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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 18 Eanáir 2024

Thursday, 18 January 2024

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Hospital Facilities

1. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of acute inpatient beds in the hospital system; the number of beds he will add this year; and if he has secured funding for the needed and promised 1,500 beds. [2054/24]

Deputy David Cullinane: My first question is in relation to the number of acute in-patient beds currently in the system, the number of additional acute in-patient beds that will be delivered in 2024 and, crucially, the 1,500 rapid-build beds that were much promised and spoken about last year. When will they be delivered? Has the funding been secured? What is the timeframe for the delivery of those beds?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank Deputy Cullinane for the question and his very appropriate ongoing agitation or advocacy for more beds. It is well established and, I think, agreed by all of us that there has been a significant deficit in the number of acute, high-dependency and critical care beds in the system. Since the start of 2020, as the Deputy will be aware, we have been in the process of adding a very significant number of beds. The latest numbers show that since the start of January, we have added 1,126 more hospital beds, a very significant increase. Without a doubt, it is one of the things that is helping to drive down waiting lists. We saw very encouraging results at the end of 2023. We are determined that this year will be the third year in a row in which the waiting lists fall.

Although a significant number of additional beds have been provided, we will all agree that more are required. This year, we have committed to opening an additional 147 beds around the country. In addition, a number of important projects are under way, with either the main buildings now under construction or the enabling works started. These include two 96-bed wards in University Hospital Limerick, UHL, which will provide 192 more beds in the hospital; 42

beds in Sligo where enabling works have been done and we are now looking to tender for the main works; and the net additional beds we will have in the national maternity hospital, where enabling works have commenced, and the national children's hospital, where construction will end later this year.

As I am out of time, I will address the 1,500 beds in my next response.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome any and every additional bed put into the system. The Minister spoke of 1,126 beds that were delivered up to January. That money and those beds were committed to in 2020. In fact, they were to be delivered much quicker. It has taken far too long to deliver all those beds. In my view, that goes back to the need to reform how we deliver major healthcare infrastructure. That is why the 1,500 rapid-build beds were very important. It was my understanding that they would be rapid modular build, could be built much quicker and would not take as long to deliver as the 1,200 beds.

The Minister spoke about 1,126 beds that were delivered. As I said, they were part of the 1,200 beds funded in 2020. We are still delivering some of those. Regarding the 147 beds that will come on-stream this year, I assume some or most of those were also part of the 1,200 beds that were funded many years ago. We need to hear from the Minister what the next step is and where we are as regards the 1,500 rapid-build beds.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Important progress has been made on the 1,500 beds. We are looking at a modular approach and rapid-build technologies, which can cut several years off these projects. Typically, these come in blocks of 24 beds, as do the traditional builds. The Deputy will have seen that they come in blocks of 24 and 48 beds, up to 96 beds, and they come faster. We are looking at them for a number of sites around the country. We have a provisional allocation as regards where we would like to see them in order to provide maximum value. We have already put out an expression of interest to the market. I am happy to say we have had a very strong response to that, both domestically and internationally. I am now working with Government colleagues to find a way to get going on those 1,500 beds. I want to see them being delivered as quickly as possible. We are working on getting to a point where we can announce their construction.

Deputy David Cullinane: Of course there are plans. That is the problem I have. The frustration is that the Department and HSE have done a lot of work identifying sites and, as the Minister said, looking at where they want the beds to be provided. I assume that will be in areas where there are pressure points. Much of that work has been done. The frustrating part is that these projects can be delivered very quickly. The Minister indicated that work had been done. Expressions of interest have been invited, and it is great there is interest being shown and these projects can happen very quickly, but has the funding been secured? The Minister said he will speak to his colleagues to begin delivering these beds. What does that mean? Will 50, 100 or 200 beds be delivered this year?

Appearing before the Joint Committee on Health, officials promised that 700 of those could be delivered in 2024. I do not see anything like that happening unless significant additional funding is provided. I fear that what will actually happen is that the Department will try to squeeze what it can from the existing capital envelope, which will impact other health projects, rather than doing what should be done, namely, secure the additional capital funding needed to deliver these beds on time, at scale and as quickly as possible.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: That is exactly what we want to do. We want to move forward with this as quickly as possible. I am not familiar with the figure of 700 beds but I will check with the officials as regards the thinking behind it.

The Deputy and I are in agreement on the need for more beds. Many beds have been delivered but we want to deliver many more. If we get agreement on providing all 1,500 beds, on the basis that 147 will be provided this year and in excess of 300 more are in the pipeline, there will be close to 500 in the pipeline. This means we will have 1,126 beds, plus the figure of slightly less than 500 and the 1,500. That number of beds will go a very long way.

We also have to keep the focus on productivity. It is not enough to just add more and more beds. We need virtual wards and beds. Critically, we need to reduce the average length of stay, which will free up the existing beds we have for patients.

Cancer Services

2. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on the impact on a number of cancer care programmes arising from the decision not to award any new development funding to the national cancer strategy in budget 2024, specifically the planned centralisation of surgical cancer services, the new model of patient follow-up and survivorship and plans for acute oncology nursing services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2015/24]

Deputy Duncan Smith: My question relates to funding for cancer care programmes arising from the decision not to award any new development funding to the national cancer strategy in budget 2024, specifically on the planned centralisation of surgical cancer services, the new model of patient follow-up and survivorship and plans for acute oncology nursing services.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the question, which is on a matter that is very close to my own heart. The advancement of cancer services for patients in Ireland is a priority for me and the Government. The Deputy will be aware that we allocated €40 million to the national cancer strategy. That money has been put to very good use by our healthcare workers. We have hired nearly 400 additional staff with that funding, including more than 140 nurses and 40 consultants. We also allocated €30 million to new cancer drugs in that period. There has, therefore, been a very sizeable investment.

The Deputy's question looks to the future. It says that is great and important but asks what is next. This year, while budget 2024 did not include specific ring-fenced funding for the national cancer strategy, there will be significant investment in the progress of cancer services nonetheless. The Deputy will be aware that I recently allocated €20 million for new medicines for this year. We are also targeting an additional €10 million in savings from the drugs budget. The intention is to provide €30 million for new drugs this year. Typically, approximately one third of that will go to cancer drugs. That will be new investment in new treatments and medicines for patients.

We are also opening and staffing many more beds and we will hire more than 2,000 more healthcare professionals this year. We are hiring several hundred more consultants this year, a number of whom will be oncologists and other healthcare professionals working in oncology. While there is no ring-fenced funding for the national cancer control programme, there will, nonetheless, be important and additional capacity and, therefore, services available to cancer

patients this year through the budget.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is recognised. The Minister mentioned the €40 million but that is since 2017, when this national cancer strategy came into being. It is said that we need €20 million per year to implement the national cancer strategy. While the funding for new medicines and increased capacity across the health service will help, the Minister will note that the national cancer strategy is aimed at early detection and prevention. We need to see investment in that.

The surgical oncology centralisation project, which supports cancer surgery, the national plan for radiation oncology, the phase 2 expansions and radio therapy services enhancements were not mentioned. These are all specific areas in the HSE's national service plan that need investment. We need to see funding going to them. It is not enough to speak broadly of investment in the health service and hope that investment raises the level of service provision in these specific areas of the HSE service plan. We need more detail and funding, which we have not seen from the Government in the two most recent budgets.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The €40 million was provided for 2021 and 2022, not since 2017. Those were the first two budgets of this Government. I asked exactly the same question the Deputy raised, namely, what is the full amount of funding sought under the national cancer strategy. The answer I was given was €20 million. In budget 2021, I allocated the full €20 million and a lot of money for new medicines. In 2022, I allocated a further €20 million, so that was €40 million for 2021 and 2022. The HSE was not able to use the full €20 million in both years so we retained the money and the HSE's was able to keep hiring sanctioned staff. That happened right through 2023. The Deputy will be aware that the HSE hired over 1,000 more staff than it was funded to hire in 2023. As a result, there have been many important new services and quicker access for cancer patients. I will refer to that in my next response.

Deputy Duncan Smith: As the Minister knows, the national cancer strategy is an ambitious but realistic document. There is a real risk that cancer outcomes, which have been trending in a more positive direction in recent years, will begin to go backwards if we do not see that funding continued in the specific areas that have been outlined.

There seems to be a disconnect between what the Minister is saying here and what the advocacy groups, the Oireachtas cross-party group on cancer, the Irish Cancer Society and other groups are seeing. Some engagement in the first quarter of this year by the Minister and his Department with the Irish Cancer Society on the specifics of the roll-out of the cancer strategy would be welcome. I would look forward to his response on that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I would look forward to that. For years the Irish Cancer Society advocated for the abolition of inpatient hospital charges. We delivered that last year and the Irish Cancer Society deserves great credit for it. Many of the groups argue that we need quicker access. I am pleased to note that due to the investment in 2021, 2022 and 2023, waiting times are down across the board. Waiting times for patients are down across the rapid access clinics for breast, lung and prostate, which is a great testament to the work being done. Last year, over 46,000 patients were seen, 11,000 cancer surgeries were performed and nearly 90,000 chemotherapy and other systemic anti-cancer treatments were carried out. There is, therefore, a lot of work going on. New services are being provided. The CAR-T cell therapy service in St. James's Hospital for children is revolutionary and mind-blowing. I have also allocated €3 million to the fantastic community cancer support groups this year. We will keep investing in and

growing these services. There will be more and newer treatments and quicker access, as well as more holistic support, not just intensive hospital-based support but also community-based and psychosocial supports that patients and families need.

Hospital Appointments Status

3. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital-initiated elective cancellations in 2023; and the number of elective procedures outsourced to private medicine in public hospitals or private hospitals in the same period. [2055/24]

Deputy David Cullinane: There is lots of information that we unfortunately cannot get through parliamentary questions. I understand the reason, namely, that there is an industrial relations dispute. I respect the right of people to engage in that. The information I am looking for is on the number of hospital-initiated cancellations for elective procedures. As we know, when the pressure is on in emergency departments, often one of the first things to happen is that elective procedures are cancelled, almost wholesale. How many cancellations in 2023 were initiated by hospitals?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I can provide the Deputy with information to the end of quarter 3. Unfortunately, Fórsa workers are refusing to provide information to the HSE, the Department and Parliament. This does not fall within a work-to-rule action, and I have clear advice on that. Nonetheless, that is what they are doing and we have to deal with it.

I acknowledge the distress this has caused to patients and families. I have been in the position, as have many others, I am sure, where a family member or friend has been waiting for a procedure, be it a minor procedure or a major operation. There is a lot involved in that. People look forward to it and they can be nervous. They may be admitted the night beforehand and may go through full preparation only to be told the theatre is not available because there has been a road traffic accident. They may be told a high-dependency bed is not available for them after the procedure, typically because something has happened in the accident and emergency department. That can cause a lot of distress.

As regards the figures the Deputy asked for, at the end of quarter 3 last year, there had been 30,833 cancellations. It is important to contextualise that number. It is 2% of the total number of procedures. While it is a large number, it is in the context of about 1.5 million procedures. Critically, when I was looking through the Deputy's question earlier this week, I asked the Department to talk to the HSE about how many of those cancelled procedures were rescheduled. It is one thing for a procedure to be cancelled but it is important that patients get care. The HSE has indicated that in a large majority of those cases, the procedure will have been rescheduled and the patient will have received either the care or a new appointment.

Deputy David Cullinane: We all know the majority of cases are rescheduled. The problem is that people end up waiting longer. By cancelling elective procedures because of pressures in accident and emergency departments, we end up just shifting the problem from one part of the health service to another. I respect the fact that there is an industrial relations dispute, but it is extraordinary that the Minister, the Department and the HSE, at a senior level, are not being given information on basic data like the number of hospital cancellations. There is lots more information I have sought that we cannot get. My message to the Minister is to resolve that industrial relations dispute by engaging with Fórsa. It is not tenable to be in the position where

basic information cannot be delivered to the Opposition or the Minister for Health.

While I am talking about the cancellation of elective procedures, I put it to the Minister that there is an awful lot of foot dragging with the elective-only hospitals. We have not even identified sites in Dublin yet, years after the delivery of those hospitals was promised. We are a long way away from delivering them in Cork and Galway. That will be the real solution to the problem of elective procedures being cancelled.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There are a few things to unpick there, the first of which is around waiting times for inpatient and day-case patients. There is good news in that regard. The Deputy will have seen the releases in recent weeks. We have looked at 2023. Thanks to an enormous effort by healthcare workers across the country, the waiting time versus the Covid peak for someone waiting the longest - over 12 months - has fallen by nearly half. We will continue to make progress. Great efforts have been made in every hospital to make that happen. The waiting time, particularly for long waiters, is falling quickly, which is something we all want to see.

On elective work, I share the Deputy's frustrations with the processes by which the State engages in building hospitals. It is deeply frustrating, which is why I sanctioned six surgical hubs. One of them will be in the Deputy's neck of the woods, in University Hospital Waterford. I visited Mount Carmel Community Hospital, where the first one is under construction. We will take over that hub in the coming months. The surgical teams I am talking to believe these hubs can be a game-changer for people waiting for procedures, both inpatient and day case.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the surgical hubs, as anybody would, but they are not a substitute for the elective-only hospitals. I share the Minister's frustration but I have also expressed frustration about the slow pace of delivery of elective-only hospitals. We are talking about lots of big infrastructural projects in healthcare. Members of the Joint Committee on Health get frustrated with digital transformation and all the other big projects that take far too long. The political system will have to deal with the fact that we have to challenge conservative thinking in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform. The political system is prioritising major projects in housing and health, especially projects such s elective-only hospitals which will make a huge difference and provide additional elective capacity. That is the big reform that will drive down wait times like never before. The waiting and foot-dragging is mainly caused by the Department of Public Expenditure, Reform and NDP Delivery but the political system is also at fault for not challenging and changing it. That is one of the big changes that has to happen in 2024.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There have been some important changes. I brought this matter to the Ministers, Deputies McGrath and Donohoe, some time ago in regard to major capital projects in healthcare. There have been some important changes and I will mention two in particular. First, the major capital ceiling was increased by €100 million to €200 million and, second, the four-stage process was reduced to two stages and is now moving quicker. I do not disagree with the Deputy's comments, not so much in terms of the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform but in terms of the process itself, which is a painstaking one. Nonetheless, none of us should underestimate the impact these surgical hubs will have. We have seen a massive reduction in long waiters in Tallaght. The hub in Mount Carmel will serve St. James's Hospital and St. Vincent's Hospital. We are going to have one in Swords that will serve the major hospitals on the north side of the city-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: And the city apparently.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We will then have them in Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway. They will make a big difference to the national inpatient day-case lists.

Deputy David Cullinane: I do not dispute that.

Nursing Homes

4. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health to respond to the recent ERSI report on the changes and challenges facing the Irish long-term residential care sector since Covid-19; his views on the consolidation of nursing home ownership, with 14 operators controlling 40% of all beds, and the increasing monetisation of elder care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2279/24]

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am raising the issue of the recent ESRI report that made fairly damning findings about what is happening in the area of residential care for older people. We have seen the rapid closure of small, community-based nursing homes and a trend towards much bigger and much more commercial nursing homes, which is certainly not in the interests of older people. What is the Minister of State's response to that?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for her question. This is a conversation we have had across this floor several times in recent years. I welcomed the recent ESRI report on long-term residential care in Ireland and developments since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report articulated an awful lot of what we already knew about the challenges facing the long-term residential care sector. The Government continues to address these to provide short-term stability and then long-term growth to this sector.

The ESRI report highlighted long-term residential care supply and care bed ownership. It stated that the private, for-profit sector was driven my new entries into the market financed by international private equity funds. We have 15 companies that now control 10,700 beds. That is one side. On the other side, we have family-run, community-based, voluntary nursing homes that are predominantly located in rural areas and towns and villages. These homes are struggling. The matter is very concerning because 22 or 25 years ago, 80% of nursing home care was run by the State, with the remaining 20% private. That ratio has flipped completely. I am trying to support nursing homes, especially smaller homes. Last year, for example, over 180 nursing homes renegotiated the deals they have, which has resulted in an increase in funding of between 6% and 7%. They can now negotiate yearly as well, which is much more helpful as regards the fees they are receiving.

Before Christmas, I was delighted to put out to public consultation a design guide for long-term residential care settings for older people. Under this, when a private operator, the State or the voluntary sector applies to build or extend a nursing home, it must have a pre-planning meeting with HIQA in advance of applying for planning permission.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: With all due respect to the Minister of State, I asked for her response and she described the report. She said we have often have had conversations across the floor. That is the problem. All we have is talk from her. There has been no action. Residen-

tial care is not the first choice of many older people. What we should be doing, of course, is expanding other options. In May 2020, at the height of Covid, the Taoiseach spoke about the work done by the previous Government to develop alternatives such as supported housing and housing with care. He stated:

> ... the new Government can and should build on and operationalise this work. We also need to consider a move away from large, modern, newly-built, 150 to 200-bed, single-room nursing homes towards smaller units ...

What, if anything, has the Minister of State done to develop alternatives to the large-scale, investment-focused facilities we are seeing springing up, which older people do not want to be in and which are not in their interest given that they want more independence?

Deputy Mary Butler: The majority of people want to age in place. They want to age in their own homes. Working with my colleagues in Government, I have put in place a triangle of supports consisting of home care, day care and meals on wheels. Today, 56,000 people will receive care in the home to support them to age in place. We have 323 day centres open across the length and breadth of the country, plus an additional 52 dementia-specific day centres. We have made great progress in that regard working with the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. About 50,000 people will receive meals on wheels today. That service is so much more than a nutritious meal brought to their house; it is also a social connection. As I said, I have done the new design guide. It is worth taking a look at it because it recommends that we use a household model whereby the nursing homes that will be built will have a maximum of 84 beds each. Action has been taken.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: In 2020, the then Minister for Health also made the point that the current model was not fit for purpose. We had two senior people in the middle of Covid saying we had to move away from the model of big nursing homes. I cannot see that the Minister of State has done anything of substance on that. I point to the fact that she continues to allow a situation where nursing home care is incentivised over home care. The promise made six years ago to introduce a statutory right to home care has not yet materialised. What is the Minister of State doing about that issue? What is she doing about expanding the prospect of supported living, which is what most people want, including building new facilities through local authorities with a health element and a care element involved? I cannot see any new initiative on her part. She continues to incentivise the big, commercial, profit-driven nursing homes, which clearly are not in the interests of older people.

Deputy Mary Butler: I continue to support the 22,700 people who are in nursing homes under the fair deal scheme. The whole purpose of that scheme is to support older people, regardless of their means, to have access to nursing home care. It is important to also point out that the commission on care has commenced. It is led by Mr. Alan Barrett, the chairman of the ESRI. The commission will look very closely at all the issues the Deputy has raised. It is also important-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister of State is kicking the can down the road again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please allow the Minister of State to conclude.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We need action on this.

Deputy Mary Butler: We have short memories here. When I came into post in July 2020

the nursing home sector was under immense pressure due to Covid. We all know that Covid bore down very hard on older people. For almost two years, the emphasis and focus were on supporting older people in nursing homes.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Departmental Meetings

5. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commit to meeting transgender advocacy groups to discuss the provision of transgender healthcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1975/24]

Deputy Duncan Smith: My question relates to transgender advocacy groups and the Minister's engagement, or lack thereof, with said groups. It is a request that he and senior officials in the HSE commit not only to having one meeting but holding a series of ongoing engagements with the relevant transgender advocacy groups.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I do not think that dig is fair. I respectfully disagree with the Deputy on that. I am happy to meet the stakeholders. I have met TENI and other groups before and I am happy to meet them. I am meeting a constituent of mine soon who was in contact. She is the parent of a transgender child who wants to talk through some of the issues that they are facing, which I am familiar with and I am very sympathetic to. I am committed to the development of a model of care that delivers proper services for this group of people. It is a very small and very vulnerable group of people and they need to have access to proper, appropriate and integrated care, including acute care and community care. Quite frankly, as we all know, they do not have access to that in Ireland right now and I am not satisfied with that. To be perfectly honest with the Deputy, I am also not satisfied with the pace at which this is progressing. There has been a hold-up for a long time in appointing a psychiatrist to lead the new model of care. What I can share with the Deputy is that an offer has now been made to a person. However, that process is not complete yet so that is all I can say at this point.

The HSE is going to consult widely with stakeholders, including TENI and others, in the development of the new model of care. The HSE is working to identify new pathways. As we know, the Tavistock centre has now been decommissioned and the UK health authorities have opened different centres on the back of the Cass report. Ultimately, we need those services available to people in Ireland and that is the objective. Of course, I am happy to continue meeting with stakeholders.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In terms of the appointment of the HSE clinical lead, while the groups are obviously aware that they have no formal role in such an appointment, given that this is a small and vulnerable group of people, they feel that engagement regarding that role or position would be important. This community has insights in terms of who provides the specialist care and who would give confidence in the provision of the care that is needed. The National Gender Service, NGS, at the moment is not national. It does not reach many corners of the country at all and is not operating as a gender service in the context of healthcare in any way, shape or form. The Minister has acknowledged that an awful lot more work needs to be done. Trans Healthcare Action and TENI believe they need more engagement and I also believe they

do and that such engagement has to be ongoing. They do not feel they are getting the engagement they need. We really need to see that to provide confidence to these groups and to this community that they are being listened to and being heard.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is disappointing but very useful to hear that feedback. On the back of this discussion, I will talk to the Department and the HSE. Of course, I can meet the groups and am happy to do so again but ultimately they need to be talking to the people who are designing the model of care. Of course, it can be useful to talk to a Minister but really, they need direct input into the model of care that is being developed.

I am happy to say that we have allocated funding for this year, a sum of €100,000, for the establishment of a new team, which is important. The HSE is working on an interim solution, an alternative pathway for children and young people who are experiencing protracted waiting times. They are waiting too long and the current situation is not where we want to be. Discussions are under way with paediatric endocrinology in Children's Health Ireland and with our psychology services to put an interim solution in place until we have what these young people need and deserve, which is a fully dedicated multidisciplinary service.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Regarding the model of care, the NGS states that patient support and advocacy organisations will be involved in governance and service development. However, after five years there is still no member of the trans community on the NGS governance committee and no member has been invited to participate in the development of the service. These are some of the tangible improvements that could be made to increase confidence. Across the NGS, the Department of Health, and among senior figures, including chief clinical officers, in the HSE, we need that level of engagement. This is something to which I will return. I accept the Minister's bona fides in terms of wanting to get this service right and wanting to deliver, but we need to see action and engagement to engender confidence in the community. It is a community of which I am not a member but when I speak to advocacy organisations, I hear what they are saying and I think the Minister hears them too.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I take that feedback very seriously. We cannot have a situation where we are developing a model of care for a group of people who are not involved and whose voices are not heard. We are trying, although it does not always work and we are not always successful, to move to a situation where the patient voice is front and centre in everything we do. We are embedding it in legislation in the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act and through new regulations within the HSE. We are not getting it right all of the time and clearly, if the trans community feels that they are outside the door and nobody is listening to them, then whatever is happening is clearly not working and needs to be looked at. I commit to going back to the Department and the HSE on this. I will also ask them to revert to the Deputy with a note on what actions can be taken.

Hospital Services

6. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the level of additional core expenditure for new developments, excluding funding for carryover and otherwise maintaining existing levels of service, which has been allocated to Cavan General Hospital for 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2071/24]

Deputy Pauline Tully: I ask the Minister to outline the level of additional core expenditure

for new developments, excluding funding for carry over and otherwise maintaining existing levels of service, that has been allocated to Cavan General Hospital in 2024.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank Deputy Tully for her question and assure her that I am fully committed to the development of Cavan General Hospital and to all of our regional hospitals right across the country. When I received the Deputy's question I asked for a note on the recent investment in Cavan hospital. It is all well and good with me saying what might happen in the future but I wanted to establish that real investment has been happening over the last few years and I have to say, the response is very encouraging. The budget in the lifetime of this Government has gone up by €16 million for last year. The full budgets for this year will obviously be agreed through the national service plan. Probably more importantly, since 2020 there has been an increase of nearly one quarter in the workforce. To me, that is always the most important bit because it is healthcare professionals, ultimately, who treat patients. That equates to 259 extra staff in Cavan hospital, which is a very clear commitment to the future growth and investment in the hospital. On top of that, the Deputy will be aware that a number of capital developments are in progress, which are going to be very important. One, of which Deputy Tully will be very aware, is the new three-storey extension block which will house a new endoscopy unit and an 18-bed ward. That is currently at detailed design stage and I want to see that progress because it will make a big difference to patient care in the area.

Recent initiatives in service expansion also include the establishment of a medical assessment unit, the feedback on which is very positive, and the further development of a geriatric assessment unit. The latter is something that we are rolling out across the country and the feedback around the country has been very good, particularly in terms of emergency department avoidance and receiving the appropriate care locally. Following the announcement of the budget allocation last year, I issued a letter of determination to the HSE. That kicks off the process for the national service plan and the detailed answer to the Deputy's question in terms of 2024 and the hospital will be available through that national service plan.

Deputy Pauline Tully: It goes without saying that the staff in Cavan General Hospital are excellent but they are under pressure. The Minister has said that there has been an increase in the number of staff and I appreciate that but there has also been an increase in the number of people using the hospital. There are insufficient numbers of front-line staff, particularly therapists. I was talking to a therapist recently who told me that her caseload for one day was 30 people. That is not sustainable. In the end, because there were only two therapists doing the job and they were each facing heavy caseloads, she ended up quite ill herself and had to take time off because she was so worn down.

Cavan General Hospital, like all hospitals, is currently facing issues because of high flu and Covid numbers. Advisories have been issued to stay away from the emergency department if at all possible and I am concerned about that. While I know the hospital is not referring to genuine emergencies, people are actually afraid to go to the emergency department even when they really do need to go. If something could be done to reduce the number of patients on trolleys and alleviate the overcrowding in the emergency department, that would be very welcome.

Morale in the hospital is quite low. I have talked to staff who feel they are under pressure and that it can be dangerous for themselves and patients when there are insufficient numbers of nurses on wards, for example. Constituents have also contacted me about cancelled or delayed appointments.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: With regard to emergency departments, I am sorry I do not have the figures for Cavan. However, last year we moved to an all-year-round approach to urgent and emergency care to get away from this annual cycle of winter plans. To the great credit of our healthcare professionals, we have seen a very important reduction. I am not for a moment diminishing the fact that the numbers are still way too high and some emergency departments in some hospitals are under huge pressure. Approximately seven hospitals account for about half the number of patients on trolleys. I am sorry that I do not have the Cavan figures to hand but our healthcare workers achieved a 22% reduction in the number of patients on trolleys for the second half of last year versus the previous year. For those most at risk, namely, the over-75s who are in emergency departments for more than a day, the number has fallen by nearly 40%. We are by no means where we want to end up but, thanks to important work, things are getting better. I will ask the Department to revert to the Deputy with a note on the figures for Cavan emergency department.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I know from meeting with hospital management that they are very proactive and are trying at all times to alleviate pressures. Sometimes, constituents contact me to say they have an appointment in maybe six months for a hernia or something. When I talk to them further, it turns out the appointment is only an initial one to see the consultant. It does not take into account the time they will have to wait on a waiting list for an operation. That is too long. Some of them will end up using the cross-border directive but they should not have to do that, as it can place a financial pressure on them because they have to pay upfront for it, although I know they will recoup the money.

Another lady came to me who was threatened with a miscarriage on a Friday. She was just over three months pregnant. When she went to the hospital it was Monday before she could be scanned to establish whether she was having a miscarriage because no sonographers were there to operate the machines over the weekend. She was not the only one. The woman concerned ended up having a miscarriage. Another lady went to the hospital with a bleed but it ended up that her baby was safe. However, it is terrible to have to wait a whole weekend to establish that. That is not okay. The woman made the point to me that if men were having babies, that probably would not happen. She felt she did not get the care she deserved. She was even examined in a room that was not a ward. It was not even private; it was a storeroom.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I am obviously not familiar with the case but it does not sound right. We are in the middle of a very fundamental shift in healthcare provision in respect of exactly the situation that woman found herself in. We are moving from a five-day week service to a seven-day week hospital service. Of course, hospitals are open at the weekends but, exactly to the Deputy's point, all the services are not always available at weekends. The new consultant contract is part of that, as is the hiring of 25,000 more staff. It takes time. It is a huge shift from five days to seven days but it is essential for all the reasons that lady the Deputy described seems to have experienced. Certainly, the Deputy should rest assured we will continue investing in Cavan hospital, continue growing services and the workforce, and seek to move to, and achieve, seven days a week so that patients can get the services they need. As she said, people need that kind of care seven days a week and not just five.

7. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health in what areas in acute hospital settings AI technology is being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2032/24]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Athbhlian faoi mhaise di. The use of artificial intelligence in healthcare settings can offer very exciting possibilities, and also present challenges and various considerations. Will the Minister give an outline of the use of AI in medical settings throughout the country, as well as the various considerations he has had of its use?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the question. I heard this morning that AI is front and centre at Davos as well. It is certainly coming to the fore very rapidly. It will have potentially radical benefits, be they in diagnostics, in some advanced care, or robotics for procedures, and as we move forward with genetics, genomics and genome sequencing. AI will move more and more to the fore. What is critical for Ireland is for us to make sure that we capture these benefits for patients. We must have state-of-the-art e-health and digital infrastructure in place. The reality is Ireland is not just a laggard but a significant laggard in the EU and the developed world in this regard.

To that end, we have been doing a lot of work on a new e-health and digital strategy. I will launch that strategy this year. It is being finalised at present. It will be a six- or seven-year strategy. We have had a lot of consultation with experts and potential providers to see what platforms can be used. We are doing it in parallel with the health information Bill, which I will bring to the Government shortly and will include the matter of unique patient identifiers. It will establish a central agency that will be able to collate data because, ultimately, AI is data driven, as I know the Deputy knows very well.

There have already been one or two projects, despite the lack of national infrastructure we need. Last December, the Mater announced it was the first hospital to use AI for patient scans. I might give the Deputy more detail on that in my response.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I note the Minister referred to the Mater. I understand it was one of the first, and probably the first, to integrate AI in its radiology department. I understand it allowed the hospital the opportunity to go through large numbers of results very quickly, and possibly not just to identify different issues but to get people additional tests while they were still on-site. There are real possibilities in that regard. If there are other examples of where AI is being used in a healthcare setting in Ireland, I would be very interested in the different ways that it can be used.

The Minister referred to the way that AI can also be used to look at large numbers of people, preparing the various records and having electronic records for that. One of the big challenges is that security and confidentiality will be needed, and buy-in and consent from patients for their data to be used in that manner. Has that been examined? Is there an update on that?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is such a good question. There are many parts to this. One is general cybersecurity. It can be imagined, following the cyber-breach we had, there has been very significant investment in and strengthening of cybersecurity across our health services.

There are many subtleties to AI, for example, ethical AI. We would be handing over some

form of advisory capacity, decision-making capacity, or whatever it might be, to algorithms. There has to be appropriate oversight of that. Not only that, there has to be appropriate input to the design of that in terms of ethical AI guidelines. A framework for ethical AI guidelines was brought to the Government very recently. It is something we have to approach carefully.

The Mater project was clinically led. It trialled the use of AI software and looked at 15,000 patient scans to assess the potential to speed up care in the emergency department. Early results indicate improved diagnostic accuracy, streamlined workflow and reduced time required to provide life-saving treatments, so initial indications are very positive.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I understand that AI can also be used to customise care plans for people, looking at how they may respond to different therapies and customising the treatment or medicine from there. Have such considerations been looked at in any settings in the country?

I return to the huge issue of consent and the whole ethical question. If we are looking at having a huge store of people's data and running AI over it to predict where different populations might be impacted by various conditions, we need buy-in from people, trust in AI and consent for the use of their data. There is also the question on the having it safe and stored securely as well.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is an ongoing process and it is a rapidly emerging field. There are areas we are looking at very closely such as cybersecurity, as we discussed, ethical AI and the guidelines on the use of that, patient consent, and full information on how information may be used. We can do population-based analyses with or without AI. Having that population-based information will be invaluable for public health responses and investment in public health. There is no doubt AI can enhance that. There also would be AI applications for individualised care around genome sequencing and matching potential treatments to potential conditions that people have. This area will need very clear consent and regulation. The health information Bill is very significant legislation and a lot of the regulatory framework for digital health and e-health will be contained within that.

Ambulance Service

8. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of ambulance drivers recruited to the National Ambulance Service and the number of ambulance drivers who have left the National Ambulance Service in each of the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1894/24]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The average ambulance response time in this country has been increasing significantly in the past few years, so much so that one particular and heartbreaking statistic is the number of times a patient was dead when an ambulance reached the person. In 2019 that figure was 700 and in the past year that has increased to at least 900 deaths. This is a very serious statistic that shows lives are being put in danger as a result of late ambulance arrival.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank Deputy Tóibín for the question. We must endeavour to do everything we can to make sure the responses are properly triaged and then the response times are such that where they really do need to be there very quickly this is achieved.

I acknowledge the commitment of the national ambulance service and all of those working in it to delivering this on behalf of patients. We have invested more than €219 million in the National Ambulance Service since 2019. It represents a €50 million increase. It is has been a very significant investment to ensure we have the best possible ambulance service. The increase in staff has been important. If we look back to 2015, over the past eight years the number of staff has increased by more than one third. We have 600 more people working in the service than we had in 2015. To be clear, just last year 228 of those were added. There was a big increase in the number of people working in the national ambulance service last year. The majority of those were hired late in the year.

