding his experience driving the trucks today, neither do we expect him to jump in and drive the buses. I completely understand the Minister's role in this, but the Government is funding a service that is not working, in a constituency where we are heavily reliant on public transport. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, that we do all that we can in here to encourage people to get out of their cars and get onto public transport. It is very hard to do that when one cannot be sure the bus is going to arrive.

The Minister of State referred to accessibility. As it happens, in my constituency some of the most efficient services that are provided are not accessible. They are provided by private bus providers, and some of the more reliable routes are not accessible. If a person living in my constituency has a disability then he or she is doubly disadvantaged. There is an issue if the lifts do not work at the train station. A person must phone in advance to say that he or she is going to need the train. On top of that, a good portion of the transport that is available is not accessible to that person. We want people to have an alternative. People cannot afford to fill the tank of the car, as the Minister of State will be aware, but *sin scéal eile*. We do want people to be able to use the buses. I challenge the Minister of State to go to any bus stop in my constituency and try to stand up his statement. That is not how the people I represent feel.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I note the points made by the Deputy, particularly on accessibility and lifts. It is critically important that these issues are addressed. It is critically important that everybody has a right to public transport and a right to access to employment services, training, and childcare services. All of those are essential and key components of good functioning urban and rural areas. This is what the Government is setting out to achieve.

There has been the 20% reduction in fees and additional measures such as the 50% reduction in fares for 16 to 23-year-olds. All of these have resulted in a significant uptake in public

transport. It is fantastic. The uptake in Ireland post pandemic has been greater than that in many other European countries, and we should be grateful for that.

As regards BusConnects, the G spine, which serves areas such as Ballyfermot, Liffey Valley, Clondalkin and Islandbridge, launched in October 2022, the H spine, running from Howth to Malahide, launched in June 2021, and the C Spine, running from Maynooth through Celbridge, Leixlip and Lucan and on through the city to Ringsend and Sandymount, was launched in November 2021. A significant amount of work is ongoing but I note the serious points raised by the Deputy with regard to specific routes. It is disappointing that people are waiting at bus stops for buses that do not show up. That throws their plans for the day into disarray. It is critically important we at Government level are putting the investment in, but it also critical that bus service providers work with us to ensure those services are provided notwithstanding the challenges relating to recruitment, employment and so on, as well as the accessibility issues raised by the Deputy.

Litter Pollution

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Office of the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this issue and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, for being here to take it. I am sure I am speaking to the converted as far as he is concerned when I state we live in a beautiful country. It is fabulous. There are lovely hedgerows, fields, mountains, lakes, rivers and coastlines throughout the country, but the amount of litter and fly-tipping is increasing all the time. It is particularly evident on rural roads. Now that the vegetation has died back, all the cans, bottles, paper, plastic and other litter that has been dumped there can be seen. It is a blight on the landscape. It is a national shame.

I am calling for a national campaign to combat this problem. It should not be a once-off spring clean but rather a year-round campaign. I would like the Minister of State himself to head and personify it. It needs a champion. Maybe he will take that on, become known as the Minister against litter and clean up the country once and for all.

I pay tribute to those involved in Tidy Towns, who do amazing work, as well as Irish Business Against Litter, which was formed by Tom Cavanagh many years ago and does amazing work. I pay tribute to the Clean Coasts programme and, in my area in particular, Clean Coasts Ballynamona, which is led by Proinsias Ó Tuama, a teacher at St. Colman's Community College. It is an award-winning group that picks up litter along the coastline.

I am very concerned about remote areas such as rural roads and wild places that are being despoiled and ruined by people throwing away bags of litter. The litter is then attacked by crows and vermin and scattered. We need to find, name and shame those responsible, but we also need to have pride in our area and our country. We need to call on nationalism here and stop this scourge once and for all. Everything that can be done must be done. We must be unrelenting. People who come to Ireland and see the extent of this problem cannot believe it is so bad in some areas. I was going home on a Sunday recently and noticed that a person had just dumped two black bags of rubbish. The crows were beginning to open the bags and tear the rubbish apart. That is happening ever more often. Far more needs to be done.

I acknowledge that money is being allocated to local authorities and spent but each local authority should have a champion in respect of this issue. That person's one and only job should

be to combat litter and to provide education, information and awareness-raising programmes to make people ashamed of litter and bring their litter home with them rather than dumping it out a car window. Walking along a country road, you can tell where the chip bag was emptied because you can see where all the litter has been thrown in particular areas. There are bottles, cans and plastic, which lasts almost forever. It impacts on wildlife - plants and animals and the visual beauty that should be there.

We need to get serious about this. We need somebody to champion it and be unrelenting on it. It should not just be about having a spring clean and then forgetting about it for the rest of the year. We need to do everything we can. I refer to recycling programmes. There was a talk earlier about coffee cups and reducing their use and so on. We are not doing it quickly enough, however. This issue should be highlighted on television screens, in newspapers, schools and cinemas and at community groups. There could be signs for car bumpers and so on to raise awareness. The Minister should have a committee of creative people working with him to prevent littering. In addition, there is a need for more incentives to help people to clean up their areas.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I thank the Deputy for his impassioned plea on this issue. It is a matter that exercises us all. In terms of champions, it is our collective responsibility here to lead. Tomorrow, I will be notifying the public of the ending of the hedgerow cutting season and of burning from 1 March. There are fires ablaze throughout the country at the moment. The Deputy rightly mentioned the impact on nature and water, including water quality. The nature of what is being dumped these days is shocking, including toxic materials. We have a real problem on our hands and it is impacting on our image abroad but, more important, on our collective well-being and sense of collective responsibility.