On the Deputy's points specifically on the response times, which I fully appreciate, the Deputy will be aware of the ECHO and the DELTA response times and the targets. The target for the ECHO calls, which includes cardiac, is 75% within the time period. To November of last year they were at about 73%, which is 2% off the target. The DELTA calls had a target of 45%. They were at 44.5%, so nearly there. They are not yet hitting those targets. I interrogated this matter further on the back of the question submitted by the Deputy. The good news is that the majority of those several 100 extra staff were hired very late last year and so the benefit of those extra staff for increased response times will not have been seen in the 2023 figures. We have, therefore, an ambition this year not just to meet the response time targets but to exceed them.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The figures quoted by the Minister are obviously from a baseline in 2015. The Minister will accept that 2015 was probably during the complete collapse of investment, post austerity, into the health service. The figures being taken as a baseline are from the lowest level of staffing within the National Ambulance Service, which obviously will make the Minister's figures improve. It is very important. In 2019 there were 750 people dead by the time the ambulance arrived. In 2022 that figure was 900. The average response time for an ambulance over that period of time in 2019 was 18 minutes. In 2022 it was 27 minutes. That is an incredible figure. In the western region in 2022 one individual waited 22 hours for an ambulance to arrive. This too is an incredible figure. In the first two months of last year one person in the south of the country waited 13 hours for an ambulance to arrive. The figures are getting worse, given the real life experience of patients, and it is having a material detrimental effect on their health and lives.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Neither I, the Deputy nor those working in our ambulance service would stand over or defend those individual cases where people clearly have waited far too long. Nobody would defend that. On the response times, the core targets the service works to are the ECHO and the DELTA times. They were very close to those times last year.

I hear the Deputy's point about going back to the 2015 figures. This is why I wanted to give the Deputy just last year's figures. Of the 600 new staff, 228 of them were just last year. I understand the Deputy's point. This is also why I wanted to say that most of these 228 were hired towards the end of last year. We do want to improve those figures.

The question tabled by the Deputy was about retention, the numbers joining and the numbers coming in. I will answer that directly in my next response.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: If I may I will add some practical solutions on this. One of the big situations we see on a regular basis is that an ambulance arrives at the accident and emergency department with the patient but due to the jam in the accident and emergency department because of overcrowding, or simply because there are not enough trolleys there, the ambulance

has to stay at the entrance to the accident and emergency department for one, two or three hours. We then have incredible situations such as in Drogheda hospital one year ago where ten ambulances had to wait for five hours because they could not off-load their patients. I have recently heard of another hospital in Mayo where eight ambulances were stuck there. When those ambulances are stuck they obviously cannot get to the rest of the region to pick up new patients. A very simple thing would be to have just enough trolleys so when the patient is moved into the accident and emergency department from the ambulance trolley there is another trolley there. The ambulance can then be freed up to travel. I am aware this is not the case in every situation and in many situations one needs the necessary medical staff to be able to deal with the patient for the patient to be accepted but that is one of the major pinch points where ambulances are stuck at the accident and emergency departments and are not free to go about their work.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I certainly know the ambulance service can take that under advisement and will do everything they can to increase the turnaround times. They have been innovating over the past few years. The clinical hub now has hear and treat and see and treat services they did not have previously. The Deputy will be aware of the pathfinder model, the medical assessment unit pathways, the community paramedic scheme, the ED in the home and various other issues. The ambulance services are to be commended for their innovation. I am not detracting from the fact there are still significant challenges.

On the Deputy's specific question about those joining versus leaving the service, I am very happy to say the ambulance service put in place a human resource plan two years ago in 2022. Their turnover rate is now 1%, which was for quarter 3 of last year versus 2.4% for the HSE. Essentially, twice as many have joined the service as have resigned or retired from the service in previous years. They are clearly doing something right. We in Government and in the Oireachtas need to continue to support them and to continue investing in them. They are showing that it is money very well spent on behalf of patients.

Health Promotion

9. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health if he will ban tanning sunbeds outright, given the serious and increased risk of incidences of skin cancer. which is supported by scientific evidence linking skin cancer and tanning sunbed usage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1874/24]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: My question is in relation to skin cancer and the link that we now know relates to tanning beds. This has come to my attention primarily from a woman in the southeast, from the same neck of the woods as the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler. I want the opportunity for us to discuss this further.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for tabling this question. The National Cancer Registry Ireland reported that about one quarter of all cancers diagnosed between 2019 and 2021 were non melanoma skin cancers.

10 o'clock

Melanoma of skin accounted for one in 20 of the remaining invasive cancers diagnosed and one in 50 of cancer deaths every year. It is very important that anyone who has any concern should contact their GP. I am engaged directly with the dermatology services, which are a criti-

cal part of this, as are oncology services, to make sure people get rapid access.

To respond to the Deputy's point, it is acknowledged there is no safe limit for exposure to ultraviolet radiation from sunbeds when it comes to risk of cancer. The national skin cancer prevention plan, which runs from 2023 to 2026, sets out the national actions to tackle our high rates of skin cancer. It uses a multidisciplinary approach through education, public awareness and behavioural change. Under the public health sunbeds legislation, a range of measures are enforced by the HSE.

In addition, as Deputy Funchion is aware, the EU is looking at this. Its response to tackling cancer is set out in its beating cancer plan. Action 18 is relevant to this discussion. It has measures to prevent exposure to ultraviolet radiation and this includes sunbeds. These are being considered by the EU. Departmental officials are working with the European Commission subgroup on cancer under the public health expert group. My understanding is that the recommendations are expected to be published prior to the end of March.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Minister. I acknowledge a particular woman, Laura, who brought this to my attention. There are also others who campaign with her. It is probably an issue about which we do not speak a lot. When we say it people ask what is the problem. We can look at how much we now know about smoking and cigarettes and their links to cancer. We have the images on packaging now. With regard to sunbeds, however, while I acknowledge there are some measures it is widely felt that often they do not go far enough. Are they actually being implemented? Among the suggestions is to have a database to which everyone running a sunbed facility must sign up. Sometimes people go into one particular place for ten minutes and then go down the road somewhere else for another ten minutes. We know this happens. If there were a database to which people had to sign up it would limit usage. With regard to ID there is still an issue with very young teenage girls. I will discuss this in my next supplementary question.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank Deputy Funchion. It is something on which, between the legislation we have and the EU's ongoing work, we can go further. As I said, one in every four diagnosed cancers is a non-melanoma skin cancer. It is a significant issue. When I was a much younger man with a full head of hair I went to Australia and lived in Bondi Beach. There was a level of awareness there about skin cancer that did not exist in Ireland. To this day we do not have the level of awareness they had 28 years ago when I was there. More can be done. This is why we launched the recent plan.

Sunbed businesses are regulated here under a 2014 Act. The Department tells me the regulations we have are among the most comprehensive in the EU but there is a question as to whether enforcement could go further and whether awareness could go further.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I am glad to hear the Minister acknowledge this because it is very important. I agree it probably is an enforcement issue, certainly with regard to ID and some of what I suggested regarding having a database. We could also do a lot more with schools and transition year and use this opportunity to educate and create awareness. Many people think there is no harm in it. There is still the myth that it rains most of the time in this country so how could a little bit of sun be that detrimental. However, given our levels of skin cancer and the number of people who pass away from it, we need to do an awful lot more.

Will the Minister consider meeting the group I mentioned? It is a small group, mainly of

women, who feel very strongly because they were not told all the negative aspects. To this day they are finding tumours that they are being told are very much linked to sunbed use in the past. Will the Minister consider meeting them to discuss ideas and suggestions on this? I know they would like to see a straight outright ban. We would probably have to take steps. I welcome that the EU is taking measures. If the Minister could speak more on what steps the EU might be taking I would appreciate it.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. With regard to the EU's recommendations we need to wait to see. However, the general sense is that it is considering restricting access for high-risk groups, the mandatory supervision of the commercial use of sunbeds, the provision of mandatory eye protection, and increasing awareness by providing information on the risks associated. I have asked the Chief Medical Officer and her team to engage in a new public health strategy, including prevention. This would be one of the parts of this. There is the legislation we have and the EU recommendations that will be coming out. Ongoing preventative work, with a refresh of Healthy Ireland and a greater emphasis on prevention in Ireland, which we have to achieve, could fit in quite well to this.

Medicinal Products

10. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which new modern, effective and safe drugs can become available here once approved by the EU authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1817/24]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to ascertain the extent to which new, effective and safe drugs are made available for use by Irish patients as soon as they become approved at EU level.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the question. We spend a lot of money on medicines in this country. Last year the medicines investment was more than €3.2 billion. This is a sizeable amount. The vast majority of the €2.8 billion was spent on the medicines themselves. There was also money spent on administration and payments to pharmacists for dispensing amounting to just over €400 million. Our public spend on medicines is, believe it or not, €1 in every €8 that we spend on healthcare. There is an unprecedented level of investment. Deputy Durkan is aware that over the past three years we have invested almost €100 million in new medicines. It was badly needed. It has led to the provision of almost 150 new medicines or extended new uses for medicines that we have. Spending on these medicines is estimated to have been almost €330 million to the end of 2023. There has been a sizeable investment when we factor in the full year costs of new development funding.

As per the 2013 Act, a company has to submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list. We sometimes forget that Ireland is a small country and a small market. We are not always prioritised by companies in the first stage. It is something that we are working on, and we have some multilateral agreements in place as well through Beneluxa.

For this year the HSE will have €30 million for new medicine spend. This comprises €20 million that I have allocated from the December additional new development funding and we are targeting a €10 million reduction in the €3.2 billion spend through a rapid switch to generics and biosimilars. This will provide another €30 million this year for new medicines, which is

obviously going to be very important. In my next response I will come back to Deputy Durkan on the process he asked about.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his reply. What is the extent to which references come from the pharmaceutical sector on the ready availability as soon as these drugs are made available? For instance, what might be the time lag between approval in the European Union and in this country?

I accept that we are a smaller country but we are a member of the European Union. As a member of the Single Market, we have the same rights to new medicines and new drugs and any other service available to the European Union as there is anywhere else, including London as used to be the case once upon a time, Paris or Rome. I heard reference made on a radio programme recently to the theory that as we are a small member state, we should come further down the list. I do not accept this. We must accept that the European regime prevails. If we accept anything less than this we will run ourselves into trouble.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy very much. I agree with him. I do not accept that either. We are a nation whose population deserves rapid access to these medicines. We have to strike a balance. We hear advocacy from the pharmaceutical industry regularly citing lengths of time. It has a particular view. Obviously, it wants Ireland to spend as much money as quickly as possible on its products. When I talk to people working within the service, the view is more nuanced. They say Ireland does quite well in accessing some drugs, and is well ahead of other European countries, but that it is not universal in terms of access to all medicines. To that end, the Deputy will be aware there was a Mazars report done some years ago which looked at the process and it found several ways we could improve it. One is around transparency of the process. I do not believe transparency has been where it needs to be for patients or indeed for the industry, and the other is in the speed with which we can approve the new medicines.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Regarding the urgency in respect of the availability of certain medicines, new medicines in particular, in this country should a safety assessment now be carried out in addition to the general European safety assessment or does the State go along with it?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will ask the Department to revert to the Deputy with a detailed note on the full process involved in the health technology assessments because there are various parts to them. What I can say is that for this coming year there are going to be some important improvements. One is that we are going to have a medicines tracker for the first time. This is something that Rare Diseases Ireland, patient groups and the industry have asked for. They say that at a minimum we need to know where the medicine is in the process. There is going to be more transparency as well around the criteria that are used. For example, when we are considering orphan drugs, there are additional criteria used because they do not fit into the normal cost-benefit criteria that are used for the more mainstream drugs. Second, I have allocated funding for a sizeable increase in the teams working in these areas, which is going to help speed up the process. Third, we must have new medicines funding as well, and that is why that €30 million for new medicines is going to be very valuable for this year.

Health Services

11. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health his views on the availability of homebirth services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1839/24]

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I would be very grateful if the Minister could give me his view on the availability of homebirth services across the country with specific reference to my constituency of Clare.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy very much. I put women's healthcare services front and centre in this Government in terms of investment and expansion. I believe we have to make up for many decades of lack of investment. The House broadly agrees that thanks to the work of our healthcare workers there has been important progress over the past three years. We will launch a new women's health action plan later on this year for the next two years. The first two years – 2022 and 2023 - are done.

Specifically in response to the Deputy's question about maternity services, there was investment of €16 million in 2021 and 2022, which got the national maternity strategy going again. Core to that strategy is the question raised by her of choice for women in terms of whether they want a consultant-led approach in the hospital, a midwife-led approach in the hospital or a midwife-led approach in the community and at home. Choice for women in terms of options for birth is core to all of this.

There is a disagreement between the consultant body – maybe not all of them but I am speaking in generalisations here – and the midwives. I met with a fantastic group of midwives at the INMO conference some time ago. Their view is that the time to the hospital – the current policy is set at 30 minutes – should be longer and they gave very good reasons for that. I also met very experienced obstetricians who said why they believe that 30 minutes is the right way to go from a patient safety perspective. Obviously I am not qualified to comment on that. There is an ongoing discussion on whether it should be 30 minutes or longer and what resources need to be in place for that to happen. I can tell the Deputy what I and the Government want to facilitate from the perspective of the direction of travel. It is the greatest possible options for women, but with an obvious caveat that those services need to keep women and their babies safe.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I thank the Minister for the information. I raise this matter with him today on behalf of my female constituents in County Clare. He may be aware of the case of one particular lady, as I have previously written to him about her. She is due her second child in July and as he may be aware there are already extremely limited options for birthing in the county. She wrote me a letter and I am going to share some of it with the House this morning:

> While trying to organise a homebirth it transpires that the midwives who previously served and wish to serve in our area, have been forced to private practice. This service, provided by the organisation Private Midwives, costs around €6,800. The national maternity strategy highlights choice as a key priority for low-risk women. It identifies homebirth as a choice. [As the Minister would know] An alongside birth centre does not exist in our area. Homebirth is the only alternative to the maternity hospital. This is a women's healthcare prerogative that needs to be addressed.

While delivering her first child, active labour lasted less than one hour so she is a perfect candidate for a homebirth. The current reality is that my constituent can register as a patient in University Maternity Hospital Limerick, UMHL, our closest maternity hospital then pay privately for a homebirth and transfer to UMHL during labour, if needed. For her family to pay privately would put them in financial hardship. UMHL's suspension of homebirth services in the Limerick-Clare-north Tipperary region, leaves less privileged women in the area without

access to a service that is provided by all other maternity hospitals.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I cannot comment on the individual case. I am not familiar with it. However, as the Deputy referenced, there was an incident in June 2022 when the HSE notified my Department of a maternal death in the mid-west following a home birth. At that time those services were then stopped. A review is being commissioned, which needs to happen quickly. I discussed this with a group of very experienced midwives who made the following point on exactly this to me: they said there are also maternal deaths in acute settings and we do not shut down the hospital maternity services. Their view was that they felt pretty strongly about that. Again, I am not qualified to make judgments on patient safety. We need this review to happen and to be concluded to take the expert advice. to listen to the voices of the women who want these services and to get to a point where we can provide the greatest possible choice while ensuring there is an appropriate level of patient safety there as well.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I again thank the Minister. I appreciate what he has stated. The stipulation of 30 minutes would really restrict services in County Clare because of the distance involved, which would limit the service to very small pockets of the county from which women would be able to get to UMHL within that timeframe. It is important to mention that to the Minister. There is a major concern that there would be a two-tier system within maternity healthcare.

The HSE recommendation to limit homebirths to women who live 30 minutes from a maternity hospital will restrict the options for women and families in County Clare, in particular for those in rural parts of the county. It is also contrary to the national maternity strategy's priority to ensure "women have access to safe, high quality, nationally consistent, woman-centred maternity care". It is important to note that this recommendation was developed with no input form midwives, clinicians, or women's health advocates. I firmly agree with the midwives association's call for a reconsideration of this policy by engaging all stakeholders. Will that be included in the review? Women were second-class citizens in this State for long enough. We should not be further restricted. Instead, we should be supported in making our own informed choices about our maternity care.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We have discussed the issue of homebirth and we need an answer to this that works for women in terms of choice and safety. While that is being progressed, significant improvements are happening across maternity care. Through the strategy we have hired an additional 465 staff who were very badly needed and who are making a big difference. I have been in many of the maternity units and I have seen the upgrades to the birthing suites. There are pools there now, for example. The midwives are saying that things that might be considered small, cosmetic changes are making a huge difference to women and the experience they have. The clinical outcomes are getting better and better. A very comprehensive system is in place. One of the areas where we actually do well in e-health is in the maternity services.

Just last year, five new postnatal hubs opened at hospitals in Cork, Kerry, Sligo, Ballinasloe and Carlow-Kilkenny. While we will, therefore, resolve the issue the Deputy has quite rightly raised, he should rest assured that we are going to continue to invest in growing all of the maternity services to ensure they really can be seen as some of the best around the world.

12. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if he will outline the membership of the commission on ageing; and how the public will be able to engage with it. [2082/24]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Bruton. This question seeks to obtain information regarding the membership of the commission on ageing and now the public will be expected to interact with it and, as a result, influence it.

Deputy Mary Butler: As the Deputy will be aware, in furtherance of the commitment in the programme for Government, in October this year the Minister for Health and I sought the establishment of a commission on care and we got approval from the Cabinet. Subsequently, a budget of €1.24 million was allocated to support this important initiative. The commission will examine the provision of health and social care services and supports for older people and make recommendations to the Government for their strategic development. Subsequently, a cross-departmental group will be established under the auspices of the commission to consider whether the supports for positive ageing across the life course are fit for purpose and to develop a costed implementation plan. It is really important that we have this because we often see documentation that proposes many measures, but these must be realistic as well and we have to be able to fund them.

I suppose we are coming from the perspective that everyone is ageing. We have one of the largest ageing populations in Europe. It is also important to point out, though, that thanks to all the very good work done daily we have the highest life expectancy in the EU, as deemed by the World Health Organization, WHO, at 82. It is also important to acknowledge that Ireland was the first country in the world to achieve age-friendly status in 2019 from the WHO.

If we speak to older people, they will tell us that their preference is to be able to age in place in their own house in their own home community with the correct wrap-around supports. It is very important, therefore, that this commission will look at all of these options.

The commission will be independently chaired. In December this year, Professor Alan Barrett, chief executive of the ESRI, was appointed as chairperson of the commission. I met with Professor Barrett before Christmas. I will respond further after the Deputy's next question

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for her detailed reply. We are all conscious of the fact that as people get older they require a greater level of services and better or improved services, and this changes too as time goes by. Has the membership of the commission been determined and, if so, who are those members? In respect of their interaction with the community, how will a means be found to ensure there is a ready change of information and dialogue to allow the commission and older people throughout the country to avail of and benefit from it?

Deputy Mary Butler: The membership of the commission has yet to be determined. We are working on it now and had a meeting on it yesterday. It is envisaged that in line with the commission's approved remit, its members will collectively provide expertise across the areas of geriatrics, gerontology, health economics, health policy and management, health ethics, health technologies and ageing and disability. Stakeholder engagement, including with the public, will be central to the work of the commission. As I said, it will be established in early 2024.

The commission will report in three modules. We will have the first six-month module, which will be completed by the summer. We will then move to module two, which will take another six months. Module three will take longer because of the amount of work that will be involved in it. Engagement and collaboration with stakeholders will be a central component of this endeavour. We will be looking forward to announcing the membership of the commission very soon.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Given we have a longer life expectancy now, and the information the Minister of State gave us in this regard is welcome, we must be conscious that some people now carry on work until an older age than they did in the past, and rightly so. In fact, the classic example is the need to recruit people who have experience and are available to continue at work. These are all welcome.

There is, however, also the question regarding the fact that we might sometimes overlook the obvious in the course of all demands in front of us. For example, it is not so easy for older people who may have mobility issues to go shopping. I acknowledge that various types of assistance are available whereby they shop online, etc. Nonetheless, it is important that the various challenges older people are likely to meet be borne in mind.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy is quite right. The first two modules of this work will focus on the provision of health and social care services and supports for older people. We know, for example, that we have 323 day centres operational. We also have an additional 52 dementia-specific day centres, which are really important for people who have a dementia diagnosis but still want to be able to live in their own homes.

Today, more than 56,000 people will receive home care in their homes. It is hugely important to be able to support people to be able to age in place. The Deputy spoke about transport. We know that Local Link, especially in the local areas, is an important facet to support older people. I also wish to mention organisations like Meals on Wheels. More than 2 million meals were delivered in 2023 to approximately 50,000 people. It is so much more than the meal itself. It is the knock on the door and the social connection, like the postman coming.

The commission's envisaged work is very ambitious but it is very timely that we do have a commission on care for older people. We are all ageing day by day. We are all only going in the one direction and everybody wants to be able to live well in their own communities.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I call Deputy Tóibín to ask the next question. We will probably not be able to get the full question dealt with.

Emergency Departments

13. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who died while waiting to be seen in emergency departments in the State in each of the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1893/24]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: On that previous issue, in the context of HSE-funded home care, there is a refusal to bring older people for walks. Where people have dementia, they are being allowed to leave the house unaccompanied because of this refusal to bring people for walks.

This is an extremely dangerous decision by the HSE.

Turning to the issue of hospitals now, the crisis there really bubbled up over Christmas. There have been really worrying trends regarding how many people are suffering on hospital waiting lists, in accident and emergency departments, etc., due to the recruitment freeze. It is important that we start to analyse how many people are suffering as a result of this situation and how many people are losing their lives in accident and emergency departments now in this State.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Not for a moment am I going to downplay the real pressures in too many of our hospitals for too many of our patients in accident and emergency departments. However, it is really important that as an Oireachtas we acknowledge the progress our healthcare workers are making. I can tell the Deputy, and I know he will have seen this himself from talking to them, they are working so hard to bring down the number of patients on trolleys in every hospital. There has been a national response to this situation. Looking at the second half of last year, which is when the new approach was rolled out, we can see there has been a 22% reduction in the number of patients on trolleys. Regarding the most high-risk group of people, who are central to the Deputy's question, there has been a nearly 40% reduction on the figures for the previous year. We have all seen a very important reduction in the number of patients on trolleys through Christmas and the new year and, so far, in January of this year. I am not for a moment suggesting this issue is fixed but it is really important that we acknowledge that the work, the blood, sweat and tears our healthcare professionals are putting into this is working.

The Deputy should rest assured that we are going to continue. We are focusing, in particular, on the hospitals where the greatest delays are. Approximately seven hospitals account for approximately half the patients on trolleys. More hospitals are now reporting no patients on trolleys and, more importantly, more hospitals are beginning to report that, at the 8 a.m. count, there were no people aged over 75 have been waiting for more than 24 hours. Those are two of the most important things that have to be achieved. To the Deputy's question, approximately 32,000 people die in Ireland every year. Approximately 13,500 of those deaths occur in hospitals. I will come back to the specific numbers regarding emergency departments in my next response.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I 100% acknowledge the work that the staff and medical professionals within hospitals are involved in. My critique is of the lack of Government investment and the lack of reform in the HSE. The newspapers are full of this. Today's *Irish Examiner* states, "A woman has told how she watched as her husband tried to resuscitate their 21-year-old daughter after she collapsed at home just hours after being discharged from University Hospital Limerick." RTÉ's website reports today that the HSE has "apologised to the mother of a boy over injuries he suffered after a battery was stuck in his throat for nine days before an X-ray was carried out". Another headline from RTÉ this week stated, "Woman died after surgery by two trainees". On Twitter, we see a disability advocate, Courtney Manning, had metal plates put into her leg that her body has rejected and that she needs removed. She is in constant pain and is vomiting due to morphine but the National Orthopaedic Hospital has said that she is no longer its patient. She has resorted to sending pictures of her body, which is rejecting these metal plates, to politicians.

We see from talking to family and friends, from our constituencies and communities and from newspapers, television and radio that there are serious problems with people suffering adverse incidents in hospitals and with people waiting for so long that they are not getting the

necessary treatment. We need to get to the bottom of this to make sure this does not happen in our hospitals in future.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There are two things I would like to say on this. I am fully in agreement with the Deputy on the cases in which people do not get the care they need. That can lead to catastrophic outcomes. A recent example is the report into the tragic death of Aoife Johnston in Limerick. Unfortunately, these things do happen. Sometimes they may be preventable and sometimes they may not but we have to do everything we can. I fully agree with the Deputy that there are too many incidences of people not getting the care they need as quickly as they need it, sometimes leading to catastrophic and heartbreaking outcomes.

I also want to provide a bit of balance. How many people arrived in our emergency departments last year? It was 1.5 million. What we almost never see on social media or reported by RTÉ is the people who went in, were triaged quickly, were seen, got great care, perhaps had their lives saved, got fantastic treatment and went home. We never hear about them. Some 1.5 million people attended but what we hear about, for reasons we all understand, is the unacceptable cases where people have not gotten the care they need. I fully agree that we need to do more to have those catastrophic events become something that never happens. I just want to say that 1.5 million people attended our emergency departments last year. A lot of excellent care was provided. We need to keep going with the reduction in the number of patients on trolleys because that is how we will get to a point at which these kinds of reports are a thing of the past.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Táimid críochnaithe. Níl go leor ama againn,

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tógfaidh mé cúpla soicind. There are serious problems and they are not arising independently of Government. Government is making decisions on funding and recruitment freezes. I know of a nurse who returned to Ireland two months ago but who was unable to get back into her old job because of the recruitment freeze here. Lives depend on the ability of doctors and nurses to have the necessary capacity and resources to deliver the health service properly. Those resources are not there and people are suffering as a result. Will the Government make sure that we have the necessary investment and reform of the HSE so that we can have a health service that does not let these people suffer so tragically?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Let us talk about what is actually happening here. In the lifetime of this Government, more than 1,100 beds, approximately 1,000 consultants and 25,000 healthcare professionals have been added to our health service. We are by no means where we want to be as regards everyone getting the right care at the right time but it is absolutely and undeniably the case that this Government has invested in our healthcare service, has grown it and is reforming it at a level we would have to go back quite a long way to see. Of course, there is more to be done but waiting lists are falling and the number of patients on trolleys is falling. More than half of the population has access to free GP care. Women's health services have been revolutionised. Really important things are happening thanks to the extraordinary efforts of our healthcare workers backed up by investment from this Government.

Student Accommodation

74. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide an update on the delivery of student housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2286/24]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Ligfidh mé spás don Aire teacht aníos. Baineann an cheist atá agam le cúrsaí tithíochta do mhic léinn. My question relates to student housing. Will the Minister give an update on student housing? I am aware of the announcements this week. Will he provide further details on those announcements?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Deputy. I look forward to working with her and with colleagues in the House throughout the year. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to take this question on what is a really important issue right across the country. Student accommodation and student housing is not just an issue for students but also presents an opportunity, as we increase supply for students, to free up other accommodation for families, professionals and people coming to a city or region to rent or purchase. There is definitely a double benefit to increasing the supply of student accommodation.

As the Deputy will know, since November 2022, I have secured Government approval to start investing taxpayers' money in the building of student accommodation for the first time. We secured €61 million to unlock the development of up to 1,000 new and additional student accommodation beds across four universities. These universities had planning permissions but the projects were viewed as unviable. We have invested taxpayers' money to get them moving. These projects are being progressed as an immediate response to unlock the supply of accommodation.

I am please to inform the Deputy that projects at both Maynooth University and Dublin City University are at tender stage. These will deliver 521 beds. I expect those projects to go to construction this year. The remaining projects at the University of Limerick and the University of Galway are undergoing due diligence assessment in line with our public spending code and infrastructure guidelines. I expect progress on both projects shortly.

This week, I secured Government approval to progress a long-term student accommodation policy. This is an action under Housing for All. This policy aims to increase the supply of student accommodation and, crucially, to also reduce students' reliance on private rental accommodation so as to reduce the barrier that accommodation can present in accessing higher education. The long-term policy aims to narrow the gap between supply and demand and targets the development of public and purpose-built student accommodation and the refurbishment of vacant units. It will also progress and explore some of the issues we have discussed regarding the rent-a-room scheme and digs. The policy will also address the cost of construction through the development of standardised design templates for student accommodation, which could be extraordinarily helpful as regards the cost and speed of development. It will also look at the examination of transport links and viable commuting options, an issue student unions across the country are, quite rightly, bringing up.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: To be perfectly honest, for most people, the announcement this week would have sounded like there was to be very substantial new investment in student accommodation. We sometimes need to look at how announcements and the media reporting around them are perceived and the hopes and concerns among students they can lead to. It is just not good enough for announcements to be made that can give people hope only for us not to deliver. If we look at what this three-point policy actually is, we will see that it will not mean any meaningful change. I do not see anything fundamentally different from what the Minister has told us about. He told us that his Department is going to start co-funding the construction of on-campus accommodation but, as he said, that has been under way since November 2022. He also told us that, in exchange for this funding, below-market rates will have to be provided for certain rooms. Again, that is part of the existing model. The likes of DCU are doing that. He further told us that use will be made of the rent-a-room scheme. This was first introduced in 2001. Will he tell us exactly what in this announcement is different from what has previously been announced?

Deputy Simon Harris: Absolutely. Many things are different. The Deputy constantly raises with me the need for a new student accommodation policy. The student accommodation policy in advance of this was wholly reliant on the private market. It was all about the private market building purpose-built student accommodation. This is turning that on its head. This is about recognising that the new policy under Housing for All is very much around funding universities and technological universities to build student accommodation and us, as a State, helping to bridge that viability gap.

We have already started projects, and I am pleased about that. We do not need to wait for formal policy to start projects. We have started projects and got them to tender in DCU and Maynooth University. We will have more to follow in Limerick and Galway. We are talking to UCD, Trinity College and DCU about more they can do. That was about the immediate, however. It was about taking projects that already had planning permission. We will now be working with every university in the country, including the technological universities, to get their plans in. We have surveyed 22,801 students who are renting or involved in student accommodation today to ask them their views on what they want to see. We are working on a standardised design template. We will have standardised design applications out to all universities and will be bringing back in projects. There is a significant focus on being less reliant on the private market. In addition, as recently as 17 days ago we extended the renters' tax credit, which makes a real difference to families in reducing the cost of student accommodation.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This is about teasing it out and trying to understand. I was previously Sinn Féin spokesperson on public expenditure and reform. I have never seen a Department that does as many announcements as the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. I welcome announcements if they mean there will be progress for students and things will be better for them. When that is the case, I am totally on board. When it is announcements that do not seem to be making much of a difference in students' lives, however, it is a different matter. If this announcement will mean progress for students, all the better and more power to the Minister.

As regards technological universities, will this allow for TUs or is it simply getting in data to see what they could build? What is the difference from the rent-a-room scheme? Does it relate to other universities being able to build? Does it relate specifically to the standardised design, which is welcome?

The reality is that announcements give people hope. At present, students are deciding which colleges to select on their CAO form based on whether they can afford to go to a college away from home. That comes down specifically to the issue of housing. We have seen the increase in the number of deferrals as a result of the housing crisis. I am concerned at the high number of announcements and their impact going forward. This Department makes a lot of announcements. Many of them are re-announcements. If there are announcements that help people, I will back them 100% and am happy to support them.

Deputy Simon Harris: To be clear, when we take policy decisions, we announce them and tell people about them. It is a good and important thing that we tell our stakeholders and bosses, namely, the people of Ireland what the Government has decided. Let us be clear. The Government decided this week, on my recommendation, to adopt a new approach to student accommodation. The Government has decided that we will use taxpayers' hard-earned money to help to build student accommodation. In terms of hope, that will mean 521 more beds going to construction this year at DCU and Maynooth University. It will mean enabling me to advance and bring to conclusion conversations with UCD, Trinity, DCU, UL and NUI Galway about more they can do. That is hope. It is extra accommodation and beds that can be delivered in projects that have planning permission.

The Deputy asked a fair question about the technological universities. The next phase is not about gathering data. We have done that through 22,801 students. All the universities have engaged in the process. The next bit is about asking them to send forward their proposals to inform my engagement with the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform on the capital review. I would like to see those proposals back by the end of this quarter.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: When will they be able to borrow?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will come back in on that question.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Minister can respond while replying to my next question.

Third Level Education

75. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will expand on the funding for which students from the Republic of Ireland can apply for in respect of medicine places in universities in Belfast and Derry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1717/24]

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I ask the Minister to expand on the funding for which students from the Republic of Ireland can apply in the context of places on medicine courses at universities in Belfast and Derry, and to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is important that we look at all the resources available on the island of Ireland when it comes to education, particularly in the context of trying to provide the number of graduates we require for our public services. We have started with nursing and therapy posts. This year, students from across the island of Ireland are availing of nursing courses and therapy positions in Northern Ireland. The interest in therapy positions - speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and the likes - was so significant we had to increase rom 50 to 80 the number of places we were funding in

Northern Ireland. We now wish to look at how we can do this in respect of medicine.

Putting aside politics, political vacuums and everything else for the moment, we know the people of Ireland move around the island of Ireland. A person living in Donegal who needs cancer treatment is likely to get it in Altnagelvin. A sick baby in Belfast who needs a life-saving heart operation is likely to get it in Dublin. It makes sense to look at the all-island approach to these matters.

As the Deputy will be aware, increasing the number of medical graduates is a priority for the Government, me and the Minister for Health. Working with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, in July 2022 I received Government approval to progress work to increase by 200 the number of medicine places in universities throughout Ireland. This was a multi-annual agreement, with 60 of these places introduced in 2022, 60 last year and a further 40 this year. This has had a significant impact. That is evident from the fact that for the first time in a decade or so, the points for medicine fell.

As part of the Government agreement, my Department sought to progress work to secure places for Irish students in medical schools in Northern Ireland. Under this approach, students would be eligible to apply for an internship in the HSE on graduation. Students may also be eligible for a maintenance grant under SUSI, the student grant scheme. My officials have been working closely with the institutions in the North and the Departments for health and the economy in Northern Ireland through the past 18 months to develop a proposal that would lead to more medical places for Irish students in the North and increase the pool of Irish medical graduates educated on the island who would be eligible to apply to work in the HSE. The final details of the proposal are now being worked through. As such, I am not currently in a position to expand further on the funding arrangements. However, I expect to be in a position to make a further announcement in the coming weeks.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I received an email from a third-year medical student who is attending Ulster University. The course is located on Magee campus in Derry and, this year, the students are based in hospitals throughout the east Trust in Northern Ireland. Many of those studying medicine at Ulster University are from the Republic of Ireland. The student was shocked to find out this week that upon their graduation in 2025, it is unlikely they will be able to apply for internship posts and work as doctors in the Republic of Ireland. This is due to the HSE requiring transcripts of their final degree from the university at an earlier date than is possible. The issue in relation to administration means that many students who wish to work in the Republic of Ireland will instead opt for a two-year foundation training course located in the UK. The student states it is disappointing that these issues have not been resolved despite the HSE being aware of the course for the past three years, and probably many years prior to that. The student further states that at a time when retention in the HSE system is critical, it is ridiculous not to allow medical students the chance to work in the Republic of Ireland. The student asks the Minister to discuss the matter and to provide a resolution, if not awareness, to most of the issues that have been raised.

This is a serious situation. The Minister has made funding available for medical students to attend these universities. We are paying for them to study medicine. These students want to come and work in the Republic of Ireland but they are not being allowed to do so.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for sharing that information from his constituent who is studying on the Magee campus of Ulster University in Derry. I will raise that matter

directly with the Minister for Health. I should be clear that what I am doing with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, in respect of the courses and places we intend to fund will be from this coming September. Without knowing the details, it sounds like the student in question is already studying in Northern Ireland in advance of the new scheme and initiative I am hoping to put in place for this September in Belfast and hopefully in Derry. If the Deputy provides details of the matter to me, I will be happy to raise it with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly. He and all the Government wish to ensure we attract as many doctors as possible, particularly doctors and students who are studying on the island of Ireland, to work in the Irish health service.

In the coming weeks, I will be finalising with the universities in Northern Ireland their capacity and appetite for accepting funding from the Government to provide medicine places that can be ring-fenced for students from this jurisdiction. It is an important initiative to keep people studying on the island of Ireland. With the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, we will be finalising what that means in terms of opportunities on graduation for internship and placements within the HSE.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am surprised that no one else has contacted the Minister on the matter. In fairness, the Government is subsidising these medical students to go to Northern Ireland. The difference is that students from Northern Ireland who wish to attend university there have to pay up to £10,000 or £11,000 to do so.

My big concern is that a recent ESRI study showed Ireland will need at least another 2,600 doctors in hospitals by 2025. Many of the doctors training in the Republic of Ireland are going abroad. This issue is on our doorstep. I am disappointed at the current situation. The constituency offices of all Members are being visited by people whose doctors have retired or who cannot get an appointment. At the moment they are depending on the HSE to get them a doctor. The situation is very simple. The HSE is not doing its work as far as I am concerned. The Minister is responsible for the payment of these fees. It is very important that he and the HSE sit down. These students want to come and train as doctors in the Republic of Ireland. I am sure there is a good reason they have to go to Northern Ireland to be trained. As I said, we are looking for doctors and these doctors are on our doorstep. This a very serious situation. As a former Minister for Health and current Minister for further education, Deputy Harris is the most suitable Minister to sort out this situation.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the vote of confidence in me. This is a very important issue for his constituent and I will certainly take it up with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I need to be clear for the record of the House. The initiative I am talking about has not yet commenced. It is commencing from September. We are not currently funding those places for students in Northern Ireland. It is a statement of fact that students in Northern Ireland pay much higher fees than students here. A registration fee in Ireland is €3,000 and we have reduced it for two years in a row to €2,000, in addition to SUSI support, student grants and the likes. In Northern Ireland, people pay many multiples of that and many avail of student loans and the like. What I want to do, and I am working with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to do it, is put in place a system where students from this jurisdiction can study medicine in Northern Ireland at the rates we charge here, not the higher rates in Northern Ireland, and that we would look to bridge the gap.

We have presided over the biggest increase in medicine places in the Republic of Ireland in many years, with 60 extra places in 2022, 60 in 2023 and 40 more places this year, as well as the discussions with Northern Ireland, for all the reasons the Deputy rightly outlined. Our

people need more doctors. On the specific issue, I am very happy to co-ordinate a response to the Deputy and to engage with the Minister for Health.

Further and Higher Education

76. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the work he is doing to ensure that current students and apprentices are retained within Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2287/24]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: What work is being undertaken by the Department to ensure that current students and apprentices are retained here? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising an important point. As we all know, Ireland has one of the highest participation rates in third level education in Europe. Every year, the Higher Education Authority conducts a survey of graduates nine months after graduation. Over 70,000 graduates from the class of 2022 completed the survey to provide a really good picture of what graduates are doing in their early-stage careers. The survey has taken place each year since 2017 with the exception of the class of 2019, who were not surveyed due to disruption caused by Covid-19. In 2020, 75.9% of graduates were in employment nine months after graduation and 13.8% went on to further study. In 2022, 83% of graduates were in employment with 10.3% engaging in further study. This shows that the overwhelming majority of graduates are choosing to stay in Ireland after graduation and to work and do further study here.

In relation to apprentices, a key part of the apprenticeship system is the relationship between employer and the apprentice. As the Deputy knows, apprenticeships are undertaken through a contract of employment. Data is currently not collected in relation to this area for apprentices. The Deputy has raised a valid point, which I will pursue. The sense we have from engagement is that the majority of apprentices stay with the employer they train with for a period after they are fully certified. That makes logical sense but we could do with more data in this area.

One of the strengths of the further education and training model, including apprenticeships, is the link between education, enterprise and the needs of the economy. These courses are designed to focus on the needs of employers and industry developments. Therefore, trying to retain that talent is a significant priority for me and the Government. There are reasons to be encouraged when we look at the figures, and I am happy to share them. We see the overwhelming majority of graduates staying in employment in Ireland or going on to study in Ireland in the months after graduation. We monitor that year on year and have actually seen an increase in recent years.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I would love to see the data. That would be fantastic. Did the Minister say 7,000 students took part in the survey?

Deputy Simon Harris: It was 70,000.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That is interesting. I am sure the Minister is aware of the story, first broken by *The Sunday Times*, that over 21,000 Irish citizens have been granted visas to Australia, double the number recorded in the previous year. This will not come as a surprise to any of us because we see it in our friendship groups and neighbourhoods. With the number

of people going to Australia, it feel like it did when I came out of college or did the leaving certificate in the 2008 period. According to *The Sunday Times*, between July 2022 and July 2023, 21,525 holiday permits were granted. That makes us the largest recipient *per capita* of this kind of visa, ahead of Britain, France and Germany. We keep hearing that the economy is doing well but very clearly something is going wrong for young people here that they feel there is no alternative to going to Australia. Of course, there will always be an element who want to go and travel, see the world and all that kind of thing, but when there is that level of an increase there is clearly something amiss.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Farrell but I think the statistics paint a different picture. They are not my statistics but those of the Central Statistics Office. The Deputy will probably have seen that they were revised upwards during the Christmas period. They show the number of Irish citizens returning to this country significantly outstrips the number of Irish citizens leaving this country. There is a narrative out there, a statistically false one, that more Irish citizens are leaving the country than are coming back. The Deputy has not said that today. If we look at the CSO data for 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, all of which is published and available, we see significantly more Irish citizens - tens of thousands more - came back to Ireland than left during that period. The figure was revised by the CSO relatively recently.

There can never be room for complacency. Right across the world there is a battle for talent. One of the biggest issues we experience in public services and private industry is the recruitment and retention of our talent. Therefore it is important that we continue our annual survey. The point about apprentices that the Deputy's question has brought up is valid in terms of how we can gain more data on that. I am very happy to share the information I have with her.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am aware of that statistic. It was the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, who raised it with me. I do not think it is tens of thousands. I stand to be corrected on that. I will have to look it up. The reality is 21,000 young people went to Australia last year, which is a massive increase from the previous year. Obviously there is something amiss here. We are not in the age group where our friends who had left are coming back or hoping to come back and are trying to raise a family. Fundamentally, the housing crisis is having a severe impact on that. In recent years, I have been to countless weddings and a large number of those who got married some years ago are still living with their parents as a married couple because they have nowhere to go. They cannot get a mortgage if they have been abroad. They find it impossible to get a full-time permanent job. As a result, they cannot get a mortgage. They cannot get planning and they find the rents are very high. The Minister and I can argue the point about the numbers. I do not have the figures in front of me. However, we do have the figure of 21,000 and we know that is a doubling. We need to look at why so many young people are leaving and we need to try to deal with that.

Deputy Simon Harris: I definitely do not want to argue. While accepting neither of us has the specific figures in front of us, let us also accept that both of us believe and know that the Central Statistics Office has produced figures that show that more Irish citizens have returned to the country than left it in the period 2017 to 2022.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is because hundreds of thousands went away after the financial crash. The Minister is including those people.

Deputy Simon Harris: Due to the fact that the economy has recovered under the management of my party in government for many years, people now have an opportunity to come back

to their country to get a job. That is a good thing-----

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: There is no housing.

Deputy Simon Harris: ----but we can debate that on another day.

Deputy Farrell is not wrong that housing remains the biggest challenge facing young people in this country. We can have a debate, as we do in this House all the time, about what the best solutions are in terms of providing opportunities. The fact that we are now seeing about 500 people purchase their first home every single week, the highest figure we have seen in many years, is an encouraging sign. That we now have schemes in place to get a deposit and bridge the gap between what people can save and what they need to get a deposit is a good thing. It is important that we are going to do more on student accommodation. In my Department and the Department the Deputy shadows, the fact that we are going to make sure we continue to train more people to build homes is good. Some people will always leave the country and sometimes people will come back. More people are coming back than are leaving. From a graduate point of few, the HEA survey provides an insight into how many people go straight into the world of work and how many people continue on in education. I am encouraged that those figures increased between 2020 and 2022. I also acknowledge that we need to do more in terms of data around apprenticeships.

Education and Training Boards

77. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the proposed site that the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board has identified for a training centre in Roscommon town; if a decision has been made by his Department to fund this site; and, if not, when a decision will be made on this. [1993/24]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Minister is well aware that a site has been identified in Roscommon for a training centre for the ETB. It has the backing of all political sides in Roscommon. It is not just me, but everyone who has spoken to the Minister. Moegie Maher, a Fine Gael councillor in Galway who is on the ETB, has been involved in it.

11 o'clock

This is Roscommon Inc. coming together to identify a site that will actually help with skills down the road. I am asking about the status of the proposed site. Is the Department funding it and where are we at? If a decision has not been made, when will one be made?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for asking the question and raising this issue with me on a number of occasions. I thank him for being good and honourable enough to acknowledge other people like Councillor Moegie Maher, Senator Dolan and others who have worked on this. I acknowledge that everybody from Roscommon in this House has come together to try to make progress on this and to work very closely with the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, GRETB. I thank them for their work on that.

My officials and I are very aware of the GRETB application and the work that is being done on the business case in respect of the proposed purchase of a property in Roscommon town to facilitate new apprenticeship training capacity. Initial documentation regarding this request for

funding was submitted by GRETB to SOLAS, our agency, late last year. SOLAS is now working with GRETB to finalise that business case, which is important in securing funding. As part of this process, GRETB will be required to provide some further detail to support the acquisition from a strategic viewpoint, while taking account of the overall regional and national plans for apprentice provision for the region. This is in line with requirements that I have to satisfy in terms of the infrastructure guidelines. Once the business case is completed, it can then be appraised and forwarded to my Department. At a practical and basic level, we need to increase apprenticeship capacity dramatically around the country. I am eager to progress any capacity that we can find. We also need to make sure that people can access apprenticeships near their locality, so that if somebody in Roscommon wants to become an apprentice, he or she does not have to travel long distances to do so. We also have to recognise that there is a gap in the map, when it comes to Roscommon, that I am very eager to fill.

The Deputy will understand that it would not be helpful for me to comment on a specific building or site, but I can tell him very clearly that my overall aim is to make sure we have apprenticeship provision in County Roscommon. Indeed, we may be a bit more ambitious in that and not just limit it to apprenticeship but other skill provision that should be available in the county. My commitment is that my officials and SOLAS will continue to work very closely with GRETB. I thank its leadership team, which is doing a very good job to try to get the business case completed as a matter of urgency and to work through the process. I am eager to work with the Deputy and his colleagues in the constituency on this matter.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: In fairness to the Minister, he has engaged until now. Suitable buildings do not become available too often in many parts of the country. I am familiar with the building in question. It was a garage at one time. It would be ideal for the type of apprenticeships that are being proposed. You do not find that easily. The GRETB staff can walk from the current building to the new proposed site. I know the Minister has said that more information has to be sent. The one thing we do not want is to see the process dragging on because we will lose the likes of a building like that. I am fearful that we will miss the opportunity that is there in Roscommon. It will help local businesses and those providing accommodation and everything else. There are different parts to it. Some of the youngsters could be staying in the town, which would help rejuvenate the area. I ask the Minister to keep engaging on this matter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with everything the Deputy said. I do not want this to drag on either. I obviously cannot be site-specific because of the process that needs to be gone through, but if I am asked whether I want to see apprenticeship provision in County Roscommon and want to help GRETB and SOLAS make that happen as a matter of urgency, I can say that I do. Right across the country, we are prioritising a massive increase in apprenticeship capacity. We just made an announcement in Dundalk today in relation to extra capacity for Dundalk Institute of Technology, DKIT to provide apprenticeships. That is an example from as recently as a few minutes ago. We are actively in the business of trying to grow our apprenticeship provision. We saw more apprentices complete first-time registration in this country last year than we did in any other year. Almost 9,000 new people put up their hand and said they wanted to be an apprentice. That means thousands more people to help us build our homes, retrofit our houses and meet some of our key targets.

The point the Deputy made about the regional piece is key. We have to make it as easy as possible for someone to become an apprentice, and we have to provide opportunities for businesses in the region to be able to access the supply of apprentices. That is why I am excited

about the GRETB proposal. I will work very closely with the Deputy and his colleagues in Roscommon on the matter.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We have talked about building houses, and I know some of them are being built off-site at the moment. We are struggling to get youngsters into a lot of the wet trades. We are struggling to get mechanics as well. One upon a time, you used a spanner to fix a tractor; nowadays, it is a computer. It is totally different. The training is totally different from what it was at one time. You need part of both, but the computer identifies all the problems now. With the way the technology has changed, we need a lot of youngsters to do the learning. Some of the mechanics who were trained up under the old system are more reluctant to have a go at it, to be honest. We need the mechanical side of it because obviously we need transport going, but we also need people in the wet trades, including plastering and all of that, if we are talking about building houses.

All I will say is that in my opinion, the proposed site is an ideal one. I would love for the process to be pushed on. I thank the Minister for his engagement so far and I hope he keeps his finger on the pulse. It is not just me; it is every representative in Roscommon and, in fairness, east Galway. They are all together on this.

Deputy Simon Harris: I give the Deputy my word that I will keep a very close eye on this and take an active interest in providing apprenticeship places in Roscommon, working with the Deputy and Oireachtas colleagues. The Deputy is correct when he talks about mechanics. I was out recently at an event. The AA has an upskilling and reskilling workshop because the mechanic of today needs a very different skill set tomorrow. I think last year we saw more new electric vehicles, EVs, purchased than new petrol or diesel cars. That means the mechanic of today is going to start seeing more and more EVs coming in. It is a very different skill set. The level of upskilling and reskilling that we have to do, even among people currently working in trades, with modern methods of construction being another example, is very real.

I am really encouraged by the number of people taking up apprenticeships. We have seen a 63% increase in the number of new apprentices between 2020 and this year. We have seen more people take up the craft apprentices than we had targeted for. A record number of people are becoming apprentices, but we have to do more. We need more capacity and we need to bring a regional balance to it. I thank GRETB and the Deputy for their work on this. I will be asking for the business case to be brought to a conclusion as a matter of urgency.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Further and Higher Education

78. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to provide an update on the long-outstanding issue of regularising the terms and conditions of adult education tutors employed by education and training boards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2048/24]

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am asking for an update on the agreement for a public service contract for adult education tutors. In particular, I am asking for as much information as pos-

sible on the terms and conditions that will be provided for in that contract and whether, finally, the adult education tutors will be recognised and given fair terms and conditions for the work they do.

Deputy Simon Harris: I acknowledge that this is an issue the Deputy has championed and highlighted in this House for a long time. She has raised it on a number of occasions, including at Leaders' Questions. I acknowledge that. It is also an issue that has been dragging on for too long. I know that is very much the conviction of the adult education tutors and those who represent them. They play a central role in meeting learners' needs. The regularisation of the terms and conditions of tutors is a priority for me and my Department. Steps taken to achieve this include the provision in 2019 of access to leave schemes, paid leave and the appropriate public sector pension scheme. The majority of tutors are paid on the unqualified teacher rate and have received Building Momentum pay increases, but there is a smaller group of tutors who are paid on the self-financing rate which was originally intended to be used for self-financing and not Exchequer-funded courses. As such, this rate has not be increased under national pay agreements. Work is under way to retrospectively award Building Momentum increases to this group this year.

In terms of the final elements of the overall process, following extensive engagement by my Department, together with the Department of Education which currently has legal responsibility for the terms and conditions of all employees in the ETB sector, and working with officials in the Department of public expenditure, a proposal was issued from my Department to staff representatives last year to establish a new grade of adult educator, with a standardised pay scale aligned with the Youthreach resource person scale. At the time, this was seen as a welcome breakthrough. The proposal provides for a consistent approach across ETBs into the future. Each of the over 2,800 tutors employed across the ETBs will have the option to avail of the proposal and assimilate on to the proposed new adult educator pay scale or remain on his or her existing arrangements. The implementation of the proposal has been the subject of further negotiations with staff representatives.

The sticking point, and a legitimate issue, was around arrangements for an incremental progression, which was the outstanding issue. The unions and the ETB management have drafted a paper on the implementation process for the proposal, and I am pleased to say this has now been agreed in principle between the parties. I am also pleased to tell the Deputy that both Departments met with ETBI this week - on Tuesday, I believe - to discuss the paper. Arising from these discussions, the proposal has now been finalised between Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, and the unions. I thank people for working on that. We intend to submit the final proposal to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform today and I hope we can bring this matter to a swift conclusion.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The Minister talked about a new adult educator pay scale. From speaking to adult education tutors, I know they do not want teacher contracts or contracts aligned to the terms and conditions of resource workers. They want to be recognised for the work they do. It is not better or worse; it is different. It is reasonable that any contract would reflect that difference and the actual work they do. They do the same work as further education and training and post-primary level 5 colleagues, and they want to be paid properly for their holidays, which is only reasonable. I know they are looking for clarification as to what is in the contract. I have been told that, as far as they are concerned, there is a lot of ambiguity about this. I am asking for clarification, although I know the Minister has already provided some.

Moreover, as the Minister recognised, some ETBs have not honoured the Building Momentum public pay agreement for adult tutors. They say they are waiting for a circular from the Department but such a thing does not exist. I ask the Minister to help to sort this out.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will speak about Carlow. Adult education tutors are vital in Carlow and we have great tutors who provide an excellent service. At the moment, some of our tutors are working with the most disadvantaged and, indeed, with Ukrainian students, both young and old. It is very important that we move along with this. A 2020 Labour Court recommendation requested that the Department seeks to resolve things and place these tutors on an incremental scale. At present, they are paid hourly and they sign on during every school summer closure. I know the Minister has agreed that this must be done and he has sent costings to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform but it seems to be stuck there. I ask that we move on this. I know many of the tutors in Carlow and they are excellent. I believe we need to get this done.

I am also looking forward to seeing the Minister in Carlow soon as I know he is coming to Carlow College, St. Patrick's. I hope that happens as soon as possible.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am looking forward to visiting Carlow College with Deputy Murnane O'Connor shortly. I thank both Deputies for raising this important issue. My understanding is that very good progress was made on agreeing the grades. I hope I did not suggest it, but this is not to suggest that the work an adult education tutor does is similar to another job. It is aligning the terms and conditions with other people working in the further education and training sector, which I think is appropriate. It is getting them into a regularised space, with a proper contract and the normal things that people would expect in any contract.

The sticking point was around the proposal in regard to an increment. The proposal was for an increment to be awarded following completion of 1,043 contact hours, rather than on the completion of 52 weeks worked. The unions contended that section 9 of the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2001 requires that part-time and full-time adult educators receive increments after the same periods of employment regardless of the number of hours worked during that period of employment. I sought legal advice in this regard and on foot of that, we have worked very closely with ETBI and with the representative bodies of the adult education tutors. As a result, an updated proposal is now issuing to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform on the basis of that increment being awarded on the completion of 52 weeks.

That is where we are literally right now. It follows on from a meeting where there was an agreement in principle between TUI, SIPTU and the ETB sector on the implementation process on 12 January, followed by a meeting of my Department, the ETB sector and the unions on 16 January, which fell on a Tuesday. I will now submit the proposal to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform and, following that, we will be straight back to the unions. I want to see this issue resolved and I know the adult education tutors really want to see it resolved. A huge of amount of work has been done in good faith by everyone. There were a couple of sticking points around implementation. The Building Momentum piece around the increases due to those tutors on SOLAS-funded programmes who are paid on self-financing rates will also be addressed as part of this process.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am pleased to hear that this will be addressed. To clarify, to gain one increment on the pay scale, do they have to work the full academic year in terms of hours?

In other parts of the public sector, one calendar year is one point on the pay scale and it is *pro rata*, so there is no advantage or disadvantage here. It is just being reasonable and fair. I ask the Minister to clarify that for me as I was not quite sure what he said.

The Minister mentioned pensions earlier. They are asking that all hours worked be pensionable and, again, I think that is a reasonable ask.

In the last few seconds of my speaking time, I want to recognise the very important work of the late Lorcan McNamee in making the case for adult tutors for so many years. Lorcan died just before Christmas and I want to recognise his very valuable contribution in supporting adult tutors for many years.

Deputy Simon Harris: I join with the Deputy in sending my condolences to the family of Lorcan McNamee and I understand from Deputy Harkin's contribution the important contribution that he made in regard to adult education tutors. May he rest in peace.

The proposal was for an increment to be awarded following the completion of 1,043 contact hours, rather than on the completion of 52 weeks worked. As I said, and for clarity, the unions contended that under section 9 of the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2001, this requires that whether someone is part-time or full-time, they would receive increments after the same period of employment regardless of the number of hours worked during that period of employment. The unions also sought confirmation that circular letter 65/2017, Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2003 - Implementation of Agreement in Respect of Tutors Employed by Education and Training Boards, will continue to apply to their members, including those who choose to assimilate and those who do not choose to assimilate.

Legal advice was sought and received from the Office of the Attorney General in regard to these matters. In light of this advice, I am now seeking approval for the award of an incremental credit to be based on the completion of the 52 weeks of work, rather than the hours. The associated cost of all tutors receiving the annual increment is, therefore, being forwarded to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform for its consideration. I would not expect that a significant amount would arise from this until approximately 2026.

I will come back to the Deputy directly on the pension issue but that sounds logical, given the Deputy's contribution.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Emer Higgins): We have a slight alteration to the schedule. There was a request to swap Questions Nos. 82 and 79 and I have agreed to that, so we will now move to Question No. 82 in the name of Deputy Colm Burke.

Apprenticeship Programmes

82. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science what progress has been made in reducing the time period for electrical-instrument and mechanical apprentices to attend college placement at a facility (details supplied) from the date an apprenticeship commences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2099/24]

Deputy Colm Burke: I ask the Minister what progress has been made on reducing the time

period for electrical-instrument and mechanical apprentices to attend college placement from the date the apprenticeship commences.

Deputy Simon Harris: I particularly thank Deputy Burke for arranging the very useful meeting that I had recently in regard to the SOLAS and ETB provision in Bishopstown, Cork. I found it very insightful to hear from people on the front line and thank those people working on the provision of apprenticeships for that work.

Apprenticeship waiting times refer to individuals and the length of time that they are waiting to access training. Apprenticeships are national programmes and the equitable management of access to training means that apprentices can be offered placement at any facility which provides the relevant training. The relevant ETB is committed to increasing capacity at the training centre referenced in the Deputy's question, which is expected to contribute to a sustained and significant impact on reducing waiting times nationally.

Strong demand for the opportunities available through apprenticeships has meant very significant growth in registrations over the past several years. The year 2023 saw a record number of 8,712 registrations, the highest number ever of newly registered apprentices, of which 6,588 were on craft programmes.

Since the Covid pandemic, there have been significant delays arising from time to time, in particular in regard to phase 2 of training, and we have been doing a lot of work on this. I am pleased to inform Deputy Burke that, as a result, we have secured an additional €67 million for apprenticeships in budget 2024. This will enable growth in the craft system from over 13,000 places in 2022 to over 16,000 places in 2024, which is an increase approaching 25%. The actions already taken have resulted in a very significant drop in the number of people delayed in terms of accessing their training. We now have the lowest figure since August 2021, when there was a peak of 11,859 people waiting. That is now down to 3,919 and the figure has dropped for two months in a row. The ETBs and SOLAS have produced a plan that shows the backlog being eradicated during the course of 2024 and there is, of course, an implementation monitoring group in place in this regard.

Several of the mechanical and electrical programmes referenced by the Deputy require increased capacity. This will be delivered by ETBs, as well as temporary provision by other partners.

Deputy Colm Burke: As the Minister will know, Cork is doing very well in the pharmaceutical industry. Nine of the ten top pharmaceutical companies in the world are based in Cork. The people I am referring to are essential to that area, such as pipe fitters and mechanical apprentices. It is extremely important that we have that number. At the moment, there is up to a 21-month period from the time the person first gets into an apprenticeship to doing the training within the SOLAS facility. That is where the concern is. As a result, it is difficult to attract people to take on these apprenticeships, because they are delayed in getting access to the technical side of the training. Therefore, there is also a concern from the employer's side as well.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Emer Higgins): There is a supplementary question from Deputy Mairéad Farrell.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: As the Minister is aware, this is something I have had a particular interest in. I note the Minister mentions the increase in the number of places from 13,000 to 16,000. Does he think he will have the capacity to deal with that? We know it has been impos-

sible to deal with the capacity up to now. On that, the Minister mentioned how just over 3,300 people are waiting. Can he specifically clarify what exactly that figure relates to? That is really important. Obviously, we need people to be trained in order that we can build the houses we clearly require.

I also wish to raise a point of information on the number of people who are coming back into the country compared with the number of people leaving the country. I had a look at this because it had been previously raised with me by Fine Gael. According to the CSO, in the 12-month period prior to April 2023, 30,500 Irish citizens left the country and 29,600 returned. That is important to note for the Dáil record.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Emer Higgins): There is another supplementary question from Deputy Gould.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister quoted figures on people taking up apprenticeships and stated it was a high number. I will give the Minister a figure that was recently released to me. There are only 83 apprentices who are at phase 7 in Cork. There are 14 electricians and 16 plumbers. Cork needs 39,105 houses by 2028 but there will be 16 plumbers and 14 electricians, if that is what we are turning out. These are the facts, because I got them from the Department. These are the facts that I am telling the Minister here.

I have been told that of a class that completed last year, 15 out of 16 of them emigrated. I hope that plumber will be really busy.

Deputy Simon Harris: Well, of course, they are not the facts, because the facts show me-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: No, Minister. These are parliamentary questions.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am not doing this.

Deputy Thomas Gould: You cannot stand there now. These are parliamentary questions.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am not doing this. I am not doing this shouting. If interest was measured in decibels, you would win the contest every time, but we do not need to shout and roar at each other. You asked me a question and I am going to answer it. You might listen.

In the Cork training centre alone, there are 484 apprentices. In Munster Technological University, which is in Cork, there are 160. In Mallow College of Further Education, there are many multiples of the figures the Deputy has referenced. You are talking-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Simon Harris: No, hang on. You cannot stand up in Dáil Éireann as a representative of the people of Cork and tell them there are only a certain number of people in a programme when there are not.

Deputy Thomas Gould: In phase 7 there are only 83 people.

Deputy Simon Harris: Just stop. You are picking and choosing one phase in one programme.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is the final phase.

Deputy Simon Harris: Today, I will send the Deputy the number of apprentices in Cork. I will send it to him. I will send it to the Ceann Comhairle and we can all tell the truth in this place.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will send on my response to you so you can have it as well.

Deputy Simon Harris: You do not need to send me my own figures. I have them.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There is no incentive there. Obviously, you do not-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Emer Higgins): The Minister without interruption, please.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I will do that for Deputy Gould today. I will acknowledge the number of apprentices that are in Cork, or for anyone else who wants the figures relating to their constituency. There are more than ever before in this country. There are more than ever before. These are record numbers. There is an issue with waiting times, which is what this question is about, although we have strayed from it significantly.

Regarding the CSO figures, the Deputy is referencing a different period to what I referenced, which is the composite period between 2017 and 2022. Let us acknowledge that, too.

In relation to Deputy Burke's point, I am pleased to say that as a result of the engagement we have had and a result of the significant investment we have made, we are now seeing the waiting times falling for the first time in quite a considerable time. We saw many people being scheduled in the Cork training centre, Munster Technological University and the Mallow College of Further Education just before the Christmas period. I have the figures here, and I can provide them to the Deputy. We saw an extra 353 apprentices being scheduled just before Christmas for phase 2 training, and an extra 291 apprentices in Cork alone. We saw 644 additional apprentices scheduled for training before Christmas in Cork alone. That is quite a high number of people.

I understand the concerns in the industry. We need to get people in and out quickly in order that they can get the qualifications. This is particularly the case in Cork, where there is a concern around the pharma sector. We also need to encourage people to go into apprenticeships. People should know that if they are going into an apprenticeship this year they will be joining record numbers, they will be going into an expanding sector, their fees have been cut by one third and they have a great chance of a well-paid job. With all 73 apprenticeship programmes except for one, apprentices are still completing their training within a four-year programme, which is what an apprenticeship programme is meant to be. I expect very significant progress on waiting times in 2024. We have already seen those numbers reducing for two months in a row.

Deputy Colm Burke: Briefly, I thank the Minister for the work he has done. There has been a huge improvement in the support for employers taking on apprentices and for apprentices as well.

I will just respond to the issue of the number of people who are leaving the country and those who are coming back in. Some 144,000 have come back in the last five years and 138,000 have left. Those are the figures over a five-year time period.

Deputy Simon Harris: I should also say that I will get back to Deputy Mairéad Farrell with specific information on the breakdown of the programmes. I am happy to provide that.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Yes, the figure of 3,000.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Minister. That is very helpful.

Further and Higher Education

80. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to outline his priorities for 2024, in particular if he will consider how SUSI can help more students and their families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2062/24]

Deputy Brendan Griffin: This question is to ask the Minister to outline to the House his priorities for 2024. Can he refer to SUSI and what improvements we will see this year for students? What will that mean for those individual students?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is my priority in 2024 to continue to drive down the cost of education. I am pleased that the Government and the Fine Gael political party have managed to reduce fees for more than 96,000 students for two years in a row now. This is putting €1,000 back in the pockets of families right across the country. I want to see more progress in relation to that. I want to continue to see us reducing the cost of education so that education will be accessible to everyone.

I want to see things like the renter's tax credit being expanded for the first time to include a parent who pays for his or her child's rent while that child is in college. I want to see that being embedded and I want all parents in Kerry and across the country to know that if you pay for your child's rent, you can claim the €750 tax credit this year. If such children were in college accommodation last year or the year before, people can seek to get it backdated for €500 for each of those two proceeding years.

I want to roll out more student accommodation. We will see accommodation going to construction at DCU and Maynooth this year. I want to make progress on other student accommodation projects that colleges have planning permission for. For the first time in the history of the State, I want to work with the regions and the technological universities to get student accommodation proposals in, which I want done in the first quarter of this year. I want to see an expansion of our apprenticeship programme in order that we can build our homes, retrofit our homes, meet and exceed our housing and climate targets and provide people with more pathways to education and qualifications.

At the end of this month, I intend to outline major new programmes for people with a disability, particularly people with an intellectual disability, to access third-level education after they leave school. I want to see the provision of part-time courses and providing funding for people who do part-time education, because not everybody can go to college, pack their bags and go full time. People are holding down jobs, people are trying to pay mortgages, people are trying to raise kids or care for a parent. This is a matter of funding for part-time courses.

I want to help businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, with the cost

of upskilling and reskilling their employees. We will announce programmes regarding both of those initiatives in the coming weeks.