In accordance with the provisions of the Waste Management Act 1996, each local authority is responsible for the supervision and enforcement of the relevant provisions of that Act and of the Litter Pollution Act and the recovery and disposal of waste within its functional area. It is necessary to advise the House that under section 60(3) of the Waste Management Act 1996, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, is precluded from exercising any power or control in respect of the performance by a local authority, in particular circumstances, of a statutory function vested in it. Under the legislation, individual local authorities are responsible for dealing with cases involving the illegal disposal of waste in their functional areas, and it is matter for them to take the appropriate enforcement and clean-up actions.

Although the primary responsibility for management and enforcement responses to illegal waste activity lies with local authorities, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications continues to provide extensive policy, financial and legislative support. For example, it provided €750,000 under the anti-litter and anti-graffiti awareness grant scheme for 2022, with a similar amount expected to be made available in 2023. Under this scheme, local authorities are responsible for selecting suitable projects and locations for funding and grant allocations. Funding is also provided annually in support of a number of important anti-litter initiatives such as the national spring clean, Picker Pals, the PURE Project and Irish Business against Litter. The Deputy mentioned Clean Coasts as well. I gave out awards to that body this year. It is involved in fantastic communities throughout the country. The recently enacted Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act advances several legislative provisions that will further enhance efforts in this area, including providing for the GDPR-compliant use of a range of technologies such as CCTV for litter enforcement purposes and an increase in the

level of on-the-spot fines for littering.

In addition, the Department provides significant support to the local authority sector in its efforts to tackle illegal dumping. Almost €15 million, including €2.8 million in 2022, has been provided to the sector under the anti-dumping initiative since it was first introduced in 2017 to encourage a collaborative approach between local authorities, community groups and other State agencies to tackle the problem. The Department also continues to invest heavily in the local authority waste enforcement network through the local authority waste enforcement measures grant scheme, with the intention of maintaining a visible presence of waste enforcement personnel on the ground in the State. A total of €7.7 million was provided to local authorities under the scheme in 2022, while a further €1 million was provided to support the ongoing enhancement of the three waste enforcement regional lead authorities.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State for his response and the work he, the people in his Department and the local authorities are doing. We are lacking passion on this issue, however. He stated that under the Waste Management Act 1996, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, cannot interfere with local authorities and is precluded from exercising any power or control in respect of their performance. What if a local authority does not perform? What happens then? The Minister cannot do anything in that circumstance. We need to revisit and reconsider that Act.

The Minister of State outlined that €750,000 was provided under the anti-litter and anti-graffiti awareness grant scheme for 2022. We need to do more in that regard to raise awareness and provide education, including in schools, on this issue. As I stated, we need to name and shame people who are discovered littering. We should make it a point of shame and on the other side of it, it should be a point of pride for an area that is clean. As I said earlier, my real concern today is the rural country roads. On almost any road you travel on now at this time of the year when, as the Minister of State said, the hedges are cut back or should have been cut back to some extent anyway, you see it in all its glory. Plastic, bottles, cans, nappies, papers and black bags are dumped everywhere. The campaign the Minister of State has described is evidently not working. We need to do more. I call on the Minister of State, his Department and the local authorities to start taking this very seriously. This issue should be tackled on a daily basis. It is a national blight and it is polluting our rivers, seas, streams and land. It is unsightly, toxic and dangerous and it needs to be stopped. I do not think we are taking it seriously enough. A national awareness campaign through television, cinema, newspapers and social media should be invoked here at the very least. It should be unrelenting, because we are losing. I am sure colleagues here will agree with me that we find it on almost every road we travel now. I know that Tidy Towns and Irish Business Against Litter, IBAL, are doing great work in and around the towns but if you go further out into the country that is where you see it, in all its awful glory. I urge the Minister of State to get stuck into this.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputy Gould also agrees with the Deputy and strongly supports him.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I want to raise a couple of points in summary. I agree with everything the Deputy has said. In relation to education in schools, the schools are at the forefront of this consistently, through the green flags initiative both in primary and secondary schools. Children are educating their parents. Late last year I met the Children and Young People's Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. They are appalled by this and want action on it as well. It is critically important that we work collaboratively. We need more prosecutions through the

Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2022, which will deal with issues around compliance and GDPR in the use of a range of technologies, including CCTV and other mobile recording devices, to determine environmental pollution. I think this is going to be important. In the past, it was very difficult to secure prosecutions. Once these regulations are approved, local authorities will be enabled to put in place both litter and waste enforcement measures involving GDPR-compliant use of technologies such as CCTV. We need a carrot-and-stick approach. That is really important.

Local authorities are highly active right across the country. The local government audit service ensures that there is a benchmarking how they perform their duties in this area. I agree with the Deputy on his point about campaigns. We need to use all media available to us, be it social media, television, radio, newspapers and other publications, to keep the public information and awareness side of it going. To be brutally honest, the people who carry out these activities, whether it is fly-tipping or throwing rubbish out of windows of cars, have no responsibility and have no pride in our State or our country. It is grossly irresponsible. Apart from all of the issues that the Deputy has mentioned in terms of the impact on our tourism industry, the impact on water, nature and all of that is hugely significant. We need to consistently double down on compliance and enforcement and awareness, as the Deputy has quite rightly pointed out as well.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Before adjourning, I note the points raised by other speakers on the manner in which the Topical Issue matters are being delegated. I realise that there is great difficulty in making time for everything but this is one of the things we have to make time for. We thank the Minister of State for making himself available but it should be noted that the responsible Ministers are expected to be in the House if they can. Only in special circumstances should they be absent. The Ceann Comhairle is aware of this and the various Departments and Ministers also will be made aware of it tomorrow morning.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.24 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 1 Márta 2023.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.24 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 1 March 2023.