As I said, for two years in a row, we have reduced the student contribution fee. We have brought back postgraduate grants for the first time in 13 years. We have increased all our student grants, effective from last week. We have increased the amount of income you can earn while still qualifying for a number of supports. As I said, this year, I want to embed the changes in part-time education to make sure people who are doing part-time education can also access support with their fees.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister. That is a comprehensive suite of measures that he has secured in the most recent budget and over a number of years. I welcome that. It makes a massive difference to students and their families all over the country. At a Government level, these things might seem like a small change but they can be hugely significant for families, for people who are struggling and for those who are trying to improve their futures and prospects. I welcome every measure that has been taken to date.

There are always things that people in our constituencies will contact us about in order that they can have them changed and improved. I urge the Minister to continue his work in trying to ensure that the costs of third-level education and further education are reduced for as many people as possible. One area in particular that I want to be looked at is the SUSI thresholds because we need to be cognisant of them, given inflation and wage inflation.

I will mention one particular area about which a woman outlined her story to me some time ago. I have raised this previously with the Minister and I want to raise it again, namely, the case of widows, widowers and SUSI. Their scenario needs to be looked at and we need to see if we can do something exceptional for people in that scenario because it is extremely difficult, as the Minister knows, for parents on one income to put children through college. In a case where there is one income that is reasonably good but where there are numerous children, people can get caught in that trap as well.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy on both issues and I will look at that widows and widowers issue. I want to look more comprehensively at an overhaul of SUSI to make sure the thresholds are right, that it is supporting people and families across the country and that it is agile enough to understand that people learn in different ways. That is why the part-time change is an important one.

The Deputy is also right about thresholds. There are often people who just about get by. They work hard and do everything right and they find they are just above a threshold and do not qualify for something. That is why I have been determined that when we have been bringing in supports for students and their families, when we reduce the college fees we reduce them for everybody. Anybody who was in a full-time undergraduate course, which is about 96,000 people, got the fee reduction regardless of a means test. Call them what you wish but the squeezed middle, namely, that group of people who find they never qualify for the support, can still be struggling to get by in the cost-of-living crisis. That is why we gave that €1,000 back before Christmas. I meet these people across the country and I know the substantial difference that made to many people.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: On the income thresholds and SUSI, in particular, we have a massive shortage of skills and labour in the tourism and hospitality sector and there is a disin-

centive for many young people. I worked right through college and school, on weekends and even on weeknights, to try to help pay my way through college. For the SUSI gross income consideration, all of that income should be disregarded or there should be stronger disregards. It is an area I ask the Minister to look at. Not only would it benefit the families and students involved but it would also benefit the wider economy, including the hospitality businesses that are struggling to attract people to work in their restaurants, bars and cafés, as well as other retailers across the economy where there is a shortage of labour. There should never be a disincentive to work in this economy and country but some of those disincentives remain and it is an area the Minister could possibly examine with his colleagues in government around the Cabinet table. The Minister might see if he can come up with a better solution to ensure there is always an incentive for people to work, particularly people who are trying to support themselves through college.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will do that. Deputy Griffin is entirely right; if you go into a café, hotel, pub or shop, people will tell you it can be hard to attract staff. There are many students who are working, who need to work and who want to work but they are worried that if they work too many hours, they might go over the threshold and lose their student grants. The good news is that progress has been made on this with the holiday earnings deduction, as it is called. The amount of income you can earn and have disregarded has increased from €4,500 in 2022 and 2023 to €6,552 currently and I intend to try to make more progress on that in the budgets ahead.

More generally, we have made improvements to the income thresholds, although I accept we have more to do. For example, the reckonable income threshold for a student contribution grant has increased from €62,000 to €100,000. If you have a household income of €100,000 or less, you are eligible for some support in respect of fee reduction. From this September, for the new college year, the income thresholds for students to receive a maintenance grant is increasing to €50,840, up from €46,790, and we will endeavour to build on this.

Third Level Education

79. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he and his Department continue to make extra third level places available by whatever means to ensure that this country's competence in the technical areas remains at the highest possible level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1821/24]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This is a question I have put down on many occasions in the past. I want to ensure that we continue to be alert to the fact that there is huge demand, competition and expectation of competence in the technical and apprenticeship areas. I congratulate the Minister on his tremendous work in that area on the one hand and we must ensure the work continues on the other.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his question and kind words. Planning for current and future public and private sector workforce and skills needs and ensuring an appropriate pipeline of suitable qualified graduates is a particular priority of mine. I say public and private because we need to meet the needs of the economy and to continue to work closely with businesses on upskilling and reskilling their workforce and around providing them with the graduates they need. We also need to ensure we are providing enough graduates to meet the

needs of our public services. This is something the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Higgins, often raises in making sure we have enough people to work in the disability sector, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. I look at the full spectrum of the needs of our country, both societally and economically.

In terms of our economy, in June 2022 I announced the creation of over 1,000 permanent places across a range of key skills areas, including: an extra 235 places in ICT; an extra 138 places in architecture and construction; an extra 112 places in engineering; and an extra 27 places in the environment. For the first time, since last September students are able to enter new tertiary programmes outside the CAO system. I believe in this; we were losing people who could be good and passionate in a certain area because they were not good at rote learning in school. You can do your degree, regardless of what you get in the leaving certificate, by being assessed in a different way for your suitability to enter, once you meet some minimum requirements. You start your programme in further education and students then progress seamlessly into a guaranteed place to complete that fully accredited degree in higher education. I am pleased to inform the House that I will be announcing a range of new tertiary programmes for September 2024 in the coming months, including new tertiary degrees in ICT, engineering and science.

Springboard+ and the human capital initiative are also ensuring this country's competence in technical areas remains at a high level. Human capital initiative pillar 2 provides additional places in identified key areas of enterprise skills needs, including science, engineering, ICT and professional construction qualifications. Through the budget, I am investing significantly in our apprenticeship system. Apprenticeships have a crucial role to play in meeting Ireland's skills needs and they significantly contribute to meeting the Government's commitments on Housing for All and our climate action plan. Building on the measures taken in previous budgets, an extra €67 million in investment in our apprenticeship system will grow the number of places from 13,000 in 2022 to over 16,000 this year.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. By way of a supplementary question, I ask the extent to which the Minister continues to liaise with industry to determine precisely the requirements in this area. I recognise that we face increased competition, not only across Europe but across the globe, in our ability to fill those technical spaces throughout industry.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister made a point about people who might not get the points and who might go through a different avenue. I dealt with a case this year of a girl who went through Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa and got the maximum results there. The problem was about getting into University College Cork, UCC, to become part of the physical education, PE, programme and become a PE teacher. The course was oversubscribed, there had to be a lottery and she did not make it. The problem for that young lady is that even if she applies this year, it will be a lottery again. This is a person who has done everything right and followed the procedures. For anomalies like that, can a solution be found for the likes of that young woman? I know she wants to do PE teaching but at the moment she is back in a lottery.

Deputy Simon Harris: On Deputy Durkan's question, we will liaise with industry in terms of our regional skills forums. This is the mechanism that has been looked at by other countries with a degree of interest. We have, in every region in Ireland, a regional skills forum. They bring together the colleges, ETBs, universities and employers in the region to look at what is needed in the south west or Dublin, for example, in skills provision. That is working very well

and we need to continue to do that. I was determined, when my Department was created, that it would not just be another Department of Education but a Department of education and skills in accessing and working with industry on the development and co-creation of programmes.

On Deputy Gould's point, I would be happy to look at that specific issue because he is right on this. At the heart of what we are trying to do, which I know the Deputy and his party support, through our National Tertiary Office, is provide people with another opportunity to get into university. Up until now it has been exactly as the Deputy says; if you do not get the points or for whatever other reason, you can start in further education. You could do well and you may or may not get to progress into the university. The Deputy is right that it is a lotto system. What we have done with the tertiary degree is that you are guaranteed, if you start in further education, that once you meet the necessary standard in the exams you will continue seamlessly into the university.

We have only rolled this out since last September. We have 23 degree programmes where we are providing it and we have written to every university in Ireland, including UCC, inviting them to get on board and to come forward with more programmes. Perhaps this is an area where the ETB and UCC would be interested in developing a programme. I can talk with them about that. We intend to double the number of what we call tertiary degree programmes, degrees outside the CAO, from this September. It is an important issue; we are losing too many good people, sometimes to other jurisdictions, because they find they cannot get the degree place here. There have to be other ways. The CAO will work for lots of people and the leaving certificate will work for lots of people, but there are other people who would make really good PE teachers, nurses or scientists and they need another pathway, so on this one I agree with the Deputy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister again. I will follow up by saying it is obvious the degree of consultation he referred to is taking place, but the demand is increasing as well in the form of the need to fill spaces throughout industry. The manufacturers and the employers are facing competition at international level and for us to fill those spaces we need to have the places in college or apprenticeships, or a combination of both sufficient to meet the requirement.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is entirely correct. He is in this House for a very long time and knows very well the different challenges that come with different stages of the economic cycle. I remember when I first got elected to this House to serve alongside him when we were dealing with an economy with 15% unemployment. The issue employers certainly were not bringing up with us was the difficulty of attracting staff. We are now in a situation of full employment and the highest number of people ever with a job in the country and therefore we cannot rest on our laurels. It is a much better problem to be in an economy with full employment, but there are still jobs that need to be filled. The Deputy is also correct that we are living in a much more globalised and competitive world. There are other issues like international tax rates, for example, where agreements have been settled, meaning the future economic and social well-being of a country will depend on its investment in its people, namely, on talent, on nurturing people and on recognising not everybody who needs to access the education system is just a school leaver, that more and more people will wish to change careers and more and more people will be in jobs which they think are secure today but that will be disrupted by technology in the years ahead. We need to be able to reach into business, especially our small and medium enterprises because they are perhaps not as well-resourced to deal with this challenge, to announce an SME incentivisation scheme to support businesses this year in upskilling and

reskilling their workers.

We are presiding over a massive expansion of tertiary education in Ireland, but it is important we do that in an intelligent and targeted way, that we do it in the areas where there is a skills need for either our public services or industry we are trying to attract to and retain in the country and that we do it in ways that are accessible to all our citizens. We need more university places, more apprenticeships and more tertiary degrees and pathways between further education and higher education, as well as more opportunities for in-work training. Even this week, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and I launched new micro credentials for people who are in work. If you are in work, but need a new module of education, that has to provided perhaps in a blended or online way that you can do while holding down your job.

Further and Higher Education

81. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for an update on proposals to develop MSLETB as a College of the Future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2010/24]

Deputy Alan Dillon: The green light was given to the Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board to proceed to the next stage of developing a multimillion euro college of the future back in November 2022. I would like an update on the current status of this project and any significant milestones achieved to date.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Dillon for his work with me and his interest on this project. We have been in Castlebar many times and we can report real progress that it is now a university town, Mayo is now a university county and we have the Atlantic Technological University. From my engagement with the president of the university and from the Deputy directly I know how much of a difference that is already making and how much potential there is to go further to drive more courses and programmes into Castlebar. Alongside that we have the very significant milestone announcement we are going to develop a further education and training college of the future, which will be a real, modern, fit-for-purpose, flagship project for Mayo and the north west.

The Deputy monitors this closely so he will be aware that the Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB has been working very closely with our agency, SOLAS, to develop the next step, called the preliminary business case, for Castlebar under the college of the future major projects fund. The development of this robust document is fundamental to moving into the next stage of requirements under the infrastructure guidelines, which used to be known as the Public Spending Code guidelines. I am really pleased to tell the Deputy the preliminary business case from the Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board was submitted to SOLAS in advance of the deadline of Friday, 12 January. The board had until then to get it in and I am aware it was working extremely hard on that. These business cases and documents will now begin to be evaluated under the various criteria one would expect when it comes to the infrastructure guidelines. We will be engaging directly with the ETB once that evaluation process is completed.

Again, the Deputy knows this because he spoke to me about it previously, but parallel to the development of the business case, the Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB is also working to identify its preferred site for the proposal. Much work has gone into this. Officials from my Department and SOLAS have met with the MSLETB and representatives of Mayo County Council to prog-

ress this and SOLAS and the Department now just await the outcome of this site identification process. It is good news. The next stage with the documents and the robust case is now over and good work is being done with the local authority, the ETB, my Department on SOLAS on site selection. I expect both of these to move ahead in parallel in the months ahead.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister for his response. It is certainly a very exciting time for both further and higher education in Mayo with the new college campus. This will build on the current links we have in the newly-established ATU and develop a clear pathway for students between further education training and higher education. It is important to strengthen those links. I compliment the Minister on the announcement before Christmas of more than €1 million being invested in the ATU with the establishment of a new apprenticeship programme for electricians. It is really important. We are seeing significant steps in the investment in both apprenticeships, further education and higher education. I compliment the Minister on his significant contribution to this project and his recent visits to Castlebar to see the current Mayo College of Further Education and Training, which is in a state of capital investment.

It is important I emphasise how critical it is we have speed of delivery. I advocate a special project delivery unit within SOLAS to manage these capital projects as Castlebar is one of 12 projects. It is good to hear the preliminary business case has been provided, but people will want to see progress in the months ahead.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Dillon. I am pleased the Atlantic Technological University and the Castlebar site are now able to provide apprenticeships, but like I was saying earlier, we expand apprenticeship provision. It is important we also try to do it in the regions, because we want people to have an opportunity to be able to access this in their home towns or counties and we want employers in those areas to have an opportunity to access apprentices in their regions as well. Congratulations are due to Dr. Orla Flynn, President of ATU, for her work on that. I am looking forward to seeing the impact it makes in Castlebar and in Mayo.

I assure the Deputy that when it comes to speed of delivery that we very much are not intending to delay this by any manner or means. As a counterpoint to that, these are big projects. This is a massive transformation. We have gone from just about having an emergency fund to fix a leaky roof in a college of further education to having hundreds of millions of euro to spend on capital. We now have somebody in SOLAS leading out on these projects. Avril Behan is a very eminent quantity surveyor leading the way. We will evaluate the cases that have come in as of last Friday and we will work with MSLETB and the local authority in Mayo to finalise site selection as well.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister. It is good to hear there is a pathway in place to see these projects delivered in a timely manner, especially the college of further education in Mayo. It is positive news to hear that there is engagement with the county council on the preferred site at the military barracks. The key consideration for this college will be site selection to serve the needs not just of the students but also of the town and to make it a hub for people to come visit and to get educated. On the back of that, I emphasise it is important that in tandem with ATU and the college of further education we will look at the broader issue of student accommodation. I am aware the Minister is working tremendously hard on that, but there is a shortage of accommodation in Mayo for students. There is a need to not just look at our main cities and universities, but also at the technological universities and the FETs so they are encouraged to submit applications to the Department for small- or medium-type developments. We should also incentivise local authorities to look at suitable sites so builders are encouraged

to put in applications. The Minister is working tremendously hard on that, but this is an opportunity to raise it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. He is entirely right. For the technological universities to reach their full potential and indeed for the full benefit to be seen for the regions of Ireland we need to see the provision of student accommodation. That never happened when they were institutes of technology. I think Waterford Institute of Technology may have, of its own volition, provided some student accommodation but I do not believe any other institute was in a position to do so. I am determined that does not happen with the technological universities because I really believe, for a variety of societal, economic and educational reasons, that it makes so much sense to look at providing student accommodation in the regions. The student accommodation policy approach that I brought to Cabinet only this week will provide for that. I have said consistently that 2024 will be the year in which we invite technological universities to bring forward their proposals so that we can engage on them. We are only 18 days into the year and I expect to be in touch with the TUs this month in relation to those proposals coming forward and then we will engage with them, just as we have engaged with the traditional universities, to determine the best vehicle to advance these projects, to fund them and get them to design and planning stage 2. We need a pipeline of projects in regional Ireland for student accommodation.

Questions Nos. 82 and 83 taken with Written Answers

Disability Services

84. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to improve pay and conditions for personal assistants working in further education settings; and to provide an update on the development of the further education disability framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2026/24]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister and I have had multiple interactions regarding personal assistants who work in the further education sector, including in Drogheda Institute of Further Education, DIFE, Ó Fiaich Institute of Further Education, OFE, Cavan Institute and Dunshaughlin Community College. They are doing spectacular work to facilitate students with extra needs but they have a contract that does not work. They have to apply for jobseeker payments, with all of the difficulties that causes. A number of things are required *vis-à-vis* their pay claim and there is work the Minister can do on an improved payment. It must be ensured this happens as quickly as possible and a system that works within the further education sector is delivered for those with disabilities.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy Ó for his question but, more importantly, for genuinely engaging constructively with me on this over a sustained period. I have found his engagement to be insightful and very useful to my Department. As he will be well aware, a number of education and training boards, ETBs, have employed personal assistants to provide supports to learners under the fund for students with disabilities. I have been in a number of these ETBs and colleges, including DIFE, with the Deputy, and my officials have engaged with a variety of stakeholders on the issue, including SOLAS, the trade union FÓRSA, and Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, the representative body for the ETBs. Indeed, Deputy Ó Murchú and I had a meeting with a number of personal assistants, which he very kindly convened and which I felt was useful. He knows my position on this. In budget 2024, I secured an

additional €2 million for the fund for students with disabilities and was very clear, on receipt of this, that I wanted my officials to examine the position of personal assistants across the tertiary system, how we can support them in the interim and what further steps can be taken. I have engaged with my officials consistently on this and the work is ongoing. I am due to meet the group again, along with the Deputy. We have a date in the diary for him and I to meet the group of personal assistants again shortly and I hope to be in a position to provide an update at that meeting.

I understand that FÓRSA has lodged a formal claim for improvements to the terms and conditions of personal assistants with ETBI. I believe that was lodged in November. Under the Education and Training Board Act 2013, the terms and conditions of service of a member of staff of an ETB are such as may be determined by the board with the necessary ministerial consent. I understand that a response to this claim will issue shortly and my Department is being kept apprised of developments. I have asked my officials to engage constructively, as appropriate, on this matter with a view to securing progress. We discussed adult education tutors earlier and the need for regularisation and a contract. I know that there are a number of parties to this, of which I am only one, but I believe in trying to get to a point where we can bottom out exactly the contract terms and conditions of personal assistants because this would be hugely beneficial to our education system and to the people working in that area.

Regarding to the development of a disability framework for further education and training, my officials are currently gathering information on the range of disability supports and services across the sector. This will inform a detailed piece of policy work around where we need to go.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the Minister's answer. FÓRSA needed to make that pay claim because that is how we will get to the end point of having a contract that is fit for purpose. Similar to the educators, this is a means of regularising the situation and putting personal assistants on a decent footing, which may be comparable to SNAs or others, because what we have at the moment is not sustainable for students or for personal assistants as employees. On some level, they feel that the situation is indicative of great disrespect, especially as it has gone on for a considerable time.

I welcome the additional funding. Hopefully, the pay claim can be dealt with as quickly as possible and beyond that, I hope we can work on the other terms and conditions to deliver for students with disabilities. That is what this is about; it is about ensuring that they can be facilitated through the further education framework.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is a big piece of policy work that I have asked my Department to do on how we support people with disabilities throughout the tertiary education system. This is not a political point because it happened long before I was here but over a number of generations we have made good progress on inclusion at primary and second level. We have more to do but there has been good progress. However, there is still a bit of a cliff edge when it comes to third level. I can point to good examples and good practice but I do not want to just be able to point to good examples and practice but to embed that. I want to know that there is a consistency of approach no matter what part of the tertiary education system a student is in. For example, at the moment we have ten ETBs employing 82 personal assistants directly, four ETBs procuring personal assistant support services via external providers and two ETBs that say they have no current demand for personal assistants which, in and of itself, concerns me. The reason I am sharing that information is to highlight the very different approaches across a range of ETBs. We need to get to a much more consistent position so that no matter where

students live in Ireland, and regardless of whether they go on to further education, higher education, or an apprenticeship, they can have an expectation in terms of the supports provided to them as a citizen with a disability in this country. I am determined that we do that piece of work.

In the short term, I want to meet the personal assistants with the Deputy and see what we can do with that additional funding for students with disabilities. My Department is also monitoring carefully the claim submitted by FÓRSA.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree that this is about ensuring we have consistency across the board and that we provide proper contracts for these personal assistants as employees, based on the work they do. It is also about ensuring that we facilitate those people who require the support of personal assistants.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree. The next step is for us to meet with the personal assistants to see what progress can be made on the basis of the additional allocation I received in November, as well as to see how the FÓRSA claim is considered and progressed. My Department is monitoring that closely. I also want to inform the House of my intention to do that broader piece of policy work on ensuring consistency in the approach to supports for students with disabilities, no matter what part of the tertiary education system they access.

Apprenticeship Programmes

85. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if there are plans for the further expansion of apprenticeship courses in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2027/24]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister to lay out his plans regarding the further expansion of apprenticeship courses in Louth. We are talking about apprenticeships in many different fields at this stage. Provision has moved beyond what could be considered traditional apprenticeships. This relates to what we discussed earlier in terms of the need for multiple pathways for people to deliver the skill sets that are required across the board.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy could not have known when he submitted his question that I would make an announcement this morning but I am pleased to say that I have just given approval for a major expansion of apprenticeship provision in the Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT. A total of 390 additional apprenticeship programme places will be provided there under a programme that will see the refurbishment of vacant space within the P. J. Carroll buildings. I want to congratulate DkIT whose new president, Dr. Diarmuid O'Callaghan, has very much welcomed this announcement. In his comments this morning, he said that he believes this will solidify DkIT's commitment to providing for and responding to the regional and national need for training in the in-demand craft system. I am very much looking forward to that project progressing.

Of course, as the Deputy Ó Murchú will be aware, this comes on the back of a very significant expansion in apprenticeship programmes in the Louth and Meath region. Louth Meath Education and Training Board, LMETB, is providing education and training services to more than 30,000 students. LMETB had a total of 2,339 apprentices registered at the end of 2023 in various programmes, including hairdressing, network engineering, ICT software development,

plumbing, carpentry and joinery, pipe fitting, electrical, tool making, motor mechanics, metal fabrication and wood manufacturing and finishing. LMETB established the Advanced Manufacturing and Training Centre of Excellence, AMTCE, in Dundalk in 2021. The Deputy will also be aware that last year I launched the Drogheda apprenticeship training hub, which provided for a very significant expansion of apprenticeships. Drogheda has 336 additional places, while Dundalk has 390 additional places.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is all very welcome but we do need to see movement on a regional skills and training centre. We also need to deal with space constraints at OFE for certain courses. It may be possible to deliver additional space through the programme announced by the Minister this morning.

On DkIT, Dr. O'Callaghan has done significant work in the past while, including enhancing the relationship with Maynooth University, which will provide solutions for DkIT into the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, will you give your remaining time to your colleagues who want to ask some supplementary questions?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I ask the Minister to provide details on those 3,000 places and exactly what they relate to.

12 o'clock

In addition, have critical skills and immigration visas ever been looked at in terms of trades? I have looked at that and it did not seem to be clear. On the five-year period the Minister mentioned, I was talking specifically about 2022-23, when there was a doubling of people with visas going to Australia and there was an increase in the number of people leaving over those coming in.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The question referenced the expansion of apprenticeship places. I ask the Minister, and I have already asked for this, for a purpose-built apprentice centre in Cork under the heading of either Munster Technological University or the ETB. The northside would be the ideal location for that. We need multiple campuses. I once again ask the Minister to look at that. It is an area that requires additional spaces. We have the capacity on the northside to deliver it.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Faoin Rialtas seo, níl dabht ar bith ach go leanfaidh creach-chistí ar aghaidh ag ceannach tithe teaghlaigh atá ag teastáil ó cheannaitheoirí tí atá ag streachailt. Caithfimid stop a chur leis seo. Tá moladh curtha os comhair na Dála ag Sinn Féin chun deireadh a chur leis seo ach tá an Rialtas ag diúltú agus ag cur in éadan an mholta sin.

Last week, it was revealed that an investment fund bought up to 85% of an entire housing

estate in Balgriffin, County Dublin. These were homes that should have been on the market for buyers but were instead snatched away from them by investment funds that have the financial power and enjoy the tax advantages that homebuyers can never hope to compete against. In response to these events, the Taoiseach said he would look into this and see whether more needed to be done. However, the Minister and I know that this was not an isolated incident, with funds snapping up homes at an alarming rate right across this city and beyond. Only last year, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael McGrath, was told by his Department that hundreds of homes were being snapped up by these funds and that the Government's measures were not working. Figures given to me by the Department of Finance show that the number of family homes snapped up by these funds has increased each year, with more than 620 homes bought from under struggling homebuyers last year alone. That was 620 homes in 2023 alone.

Far from what happened with Belcamp Manor in Balgriffin being an isolated incident, a Belcamp Manor is being snapped up by these funds every 30 days. That is what happening and it is happening under the Minister's watch. In less than three years since the Government's half-baked measures were introduced, more than 1,200 homes have been snapped up by these funds. These are homes that should have been available for workers and families to buy, own and live in, yet the Government has decided to do nothing about it. It feigned action. In 2021, the Minister Housing, Local Government and Heritage said, "We need ... to make sure that we don't have first-time buyers competing against large investment funds ... That's not a situation that anyone could stand over, nor indeed that I as housing minister could stand over." However, he has stood over it and is standing over it because he knows exactly what is happening. The funds are buying hundreds of homes every single year under the noses of first-time buyers.

In May 2021, the Government scrambled to respond. In truth, its response paid lip service to the issue. A new tax was introduced to give the appearance of action but it was a bluff. I warned at the time that the tax was too low and would not stop investment funds from snapping up homes that should be available for workers and families to buy. That has proven to be the case. Now that the Government is confronted with the facts, it decides to do nothing about it. This Parliament can ensure that a vulture fund never ever buys a home that should be available to workers and families to buy and live in. We can do that by increasing the stamp duty that applies to them and stopping this practice for once and for all. That is the action Sinn Féin put to the Government in the House yesterday, yet it is opposing it. The only logical conclusion anyone can reach is that this is a government that is on the side of the vulture funds, that is happy for this to continue and that is happy for 85% of an entire development in Dublin to be snapped up by an investment fund and rented out at extortionate rates of more than €3,100 per month. To add insult to injury, those funds will not pay a penny in tax on that rental income. This is a government that is obviously comfortable with the fact that more than 1,200 family homes have been snapped up by investment funds in less than three years, is comfortable with the fact that struggling homebuyers are being priced out of the market by these funds and is comfortable with the fact that these funds are increasing their reach and snapping up more homes than ever before.

How can the Minister stand over this when he stood in the House in 2021 and said he would never stand over it? It is happening at a scale we have not seen before, yet the Government is deciding to do nothing. Will he support the Sinn Féin motion and stamp out vulture funds buying family homes from under the noses of first-time buyers?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na ceiste. Ar an gcéad dul síos, tá sé tábhachtach a rá

go ndearna mé athrú ar dhlí pleanála i mí na Bealtaine 2021. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta faoi sin. Cosnaíonn an t-athrú sin tithe teaghlaigh do dhaoine aonair agus do theaghlaigh. Tá an t-athrú sin ag obair. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta faoi sin freisin. Tá coinníoll ar leith ag baint le 40,000 teach anois iad a dhíol ina n-aonar. Baineann an cheist seo le tithe a bhfuair cead sular athraigh mé an dlí. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta faoi sin freisin. Is é an rud a gcaithfimid breathnú air ná an cháin. Aontaím leis sin.

It is correct to say, which the Deputy neglected to mention, that the planning law was changed. It was changed in May 2021 and since then 40,000 homes, up to October this year, have the owner-occupier guarantee. What pertains in this case, and some others, relates to planning permissions that were granted prior to that date. That was the reason the stamp duty change was brought in. What the Deputy and his colleagues neglected to mention in all of the commentary on this is that we have changed the law on planning and that is working. What we need to look at, which we are doing, is the rate of stamp duty applicable.

We also need to put this in context. If we look at the just less than 1,200 homes that have been purchased in the period since I brought in those planning changes, which relate to planning permissions granted before the change in planning, those homes represent less than 1% of approximately 125,000 property transactions. The planning changes are, therefore, working. Those 1,200 homes are equivalent to the 1,200 homes, in one town alone in Donabate in Fingal, that the Deputy's party objected to - his party colleague is in the front row beside him. Let us talk about context. We are for first-time buyers. We have measures to help them, such as the help-to-buy grant, the first home scheme and the vacancy grant, all of which the Deputy's party would abolish. The Deputy said his party is for first-time buyers but is against every single measure we bring forward, even the measures, such as the first home scheme, which are actually working. There have been nearly 8,000 registrations for that scheme. Some 42,500 families have got their own tax back from their deposits but Sinn Féin would abolish that.

There seems to be a little conflict between Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson and party leader on this because the party spokesperson said he would get rid of those schemes straightaway while the party leader says quietly, when she is talking to people, that there will be no cliff edge. The reality of it is that more first-time buyers are now buying properties, with 600 people a week now drawing down their mortgages, which is the highest rate since 2007. It may disappoint the Deputy to know that later today we will publish the commencement figures for new homes for December. A total of 3,167 commencement notices received in December, which is a 76% increase on the previous December. That is the highest number of December commencements ever on record. It means that 32,000 homes have been started in the past 12 months. That is progress. It means there is progress on new housing delivery, social housing is being delivered at a rate that we have not seen in more than 50 years, there are affordable homes for people for the first time in a generation, and first-time buyers are able to buy.

While it certainly angers me to see 46 homes sold in Belcamp, that related to planning permission granted in 2019. As the Deputy is someone who is familiar with the law, since he has been a Member for quite some time, I expect he will understand that those retrospective changes to granted planning permissions cannot be made. He does not want to say that. However, 40,000 homes have been protected by the owner-occupier guarantee. The stamp duty levy is something that absolutely needs to be reviewed, but let us put this in context. The Deputy said there is a Belcamp Manor every week but there is not. Out of 125,000 property transactions, approximately 1,000 properties have been purchased by vulture funds, which is less than 1%. We back first-time buyers; Sinn Féin does not.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister can huff and puff all he wants. A Belcamp Manor is happening every month under his watch. He knows it. The figures stand over exactly what I said. There were 623 homes bought by vulture funds and investment funds last year alone. That is the equivalent of a Belcamp Manor every single month. The majority of those purchases are in the region of Dublin. In the first nine months of last year 70% of completions were apartments. The Minister exempted apartments from all of his planning regulations and stamp duties. Vulture funds are free to go in and buy as many apartments as they wish under this Government. The number of houses completed in the first nine months in Dublin was just over 2,600 homes, some of which were social homes so would never be on the market for ordinary buyers in the first place. Vulture funds bought 623 homes and the Minister tries to pretend that this is a small impact of less than 1%. It is nothing like it. It is having a significant impact in the Dublin market. The Minister told us that he would not stand over it yet he knows about this. Belcamp Manor is no surprise. The Minister for Finance was told in the tax strategy papers last summer that this was happening in the scale of hundreds. That Minister was told that the tax measure was not working. The solution is, as Sinn Féin argued back in 2022, to increase stamp duty on vulture funds to a point where they will not do this. Sinn Féin has a motion before the Dáil and the Government is voting against it. The Minister is feigning outreach and feigning that he will do something. The Government is voting against a solution that will stop vulture funds buying these properties from first-time buyers.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am simply giving the facts-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: These are the facts.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Relax, Thomas, for a second. I have given the facts. No one wants to see family homes being bulk purchased and that is why I made the planning changes. Whether the Deputy likes it or not those planning changes are working because 40,000 planning permissions are granted now with an owner-occupier guarantee on them, which means they cannot be sold on a bulk basis. That is working. Why are 600 first-time buyers a week able to buy properties and draw down their mortgages at the moment? The Deputy might answer that. They are able to do it because of the support the Government is giving. We will look at this tax measure and we should but let us not say this issue is predominant right the way across the country. The Deputy must put it in context. It is 1% of all property transactions.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is double digits in Dublin.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The State is investing €5 billion in housing this year. Every single measure we brought forward on housing Sinn Féin has opposed. It opposed the Land Development Agency. It opposed it right the way through.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Government has not built houses.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have actually. Whether Sinn Féin likes it or not commencements are up as are completions. We will exceed our target for 2023 as we did in 2022. There are still issues but this Government backs first-time buyers. All that Sinn Féin would do for first-time buyers is abolish every measure there to support them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The vulture funds are buying hundreds of homes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Then the Sinn Féin party leader comes up with this great plan of dropping every house price to €300,000. Deputy Louise O'Reilly was asked-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The vulture funds are buying hundreds of homes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----on TV last week how would that be done. She huffed and puffed through that. No one has actually told me. The Deputy might use his time when he comes back in afterwards to explain to the House the Sinn Féin plan to drop house prices to €300,000, how it would work and how long it would take. The Deputy might explain that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We will build houses.

An Ceann Comhairle: A little order please.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Last year more than 21,000 Irish citizens were granted Australian working holiday visas. This was the highest recorded figure in 16 years. Even during the 2008 crash just 12,847 visas for Australia were issued. A figure of 21,000 last year when we have full employment in this country is extraordinary. It is something we should be talking about in this House because clearly it is no country for young people. Those young people are now voting with their feet. Many of them do not want to leave but they feel they have no other choice if they do not want to spend their entire 20s and 30s, even into their 40s, living in their childhood bedrooms while their life is passing them by.

Increasingly people just have no hope for their housing prospects in Ireland. Rents have doubled in the past decade and young people simply cannot afford them. Record house prices mean that dreams of home ownership are long gone. Housing is more than an investment vehicle and it is about more than bricks and mortar. It is about independence, security, relationships and starting a family. It is the foundation for so much that is central to a happy life but that foundation is missing now for an entire generation.

How does the Minister think it feels for those people and for their parents when the Minister's approach is tried, tested and has failed, and yet he consistently comes in here in a state of denial making promises that are later broken and setting targets that are not met? We have now heard promises for years that things will get better. Simultaneously, we are seeing reports that an investment fund bought up 85% of the homes in a Dublin housing estate, which is just the latest example that things are not changing.

The flippant attitude of the Minister and his Government towards this speaks volumes. Government Deputies have spent the last week down-playing it and the Minister has just done the same here. The fact that the Minister has not bothered to close such a gaping loophole tells us all we need to know about where his priorities lie. It is not with vulnerable renters or struggling first-time buyers who obviously cannot compete with €800 million funds that are cashing in on a crisis. Those 46 homes in Dublin are now on the rental market for €3,125 per month. This is rent of €37,500 a year. This is why 21,000 young people left this country to go to Australia last year. This is why it is obvious to everyone that the Minister's approach is not working. This is why people have run out of hope.

It is my belief that the only thing that will change this is a change of Government but perhaps the Minister will prove us wrong. The Minister's 10% stamp duty on the bulk purchase of homes is clearly no disincentive to funds that are making super profits from a housing crisis. Sinn Féin's proposal to increase it to 17% will not work either. It is too weak. My colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan has put down an amendment to increase stamp duty on bulk purchase homes to 200%. It is an effective ban. We need an effective ban on the bulk purchase of homes. Will the Minister do that and make some effort to at least deal with that low-hanging fruit?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I must first reject the Deputy's assertion that in any way, shape or form we deal with housing in a flippant way. We certainly do not. We are very serious about it. This Government is investing more than any previous Government has in housing. We brought forward measures to help in housing. I would also say to the Deputy that while people do travel perhaps the Deputy has read about the housing situation in Australia and the cost of housing and rents in Australia. It is far worse than here. Some 30,000 Irish citizens came back last year as well, which the Deputy neglected to say. Measures we brought forward such as the Affordable Housing Act actually legislated for cost rental. With cost rental we now have thousands of tenancies approved. Cost rental did not exist here and now we have State-backed affordable rents for working people. I remind the Deputy that her party opposed the Affordable Housing Act and voted against it. They voted against that legislation which established the affordable housing fund. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan will be aware of this because in the Fingal area his party also opposed at every given stage one of the largest affordable social housing developments in the country of 1,200 homes in Donabate, 253 of which were social-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That is not true. The Minister is misleading the Dáil. We wanted them all to be affordable homes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----and private homes as well.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That is not true. We wanted them all to be affordable.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Then the Social Democrats also say they want us to build on State land. We are building on State land.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Building private homes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When we brought forward the Land Development Agency Act what did the Social Democrats do? They voted against that as well. They voted against the Affordable Housing Act. They voted against the Land Development Agency Act.

Consider the first-time buyers that the Social Democrats purport to want to represent. They opposed the help-to-buy grant, they opposed the first home scheme-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Will the Minister deal with the question?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are bringing forward measures that are actually working and it takes time to turn housing around. Consider where we are with completions. Since we have taken over and since this coalition has come into government, by the end of 2023 we had built more than 100,000 new homes in this country. There are still stresses and demands there, unquestionably, and that is why we need to increase supply across all tenures. This is why last year we built more new social homes than Ireland has done in 50 years and affordable homes for the first time in a generation.

With regard to renters, cost rental is taking hold now. We now have cost-rental apartment developments right across this country. I have met those tenants and have met people who have actually been able to get safe and secure tenancies at a minimum of 25% below market. That is working but the Social Democrats have opposed every single measure and every single piece of legislation that has come in here-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Government opposed our amendments to improve it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The voting record speaks for itself. I still await the Social Democrats' housing policy or housing plan as to what they would do differently.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: There is the proposal to increase the bulk buy stamp duty.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The reality is that we back first-time buyers and we back renters. We brought in the renters' tax credit as well to help defray the costs there. The rental market is far from perfect. I know that.

On bulk purchase the Deputies will also know - as I have explained to Deputy Doherty earlier - that we have changed the planning law from May 2021. More than 40,000 homes now have the owner-occupier guarantee in place. That is there. It is a legacy issue that about 1% of properties have been purchased in that way and the 10% surcharge applies to those. I said already in response to Deputy Doherty that this rate should be reviewed and will be reviewed but let us put it in context as well; it is less than 1% of property transactions.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Minister's defence is, quite frankly, pathetic. All he does is come in here and mislead the Dáil about housing objections. He knows that what he said is not true.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It says a lot about the absence of a real defence on this.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The record shows.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Minister tries to bamboozle people with figures when he comes in with his replies. Here is a figure: the Minister promised 55,000 affordable homes in 2023. He delivered 4% of that by October.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is Deputy Cairns saying 54,000 affordable homes in one year?

Deputy Holly Cairns: That is what the promise was. The Minister comes in here and sets targets but does not meet them.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It was 30,000 houses in total.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Minister speaks about putting things in context and the reality of how long it takes to build homes. Everyone recognises that it takes time to address this. We have had 12 years of Fine Gael in government trying to address this and it is simply not working. The Minister says we are making no suggestions. I just made a suggestion to try to stamp out the bulk buying of homes. We need an effective ban. There is a suggestion. Other low-hanging fruit include tackling vacancy. At a time when house price inflation was 10%, the Minister introduced a 0.3% tax on vacancy. That is feigning an attempt to address vacancy. He is feigning an attempt to stamp out the bulk buying of homes. These are two suggestions. They are low-hanging fruit and the Minister can do that immediately. Will he do it?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Everything I have stated here in the House is correct in relation to the Social Democrats' approach to housing.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We know your own approach to housing.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tell me one thing I said that is incorrect. You cannot do so

because what I have stated is fact.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: We supported 1,200 affordable homes in Donabate.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The reality is that we have brought changes into planning to ensure the owner-occupier guarantee is there.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Please answer the question.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is in place. More than 40,000 homes have that condition in place. There are legacy issues with planning permission granted before this. I do not like to see the sale of family homes to vulture funds either. This is what I said in response to Deputy Doherty and I have already said to Deputy Cairns that the rate will be reviewed. I intend to have discussions with the Minister for Finance in this regard. We have to put it in context also. Deputy Cairns cannot catastrophise everything, particular when she comes in here and does not have any policies herself. Her party has not come forward with any suggestions on housing delivery.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: You do not listen.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: With regard to the 54,000 figure, our target last year was 29,000 new homes. We will exceed that and Deputy Cairns will see this later this month or in early February. We will exceed it substantially. For the second year of Housing for All, we will exceed our targets and we will deliver more than 100,000 new homes. We know we need to do a lot more and we are determined to do it.

Deputy Michael McNamara: In 2023, 3,285 people presented at Dublin Airport without valid travel documents. In 2022, the figure was 4,968. Under section 11 of the Immigration Act 2004, it is an offence to embark in Ireland without valid travel documents. This appears to me to be a strict liability offence. It does not really matter what someone's intention is or what the reasons are, it is an offence. If the window flies off a Boeing 737 and a passport gets sucked out, it is still an offence. It may go towards the sentence someone receives but it is still an offence punishable by up to 12 months in prison and arrestable without a warrant.

To date, one person was prosecuted in 2022. It seems this is an offence that is not being prosecuted in Ireland, for whatever reason. What I want to know from the Minister is why. We are constantly told we have a rules-based approach, and we do in some respects. Sometimes rules are applied and sometimes they are not. It is not clear sometimes why they are being applied and why they are not. I want to know why this particular offence is not being prosecuted in Ireland. It is leading to considerable disquiet. It brings the law into disrepute if there is a provision on the Statute Book that is either not prosecuted or prosecutable. I want to know what the story is with this. Not that long ago, a statute law revision was done to take off the Statute Book various provisions going back hundreds of years that were not being used. This is relatively recent legislation. It is section 11 of the Immigration Act 2004. Dublin Airport is in the Minister's constituency and, if not, it is very close to it. All of these people presented at Dublin Airport. People may present elsewhere but certainly Dublin Airport is getting most attention in this regard.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have a rules-based system and those rules need to be enforced. There is no question about that. I have seen the reports on those arriving at Dublin Airport without travel documents. We must remember that many people who are arriving and

seeking protection are fleeing persecution. I know Deputy McNamara would agree that as a country we have been welcoming and we should continue to be so. In some instances, people have very valid reasons for not having travel documents. People are fleeing countries where passports or travel documents cannot be issued. We must be aware of that. Where people seek asylum for false reasons, it deserves to be prosecuted. There is no question of that.

There has been additional training for airline staff for when people present without documentation. We have a rules-based system in Ireland. We must ensure as a State that while we are seeing a continued increase in the number of people wanting to live here and seeking asylum here, we make sure the supports are in place for them and that supports are in place for the communities who host them. I commend the communities throughout the country who, in a very short space of time, have been able to accommodate 100,000 people. Many new people will set down roots here. Their families are coming here. They are getting a welcome. Very recently, we have seen some awful situations, whereby accommodation centres and places identified for accommodation have been torched. That must be roundly condemned. It is atrocious criminal behaviour that has no place in this country.

To get back to Deputy McNamara's specific point on the law and immigration legislation, it is clear with regard to travel documentation that where someone is found to be breaking the law, they should be prosecuted and they will be. I do not have the numbers that have been prosecuted under the provisions of the Act.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I can tell the Minister that it is none.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is certainly something I can raise with the Minister for Justice. This has been discussed at Cabinet and Government level and among our parties to make sure we have a fair system for people who come to the country. We issue approximately 60,000 work permits a year for people who choose this country as a place to live. One would not believe this is the case from listening to the previous speaker. Many thousands of people do. Many thousands of Irish people come back here. Many people from other countries want to come and live here.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is a complete misrepresentation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am responding to Deputy McNamara, if the Deputy does not mind. Regarding the number of prosecutions, Deputy McNamara said there have been zero. This is something I will raise with the Minister for Justice. We have ensured that airline and immigration staff are properly and appropriately trained to deal with people coming in who are trying to get around the laws that are in place. The claims of the vast majority of people seeking asylum and protection here will be processed expeditiously and efficiently. Those who can stay should stay and should get a welcome in the country.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Minister is conflating two slightly different things. One is a requirement to have a passport when embarking in the State and the other is the right to claim asylum. I am not saying that those who arrive without a passport do not have the right to claim asylum. They do. However, they are still subject to the laws of the land while claiming asylum, including the requirement to present a passport on arrival. It certainly is the case that millions of people throughout the world flee countries without passports but they do not get on a flight to Dublin Airport without a passport. We all know that. My question is not why people are allowed to claim asylum. Of course people are allowed to claim asylum. It is our interna-

tional obligation. My question is why are people who are in breach of a strict liability offence not being prosecuted in the State? Who is giving the order not to do so? Is it coming from senior Garda management, the Garda National Immigration Bureau, GNIB, or the Government? The law is not being applied. This brings the law into disrepute at some point. The question is not why people are allowed to claim asylum. I know why they are allowed to claim asylum. We have an international obligation and as decent human beings, we have a requirement to allow people to claim asylum. Why are people not being prosecuted for presenting at Dublin Airport without valid identity documents? That is my question and I would like an answer.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I understand the question. All of us know Dublin Airport well. Deputy McNamara knows with regard to anyone who comes in without travel documents that there are GNIB officers and immigration officers who interview each of these individuals. Nobody walks straight into the country. They are interviewed. There can be valid reasons, as Deputy McNamara has also said, as to why people would not have travel documents. At the point of exiting the country, one would expect that if they are travelling from another country, they would have travel documents to get on the flight in the first instance. There can be security or personal reasons that people would not have that documentation when they arrive in Dublin. I do not have a specific answer as to why. I am sure there is no direction to say there should be no prosecutions in this regard. Detailed interviews are held with people when they arrive in our ports and in Dublin Airport not just seeking asylum but without travel documentation. Deportations happen in Ireland too. The Deputy is aware of that as well.

Deputy Michael McNamara: There were 13 last year.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: What I am saying is that we have a rules-based system. Those rules need to be and are being implemented.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not have the up-to-date detail on prosecutions under that Act, but I will certainly get a response for Deputy McNamara.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I raise with the Minister the issue of planning permission and planning guidelines for log cabins, modular homes and mobile homes. We are all well aware of the housing crisis, which the Minister has been addressing, and we are all talking about it. There is a concerning situation in the case of people who have modular homes or a mobile home. I have previously asked for a ten-year moratorium during this crisis. There is strong enforcement by local authorities of planning policy against log cabins and temporary dwellings. I am aware of at least a dozen cases in south Tipperary where people are being turfed out, brought to court and prosecuted for putting up mobile homes or extended log cabins on their own site. I am not talking about reckless planning. These homes are carefully constructed. These modular buildings are now very safe and comfortable. Will the Minister amend the guidelines? It is his bailiwick. The Government could easily issue guidelines on rural planning. We are waiting for them as they have not been changed in 20 years. We are now told that the Green Party is insisting that will not happen. While the outdated guidelines for rural planning remain the same, a house will not be built in rural Ireland for a farmer's son or daughter or for anybody else either. That is a shocking scenario that the tail is wagging the dog to that extent. I call on the Minister to publish the new statutory rural planning guidelines and to include log cabins within them. That could be done with the simple stroke of a pen. I also call on him to sign an emergency ministerial order, a statutory instrument, to relax the planning laws for log cabins and to accept

them as a viable solution to the housing crisis.

I am aware of a gentleman, Sean Meehan, who is 66 years of age. He has given me permission to use his name here. Following a marriage separation, he bought 5 acres of land and built a log cabin on it. Tipperary County Council has brought him to court four times. He was told by the judge ten days before Christmas to have his bag packed the next time as he has been sentenced to four months in prison if he does not remove the log cabin. He has nowhere to go. Tipperary County Council does not have anything to give him and it has not approved his application for housing. He is in a desperate situation. Let us just imagine that. He is an Irish citizen. All his people are buried within a mile of him up the road. He was born and reared in the townland of Loughkent and Woodenstown. He has a comfortable house there on his own site, with his dog and cats. Now, he is facing prison or sleeping under the Main Guard in Clonmel when he comes out of prison. That is a bonkers situation.

I am not asking for planning laws to be recklessly abandoned but the Minister could at least introduce a moratorium. He will not publish the long-promised planning guidelines, which was a commitment in the Government manifesto. The Green Party will not allow it to do so. This man and many more like him – there are 12 others – are being prosecuted by the council. The council has enough to do to find homes for people. We should support people where they have the will and the way in the sense of having a few pounds together to do this. I have been in many log cabins. They are lovely comfortable homes. They are connected to their own sewerage and water systems. They are not interfering aesthetically with the scenery or anything else, yet they are being prosecuted. Can we believe it in this day and age? They are being prosecuted. As Deputy McNamara said, the Government cannot prosecute people arriving here illegally. This is a shameful treatment of Irish citizens, in this case, Sean Meehan. The Minister sits idly by although he could change the guidelines at the stroke of a pen and introduce a statutory instrument so as to ensure that people who try to house themselves are not made into criminals.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I believe in rural housing. Last year, more than 5,000 one-off homes were built in rural areas, so people do get planning permission for rural homes. We also believe in ensuring that our towns and villages are rejuvenated. That is why we have had more than 7,000 applications for the vacancy grant, whereby people can get €70,000 to bring vacant and derelict homes back into use.

Specifically in regard to demountable properties or log cabins, people can seek planning permission for those type of dwellings as well.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The guidelines do not allow them.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy should let me answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please let the Minister respond.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have two and a half minutes left to respond. If the Deputy keeps quiet, I will try to answer his question, specifically about Tipperary. People can apply for planning permission for that type of dwelling. That is allowed.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They never get it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy McGrath is not looking for a blanket moratorium. We must have a planning system and planning rules in place. A number of cases have been brought

to the Department's attention specifically in regard to Tipperary. Tipperary County Council has been asked to look at existing dwellings that are in place and to review the situation there. A review is being carried out in that regard to see if there are ways that we can ensure there is some type of standard for these types of properties. Every back garden in the country cannot have a log cabin. We cannot just set aside planning law for that. I am aware that enforcement orders have been issued by local authorities to people who have been living in these dwellings for many years. In many instances, they have been issued because complaints have been received by the planning authority from other residents in the area. I assure the Deputy that Tipperary County Council has not gone out looking for these dwellings. The enforcement action has been taken on the basis of complaints received. I wrote recently to the chief executive of Tipperary County Council when some of these cases were brought to my attention. I have asked him and his team to review the situation.

The rural planning guidelines are at a very advanced stage of finality. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, is dealing with that matter. I expect the guidelines to be published very soon. They are areas that can be looked at as part of that process. It is important to note that many of the enforcement orders that have been taken have been on the basis of complaints received by planning authorities from other residents in those areas. It is not the case that the local authority has sought to issue these orders with no complaints having been received at all.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: From Whitelands Cross right up to Glenagat Cross where Dan Breen was married in a cow house, as his wedding took place in troubled times, every resident on the road signed a petition supporting Sean Meehan to be allowed to live in his home and on his site. The Minister is totally wrong there.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil promised at the last election that the rural planning guidelines would be changed but then they did a grubby deal with the Green Party and that promise went out the window. This political promise on changing the guidelines has been broken.

The Minister is also wrong in saying that planning can be obtained for these dwellings. We have umpteen cases where they cannot and will not be because the guidelines do not allow the planners to proceed. The Minister will not publish the new guidelines and although the planners might want to allow these dwellings, they cannot do so under the current guidelines. He said the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, is going to introduce them. When will that be? Will it be after the Green Party is out of government and long gone? The Government does not have the will to change. Imagine bringing a 66-year old man to court four times. He is also faced with spending four months in prison if he does not remove the log cabin. If he does not remove it, the council will hire someone to remove it and he will have to pay for it. Let us just think about that. At this time, we see people trying to sleep in tents all over the country in towns and everywhere else.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This man has housed himself. I am dealing with 12 more people like him who have housed themselves. They are not looking for anything off the council. They just want to be left alone. The Minister should do his job as part of the Government but he is not doing it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I cannot respond to specific cases. As Minister with responsibility for planning, I will not do that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are no objections.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am not referring specifically to that case. I have already answered on instances that have been raised specifically in Tipperary. I and my officials have engaged with Tipperary County Council. The rural planning guidelines will be published shortly. A lot of work has been undertaken in that regard. The guidelines have not been updated since 2011. The facts are borne out as well that in the last full year for which we have the figures, 2022, some 5,000 rural homes were built and over 5,000 permissions were granted. It is simply not true to say that planning permission is not granted in rural areas. It is not borne out by the facts.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is in the Chamber and she may want to take this question. I raise the important and sensitive issue of the closure of the Letterkenny-based child and adolescent counselling service. It is the only one in our county and it is a vital amenity that provides services right across the county, not just in Letterkenny but elsewhere. Some 120 clients avail of counselling services at any time, with hundreds on the waiting list. It has been delivering a service across the county since 2010 and has huge support. It is where many of the families of the Creeslough tragedy turned, those who were victims themselves and families of the victims. I spoke to one mother who lost her beautiful daughter in the Creeslough tragedy. I know she was in contact directly with the Minister of State as well. She talks about the support she and her family get from this service. The fact that the service is now in a wind-down mode because it has been refused core funding is devastating to anybody who is availing of counselling services. Anybody who is going through counselling knows the impact of not knowing that a counsellor will be available in the coming weeks or months.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have asked that the HSE and Tusla directly engage with people.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I will finish on this point.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Has the Minister of State had a chance to intervene to date and can she shed any light on the matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue. I do understand how important this service is. I have spoken to those using the service and those involved in setting it up. Colleagues of the Deputy had a meeting with the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, yesterday as well. I was also in contact with Dermot Monaghan, who is the chief officer in the area.

When I spoke yesterday I had not received the briefing in this regard. Where we are now is that a meeting has been scheduled by the HSE to review the request received from the Raphoe diocesan pastoral services and consideration will be given to all the issues arising, taking par-

ticular cognisance of the impacts on the service users. It covers primary care, social inclusion, Tusla and mental health. Now, my mental health budget last year did provide €56,428 for a waiting list initiative and we will look at this aspect again. I will, though, stay over the details of this issue, working with everybody. This is a hugely important service and I was very much struck by someone bereaved by the Creeslough tragedy reaching out personally to my office.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Returning to the area of school transport and its reform, I know the review of the school transport system is with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. How long it remains with her remains to be seen. We need it to be published urgently. As it stands, though, there are still cohorts of children all over the country who have been left behind by a school transport system that is not fit for purpose. In our own constituency, 17 families plus from Swords have students going to Coláiste Ghlór na Mara, Balbriggan. A provider is ready. It is the local, regional Gaelcholáiste for these students, the only one in Fingal and the one they should be going to. This archaic system in place though means they are being told to go into Dublin city or even across into County Meath. While we wait for this review to be published, therefore, can something be done for this cohort of children in our own constituency and for students all over the country who still await a proper school transport system?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage(Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht an cheist sin. Bhí mé ag caint le tuismitheoirí aréir faoin ábhar seo agus beidh mé ag buaileadh leis an Aire Oideachais an tseachtain seo chugainn. Tar éis sin, tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta agus chuig na tuismitheoirí freisin. Ba mhaith liom an cheist seo a réiteach go luath. The students need a service. This is the only Gaelcholáiste in our Dáil cheantar and I wish to ensure the Gaelscoileanna and those pupils leaving them and going to the Gaelcholáiste have a bus to get them to school. As I said, I am meeting the Minister for Education on this specific matter next week. I spoke to parents only yesterday and I will be returning to them after that meeting and also to the Deputy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I wish to ask the Minister about rogue landlords. Salvador Chavez Morales, a computer engineer, was left short of food and at risk of becoming homeless after he was evicted by landlord Marc Godart. What had Salvador done to prompt this eviction? He had made a complaint about being recorded in his home live on CCTV cameras and was evicted as a result. Marc Godart is renting out 208 beds across 19 properties in Dublin city centre. In one property alone on Cork Street, 33 beds are being rented out. The Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, has made multiple rulings against Godart. Fire safety notices have been issued against multiple properties that he rents. Damages owed to tenants have been left unpaid. He is operating with complete and utter impunity. Apart from the properties he owns, he has no connection with Ireland at all. He has simply spotted the opportunity to exploit our lax regulation and very weak protections for renters. What is the Minister going to do to stop rogue landlords like Marc Godart from flouting the law and exploiting renters?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is a horrendous case. I have read about it and I am aware of it as well. I know there is a matter before the courts now. From what I have read, the behaviour of the particular landlord mentioned by the Deputy has certainly been absolutely horrendous. The RTB, as the Deputy knows, has been heavily involved. It is a matter that Dublin City Council has also been involved in as well. The matter is also before the courts. Secret surveillance of tenants is absolutely precluded and should not happen. It should never happen. The fact that a tenant makes a complaint and is then illegally evicted is outrageous. This matter has been and is being dealt with by the RTB and by the courts.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On New Year's Day, the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, issued an absolutely damning ruling against Metropolitan Films, which is one of the biggest film producing companies, with tens of millions of euro of public money having been issued to it over the years. Awards in the region of hundreds of thousands of euro have been made to film crew workers. This ruling revealed systematic blacklisting, breaches of employment legislation and forging of employment contracts to cover up the failure to honour the workplace and employment rights of workers. What is infuriating is that for four years I, on behalf of the blacklisted film workers, have asked the Government to stamp out this abuse, which is endemic across a film industry that is receiving €100 million annually, at least. I ask the Government to stamp out this abuse and to respond to the request from the blacklisted workers to meet the relevant Ministers to discuss the implications of the case.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Any WRC ruling should be respected, unquestionably. I am not familiar with this specific case, but I will certainly raise it directly with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. If the Deputy will submit the documentation to me, I will certainly seek from the Minister a meeting with the Deputy and the impacted workers, if that is at all possible.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Last year, the Saolta University Health Care Group undertook an external review of nine cases of haemorrhage where newborn babies suffered bleeding between their skulls and their scalps during their birth in 2022 in University Hospital Galway. Despite having had the report since last October, it remains unpublished. This is worrying because the Saolta group has been inconsistent in how it carries out external reviews of maternity problems in its hospitals. More alarming is the direct contradiction between the internal and external reviews concerning those nine babies. Additionally, the HSE has not given clear reasons for these differences. This situation shows that our health service is not being open and honest, as it should be, especially after the passage of the law last year on open disclosure mandating such transparency. This report must be published immediately and we need a fully independent and transparent review of this type of incident at University Hospital Galway.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for raising this extremely serious issue. The review of the neonatal subgaleal haemorrhages in 2022 was undertaken because the management team in University Hospital Galway maternity services observed through the clinical governance processes that there had been an increase in the incidence of this type of haemorrhage in newborn babies from previous years. While this increase was well within the reported range in the international literature, the management team in UHG decided to undertake an audit of the nine cases. The aim of the audit was to provide insights into trends, root causes and potential areas of improvement. I take on board what the Deputy has said. I will bring it back to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and I will ask him to respond to the Deputy in writing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I know the Minister met a group of businessmen from Clonmel recently, including David Burke, Richard Gleeson and Nuala Hickey, regarding the situation concerning Uisce Éireann in the town. It is just abominable. For three or four days again this week there has been no water in Ballingarrane, Cherrymount and other parts of the town for businesses and houses. No information has come from Irish Water. Local staff on the ground are trying to do their best but Irish Water is coming along, installing pressure reducing valves, PRVs, not telling anybody and upsetting the whole system. When is someone going to have a day of reckoning with Uisce Éireann and make it accountable to somebody? People in Rosegreen also have no water. It is out every second day and gone an hour after it has come back. Pumps are being replaced. The overseers or people in charge are not being told about them.

There is no joined-up thinking and the company is just running amok. Businesspeople are paying for their water. Everybody is entitled to a service and customers are not being treated with respect. I appreciate the Minister having met these people but they are not getting satisfaction and they have no certainty. It is bad enough to be without water this time of year but what will happen when the summer comes? It is just not acceptable in Clonmel.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I met residents and representative business owners in Clonmel. I had a good meeting just prior to Christmas before the recess. I have engaged with Uisce Éireann on the behalf of those people as well. There has been significant investment by Uisce Éireann in Clonmel, as the Deputy knows, and in the region. Another potential investment is required and some workarounds are also being looked at. I do not have an update yet from Uisce Éireann but I did engage with residents and the chamber of commerce in the town last December. We will stay engaged with them on this issue and work towards making progress in Clonmel.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I ask that the Minister speak with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment regarding the current crisis in the hospitality sector, especially for the smaller, independent-led cafes, restaurants and pubs that serve food. Every week, more and more of them are closing their doors permanently. They are being hit by a wave of extra costs including an increase in the VAT rate, wage inflation, increasing supplier costs and their warehoused taxes. There is also additional and increasing pressure in many towns, including in Bundoran and Rosses Point in my own constituency, due to hotel accommodation being used for refugees. The downstream tourism and retail businesses are suffering even more because there are no tourists. A suite of measures needs to be put in place and the Government needs to consider reinstating the 9% VAT rate, a much longer timeline to pay warehoused tax debt and a tailored support package for this sector.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This Government has supported businesses right the way through the Covid pandemic. Most businesses and sectors will respect what we have done there. We work together to protect businesses. I am aware of increased costs on businesses due to inflation in the cost of wages, materials and so on, as are we all. The Government is bringing forward and has signed off on a package of €257 million through the increased cost of business grant. That will be a vital measure to support those small and medium businesses. I know the Deputy has raised this issue directly with the Minister. That grant will be paid at a rate of half of an enterprise's commercial rates bill for 2023 for firms paying up to €10,000 in rates. It is a flat €5,000 grant. Our analysis suggests that approximately 143,000 businesses will benefit from that. The Deputy may have seen the Minister for Finance, Deputy McGrath's remarks on the warehousing arrangements for tax debt. He has committed to looking at those again. We want to support the indigenous SME sector and we have done so. The Minister for Finance has committed to looking at the issue to see what we can do to help on the tax side. We expect the increased cost of business grant to be paid out by the end of the second quarter of this year.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá obair iontach déanta ag an Aire sna ceantair tuaithe. He has done a lot of things including extending the first home scheme to rural areas. He is also carrying out a review of Gaeltacht planning and so on. The measure that has had the most immediate impact in rural Ireland is probably the extension of the Croí Cónaithe scheme to single houses in rural areas. There is a substantial amount of interest in that scheme in rural Ireland. Does the Minister have any data as to the number of applications received from rural areas as opposed to urban areas since he made the groundbreaking decision to extend the scheme to rural areas? My second question relates to the first. Do we have any information on the delay with

inspections in different county councils because that is the only cloud on the horizon with this scheme? When people apply, they like to get a fairly quick response.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Gabhaim buíochas le Deputy Ó Cuív as ucht na ceiste. Is cinnte go bhfuil deontas folúntais Chroí Cónaithe ag obair go dian tríd an tír. People have responded to it extremely well with over 7,000 applications and 3,600 approvals. We update it per local authority and we are now building data on one-off homes. Since the scheme was extended to rural homes, we have seen a really big uptake. I have received approval to double our targets this year. I want more grant applications coming in. The average processing time is approximately 11 weeks. We only want two inspections: one at the start and one at the end. I had a meeting with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann yesterday. We have now seen 14 applications from our islands, which is not insignificant. I have committed to looking at further increasing the grant for islands based on the Deputy's intervention. We should do that because of the additional costs for our islands. We want to make sure that island populations can be regenerated and rejuvenated. I will get that data and send it on to the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Last June, I brought to the Dáil's attention a pressing issue concerning Castlebar Educate Together National School, which finds itself in a serious situation. It comprises 140 enrolled students, five teachers and one SNA. For the past eight years, the school has been operating out of Marsh House, a former town council building leased from Mayo County Council. The conditions are dire for an educational institution. The school is now scattered across three campuses, each with limited classroom space. The children are forced to play in a car park and in public areas, which, as the Minister will know, poses significant safety risks. Despite tireless efforts to engage with the Department of Education, the school's pleas have fallen on deaf ears, which is completely unacceptable. As a Government, we need to take immediate action to address Castlebar Educate Together National School's concerns and to secure the appropriate accommodation the school so desperately needs.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am not familiar with the specific case of Castlebar Educate Together National School. I will raise the matter directly with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and ask her to engage directly with the Deputy.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: The situation at Tara Mines has reached a critical point. The mine has been suspended since July of last year and the prospects of reopening remain uncertain. The unions are not ruling out industrial action. The management released plans to the media without first consulting with the unions or the workers. SIPTU has accused the company of trying to rip up negotiated agreements under a new rescue plan. Unite, one of the unions representing the workers at Tara Mines, has detailed the challenges faced by the workers and the broader implications for the local economy. Immediate action is necessary to safeguard the livelihoods of the workers and to secure the future of Tara Mines. The concerns that have been outlined by the unions highlight the need for Government intervention to ensure the highly skilled jobs at Tara Mines are preserved and that the terms and conditions of the workers are maintained. I ask that the Government talk to all relevant stakeholders to make any supports provided contingent on Tara Mines committing to an early and firm reopening date while maintaining the terms and conditions of the workers, including any voluntary reduction package. Workers will tell you that better terms and conditions were offered 30 years ago.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue. The Government is committed to providing all possible assistance to facilitate a resumption of operations at Tara Mines. This is a matter that has been raised directly at Government level by the

Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and by Senator Shane Cassells. As the Deputy will know, Enterprise Ireland is liaising with the company on energy and productivity supports that could assist with a sustainable reopening. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and officials from his Department will continue to engage closely, as I assure the Deputy they have been doing, with both management and unions to support ongoing efforts to achieve the accelerated resumption of operations. I have also read of workers' concerns about potential pay freezes and so on. The Government is committed. These are strategically very important jobs for our country. There are skilled workers there. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has had a number of meetings with the management of the Boliden group and with trade unions representing workers to discuss the issues that impact on the potential reopening and such meetings will continue. I will keep the Deputy informed and thank him for raising the matter here today.

Deputy Emer Higgins: We all watch in absolute horror as the horrific scenes from Gaza get more and more devastating. More than 23,000 people in Gaza have been killed since the Hamas attack, 70% of whom were women and children. Yesterday, I convened a meeting with my Fine Gael colleagues and Sadaka – The Ireland Palestine Alliance. That group's biggest concern right now is Gaza's newest deadly threat, starvation. The majority of people in Gaza are experiencing famine right now. That is on top of being displaced, not having access to clean water and being at risk of disease. People there are living under constant deadly threat. There are attacks and bombings and now starvation and the world looks on. What Israel is doing is far beyond disproportionate. I spent time in Palestine and am particularly passionate about this issue. I am proud that Ireland has been a lonely voice on the international stage in support of the people of Palestine. However, right now it is South Africa's voice that is lonely. What is the Government's response to the South African court case?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy that what is happening in Gaza, and now in the West Bank as well, is extreme, horrific and horrendous. It is totally and utterly disproportionate. What the State of Israel is doing in the destruction of Gaza, the killing of women, children, men and women and bombing Gaza into oblivion is outrageous but it is what is happening. As the Deputy has rightly said, our Taoiseach and Tánaiste have been to the forefront of the Government's response to this in trying to bring about a collective approach within the European Union. We have been successful in doing so. Just yesterday, the Taoiseach met with the Belgian Prime Minister in this regard. Other EU states are also involved. We need an urgent ceasefire now and proper humanitarian access. Starvation is happening now. We are watching a potential famine happening in front of our eyes. It is incredibly distressing and very wrong. Our Government is absolutely committed to doing everything we can at diplomatic level to push for that immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access to people in Gaza.

1 o'clock

Let us not forget also what is happening to Palestinians in the West Bank, with the grabbing of land and the continued expansion of illegal settlements. It is outrageous, frankly, and Ireland stands against those illegal actions.

Deputy Brian Leddin: The Minister is very familiar with the issue of LDA development in my home city and county of Limerick. There was much excitement and enthusiasm in Limerick when we initially heard of the plans for Colbert Station. However, there are concerns locally at the slow pace of delivery and a watering down of the ambition. It is important the Minister hears those concerns but my concern is separate from them. It is that it seems there is no plan beyond Colbert. We have a very ambitious transport strategy now in Limerick. The Colbert

plan is fantastic, notwithstanding the concerns I mentioned, but there should be planning for Lisnagry, Ballysimon, Dooradoyle and Moyross. It should extend out to Shannon as well, which is very much part of Limerick's transport strategy. It is all built around a rail network. We need to see LDA action in these areas.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When the three parties came into government, the LDA did not have legislation underpinning it and it had no money. We have been able to make significant advances in that regard and fully capitalise the LDA. I received approval for further capitalisation before Christmas. It delivered approximately 800 homes last year. I have been in Limerick on a number of occasions with the LDA. I was at the launch of the Colbert Station master plan, which will make a massive difference to Limerick. We want to see that drive forward. I assure the Deputy that the LDA is absolutely committed to that. We have seen it break ground on three large sites, namely, Shanganagh, Devoy Barracks and St. Kevin's in Cork. The LDA work is happening apace.

Specifically with regard to Limerick, I assure the Deputy the commitment is there. I am interested to hear his views on what is perceived in Limerick as a slow pace of delivery on the Colbert master plan. I will raise that directly with the LDA and revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I gather a new national student accommodation strategy is being developed as we speak. The 2016 policy targeted no new student accommodation in Waterford, despite the issue of a university in Waterford appearing in the 2011, 2016 and 2020 programmes for Government. To reiterate: none, nada, nothing. I cannot resist the cheap shot that this is one of the few targets in housing the Government has actually achieved. WIT, now known as SETU, was at the vanguard of developing its own student accommodation, with the College Fields development dating back to 1992. It was the first institute of technology to do so. Of course, this was back when WIT management had some control of its own affairs and strategic planning. In the current programme for Government, Waterford was barred from borrowing as part of the process, forcing it to accept the technological university. Will the new student accommodation policy have any scintilla of ambition to address the brain drain in the south east? When will SETU be allowed to borrow?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To correct a point made by the Deputy, we met our housing targets in 2022. We exceeded them in that year and in 2023, and substantially so. As regards student accommodation, I will be with the Minister, Deputy Harris, tomorrow at a launch in DCU. We have already invested €61 million in additional student accommodation that we want to be affordable. My Department has worked directly with the Minister, Deputy Harris, on this.

Specifically in respect of the south east and Waterford, the Deputy will be aware there has been unprecedented investment in Waterford and the region since the Government came into office. I have had the pleasure of being in Waterford on several occasions, seeing game-changing investment there. The Waterford Crystal site has been purchased as well. We are working with the technological university in the south east regarding the provision of additional student accommodation. I will be with the Minister, Deputy Harris, tomorrow. I will discuss it directly with him and revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The biggest ever strike is taking place in the North today, with more than 150,000 workers from right across the public sector taking co-ordinated action to fight for higher wages. They are fed up with seeing their real-term wages drop and being punished by a Tory Government that wants to ensure their pay levels drop behind those of workers in England,

Scotland and Wales. They are absolutely correct to engage in strike action. They have the full support of People Before Profit. If they are prepared to continue and escalate, they will win. There is a danger for the Government that workers in the South will take inspiration from what they are doing and be willing to do the same unless the Government is prepared to make a pay offer to the public sector that actually makes up for the loss in real terms that workers suffered in the past couple of years. That means a 7.5% increase in one year. Unless that offer is made, workers should engage to have co-ordinated ballots for strike action in the South.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: What we are seeing in the North as well is the fact there is no Assembly or government there. The public services there are under incredible strain across every sector, from local government to health. I came into politics through my membership of a trade union and I support the right of workers to defend their rights and pay and conditions. What we have been able to do in this country for many years is to ensure we get agreement on public sector pay. We have done that and we are in the middle of those negotiations right now. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, is leading that and I am confident we will be able to strike a deal that is good for workers and the public sector. We have more public servants working now than we ever had previously. This Government has invested in the public sector. We respect and value the work it does and I expect we will be able to work together to secure a pay deal that secures the agreement of employers and workers.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: During Covid, the Irish Wheelchair Association took over An Castan, the then HSE-run high support day service for adults with disabilities which is based on Commons Road, Navan. Some 14 adults from County Meath are greatly dependent on the service. It is a vital lifeline and support for those using it and their families. Before Christmas, services for all 14 of them were cut by 40%, from five days to three days. These are adults with considerable needs. It is a high-support service. The Irish Wheelchair Association states it is living with a recruitment and retention crisis. It understandably points to pay parity with HSE counterparts. These are vulnerable adults who need significant support. Many of them are immobile, incontinent or non-verbal. They are in desperate need of these services. The services need to be reinstated. It is very difficult to get an answer from the HSE, as all Members are aware. We need a ministerial or departmental intervention.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will respond to the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am not over the details of it. If he sends them on, I will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, about it. As the Deputy is aware, the Government is committed to enhancing services for people with disabilities. The Deputy referred to the fact that the Irish Wheelchair Association stated there were difficulties with recruitment and retention. That may be the reason for the 40% service cut. Services are so important for people with disabilities. If the Deputy passes on the details, we will have it looked into straight away.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I refer to Carlow CDNT. As the Minister is aware, the outcome for children with complex needs is far better when they receive early diagnosis and treatment. With the right treatment at the right time, such children can grow up to lead happy, independent lives. There are children in Carlow who will never be lucky enough to achieve that, however. We have to be fair. My issue is that children need to get these services urgently. I am told the issue is staffing. The 2023 staff census was conducted in December. What are the staffing levels now? What is being done to increase those levels to serve these children? The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, knows it is important to get services to children quickly. I

have had a significant number of meetings with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and the HSE. This is an urgent issue in Carlow.

Deputy Mary Butler: As I stated, the Government is committed to enhancing services for children with disabilities. In budget 2024, €8.5 million additional investment was allocated to improve children's services, including the recruitment of additional therapy positions, the procurement of assessments from the private sector and increasing third level places.

As regards the Deputy's specific question, the 2022 CDNT staff census notes an average vacancy rate of 34% across CHOs. An overall analysis of the data from 2021 and 2022 demonstrates an increase of 11% in the number of approved posts and a 2% increase in CDNT. It is important to note the HSE has agreed to provide a special derogation for categories of staff employed across HSE and section 38 disability services under the HSE recruitment pause. This will allow CDNTs to continue with efforts to address the staffing gaps. Recruitment is under way at pace at the moment.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have three remaining Deputies and we are out of time. We will take 30-second questions from each of the three. I call Deputy Durkan first.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: In the past two years, I have had occasion to raise on numerous occasions the question of family law and its application in this country, and the manner in which it continues to separate children from their parents, fathers and mothers, more especially mothers, by way of the use of the parental alienation theory, which is not a law, just a theory. The abuse continues with obvious consequences for the children and the parents. Some parents have not seen their children for more than two or three years. What can be done to expedite procedures to deal with the issue?

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I commend the gardaí in Dublin West on the hard work they are doing and the commitment they have, particularly in the difficult circumstances since the horrific murders on Christmas Eve. However, I want to raise the chronic issue of the lack of Garda numbers, which is affecting the confidence of people in Dublin West in the ability of the State to provide a service. Confidence in community safety is dropping like a stone. I have an issue relating to Hollywoodrath in my constituency, and The Crescent. I have here a list of 30 calls that were made over a period of ten weeks to the Garda regarding antisocial behaviour that is going on at the moment. It is something that really needs to be addressed, particularly for the community and the gardaí themselves who are really feeling the pressure.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Social Democrats are very supportive of the principle of marine protected areas. As a former marine biologist, I am keenly interested and want to see that legislation progress as quickly as possible. It was first mooted by Government in 2019. The heads of the Bill were published in 2022. It is going quite slowly considering the potential impact and the biodiversity loss that we are seeing. Can the Minister give me an update on when he anticipates the Bill will be before the Dáil? It is important that it is passed before the next term.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will bring the matter Deputy Durkan raised to the attention of the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, and get her to come back to him.

I join Deputy Donnelly in commending the work of the gardaí in Dublin West after the horrific incident on Christmas Eve on Main Street, Blanchardstown, a place I know very well as he does. We are committed to continued increased investment in An Garda Síochána, with this

year's budget 2024 allocation at €2.31 billion, which is a 23% increase on 2020. We need to make sure there are more resources, more gardaí on the street and more gardaí in the station. I agree with the Deputy on that and I know he has been engaging with the chief superintendent, I expect, in that area. I suggest also that he raises the specific matter, which I can also raise with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on his behalf.

I know Deputy Whitmore has been supportive of these matters. We have brought forward generational change in amending legislation through the Maritime Area Planning Act, 2021. The marine protected areas legislation is imminent. The Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has been working very closely on that and we expect it to be finalised in the coming weeks. We hope to get it before the Dáil in the first or second quarter this year.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.14 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.54 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.14 p.m. and resumed at 1.54 p.m.

Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill 2023: Second Stage

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

In line with the programme for Government commitment, the Government established a child maintenance review group to examine certain issues relating to child maintenance in Ireland. The group's terms of reference were to consider and make recommendations on the current treatment of child maintenance payments in the Department of Social Protection, the current provisions regarding liable relatives managed by the Department, and the establishment of a child maintenance agency in Ireland. The report of the Child Maintenance Review Group was published in November 2022. There was no consensus among the group on the establishment of a child maintenance agency. This matter falls under the remit of the Department of Justice and it is not within the scope of this Bill.

Since publication of the report of the Child Maintenance Review Group, a number of measures have been brought forward by the Minister for Justice to reform the family law system in respect of child maintenance. The report set out three recommendations relating to child maintenance and the social welfare system: that child maintenance payments will no longer be included in social welfare means tests; that the efforts to seek maintenance requirement for certain payments will no longer apply; and that the liable relatives provisions operated by the Department of Social Protection should no longer apply. The Government has accepted all three recommendations.

Last year, I signed regulations to remove the requirement for recipients of the one-parent family payment and jobseeker's transitional payment to make efforts to seek maintenance from the child's other parent. This requirement often involved lone parents having to go to court to seek a maintenance order, so this change removes a potential additional stress for them, as well as helping to reduce the burden on our courts system. This is a significant benefit for lone parents and something that representative groups have been calling for. The Bill sets out the legislative provisions required to implement the other two recommendations. The combined effect of these measures will be to decouple the social welfare system from child maintenance.

As Members will be aware, to qualify for any social assistance payment, the applicant must satisfy a means test. A person's means, as calculated by my Department, must be below a certain level to qualify for a means-tested payment. When a person does qualify for a payment, their rate of payment will depend on the level of their means. Means currently includes all capital, earnings, and other income, including maintenance payments, whether child or spousal maintenance.

2 o'clock

Some income sources, such as child benefit, are disregarded in the means test. There is also a capital disregard and other disregards that apply in different ways across schemes.

As a result of the provisions in this Bill, my Department will no longer assess child maintenance payments in the means tests for social welfare schemes. This will be of direct benefit to an estimated 16,000 lone parents at a cost of €10 million a year. In some cases, this will mean that people receive a higher payment. In others, it will mean that people qualify for a payment for the first time. I only have to think back to my days working in a credit union, where I met many parents who relied on child maintenance. I saw it on different occasions; some weeks, the child maintenance was paid, and other weeks, it was missed. The person who suffers most in that situation is the child, and I do not want to see that happen again. That is why I believe this particular element of the Bill, excluding child maintenance payments from the means test, will make a huge difference to the lives of many families.

Under family law, parents have obligations regarding the maintenance of their children. The "liability to maintain family" provisions in social welfare legislation are separate to these obligations. They do not negate or supersede family law obligations in any way. Where a person is in receipt of one-parent family payment, the liable relative provisions provide the Department with a legislative basis to assess the child's other parent. The Department can then issue a determination order for that other parent to pay a contribution towards the costs of the scheme. These provisions are being revoked by this Bill. This means that the Department will no longer seek to recoup a portion of claim costs from the non-resident parent in these cases.

On an administrative basis, the liable relative provisions have not been applied to new claims for one-parent family payment since the Government decided to revoke the provisions in late 2022. I should clarify that under the liable relative provisions, the Department is not arranging maintenance but ensuring, where possible, that where there is a one-parent family payment in place, the other parent makes a financial contribution towards the cost to the State of providing that support.

In 2022, expenditure on the one-parent family payment was approximately €614 million. The cash receipts to the Department as a result of activity carried out under the liable relative provisions amounted to less than €400,000. I should again emphasise that removing the liable relative provisions does not replace or supersede the primary responsibility of parents to maintain their children.

The general scheme of the Bill was referred for pre-legislative scrutiny to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands. I thank the committee for its deliberations during pre-legislative scrutiny and for its report.

I will now go through the Bill section by section. Each section amends the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended.

Section 1 provides for the definition of relevant Acts which are referred to in the Bill. It defines the "Act of 2015" as meaning the "Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015". It also defines the "Principal Act" as meaning the "Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005".

Section 2 amends the definition of "social welfare inspector" and the interpretation of "liable relative," to remove references to Part 12 of the Act. Part 12 sets out the "Liability to Maintain Family" provisions and is being repealed under section 5 of this Bill.

Section 3 removes a reference to Part 12 of the Act from the provisions relating to the role and duties of a social welfare inspector. As a result of these amendments in sections 2 and 3, a social welfare inspector will no longer have any role regarding liable relatives.

Section 4 removes a reference to Part 12 of the Act from the provisions setting out the role and duties of deciding officers. As a result, deciding officers in the Department of Social Protection will have no role regarding liable relatives.

Section 5 is the substantial amendment which repeals Part 12 of the Act which sets out the "Liability to Maintain Family" provisions. As a result, my Department will no longer seek to recoup a contribution from the other parent where a one-parent family payment is in place. Once again, I want to stress that removing these provisions does not replace or supersede the primary responsibility of parents to maintain their children.

Section 6 provides for a number of amendments to ensure that child maintenance payments are not assessed in the means tests for various social welfare schemes. It inserts a new term, "maintenance payment made to or in respect of a qualified child", into the Act and defines this to mean "any maintenance payment made to or in respect of a qualified child that may be prescribed". This change will mean that my Department will have to distinguish between child maintenance and other maintenance payments which a person might receive. It is my intention to provide for this distinction by way of regulations made under this provision.

The section further provides for consequential amendments to the rules governing the calculation of means as set out in Schedule 3 to the Act. As a result of this change, child maintenance payments will no longer be assessed in the means tests for a range of schemes, including in relation to jobseekers, pensions and, importantly, one-parent family payment. Section 6 also defines the "Act of 2022" as meaning the "Social Welfare Act 2022". Section 7 provides for the Short Title, construction and commencement.

As Deputies will be aware, the EU temporary protection directive has been extended to March 2025. Ireland has welcomed more than 103,000 arrivals from Ukraine, with 76,000 people currently living in State accommodation and 58,000 in fully serviced accommodation. This relates to my intention to bring forward amendments to the EU temporary protection directive. Ireland has welcomed 2.3% of those fleeing Ukraine who have come to the EU since the war, which is a significant response, and weekly arrivals remain high. Following extensive discussions, the Government has decided to amend the support and accommodation provided. This will more closely align us with other EU member states. We will, of course, continue to meet Ireland's obligations under the temporary protection directive.

The new arrangements will involve the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth introducing a more time-limited 90-day accommodation offering for newly arriving beneficiaries. In addition, the current equivalence with Irish citizens in terms of accessing social welfare benefits will be removed while still meeting the standard set out in the

directive. As a result, beneficiaries of the directive who are living in designated accommodation centres will not be eligible for social assistance payments, and will instead receive a payment of €38 per week, which is the equivalent of the expenses allowance paid to those in direct provision.

Implementing these changes will require legislative amendments. The Government has approved the drafting of the necessary amendments for inclusion in this Bill. I want to signal to the House that I intend to bring forward the necessary legislative amendments to give effect to these changes as part of this Bill. This is to ensure that the changes can take effect as soon as possible. Officials from the relevant Department are working closely with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and the Office of the Attorney General.

I believe the measures contained in this Bill will have a positive impact on the lives of lone parents. They represent changes that many people, including Members of this House, in particular Deputy Kerrane, have been calling for over a number of years. They will help to tackle child poverty and make the child maintenance system in Ireland fairer, more humane and more effective. I, therefore, commend the Bill to the House and I look forward to Deputies' contributions.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I am delighted to see this legislation progress in the House today and I commend the Minister on making it happen. It is very important legislation that will make a real difference to the lives of lone parents and their families.

When I took up the role as the party's adviser on social protection back in 2016, I knew very little about lone parents and how they access or, in many cases, do not access child maintenance. The many changes to how the system works since then will make a difference. These are issues that very much remained with me, particularly the instances where lone parents go to court and how that can work out or, in many cases, not work out at all. Of course, we would all like to think we live in a world where both parents contribute financially to bringing up their child or children but, unfortunately, that is not the case. With that reality in mind, we have to do everything we can to support lone parents and their families, particularly when it comes to income and financial supports through the social protection system. That can be done. The changes that have been made in this legislation will make a difference and will support lone parents an awful lot better.

This has been a long time coming. I have raised the issue of maintenance being treated as household means and how wrong that is many times in this House since I was elected. It was never right to treat maintenance as a type of household income coming into the house. It should always be the case that maintenance is for bringing up and supporting a child or children as they grow up. It was also the case that even where lone parents ended up going to court and a maintenance order was determined by the judge of the day in that court, it did not necessarily mean that maintenance was actually paid. Once it was court-ordered, however, it was listed as maintenance for the social protection system. Whether it was paid or not, it was deducted and the lone parent's income support was reduced. On the one hand, lone parents were obliged to prove they sought maintenance, and some had to do that through the courts, while, on the other hand, they were risking having maintenance ordered but not paid and their payment being reduced. They were therefore being punished financially, one way or the other, in some cases.

The Minister will also know that I was critical of the liable relative's clause. The system did not work. The figures speak for themselves. I found it concerning that the Department did

whatever it took to recoup its costs. If the same effort was made when seeking maintenance in the first place, it would have been far more beneficial for lone parents and their families.

I ask that the measures announced today - I know the legislation has not yet been signed into law - be communicated as best as possible to lone-parent families, particularly through organisations such as SPARK, One Family Ireland and the new national alliance which do so much great work representing lone parents and their families. We need to communicate the message to lone parents who may be on a reduced payment that it may be increased. While the legislation is certainly a step in the right direction, we can and should do more.

While I understand there was no consensus on the review group, it did not necessarily disagree on establishing a child maintenance service. I have brought forward proposals on this matter three times. They are published and replicate to some degree the system in place in the North of Ireland. It is not just a system that collects maintenance but one that provides support and advice to lone parents. Some parents will not require assistance when it comes to agreeing maintenance. Others will require assistance when it comes to calculating what that maintenance should be. At the moment, when a case goes through the courts, the judge of the day will pick a figure out of the air. That is how maintenance is determined. One judge could determine it is €50 on one day and another judge down the country could say it should be €100. There is no mechanism for setting maintenance. I ask that further consideration be given to establishing such a service to provide advice and support to lone parents in making a calculation where agreement cannot be reached on the amount to be paid and, in some cases, to have the powers, via the Revenue Commissioners, to collect maintenance where it is not being paid. We know that in some cases maintenance is court-ordered or agreed and is not paid. It is the lone parent who then has to go back to court and the vicious circle starts again. It is always on the shoulders of the lone parents. That is not right.

I do not believe a service would cost an awful lot of money. There would be an increased cost at the beginning, perhaps similar to the set-up cost of the Residential Tenancies Board. After that, it will be money well spent on supporting lone-parent families. We know that lone-parent families rank very high under the three indicators of consistent poverty, at-risk of poverty and deprivation. Research has shown that where maintenance is paid, as opposed to ordered and agreed, it can play a part in reducing poverty. For that reason alone, further consideration should be given to the establishment of a child maintenance service. I ask that the Minister address this through another avenue. Now that the child maintenance review group has done its work and published its report, I ask that another mechanism be used to engage with the relevant organisations to see if this can happen.

I am glad to see the changes in this legislation, which will make a difference for parents. I commend the Minister in that regard. Today is a good day for lone-parent families but there is more to be done. A child maintenance service would have a greater impact than anything else that could be done to support lone parents by ensuring that both parents contribute in some way to raising their child or children. It is the best way to do that and to support lone-parent families.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Tréaslaím leis an Aire agus leis an Teachta Kerrane in éineacht leis na hoifigigh sa Roinn. Is reachtaíocht fhíorthábhachtach é seo a dhéanfaidh an-difríocht do thuismitheoirí aonair agus do dhaoine atá ag comhoibriú ó thaobh tuismitheoireachta. Ní raibh na forálacha faoi mar a bhí cóir. Níor thóg siad cuntas i gceart gur don chaiteachas a bhaineann leis na leanaí atá á thógáil aige nó aici atá san airgead atá á thabhairt don tuismitheoir aonair seachas ioncam breise.

I welcome this important Bill and that child maintenance payments will no longer be assessed as means. This is a long overdue measure. I also welcome the discontinuation of the liable relative provision. I commend the Minister and her officials on their important work on the legislation. I commend Deputy Kerrane in particular. This has been a passion of hers for many years. In the previous Dáil term, I recall the Deputy working with Deputy Brady. I also acknowledge Deputy Brady's work on this. Deputy Kerrane has been working on this for years now. She has driven it passionately in our party and has made it a social welfare priority for Sinn Féin. I would like to think her work has helped to push the Department and Minister to move on the issue. I am sure the Minister was sympathetic in any event, but I think the emphasis that has been placed on the matter has been very welcome. Away from the glare of the media, this place sometimes works okay. Sometimes the Opposition and Government can find agreement and co-operate. I acknowledge that as well.

We have sought this change for many years. It is important to note that the removal of these provisions does not replace or supersede the primary responsibility of parents to maintain their children. That is crucially important. The payment of maintenance by the non-custodial parent is not just a recognition payment but an obligation. The Minister and I both know that children are expensive. This is not an additional income by any manner or means. Often, it will not come close to meeting the costs that children accrue. They are obviously worth every penny but there is no doubt that there is a significant associated cost.

There is no doubt in my mind that there is an obligation on the parent. Many people are co-parenting and fulfilling that obligation perfectly well and that needs to be acknowledged. This legislation is to ensure that in circumstances where that is not happening, the other parent does not lose out significantly. They are already single parents. It is worth acknowledging that single parent families are at enormous risk of poverty relative to the rest of the population and these families are overwhelmingly, albeit not exclusively, headed by single mothers. This obligation and expectation need to remain in place. That is my expectation and I hope it remains an expectation of the Department. That ties in well with the point about the need for a child maintenance service.

Tuigim go bhfuil an tAire tar éis a rá gur fhreagracht don Aire Dlí agus Cirt é sin. Tá sé sin ceart ach táimid ag déanamh díospóireachta ar reachtaíocht agus moladh a bhfuil an Rialtas ina iomláine freagrach astu mar aonad. Cé go raibh tromlach i bhfabhar, tá sé tábhachtach a rá nach raibh gach duine i bhfabhar. Is moladh ceart é agus déanann sé ciall. Coimeádfaidh sé tuismitheoirí amuigh ó na cúirteanna nuair nach gá dóibh dul ann. Ba chóir go mbeadh sé sin mar thosaíocht againn i gcónaí.

I note that the establishment of a child maintenance service is the responsibility of the Minister for Justice. When debating a Bill, however, there is no harm in acknowledging the responsibility of the whole of the Government. The Government can discuss these issues, which brings me to another point, one I will raise in a moment, related to the Minister for housing. This is a relevant topic for discussion. I appreciate the Minister's point that there was a majority but not unanimous opinion on this matter. Notwithstanding that, establishing such a service is a good idea. Sinn Féin would do so in government and this Government should do it. Our objective with regard to maintenance and everything else related to the family should be, where possible, to keep these issues out of the courts and legal system. The less cost, the fewer causes for friction and the fewer adversarial situations, the better.

This applies in other areas as well. It is a source of huge regret to me that in recent years I

have come across local authorities where previously an affidavit was adequate to demonstrate that a single parent was living alone. Now, increasingly, I am seeing local authorities asking lone parents to go to court. That is wrong and gives rise to unnecessary cost. It brings the adversarial situation into play. The way this issue has been left, with no child maintenance service, also increases the possibility for adversarial situations and friction. That is not always the case but it is a greater possibility.

The previous system was inefficient in obtaining contributions from non-custodial parents. While this is to be changed, ending this policy alone will not meet families' needs. We need to see the establishment of a statutory child maintenance service. As Deputy Kerrane has demonstrated, that does not need to be expensive and it is something we have consistently provided for in our alternative budget. Such a service would take the responsibility for the pursuit of child maintenance off the shoulders of lone parents and, importantly, out of the courts. That is an important move. It is not fair to force parents through the courts system. In Britain and the North, the move to a child maintenance service has been largely positive and it removes the adversarial approach. It also ensures that the child is central to the decision on child maintenance to be paid and has the necessary enforcement powers to ensure it is paid.

I urge the Minister to keep this matter on the agenda and continue to discuss it with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. There may not have been unanimity but plenty of recommendations from the committee have been enforced without them having unanimous support. A majority should be adequate. The model that Sinn Féin proposes draws on extensive work that an Teachta Kerrane, Deputy Brady and I, along with others, have done on the issues. It echoes calls from other organisations, including SPARK, One Family Ireland, Treoir and a variety of others. We want to take child maintenance out of the courts and instead see a statutory agency step in when it comes to the arrangement, calculation and payment of child maintenance, rather than leaving it up to the lone parent alone. We know that child maintenance, where paid, can play a key role in reducing child poverty. That is one reason having a robust system in place is so important. I urge the Minister to examine our proposals carefully.

As the Minister and Deputy Kerrane acknowledged, one-parent families remain at a significantly greater risk of poverty than the general population. That has been the case for many years. While actions have been taken to address that, much more needs to be done. In the Sinn Féin alternative budget for 2024, we provided for a number of specific measures that would apply to one-parent families and tackle this issue. They include increasing the age limit for one-parent family payment to 12 years; beginning the process of increasing the age limit of the jobseeker's transitional payment to 18 years, starting with an increase by one year up to 15 years; establishing a child maintenance service; and increases in the qualified child payment for all children. The Government did not take action on these measures.

It is wrong that one-parent families lose the one-parent family payment when their child reaches seven years of age. That was one of the worst cuts of the recessionary era and it has not been addressed. I have spoken to people who are getting the one-parent family and working the hours that allows them to get the working family payment. All of a sudden, they no longer get that payment and lose a significant amount of income because their child turns seven. That is a serious cliff edge for those parents and amounts to a loss of a significant amount of money on a monthly basis. That puts them at a much greater risk of poverty. These are parents who are working. That, too, should be acknowledged because that cliff edge is wrong. Similarly, the cliff edge at 14 years of age is a problem. More needs to be done in that area and we need to continue to discuss it. People will talk about the jobseeker's transitional payment people can

get when their child reaches seven years of age, which is an equivalent rate, but they cannot get the working family payment if they go on the jobseeker's transitional payment. That is a serious flaw.

Lone parents deserve better. The costs of raising a child - the cost of clothing, food, childcare and back-to-school costs, among others - are constantly increasing. A single parent who is renting will not have much left after the rent is paid. The cost of raising a child in Ireland is skyrocketing. I know this goes beyond the Minister's Department and needs cross-departmental consideration. As I stated, in advance of the budget the Children's Rights Alliance proposed what it considered to be the minimum increase for a qualified child. The budget measure outlined did not meet that minimum. The alliance called for an increase of €5 for those aged under 12 and €10 for those aged over 12, whereas a €4 increase was introduced across the board. Child benefit has not increased since 2016 and it is still below 2008 levels. The payment has lost much of its impact in supporting families. I urge the Government to listen to and implement proposals brought forward by Sinn Féin, as it has thankfully done with this Bill. I welcome that action has been taken but much more is needed to support one-parent families.

I come to the issue of housing, and again this is not the Minister's responsibility. There is a comparison that can be drawn fairly and it needs to be examined. I urge the Minister to bring it to her colleagues at Cabinet, particularly the Minister for housing. For the purposes of social housing need assessment, child maintenance is still considered as income by most local authorities. Similarly, for the purposes of the housing assistance payment, HAP, when the differential rent that the HAP tenant has to pay to the local authority is being calculated, child maintenance is considered an income. We have agreed in principle that child maintenance is not an additional income or a recognition payment. It is a payment to defray the considerable costs of raising a child. Surely the same principle should apply with HAP and social housing. I urge the Minister to raise this issue at Cabinet and have it considered. I know she cannot act on this alone but as part of Government, this is an issue that can be addressed.

The same principle applies. This is not an additional income; it is simply to defray, often only partially, the cost of raising children. In some instances, that rules people out and puts their income over the limit for social housing, thereby disqualifying them. That is a source of serious regret and something we should avoid. As we know, credit time for social housing is money in the bank for families so it is devastating for families when this happens. It does not put the interests of the child first when a family potentially misses out on the opportunity to have a secure home and a roof over their head due to the child maintenance payment. That is not right and I urge the Government to look at it.

That is the height of it. I commend the Minister and her Department on bringing forward this useful Bill. It is a good piece of work and while there is more to be done, it is very welcome. I acknowledge, in particular, the work that Deputies Kerrane and Brady have done over several years in highlighting this issue. This is a good day for lone parents but there is much more to be done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: When Deputy McAuliffe is finished speaking the Minister will conclude the debate. I am giving the House that warning.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: When I saw the attendance I suspected my slot would come earlier so I took the opportunity to avoid the debate falling.

I mention the phrase "success can have many mothers and fathers". It is not often I get the opportunity to congratulate both the Government and Opposition on good examples of a practical and pragmatic issue being brought forward, listened to in the Department and supported by organisations such as SPARK, One Family and so on. The provisions in the Bill that relate to families and lone parents are pragmatic and practical.

In the week the House voted to extend the constitutional definition of a family to families other than the traditional marital unit, it is important to say that measures like this are examples of how Ireland has changed over recent decades. If the House is making similar changes to social welfare legislation or any other form of legislation, it is time the Constitution caught up with that principle. I say to the many one-parent families that the Government is introducing these measures and a constitutional protection for the family and the definition of the family gives the control in the Constitution to that principle and protects against any future Government deviating from such policies.

On the provisions, I particularly welcome the concept that maintenance is not disposable income that can be compared with any other form of income. That is important. The previous speakers made a valid point on its use in the calculation of differential rent. That is a matter on which the housing committee could do some work and submit it to the Minister for housing. I will commit to doing that as the Leas-Chathaoirleach of that committee.

On the issue of the liable parent, elements of this are about control. When relationships break down there can often be issues of control. In an abusive relationship, engagement in the court system on issues of custody and maintenance can be used to exert control. What the Minister has done here, while being a very pragmatic step in regard to social welfare administration, also removes an opportunity for adverse control to be used in a relationship that is abusive and I especially welcome that. It also removes an element of judgment. At the core of a provision like this is an element of judgment about lone parents and so on and that is a sentiment that has long disappeared and it is right to remove it. The last point is that it is a very good example of the State quality-controlling the legislation we pass and looking at the numbers, which speak for themselves. This is not working as a provision and therefore it is not appropriate that we probably spend more money administering the system than it brings in. For all those reasons I commend the Minister and the Opposition on advocating this position, which I support.

On the provisions concerning the temporary protection extended to people from Ukraine, this is again a pragmatic decision. When the war occurred we did not know how long it would be. There was a very generous, open response reflecting our wish to support those Ukrainian people and to do everything we could and we continue to do that. However, as the war has gone on, we have to put this both on a sustainable footing and on a footing equivalent to our European partners. We are in a Single Market, have freedom of movement within the Continent and it is wise for us to have a similar provision for people who are coming from Ukraine. I commend the Minister and Government on making that decision. As we are doing with other provisions, we need to keep a watchful eye on it. As we need to ensure nobody who is vulnerable finds him or herself in a position, because of transition arrangements and so on, where that person is unable to care for and look after him or herself, we should continue to keep a close eye on it. These are the right provisions and I commend the Minister on them.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I welcome this Bill. It is absolutely necessary that the plight of children in poverty is treated with the seriousness it deserves. The report and review that provide the basis for this Bill are a multitude of steps in the right direction but I should point out

that as UNICEF stated in a recent publication, Ireland has made progress in reducing child poverty but it still exists at a completely unacceptable level across the country. Not a single child should suffer from poverty, yet UNICEF still found one in seven children are still living in poverty and more than one in ten have experienced prolonged poverty, which is defined as lasting at least three consecutive years. That is three years without the absolute minimum required to live a life of dignity or to have a fulfilling childhood.

It goes without saying all children should be treated equally, regardless of who they are, where they are from, their colour or their creed. A child deprivation module published by the CSO indicated children in single-parent households which had no one in employment and children in rented accommodation were most at risk of experiencing deprivation. The children who grew up in households below the poverty line had a greater likelihood of remaining in poverty for much of their life. A few months ago the Pobal deprivation index showed a rise in people living areas classified as "very disadvantaged" or "extremely disadvantaged". We are, it is often said, living through a period of full employment, yet quality of life in areas that have traditionally been deprived has yet to improve and has in some instances worsened. The data revealed the number of people living in areas classed as very disadvantaged or extremely disadvantaged increased from 143,000 in 2016 to 196,000 in 2022, which is a rise of more than 52,000 people over six years, not discounting the fact we have had population increases.

A disproportionate number of disadvantaged communities are located in my constituency of Dublin Central. Some of them are where I grew up in the north inner city. These are all areas where there is a greater number of one-parent families, higher unemployment rates and lower levels of education than in many parts of the country. These families have often felt abandoned by government and its policies, which are seen as failing them generation after generation. Similarly, children with disabilities and many from minority ethnic or racial backgrounds are often at a higher than average risk of poverty, as are children of lone parents, who are three times more likely to experience poverty.

The long-term effects of child poverty are dire. The inability of a household to afford nutritious food, warm clothes, a secure home and a decent education more often than not leads to lifelong disadvantages for a child with respect to their opportunities, future health and generational quality of life. Last year, at least 13,000 people, almost 4,000 of whom are children, spent Christmas in emergency homeless accommodation. That is the highest figure recorded in the history of the State. When all these statistics are taken into account, it is clear we need to make changes to our social welfare system to ensure we leave no child behind. It is the absolute least we can do. The Taoiseach recently stated he wants Ireland to be the best country in the world in which to be a child. I am not even sure he knows how far we are from that being achieved, but it is absolutely necessary that we all band together and collaborate to make such a statement a reality.

This Bill is a rarity in Irish politics, in that it is based on a comprehensive review and report that took the opinions of major stakeholders and experts in the field seriously and in doing so has made a step in the right direction. I welcome the implementation of the recommendations of the report of the child maintenance review group regarding the social welfare system. One-parent family obligations to seek maintenance to access social welfare has delayed payments and caused vulnerable families and their children to go without. The new definition of maintenance payments is also welcome, as child maintenance should not be assessed as a means for the purpose of any social welfare means test. Child maintenance payments are required for many vulnerable families in exclusion of their receipt of any other support required for those

children. If this section of the legislation is to be enacted, some one-parent families will receive higher rates of payment or new payments altogether and this is an example of a targeted, structural change that should make a real difference to those who need it and is incredibly welcome.

There are still many pitfalls in legislation which we must be sure to avoid if any significant improvements are to be achieved. The National One Parent Family Alliance has expressed deep disappointment with the Government's decision to not establish a statutory child maintenance agency or appropriate system despite the majority vote of an independent committee in favour of the creation of same. I second this view. Without such an agency, the roll-out of maintenance payments runs the risk of inconsistency and incapacity to keep up with demand, which could lead to a failure to achieve this Bill's goal of alleviating poverty and disadvantage for those most at risk.

I agree with the committee's stating there is scope for such an agency within the Department of Justice. Without such structures in place, the benefits this Bill hopes to bring may fall by the wayside, as many have during this Government's tenure. The National One Parent Family Alliance also points out that without a child maintenance agency, the dissolution of the liable relatives unit, which is another aspect of this Bill, may lead to a loss of child maintenance or parents receiving one-parent family allowance and an increase in lone parents seeking child maintenance through the family courts. As the committee's report suggests, when a lone parent's youngest child turns seven years of age, non-resident parents receive a letter saying they need to switch payment of maintenance from the Department to another parent, which leads to a 60% drop in maintenance payments due to non-payment and a 50% drop in the overall amount of maintenance paid after the youngest child turns seven. Without a child maintenance agency, communications with liable relatives may cease to be clear and concise, leading to underpayments and damage to a child's well-being. Due to how overwhelmed our family law courts regularly are, it is disheartening the State is taking a step back from its role in enforcing maintenance orders. I fear the delays that could result from this burden on the courts could leave vulnerable families in need at times when they might require support the most. Why, despite consultation and widespread approval, has a statutory child maintenance agency been left off the agenda?

As I stated in this contribution and all my time speaking in this Chamber, one-parent families are among the most disadvantaged groups in society. Their risk of poverty is a horrendous reality to behold. Children are the ones who lose out when it comes to the negative effects of means-testing in areas where intergenerational trauma is embedded in families. Everyone involved is hurt by the *status quo* and the changes proposed in this Bill create the chance for a better system. However, it is of utmost importance that money intended for the child is indeed used to improve their quality of life and prospects. Only by investing in future generations can we interrupt and stop this intergenerational poverty that ravages our communities. It is also equally welcome that the report acknowledges the current rate of housing disregard at just over €95 and calls it derisory. It is a joke compared with current rent and mortgage rates and should be reassessed immediately as it is leaving countless vulnerable families behind. This debate is not centred around housing but it is difficult to stray far from the topic when discussing poverty and deprivation.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá áthas orm deis a bheith agam cúpla focal a rá ar an mBille seo. There are two parts to this Bill. It is not the first time a Bill has had two very disparate parts and I understand why that was done, so I am going to treat them separately. I remember suggesting when they were talking about an Irish language Act in the North that there should be two parts

to that language Act, with totally separate provisions - one part for the Irish language that would reflect its status in the Good Friday Agreement and the other for Ulster Scots, reflecting a different status because it had a different status in the aforementioned agreement. I suggested this be done within the one Act. I believe there is merit in doing things like that and being creative when we are legislating.

I welcome this Bill. Anything that rationalises and eases the burden of social welfare means-testing will get my support. I hope that this is another step on a path of more changes to the means-testing regime. I have often said that if people are down, the State will provide a basic income, which is the welfare system. In all circumstances, people should be entitled to a welfare payment and that is the system we have. However, what I would argue is that for those just above that level, the minute they start climbing the ladder, we tend to haul them back at a fairly drastic rate. This is an inhibiting factor for people. It inhibits them from improving their standard of living and that is not a good thing. The minimum or basic social welfare rate should be seen as just that, a basic payment, but as many people as possible should be facilitated to have a higher income than that. Eventually, if they get high enough, they should come clean out of the welfare system and start becoming a taxpayer. That should be seamless but it is not. As the Minister knows, the means test penalty is much more severe in reality in terms of the financial penalty it imposes on people than many of the higher-end tax rates on individual citizens.

Basically, the changes here are twofold. The Minister is changing the means test *vis-à-vis* the child maintenance payment, which will no longer be assessed as means and I believe that is sensible. I have argued for this many times and was surprised when dealing with cases that this was not the way it was. This is an important step in the right direction because it stops people from being pushed into poverty. The Minister knows all of the positive consequences of not being in poverty. We all know the consequences of being in poverty, the dependency it creates and the disadvantage it leads to for children in particular. It often leads to educational disadvantage and can also lead to intergenerational disadvantage. What we should be doing is the opposite by trying to make it much easier for people to rise above that and to move on with their lives.

The second change is the discontinuation of the liable relative provision. Currently, where a lone parent is in receipt of the one-parent family payment, the Department has a legislative basis for carrying out an assessment of the other parent and issuing a determination order for that parent to make a contribution to the Department towards the cost. I would not think the Department took in much money. This is one of those old provisions that was a drag on the system and which, in the context of the Minister's €26 billion budget, was not providing any saving. In fact, it was just causing more grief, more administration and so on.

I hope that this is the first of many changes this year. The Minister has brought in changes previously and has done good work on the means-testing of the carer's allowance and the fuel allowance, in particular, which is very welcome. I am looking forward to the report the Department is preparing on social welfare means-testing and to a continuous roll-out of changes. I do not think it should be a big bang report or a big bang implementation. The best approach, always, is to do things step by step to ensure that any unintended consequences get ironed out fairly rapidly. I look forward to that happening.

The second issue I would like to talk about is the payment given to Ukrainians compared with international protection candidates, which I have always thought is completely out of kilter. It actually left them better off than Irish citizens because they were getting board and lodgings, even with the changes that were made, for something like €50 per week, whereas people

on social welfare would have to pay €40 in rent, buy their own food and pay for their heat and light. While I think this change is sensible, I have some issues with it. First, the allowance of €38 per week for everybody who is seeking international protection, as well as for Ukrainians from now on, is low. That payment should be reviewed and raised because it is a very small amount of discretionary money for any person. That said, I do agree that everybody should be on the same rate.

The other issue that really worries me is the 90-day limit. I know this is not a decision of the Department of Social Protection but it is part of a suite of measures and I ask the Minister to carry a message back to her Government colleagues. What happens after 90 days? Where are they meant to go? If we put them on the housing list, the Minister knows what is going to happen. It will mean more competition within communities who are all queuing up for public or social housing, for HAP, and so on. If they do not go there, where are they going to go? That is the one part that really worries me because of the potential consequences within communities as well as for those seeking tearmann, asylum or refuge in this country who come from Ukraine. We need to think this out and admit that we cannot enforce a 90-day limit. All of the people seeking international protection do not, quite rightly, face a 90-day limit because they are not entitled to HAP or to go on the housing list. Even if we did make them so entitled, we would just increase the pressure and competition within communities who already feel that the housing lists are way too long. That one should be thought out again.

Deputy Martin Browne: Data from the 2022 survey on income and living conditions shows that those living in one-adult households with children under 18 years were among the groups most likely to experience enforced deprivation, at over 43% compared to nearly 18% of the population as a whole. The treatment of child maintenance payments within the Department of Social Protection as means, and the requirement to make efforts to seek maintenance as a condition of eligibility for the one-parent family payment and jobseeker's transitional payment has hampered efforts to address the deprivation figures I opened with. While I welcome that these two issues are being addressed in the Bill finally being put forward today, I have to highlight my concern that what is missing from this legislation is the establishment of a statutory maintenance agency.

In March 2017, the United Nations published a report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which suggested that consideration be given to the establishment of a statutory maintenance authority to reduce the burden on parents of having to seek child maintenance orders. It has been pointed out by the National One Parent Family Alliance that a failure to establish such a statutory maintenance agency could result in a loss of child maintenance for parents receiving the one-parent family allowance and an increase in lone parents seeking child maintenance through the family courts. We know that when non-resident parents are directed to switch payment of maintenance from the Department to the other parent, the transitional period results in a 60% drop in maintenance payments. The One Parent Family Alliance told the Oireachtas social protection committee that it is concerned that the likelihood of this could increase as oversight drops, leaving hard-pressed lone parents increasingly having to address this through the courts.

Sinn Féin has been consistent in promoting the need for a what we have referred to as a child maintenance service for Ireland. This would remove the adversarial court approach and ensure that the child is central to any decisions on the child maintenance to be paid. This service must have the necessary enforcement powers to actually ensure maintenance is paid. Our child maintenance service would also assist parents in reaching agreements on maintenance

where the non-custodial parent is willing to pay. In cases where they are not so willing, it would calculate the child maintenance payment, collect it from the non-custodial parent and pay it to the other parent. I urge the Minister to discuss this with the Minister for Justice. We have also proposed increasing the age limit for the one-parent family payment to 12 years and we would begin the process of increasing the age limit for the jobseeker's transitional payment to 18.

Finally, I have been told many times that maintenance payments are affecting the rent or HAP contributions people are expected to pay. Could the Government examine the possibility of excluding maintenance in the assessment of means for housing support and contributions under HAP?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I welcome this Bill as a long overdue reform of the social welfare system in relation to maintenance. It is nothing short of outrageous that for decades lone mothers have been legally obliged to pursue fathers for maintenance by the Department of Social Protection and are then penalised by the Department when the father does not pay court-approved maintenance. That is because the Department deducts maintenance approved by the courts from the mother's social welfare payments regardless of whether she actually received it or not. Her reward for months or even years of chasing a father through the courts for maintenance is to have the amount approved by the court deducted from her own payment.

Submissions to the child maintenance review group from women's rights and lone parent's organisations, such as SPARK and Women's Aid, have spelled out the incredible injustice of that situation. It is yet another example of the State working in a misogynistic way to victimise lone parents. Not satisfied with placing the full burden of responsibility on them to raise their children alone, with very little help from the State as regards housing or childcare, its maintenance regime has directly penalised lone parents for raising a family by themselves. All of the women's rights and children's rights organisations have told us for years that this is grossly unfair on lone parents and that it contributes to child poverty and homelessness, especially as maintenance is deducted from rent supplement. It has taken all these years, however, for the Government to finally act.

I hope this is only a first step in removing every last vestige of misogyny and discrimination against lone parents from our social welfare system. Unfortunately, plenty of those elements are still in our system, including the utter disgrace that in 2024 social welfare inspectors can still turn up at a woman's door and invade her privacy to effectively check for men under the bed. A 2020 investigation by the *Irish Examiner* found that: "In many cases the women are left feeling small and worthless. The Social Welfare inspectors have all the power, and in some case they abuse it. The mums claiming the single parent allowance are left between a rock and a hard place - make a complaint and risk losing a payment, or just stay quiet and take it." The newspaper spoke to women who said: "... inspectors would come to their homes unannounced, searching each room, sometimes opening wardrobes looking for men's clothes and questioning them about cars parked outside." Rather than outlawing this misogyny, which reeks of the squinting-windows Catholic Ireland of old, the Department continues it. Between 2018 and 2020 alone, 32,559 recipients of the one-parent family payment scheme were examined by social welfare inspectors, 2,327 were cut off, and another 3,665 had their payment rate reduced on review.

To return to the subject matter of the Bill, it is unfortunately the case that even if 100% of child maintenance were collected, there would still be significant poverty and inequality in this country. The tens of thousands of children in two-parent families who are living in poverty,

despite receiving financial support from both of their parents, are proof of that. As a socialist, I do not believe that children's standard of living should be dependent on how wealthy their parents are. A genuinely left, socialist government would directly eliminate child poverty. It would provide high-quality, universal public services, such as housing, childcare, healthcare and public transport, free of charge to all. It would increase social welfare payments such that they would provide a decent standard of living and it would legislate for living wages and mandatory trade union recognition so that workers could fight for higher wages. That would benefit all children, regardless of their parents' income or family circumstances. This would be funded by taxing big business and the wealthy and taking key sectors of the economy, such as the banks, into democratic public ownership.

Oxfam's wealth report, published earlier this week, showed how a tax on the millionaires and billionaires in this country could raise even more than €9 billion every year. It showed that just two billionaires in this country have the same wealth as 50% of the country or half the entire population. That €9 billion alone would pay for abolishing childcare fees, increasing all basic social welfare payments and pensions to €350, and making medicines and public transport free. A wealth tax would raise much more funds to abolish child poverty than placing attachment orders on people's social welfare payments as the Government proposes to do in the near future.

I welcome the provisions in the Bill that repeal the Department's responsibility to pursue what are called "liable relatives" for maintenance. This will be dealt with separately by the Department of Justice. We will watch very closely to see what is proposed in that regard. I clearly state in advance of that, while we wait, People Before Profit will not support punitive measures, such as the proposals for suspended sentences, to be used against people who do not pay maintenance. We fear this could have a serious impact on people on low incomes and vulnerable people suffering from addiction or mental health problems. We do not consider that sort of punitive approach to be the answer.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Deputy Murphy has made many of my points. We welcome the Bill. Single parents suffer disproportionately from poverty. That has been well documented and remained consistently the case for many years now. The fact that the amount of maintenance single parents might receive, the vast majority of whom are women, is means-tested and then impacts on their social welfare payments is completely unacceptable, when we have such a disproportionate level of poverty among lone parents. We very much welcome this long-overdue move to decouple maintenance from social welfare payments.

I also add, however, that even this improvement will still leave many lone parents in poverty because our basic rates of social welfare, whether it is the one-parent family payment or other social welfare payments, are below the poverty level. Significant numbers of our lone parents, including pensioners and other people who because of disability or other reasons, such as losing their jobs, are forced to live in poverty. It is our view that the basic social welfare and pension payments should increase to bring everybody at least above the poverty line. I do not see how in a society as wealthy as ours, one of the wealthiest in the world, that it can be justifiable to leave hundreds of thousands of people still living in poverty. I also take this opportunity to repeat the call of the disability community to add a premium payment. Our view is that everybody should be getting at least €300 a week in pension or social welfare payments to lift them out of poverty and people with disabilities should also get a premium payment above that. During the Covid crisis, with the €350 figure, we acknowledged that nobody could or should be expected to live on less than that. There is no reason to continue to leave so many people, many of them lone

parents, languishing in poverty.

While we welcome the Bill and the decoupling of maintenance payments from social welfare, there is a hell of a lot more to do if we are to lift lone parents and many others in our society out of poverty.

3 o'clock

I will elaborate on a point because I noticed Deputy Durkan had a wry smile on his face when Deputy Murphy referred to the recent Oxfam report and the extraordinary levels of wealth concentrated in the hands of a tiny proportion of Irish society. Oxfam is only confirming what the Central Bank has confirmed. This is just in case Deputy Durkan is a little bit sceptical-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Just a part of it, not all of it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, sure. If the Deputy is sceptical and if he does not believe Oxfam, he should check out the Central Bank. It may be a source that the Deputy might consider more reliable. I believe Oxfam is very reliable. The Central Bank has started to produce something we have long asked for, which is figures on the distribution of wealth in this country. In its quarterly bulletins at the beginning of each year, the Central Bank has always shown the level of net wealth and assets in the country but has never shown the distribution. Essentially, we had to extrapolate from old studies on wealth distribution to work out what proportion of the wealth was in the hands of different deciles of our population. The Central Bank has confirmed with a report - from I believe the end of 2022 - what we, Oxfam and others have been saying for many years and the bank will do this on an ongoing basis. The report confirmed that the richest 10% of our population has approximately 54% of all of the wealth. This is massive. The net wealth in this country is now in excess of €1 trillion. One can do the maths. It is an extraordinary concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny group of people. This is the issue that needs to be addressed. There is more than enough wealth in Irish society to lift people out of poverty and to address many of the problems we have with the lack of resources for housing, infrastructure, amenities, and for decent pay and conditions for working people, many of whom have seen themselves hammered with the cost-of-living crisis over the past few years. The money is there but it is concentrated in the hands of a tiny few. Now we have the figures to back that up. A wealth tax could begin to address that and redistribute that wealth in a fair way.

As the Minister, Deputy Humphreys is present, I have a final couple of comments on the issue of addressing poverty and the immediacy of this. I was not aware of a particular issue, but have been made aware by a number of pensioners who have come to my clinic over the cold snap we are experiencing. There is a provision in the electricity credit measure, which is the €150 payments people have been getting off their electricity bills, whereby if the customer does not reach a certain threshold of electricity use, he or she does not get the payment. I was quite shocked because elderly people have come to me this week who had made sure their electricity use did not reach the €150 threshold because they could not afford to pay anything above it. They assumed they were going to get the €150 credit so they kept their use to just below €150 only to discover that because they had been economising on their use of electricity they were not getting the payment at all. That is pretty terrible. We can see how cold it is out there now and people who are cutting back on their use of electricity to heat their homes or for other uses of electricity are now not getting the payment precisely because they were cutting back as they could not afford it and were afraid of the prospects of using too much electricity. I believe if people do not get those credits, they do not get a lot of the other stuff as well. I ask the Govern-

ment to immediately address this. It is just grossly unfair.

I have another ask of the Minister, which again is related to the cost of living and the cold snap and is to do with some of the additional payments the Government is giving to address the cost of living. I refer to the people who are on so called "short-term payments", although some of these payments are not that short term. If someone is on any of the short-term payments such as illness benefit, job seeker's allowance for less than nine months, the back-to-education allowance, the enterprise allowance and so on - and this is not an exhaustive list - he or she is not getting any of the additional once-off cost-of-living payments or fuel allowance. That is not right. Those people are on the same levels of low income as everybody who gets the payments, yet they have the same need to heat their homes in the cold snap in the winter and all the rest of it. Just because they are on a shorter-term payment, have just lost their job or are on a back-to-education scheme or an enterprise allowance scheme, they are having to go through this cold snap with all the extortionate cost-of-living increases and the inflation increases without the support of the once-off payments, the fuel allowance and so on that have been given to everybody else. That is not fair and in many cases that is actually penalising people for doing things like getting back into enterprise, trying to get to back to work, or trying to upskill themselves. Those who just happen to have lost their job recently and are no doubt trying to get back into it work are being penalised because they lost their job. That is not fair. I ask the Minister to address it and even at this late stage to give this cohort the payments that have been given to others.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome this particularly important legislation. I just want to make a few comments on the opinions expressed by the previous speaker in respect of a report that was published recently by Oxfam. The Deputy did not quote the whole conclusion. The conclusion was the same as it was nearly 50 years ago to the effect that 80% of the wealth was owned by 10% of the population. It then went on to say that 80% of the taxation was paid by 10% of the population. The Deputy left that bit out and I do not know why that happened.

In the company of a certain gentleman who was a millionaire or billionaire Oxfam was involved a few years ago in travelling around the globe explaining to the people of the world how Ireland was a tax haven and how it had to be addressed as a matter of some urgency-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Very good.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----and with which I strongly disagreed. Those who called for this tax haven to be stopped said nothing at all when we needed - in the worst way possible - everything we had after the financial crash and following and during Covid. When people quote from these situations, it is a good thing to tell the whole story so as not to confuse the public. Sometimes the public does get confused and might believe it. I happened to be in a position where I could confront said gentleman and his cohorts at the time but for some unknown reason the management of the situation at the time ensured that he escaped from potential cross questioning. There will be other times and I certainly have not forgotten it anyway.

Sadly, we were on our uppers at the end of the financial crash and this was the solution that some of these guys had. We should not forget that.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not often you lose your quarry, Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I know. It was a few years ago but it will not happen again. I welcome the legislation. Contrary to what Members opposite have said. this is not the first time

we have visited this type of situation, as the Minister and the Ceann Comhairle well know. We remedied this particular problem many years ago to a certain extent when the courts made a decision in situations where there was a separation and people went their separate ways. In some cases, it was acrimonious and partners who were in the position of providing maintenance to their family as ordered by the courts did not do so and made themselves artificially unemployed so they would not have to do so. They left the children and the mothers in a desperate state. On top of this, there were many situations where there was colossal home abuse, with physical and mental abuse that went on and on to such an extent that the mother and the children were afraid to ask for their rights or to look for them because of the consequence to them as a result. This is still going on and we all deal with these types of cases. This week I have already dealt with a couple of such cases. The abuse is of such a threatening nature that the children or mother will do anything to avoid it. Occasionally there is a situation where one person will fight back and try to assert their rights, and rightly so.

I fought this when I was in the Department and we changed it to a great extent but it drifted back in again in the aftermath of the financial crash. We have to be alert all of the time to watch all of the benefits that were fought for over the years by all of us. It is as if someone with a rope is drawing them back again. We look around and we do not know they have gone. This happens. I was dealing with a case the other day where appalling physical and mental abuse has been meted out to the unfortunate mother and children. It should not be happening. The result of it is visible when looking at the family. It is breaking them down mentally and physically to an appalling extent.

When we combated it previously we found it was possible to do so on a one-to-one basis. Deciding officers in all Departments need to be told about this but particularly in this Department. Where a mother finds herself vulnerable with nothing to pay the bills and the offending partner knows this is the situation, she is on a hiding to nothing. It is appalling what happens. Even this year, we have such situations. Somebody was told they would have money coming from the child benefit the following week. This is what a deciding officer said to someone. I am bowled over by that. The fact of the matter is that she and the children are entitled to that as well.

I remember an issue regarding an official in Kildare County Council once upon a time, and the Ceann Comhairle knows of this too. A national wage agreement gave council housing tenants an increase of a fiver. Because of the differential rent, the system took back the fiver even though it had nothing to do with it at all and it was not entitled to do so. Only a proportion of the fiver with regard to the total income was entitled to be taken back.

The point is that we must do a lot more in this area. I will not go into the most recent issue I have been dealing with, whereby women who are mothers of children, sometimes with large families of children, are subject to appalling treatment by the system. It is not the social system in this case but the family law system. We need to examine these situations and ask ourselves how long does this have to go on. We must remember that under the Constitution, everyone has rights of one kind or another and to some extent or another. If we allow a situation to drift we will allow for a situation that will be highly embarrassing in the future.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the legislation. I commend the work done on this by Deputies Kerrane and Brady from my party. We all welcome the fact that child maintenance payments will no longer be assessed as means for social welfare and the discontinuation of the liable relative provision. It has been a problem for a long time. If we go through the entire

social protection system we see a number of anomalies. People get caught in them. Sometimes we have really hammered down on those who have really needed support. We have probably created a pile of unintended consequences. I am very glad to see this will go.

Many of my colleagues, particularly Deputy Ó Laoghaire, have spoken about the need for a properly operating child maintenance service. We would all agree on anything that can be done about placing the onus of legal ramifications or financial burdens on single parents, who definitely have enough work to do in raising their child or children. We all know the difficulty of going through the court system. I ask that this issue be expedited. What we need to see is a sensible solution to the overall circumstances we have.

The idea of doing this is to deal with the issue of poverty. We know that single-parent families are often under severe pressures. This is probably a small enough intervention. We all know that a large number of families need intervention earlier than it happens to ensure the right of children to be all that they can be. Earlier we were dealing with further education and all of the new roadmaps with regard to apprenticeships, post-leaving certificate courses and degrees. Apprenticeships are no longer the traditional apprenticeships only. There is a large cohort of children and young adults who are well removed from this educational sphere. We have to do a far better job at an earlier stage. Many of these children come from disadvantaged communities. We definitely could make an intervention that would have an impact by empowering and facilitating families and ensuring we can bridge the gap and can allow people to get onto this route out of poverty.

The Minister and I have spoken many times about family carers and the fact we need to take a look at how we deal with this issue. I accept there are big differences between the supports provided to many family carers. We probably could not put a cost on some of them. We need to make sure people do not get caught in these anomalies either. A review of disability payments is ongoing. This involves another cohort of people who at times have fallen between stools. If we are speaking about dealing with poverty and facilitating all citizens to be what they can be, we need to look at these across the board. This is a good start but there is a lot more to do.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome the work that has been done on the Bill. More work can be done on it but it is heading in the right direction. Many means-tested applications take maintenance payments into account. For example, medical card applications require maintenance payments to be included for the means test. How many people have been denied medical cards due to maintenance payments bringing them over the threshold, even though that maintenance is for the children and young adults dependent on it? Legal aid costs of divorce in Ireland average at between €10,000 and €20,000 per spouse. Thankfully, legal aid exists in Ireland but maintenance payments for children and young adults are taken into account in the means test. Will there be a system to reimburse people whose applications were rejected because of the maintenance payments being included in the means test? This needs to be looked at. Maintenance payments are for the well-being of children and young adults.

Another issue is the struggle of single-parent families. Some 57% of homeless families in this country are single-parent families. In situations where a sole breadwinner is mandated to cover a mortgage, the Department of Social Protection accepts that mortgage payments are means, treating them similarly to maintenance. I know the debate is on the Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill but I wish to raise those who are not covered by it as well. I refer to people who are separated. When one looks at it, they are bringing maintenance into the equation as well.

With an average mortgage payment ranging between €1,020 and €1,361, deductions from social welfare payments place families at a significant risk of poverty. The weekly household disregard, which was set in 1997 at €95.23, fails to align with current housing costs, further intensifying the financial challenges faced by these families.

Focus Ireland provides an illustrative case involving a €300 mortgage payment. Before the High Court ruling, the assessment treated it as means of €27.39 but post ruling the assessment increased substantially to €103.39. The significant loss of €75 in social welfare support is particularly impactful on single-parent families already facing financial challenges. I believe that mortgage payments should not be regarded as means as they target single-parent families in reducing their already minimal income. This is the case with families who are in the process of splitting up.

We have mentioned the single-family payment and women. Some 99% of the cases in our office relate to women but we also have male single parents. I would like that to be recognised. While they are in a minority, they must be acknowledged because we have fantastic parents out there, male and female, who are doing the best for their children.

This legislation is going in the right direction but it needs to be looked at in its entirety to make sure it covers all family members. We must look again at inflation costs in this country. Everything must reflect that going forward. I commend the Minister on what she has done with the legislation so far and look forward to the implementation of further legislation in the future.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill.

I welcome the legislation and its intention to change the social welfare means test so that child maintenance payments will no longer be assessed as means. It is totally inappropriate to ever treat child maintenance as a household income when it is intended specifically for the child. This change is long overdue. In 2022, CSO figures showed that 43.5% of one-parent families were living in deprivation in comparison with 17.7% of people in two-parent households. In addition, 23.8% of one-parent families were at risk of poverty and 14.1% were in consistent poverty.

Recent findings from Growing Up in Ireland show higher levels of disadvantage among one-parent families and that financial strain is substantially higher for one-parent families, with 21% experiencing financial hardship. Lone-parent families are also consistently at a greater risk of homelessness and are significantly overrepresented in emergency accommodation. These figures clearly show that Government policy designed to tackle poverty is failing. In 2022, 17% of Irish households were headed by one parent, with more than five times more one-parent mother families than one-parent father families. In my constituency of Donegal, 6,410 families with children were headed by single mothers and 1,182 by single fathers.

There is no doubt there is a national narrative around family at the moment given the upcoming referendums on family and care in March. Many people in this country believe they are pro-women and pro-equality. They may be shocked to read the statistics on the notable and pervasive gender pay gap and the poverty rate for lone parents. They may also be shocked to hear others make sexist or misogynist remarks about single mothers or maternity leave being a holiday. Sadly, there are many who will not be shocked by these conversations or statistics. I refer to those who have first-hand experience of what it is like to be a lone parent in a country

where it has taken us until 2024 to consider changing the legal definition of family beyond the scope of marriage.

The term "single mother" is almost a loaded one. One must ask why that is. They are the parents who stayed, yet our misogynistic society uses that against them, while the other parent escapes stigma. To add insult to injury, the parent who is raising the child then has to chase down financial contributions from the other parent. Worse still is the fact that this is considered as means when assessing a social welfare claim. The fact that the burden has been left to the caring parent for this long is an absolute disgrace, as if the person did not have enough on their plate as a lone parent. I am glad this has been addressed to some extent in the legislation, although for some it is too late.

It is disappointing that the Bill did not include the committee's pre-legislative scrutiny recommendation to set up a statutory child maintenance agency as a first step before progression to family courts. That is despite the fact that the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission stated that reliable and adequate provision of child maintenance can be an effective poverty reduction measure and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended that Ireland consider establishing a statutory maintenance authority and prescribing amounts for child maintenance in order to reduce the burden on women of having to litigate to seek child maintenance orders. The justice committee also recommended that a statutory child maintenance agency be established.

It is time that Ireland started to show due respect to lone-parent families and also to carers, the majority of whom are also women and many of whom also experience significant financial strain. I do not understand why carers, who are saving the State hundreds of millions in costs every year, are actively hemmed into poverty by our social welfare means-testing policy. A parent who cares for a disabled child is allowed to work 18 hours per week and to earn no more than €450 per week, as implemented in the last budget. This implies that these circumstances would only occur to those on a smaller income or in a position to carefully monitor hours. Let us consider the ramifications of that. Disabled people are already more impacted by poverty than other sections of the population. Disabled children and their parent carers are having their financial situation curtailed. The Government should remember that carers are providing the State with assistance, not the other way around.

As with the situation regarding maintenance, it is time we stopped creating social policy with the few opportunists who may find a way to take advantage in mind and start ensuring we treat all our citizens with respect and empathy. First and foremost, this is what needs to be addressed, if we are serious about creating an equal society for women in 2024.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank all the Deputies for their contributions. I acknowledge Deputy Ó Cuív's commitment to the means test and the need to continually review it. It is something he has raised with me on many occasions. I look forward to receiving the report on the means test shortly.

We all know that lone parents are a particularly vulnerable group, which is why I am very pleased to bring forward this legislation. I thank Deputies for their support. As a result of the provisions in the Bill, my Department will no longer assess child maintenance payments in the means test for social welfare schemes. As I mentioned earlier, this will be of direct benefit to an estimated 16,000 lone parents, at a cost of some €10 million a year. Some people will receive a higher payment while others will qualify for a payment that they would not have if we did not

make these changes.

The "liability to maintain family" provisions in social welfare legislation are being revoked by this legislation. This means the Department will no longer seek to recoup a portion of claims costs from the non-resident parent when a person is in receipt of the one-parent family payment.

As Deputies will be aware, under family law, parents have obligations regarding the maintenance of their children. Nothing in this Bill changes or undermines any of those obligations. I, too, acknowledge the vast majority of parents who meet those obligations.

On an administrative basis, the liable relative provisions have not been applied to new claims for one-parent family payment since late 2022 when the Government decided to revoke the provisions. In addition, last year I signed regulations to remove the requirements for recipients of the one-parent family payment and jobseeker's transition payment to make efforts to seek maintenance from the child's other parent. This means there is now no question of a person having to go to court just to satisfy an eligibility requirement for one of these payments. In making these amendments, we are decoupling child maintenance from the social welfare system. There are three significant changes that will have a positive impact on the lives of lone parents. My colleague, the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, is bringing forward reforms in the family law area that will also be of benefit to lone parents. Taken together, these represent a significant suite of reforms across the two systems that will address concerns that have been raised over the years.

As I explained in my opening remarks, I will bring forward amendments relating to the supports available for the beneficiaries of temporary protection. These changes will be more closely aligned to other EU member states. The impact of these amendments will be that new arrivals from Ukraine staying in designated State-provided accommodation will receive a weekly payment of €38.80. The Government has decided this and bringing it forward through this Bill is the fastest legislative vehicle to get the measures enacted. People will have the opportunity on Committee Stage to raise issues in this regard.

Some other issues were raised as well, including setting up a child maintenance agency. The Child Maintenance Review Group did not reach a consensus on this point. The Minister for Justice, however, has announced significant reforms to make the family courts system more accessible and more family-friendly. We need to see how those reforms bed in. As part of these reforms, the Department of Justice undertook a review of the enforcement of child maintenance orders. The Minister published that report last week. It contains 26 recommendations, including measures to examine how we can strengthen the enforcement of child maintenance payments via attachment orders and so on. The answer to all of this is that if people are supposed to pay, they should pay. I would like to see such payments deducted at source if people are working. People should just get on with it and stop messing about.

The Minister wishes to progress these proposals as quickly as possible. There have been some calls for Ireland to introduce a similar-styled child maintenance service to what is in place in the UK and Northern Ireland. It is important to say that an independent report from the national audit office in the UK found that since the agency was established there the estimated proportion of separated families without any child maintenance arrangements has increased from 25% in 2011-12 to 44% in 2019-20. The amount of unpaid maintenance owed to parents increased by more than £1 million weekly to a total of £440 million as of October 2021. Outstanding arrears will grow indefinitely and are forecast to reach £1 billion by March 2031 at the

current rates. If we look at this, we can see that there are an awful lot of complaints about that service in the UK and how it is working. In fairness, I can see, therefore, why the review group found it difficult to reach a consensus on this. The last thing we want to do is to spend a lot of taxpayers' money and waste a lot of time and then end up back where we were at square one.

I just wish to also address another matter. Deputy Boyd Barrett asked about the use of an electricity usage threshold for the electricity credits. I will have to refer this to the Department of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I was not aware of this and I do not think that it was the intention but I will refer this query back to the Minister.

Deputy Paul Murphy made comments about social welfare inspectors visiting houses. My Department repeatedly sought details of those alleged cases that were reported in the media in the context of anonymous sources but that information was never provided to us. None of those media reports has ever been backed up by facts. I just want to put this on the record because the social welfare inspectors in my Department do not have an easy job sometimes. As far as I am concerned, however, they do a good job. I just wish to ensure that people are aware of this. I have heard those allegations previously and I do not want to have the good name of our social welfare inspectors tarnished in any way.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank all the Deputies who participated in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill 2023: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands pursuant to Standing Order 95 and Standing Order 180(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021 [Seanad]: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I move: "That the Bill be read a Second Time."

I am sharing time with my seconders, Deputies Brendan Howlin and Ged Nash, who will be taking five minutes each.

An Ceann Comhairle: Grand.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Five years ago, in 2019, I was approached by my Labour Party colleague, Councillor Alison Gilliland, who has since been Lord Mayor of Dublin and who was then an official of the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO. She approached me because many members of the INTO had approached her and other officials to express concern about having to take time off work to undergo treatments for reproductive health-related issues, such

as *in vitro* fertilisation, IVF. Many others had told her and other INTO officials of their experiences after losing a pregnancy early in term, before the 24th week. Some of them had reported having to return to work while still experiencing the emotional and physical symptoms of their experience – a number of them even still bleeding. All of them were traumatised by the experience and many felt unable to speak about it in their workplaces. If they were teachers, they felt unable to speak about it to their principals. All these women were united in not being able to acknowledge their experience in a formal way in the workplace or, indeed, to have any formal recognition of having had an early miscarriage or of having had to undergo IVF treatment.

This became a big issue for the INTO. In response, the union carried out a survey in 2019 and found that 60% of respondents, mostly women, as would be the case with the INTO membership, had faced reproductive health difficulties in their workplaces. Clearly, then, this was an issue for their members. A motion was passed at the union's annual conference seeking a change in the law to enable recognition of early pregnancy loss and reproductive health.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, to the Chamber. I was explaining the background to the legislation we in the Labour Party are bringing forward today. As I said, it stems from work done by the INTO and Councillor Alison Gilliland. I pay tribute to the INTO and to Alison for their pioneering work on this matter and for pushing this legislation. After passing the motion at its annual conference, the union approached me and my Labour Party colleagues to seek assistance in introducing a measure into law that would enable recognition for the first time of early pregnancy loss and of IVF treatment and reproductive health issues.

We worked on the Bill for some time and, in March 2021, I published this legislation as a Senator, along with other Labour Party Senators, to provide statutory leave to those suffering so-called early miscarriage, pregnancy loss early in term or needing time off for reproductive healthcare treatment. The structure we used was to amend the existing Organisation of Working Time Act and to use that statutory framework to introduce this entitlement to a new, albeit relatively short, period of leave. I am conscious that we could have gone down a different route and used the employment equality legislation or the maternity protection legislation but we believed at the time that this was the appropriate framework because it already includes provision for *force majeure* leave. However, I said at the time we introduced this Bill that we would be happy to work with the Government to seek a more appropriate legislative framework, if required. We are not fussy about how it is done but we want some mechanism for women employees to be able to take reproductive health-related leave and to get formal recognition in the workplace.

We drafted this legislation following that input from the INTO. At the time, we knew that many teachers were suffering and enduring early miscarriage or pregnancy loss and finding their workplaces really not receptive or warm places in which to recover from their ordeal. However, nothing prepared us for the outpouring of correspondence we have received since we introduced the Bill from women across the country who suffered loss of pregnancy early in term, couples who have been balancing work commitments with IVF treatments and men watching their partners struggle with fertility issues. It has been incredibly moving. I have received highly personal and poignant messages from women struggling to conceive and having to undergo successive cycles of IVF without success and from women who have experienced miscarriage early in term and not so early in term. Miscarriage up to 24 weeks is simply not recognised in our workplaces and there is no entitlement to leave. Women have had to take sick leave or unpaid leave in order to recover from their experience.

What has been really moving is that some of the women and men who have disclosed the trauma of pregnancy loss to me had never shared it with others. The publication of this Bill and the debates on it in the Seanad that followed have uncovered a groundswell of feeling out there. We have talked about an unspoken tsunami of grief and the sort of loss that so many have experienced. It is, in fact, a very widespread issue but it is an unspoken one. We believe that publishing and bringing forward this Bill is also a way of highlighting this issue and this trauma and enabling more people to speak up and gain support from the experiences of others. It is what we call the need for leave when it matters most or the need for compassion in our law.

As with the campaign to repeal the eighth amendment, there is a groundswell of support for this and a sizeable group of people who feel that they were unable to speak up until now. This silence may have been due to stigma or just because it was so difficult to speak about their experience. As we know, reproductive healthcare has for far too long been marginalised as an issue in this country. That is why it is so important for us to push this Bill within the Oireachtas and to shift our workplaces to be a little bit kinder and more compassionate.

As I have said, we are conscious that a great many women have experienced this. It is estimated that 14,000 women experience pregnancy loss each year. Our maternity protection law currently only offers leave to those who endure this experience after 24 weeks. We need some recognition for earlier pregnancy loss.

This Bill passed through all stages in the Seanad and finished in that House last November. It had Government support there. We had hoped that we would today see Government accepting the Bill, at least on Second Stage, in the Dáil and then working with us to bring it into law in whatever format it wished. We are very disappointed to see the Government seeking to delay the Bill by 12 months when we know that an election is likely to have taken place in that time. One will certainly have had to have taken place within 14 months and yet the Second Reading of the Bill is to be delayed for 12 months. There is therefore no reality to the Bill becoming law during the term of this Government if the Government's amendment is accepted. That is deeply disappointing, not so much for us in Labour, but for all of those who are clearly and desperately affected. I urge the Minister not to move the amendment to delay the Bill.

We have seen the rationale offered by Government. It talks about the study it has commissioned. I will take the opportunity to thank those engaged in carrying out that study. I refer to the UCC pregnancy loss research group. It has conducted an incredible study into pregnancy loss in the workplace and it has been really valuable to see that work being done. Professor Keelin O'Donoghue, who has been leading the research, is in the Gallery for this debate. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, commissioned the research. He informed us of this research project in November 2022. He informed us of the plans in the equality committee following a Labour Party amendment to a Government Bill, which would have given effect to our Bill, being ruled out of order. We were concerned that the commissioning of the report might delay matters further but we now understand that the research has been completed.

I again thank Professor O'Donoghue, Professor Mary Donnelly, Dr. Marita Hennessy and Ruadh Kelly Harrington. They are to be commended on their extensive and detailed work, which I understand to shine a comprehensive light on the effect in the workplace of the experience of pregnancy loss and fertility issues. As I have said, these are issues that are very often shrouded in secrecy. In December, the research group presented preliminary findings to TDs and to the Labour Party and offered useful suggestions. Its survey of more than 900 individuals appears to confirm that 95% of those surveyed would seek to avail of specific leave if such

a provision was in place rather than having to take sick leave or unpaid leave, as I have mentioned.

The work the group has done should serve as an impetus for Government to act and to work with us, the Minister for equality and other Ministers, if necessary, to find a way to make this legislation work. It is simply not good enough to see it being delayed further. My Labour colleagues in the Seanad, Senators Marie Sherlock, Rebecca Moynihan, Annie Hoey and Mark Wall, really pushed this legislation through in November and were really glad to get strong support from Government Senators as the Bill went through the different stages in the Seanad. It is therefore very disappointing to see a different approach now being taken in the Dáil and to see Government making use of this delaying tactic to delay further debate on the Bill for 12 months. I again appeal to the Minister of State to withdraw the amendment, to enable the Bill to pass Second Stage and to work with us - we are very happy to work with him - to see what amendments are necessary to ensure this Bill can become law. We would love to see it become law this calendar year, before the end of the Minister of State's Government's term.

I will point out that other countries have introduced this measure in different ways. New Zealand, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Taiwan and others all have some form of reproductive health leave. It is not unprecedented. We have seen the Government introduce domestic violence leave, which is very welcome. Indeed, this made use of a similar structure, being introduced through the Organisation of Working Time Act. It is beyond time for the Government to move on this Bill. I appeal to the Minister of State to enable it to pass Second Stage today. It will have overwhelming support in this House and from the many women and couples for whom it really matters.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am very proud to second Deputy Bacik's proposal for this really important legislation. It is important for this House and for each of us to fully understand the impact of the pain and trauma caused by pregnancy loss. Many of us, and I include myself in that, have not fully empathised with those women, men and families who have endured such loss. It is only when you have experienced it directly or have been close to those who have that you can fully understand and comprehend the impact of early pregnancy loss. That is why this matter even being debated is of such importance. The struggle some individuals and couples have with fertility is also an issue of extreme importance that is addressed in this legislation. The scale of the impact of this is very significant. It is not a niche or minor issue but a very critical issue for a great number of citizens in our State who look to this House and to this Legislature to address issues of fundamental importance in their lives. We are well behind the most progressive countries in providing workplace leave to those who have reproductive health issues.

As Deputy Bacik has said, this has been debated as an issue for years now. This particular piece of legislation was introduced in the Seanad by the Labour Seanad group in 2021. In recent times, its advancement and progress has largely been led by Senator Marie Sherlock, whom I credit and thank for all her work, following on from an initial impetus from the Irish National Teachers Organisation's membership crying out for action in an area that affects a great many of them. The facts are plain. Each year, 14,000 women in Ireland experience pregnancy loss. One in six couples experiences fertility issues. Those of us who know couples who tried to have children and have gone through IVF treatment are aware of the toll it takes on them, as well as the delight if fertility treatment works. We must support them. The citizens and couples in that position deserve the support of this House and the protection of this legislation, which will afford them time off work - ten days for a worker who needs to access fertility treatment and

20 days for a person who suffers pregnancy loss. A woman who loses a child before 24 weeks certainly deserves to have the time to come to terms with that personal trauma and difficulty.

As has been explained, these proposals enjoyed all-party support in the other House and passed all Stages unanimously. It would be a truly regressive step for this House to halt the progress of the Bill. Unfortunately, that is the intention of the Government. It is a tautology to suggest that it needs 12 months to further consider the Bill when it knows that delaying it for 12 months will mean, in effect, killing off this legislation for this Parliament. Even if the Bill passes Second Stage 12 months hence, there is no way it will pass into law in the lifetime of this Parliament thereafter. The Minister and the Government know that full well. I strongly add my voice to that of Deputy Bacik - all my colleagues will add their voices - to ask the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, not to move his amendment but, rather, to support the Bill through Second Stage and deal with any issues that might arise on Committee Stage to get good legislation for those who demand it.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am privileged to support the Bill for several reasons. It is very much anchored in two areas of policy that are synonymous with the best traditions of the Labour Party, namely, workplace rights and the vindication of the reproductive rights of women. Pregnancy loss is utterly cruel. It is deeply personal, harrowing and physical and has a lasting emotional impact. For a woman who is going through that cruel loss, it is often far too painful to even discuss. It is not an illness or a sickness, however, and we should not treat it as such. It certainly should not be the case that a woman would be forced to produce the equivalent of a sick note to her employer to explain why she is not at work that day or week, or for her to have to take annual leave to recover or to organise her procedures through the IVF process. A woman who loses a child up to 24 weeks has no statutory entitlement to leave. A blunt and hard line is drawn, and that is inhumane, frankly.

The very fact we are looking at introducing a statutory right to time off at a time of early pregnancy loss says the conversation and the laws need to change. There is demand for this. Momentum is building and this will happen; it simply has to. The compassionate, humane and practical measures contained in the Bill would help to change that conversation and have a real and meaningful impact on the lives of women and couples. It is pioneering legislation and I firmly believe that in five or ten years' time people will sit back and say this is normal and how it should always have been and ask why we did not do it earlier. We need a statutory enforceable right to protected and ring-fenced workplace leave for early pregnancy loss and to accommodate the reality of the fertility journey for thousands of women and couples every year.

There are serious shortcomings in the Government's approach to publicly funded IVF but that is, to an extent, a discussion for another day. It is absolutely perverse, however, that we have correctly decided funded IVF is a public good, yet access could be restricted to those who can work flexibly unless a statutory right to leave to access it is introduced.

As we know, a woman going through IVF is at the mercy of her body as to when procedures happen. As things often do not go according to plan, using annual leave, for example, is fraught with danger and that adds to the anxiety the woman may already have. Procedures include scans, follicle examinations, egg collection, transfer and follow-up consultations. Unless the woman is in Dublin, Cork or another major urban centre where the facilities are available, the chances are she will have to frequently travel for up to several hours to access that treatment. If we are to have full and equal access to fertility treatment, statutory leave must be a vital component, otherwise the Government is selling a unicorn to so many women and couples.

To say Ireland has been conservative and slow on reproductive health rights is an understatement. As the Minister of State is aware, there is grumbling from employer bodies on the raft of employment rights legislation, minimum wage and pension reforms adding to what they describe as their burdens coming down the tracks. Many of the burdens, as they would describe them, the imposition of which was started by the Labour Party several years ago, are coming down the tracks but much of the reform is coming at once. That results principally from the failure of the Government in place from 2016 to 2020 to introduce the kinds of reforms we are seeing now, including those on the living wage, pension reform, pension entitlements and other employment rights.

Like my colleagues, I appeal to the Minister of State not to block or delay the progress of this legislation. It can and should go to Committee Stage. These are compassionate and practical workplace reforms that will make a significant and meaningful difference to the reproductive health rights of women, to their lives more generally and to the lives of couples. I ask the Minister of State not to fall into the trap of viewing reproductive health leave as a burden for business but, rather, as a practical and humane intervention towards a more decent, compassionate and caring society.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Neale Richmond): I move amendment No. 1:

> To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:
>
> "Dáil Éireann resolves that the Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021 *[Seanad]* be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, so as to allow sufficient time for the development of Government legislative proposals before the end of 2024, in line with the principles of this Bill, following publication of a research study which has been commissioned and submitted to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.".

At the outset, I make the point to Deputy Nash that it will never be viewed as a burden, nor should it ever be so viewed. I pay tribute to the Labour Party for consistently bringing forward this legislation since it originated in the Seanad under Deputy Bacik. I join her in commending Councillor Alison Gilliland. I was very disappointed to hear Councillor Gilliland will not be seeking re-election. It is not the most parliamentary of language, but she is a good egg. She has been an excellent representative on Dublin City Council, as well as on the European Committee of the Regions on which I served prior to her with Councillor Niall McNelis and others. Just before Christmas, we had a really strong debate on the Bill in the Seanad, with contributions from across the House led by the Labour Party's Senator Marie Sherlock, as well as a particularly insightful intervention from Senator Mark Wall. I acknowledge the importance of those contributions.

I underline the seriousness with which the Government takes this issue. Unfortunately, pregnancy loss is experienced by a significant portion of society. I am at an age where every couple of weeks I get a phone call from friends, family members or upset couples, many of whom are at a stage where they are starting to give up as they do not think this will be for them. They are making that journey through IVF. It is a right, as I stated to Deputy Nash. When you get that phone call or meet the person for a coffee or a drink, the scale of the issue becomes clear.

The point was rightly made that this is something that happened in silence for far too long. It was seen as silent burden that fell solely on the mother. The partner was not expected to be able to show emotion or have a genuine sense of loss to the same extent. I appreciate there are different degrees of loss for a father and a mother or for a non-bearing mother and a child-bearing mother and that must be recognised. It can be particularly difficult for people to share. They must deal with that aftermath alone for too long. It is very sad. It is understandable that pregnancy, trying to conceive and pregnancy loss was a deeply private subject for so long, but I am glad it has changed. It needs to change further and having this debate is a good start in that direction. There is far more movement towards change. There has been a welcome move in society towards greater openness about miscarriage, pregnancy loss, the inability to conceive and the heartbreak it can bring.

4 o'clock

This is an area where we see social media actually playing a good role. We criticise social media, rightly so. I have had my battles on there and have had my battles with the social media companies. However, this is an area where it is forcing people - it could be down to algorithms or whatever else - to be a lot more aware of what is going on, to have that conversation and to be a lot more open. I completely acknowledge that despite this, it is clear that parents who have gone through the experience would benefit absolutely from further supports.

Although there is no provision for the loss of a pregnancy prior to 24 weeks, the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 to 2004 provide for an employee to be entitled to full maternity leave in the case of a stillbirth after 24 weeks. The Paternity Leave and Benefit Act 2016 also provides for paternity leave in this situation. The Sick Leave Act 2022 provides for a statutory sick pay scheme for all employees who are medically certified as unfit for work. From 1 January 2024, this has been increased to five days, and it will rise incrementally to ten days by 2026. It is not the right vehicle but it is something that is there. This point was made appropriately from across the benches. I fully want to acknowledge that those experiencing pregnancy loss and other daily commitments that they have to go through go way beyond what is provided for in the existing legislation. The experience of pregnancy loss is sadly shared by far too many and there is room within our legislative framework to better care for working mothers and fathers who go through a pregnancy loss.

As a society we need to continue encouraging a move away from viewing pregnancy loss as something that must be dealt with in secrecy. Employees should feel that a miscarriage is a loss which they can share with their employer, recognising that they have suffered a bereavement and that they need time to deal with their loss. Reproductive health should also be supported in the workplace, and indeed reproductive rights, and I make that point deliberately. Employees should not feel concerned that an honest conversation about their pregnancy loss or reproductive health challenges will disadvantage them. I am sure that most employers would treat employees dealing with pregnancy loss or reproductive challenges in a sensitive manner, but additional support for employers or employees could be an advantage. As has already been alluded to, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, commissioned research to examine how best to support working parents who have suffered pregnancy loss and I will touch on this research a little later on to elaborate on the points made by Deputy Bacik.

The intentions and sentiment behind this Bill are absolutely laudable and I am fully in agreement with them. The Government recognises that this is an issue which should be addressed. However, we have now reached the point to drill down into the details and we have

to recognise that this is an extremely complex policy area that requires detailed consideration and assessment in advance of progressing legislation. On this basis, I have moved that the Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021, be deemed to be read a Second Time this day 12 months, so as to allow sufficient time for the development of Government legislative proposals, in line with the principles of this Private Members' Bill, before the end of 2024, following publication of a research study which has been commissioned and submitted to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, in accordance with Standing Order 176(1)(i).

I recognise that this may come as a disappointment to many colleagues in the House. I wish to make clear that we understand the importance of progressing proposals in this area. This is not a decision we have come to lightly, rather there are steps we have to take to ensure this is done properly. I hope Deputies will take my genuineness and accept my bona fides. This is something we want to do. We want to do it as soon as possible but we want to do it properly. First, the Bill presents a number of potential regulatory impacts across a range of considerations and these potential impacts require detailed assessment and scrutiny in advance of progressing legislation. Second, a qualitative research study commissioned by the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, which examined the workplace experiences of people dealing with pregnancy loss before 24 weeks' gestation has only just been completed. When we took this in the Seanad, we had only had eyes on the explanatory memorandum so it is relatively fresh. It is only right that due consideration and analysis of its finding should be carried out in advance of progressing any legislation. Third, and this is more of a technical and logistical point, Government is of the view that the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate or logical legislative vehicle to provide for the proposed new entitlements.

With regard to my first point on the potential regulatory impacts of the Bill, a range of considerations should be given due regard in advance of progressing legislation in this area. For example, consideration will need to be given to extending this proposed leave to terminations of pregnancy for medical and other reasons. With regard to the reproductive element of the Bill, the legislation will need to provide for a detailed definition of medical terminology and the circumstances in which leave for reproductive purposes would apply. As this Bill proposes to introduce a new form of leave, detailed legislative provisions regarding the circumstances within which the leave entitlement would arise would need to be developed. Any new provisions may result in the requirement to amend existing relating legislation. In addition, the legislation would need to clearly define the circumstances within which sick leave or medical care leave would be a more appropriate form of leave for pregnancy loss or reproductive health interventions. Inconsistencies between the Bill and existing legislation are also apparent. While the Bill proposes leave with pay when a miscarriage occurs before 28 weeks' gestation, existing entitlements to maternity and paternity leave apply to a stillbirth after 24 weeks.

Further potential regulatory impacts would need to be assessed with regard to the employer and there are a number of elements to consider here. The Bill proposes an employee is entitled to leave with pay from his or her employment for 20 days in the case of miscarriage and ten days in the case of reproductive healthcare treatment in any leave year. Therefore, this proposed legislation would place a new and considerable financial requirement on the employer. It is therefore only right that we engage with businesses on this as there has been a great deal of change as has been alluded to. I stand over every single one of those changes. They are the correct thing and we want to see no backsliding on them. We will continue to go further as has been laid out in the programme for Government. However, there is currently no statutory

requirement for employers to pay women who are on maternity leave, or those availing of maternity leave following a stillbirth after 24 weeks' gestation. Maternity and paternity benefits are paid by the Department of Social Protection to those who have a certain number of paid PRSI contributions on their social insurance record and who are in insurable employment up to the first day of their maternity or paternity leave. Therefore, placing this new financial responsibility on the employer deviates from current policy under which the State provides maternity and paternity benefits.

I have a good few more points and I do not know if I am going to them in time. If it is okay with those opposite, I will circulate the full extent of the speech and the Minister in summing up will be able to touch on all of them. I will skip ahead to a couple of points that are really pertinent in terms of the direction of travel in this policy area, that is, in relation to the Organisation of Working Time Act. As I have already laid out, we do not believe that this is the appropriate or logical legislative vehicle to provide for the proposed new entitlements. The Act was enacted to provide for the implementation of the European working time directive. As such, it sets out legislation regarding employees' working time, such as an employee's maximum working hours, entitlement to minimum rest periods and an entitlement to a minimum period of paid annual leave. The Act was not designed to set out the terms and conditions around the taking of specific forms of leave such as protective leave. The Act only references protective leave arrangements to clarify that they are not to be included in reference periods used to calculate maximum weekly working hours and nightly working hours. It is considered by the Government that discrete stand-alone legislation or an amendment to existing family leave provisions would form a more suitable legal basis for reproductive leave. Additionally, it is considered by the Government that it would be both more logical and appropriate to progress pregnancy loss legislation through stand-alone legislation or an amendment to legislation that already provides for protective leave. Such legislation has expanded in recent years to legislate for what has become known as protective leave entitlements in legislation in respect of maternity leave, paternity leave and adoptive leave.

Again, these are very technical details and it takes away from the real impetus of what is trying to be achieved here this evening. As I am sure colleagues will appreciate, these are the details we have to ensure are correct. I would like to emphasise that the Government understands the importance of progressing proposals in this policy area. We have tabled this motion today in the aim of developing appropriate and fit-for-purpose legislation that is backed by well researched and evidence-based policy which will serve society in the long term. I urge the House to agree to the motion for a timed amendment for 12 months. This will allow time for Government to consider the recently completed qualitative research study and to allow the development of Government policy and legislative proposals, in line with the principles of the Private Members' Bill, before the end of this calendar year.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Minister of State referred to how disappointed we would be with a timed amendment. It pales in comparison to the disappointment that many women and couples will have who have had their eyes on this legislation for the last three years. We believe the Government is making a huge error, politically, in what it is doing here. Regardless of when the next election is going to take place, we know that a 12-month timed amendment in the life cycle of this Dáil means this Bill will never see the light of day again. It will have to be reintroduced in the next Dáil. Even if we did not have that situation, we have no confidence that the Government would do anything within the 12 months to bring this forward. There is no evidence it has done that with any of the other Bills that have come from us or other Opposi-

tion parties and that have received timed amendments. These timed or delayed amendments go back two and a half years, I think, from when the first one came in. They vary from nine to 12 months. The Minister of State has said that this requires detailed scrutiny and that it is complex. We agree, and we feel the best place for that is on Committee Stage within the Oireachtas. If the Government wins the vote next Wednesday, this, as an issue and as a Bill, goes out the door and we will not see it again. What disturbs us most is that there is a template for actually getting complex pieces of legislation through. If we look at Coco's law, which started with my colleague, Deputy Howlin, who spoke a short time ago, and ended up being introduced and delivered by the Government in 2020, it was three years in development. It came from Opposition over to Government and we worked with the Government to get that done. There is a similar moral impetus to this legislation as well, and that is why we are bringing it forward. We are not wholly precious about every line or the Title of this Bill. We will work to get the essence of what this Bill is designed to do into law. We are bitterly disappointed for the women, couples and prospective mothers and fathers in this country who are not going to benefit from it for any number of years. I have spoken to women across my constituency and my own peer group. The Minister of State and I are of a similar age. There have been people in and out of my life over the last few years who have experienced fertility treatment and pregnancy loss, as there probably will be in the next few years. They need this legislation, and the Government is plainly denying them it. The 12-month timed amendment is an absolute cod, considering where we are and given the Government's track record on timed amendments. The piece of research that has been carried out by the INTO equality committee has done a lot of the initial heavy lifting. I think we can extrapolate its findings with confidence across many other, if not all, employment sectors and jobs. It is therefore absolutely unacceptable that we are in this situation in relation to this Bill today.

As I have said, our reproductive health Bill would remove the concern that prospective mothers have by providing up to 20 days of paid time off work in the case of pregnancy loss, acknowledging the profound physical and emotional impact that it has on individuals and families. Additionally, our legislation advocates for up to ten days of paid leave for those accessing fertility treatment. Again, the reasons for that have been outlined by my colleagues, Deputies Bacik, Nash and Howlin. There are 14,000 women who experience pregnancy loss every year. It is an extraordinary number and it does not come as a surprise to anybody in this House who talks to people in their lives and knows what their friends, family and peer group have been going through. The legislation offers empathy and dignity to workers of this country. It should be reason enough for members of this Government to immediately move to support the legislation through Second Stage and to get it to Committee Stage, where it can be rigorously analysed, teased out and amended as needs be to ultimately get it into law within 12 months, and not to delay it for 12 months.

Unfortunately, the Government as a whole has shown that when it comes to offering real and impactful change in this area, it has fallen short. I do not think this will be forgotten. The Government has misread the attention of the nation on this issue and I think it will pay a heavy price for that, because it is something that is deeply borne my many women - 14,000 a year - in this country. We also believe the Government's provision of publicly-funded IVF, which has been a step forward, leaves a lot to be desired. The legacy that this Government will leave in this area, by ultimately taking this Bill and ensuring it goes no further, will not be what be what it thinks it will be when it comes to the next general election. Nothing about this Bill cannot be enacted and amended in the next 12 months. It is a simple question of whether this Government wants to ensure that compassionate leave is available to people or not. That is how simple it is. That

is the choice the Government has and the choice that, unfortunately, it has turned away from.

It is important to note that fertility treatments are rarely, if ever, a once off. That is something that we really want to pay attention to in this Bill. There are a whole series of tests, scans and procedures that take place. As one of my colleagues mentioned, there is also a lot of travel involved for many people to access these services. It is something that we are accounting for in the provisions of this Bill. It is something that the Government is failing to account for by proposing the timed amendment.

Tommy's, the pregnancy and baby loss charity, found that 20% of women experience PTSD after pregnancy loss, and 16% to 18% will suffer from anxiety and depression. These numbers go to the heart of the issue when we consider the 14,000 pregnancy losses per year and the high percentages of these very difficult, emotional responses. That is not counting the physical impact of pregnancy loss. We are treating pregnancy loss in this country like an illness, where we have to take sick leave and annual leave. It is not an illness; it is grief. We need to be a compassionate country. This is the test to determine if this Government is a compassionate one.

In the UCC research commissioned by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, a number of things are made clear. First, and most important, the findings show that most women need leave from work following a pregnancy loss. They need that leave. That is what research commissioned by the Government itself highlights. It also highlights the level of secrecy and stigma that is still attached to pregnancy loss. That is another reason why this empathetic piece of legislation needs to be brought to Committee Stage and brought into law. There is a fear of dismissal from work, a fear of discrimination in career progression, a fear of perceptions that people are not telling the truth or the full truth. There is a fear of being the subject of idle gossip and tittle-tattle around water coolers and in cafeterias. That comes from the stigma that is attached to it. It comes from the fact that we are not recognising it in legislation. We are not recognising that we need leave and that it should be on the same level as other statutory leave. There is a growing awareness and importance of this need within the workplace. In the past 20 years, this country has taken strides forward in progressive changes throughout our society, but the issue of pregnancy loss and the difficulties surrounding IVF treatment have been left in the shadows and in the silence. By bringing this legislation forward, we can take another progressive step forward and shine a light on an area that for too long has been left in the dark. If the Government continues with the path that it chooses to take, it will be clear that once again, it has opted to turn its back on people when they really need it. When we really need compassion and to see the Government get into the detail of an issue and of workers' rights to leave, it is going to turn its back on it. The 12-month delay is an affront to the women and people of Ireland. The Government has a week to take a different path. Then, we will have between nine and 12 months to get this into law. We will work hard to do that with anyone in this House, including Government. I urge the Government to change its tactics on this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Hear, hear.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on this legislation and I thank the Deputies for bringing it forward. I genuinely think there is something a bit cynical about the 12-month delay. This is a piece of legislation that has been knocking around for a while. The work that the Minister of State has talked about could have been done. What he is doing is making very clear that if it happens, it certainly will not be because of this Government, because it is being put past the end of the time that this Government could possibly run for. The Minister of State is saying very clearly that either the Government does

not want to do it but does not want to admit that, or it wants to do it but for some reason it just cannot. I think it is a bit cynical. While it might be very necessary in some instances to put that 12-month delay in place, and I have seen it used to good effect, sometimes the perception is that it is being done just to kick the can down the road so as to not engage with an issue, or because the Government does not want to be caught on the wrong side of a debate but also does not want to take any action. I encourage the Minister of State to reflect on that.

I fundamentally disagree with the Minister of State regarding the Organisation of Working Time Act, which I believe is the place for this. My legislation on access to paid leave for victims and survivors of domestic abuse was an amendment to the Organisation of Working Time Act and I acknowledge the Government went forward with the work-life balance Bill. We need to situate rights like this in workers' rights legislation, which is the appropriate place for them. While I accept we may never agree on that, I genuinely believe it. When we talk to people working in the area of workers' rights, they will say that they believe the Organisation of Working Time Act is the appropriate place.

Sinn Féin supports the principles of this Bill. We supported it in the Seanad, where we were heartened to see that it was not opposed by the Government, although we now see that, if it is not being opposed, it is effectively being obstructed. It will not happen because it will go beyond the lifetime of this Government so, effectively, the Government is saying that it is not going to do it. It should be honest about that. There is a 12-month delay mechanism when it could be a six-month or three-month process. It is not being done and is being put very firmly beyond the lifetime of this Government, so it is not something the Government is going to do.

The Bill is fairly straightforward. It amends the Organisation of Working Time Act to provide for a statutory entitlement to paid leave as a consequence of early pregnancy loss or for the purpose of availing of reproductive healthcare. It extends the protection against unfair dismissals conferred by the Unfair Dismissals Acts, 1977 to 2015, to cover workers for each leave in such instances.

While the Bill may be straightforward, it nonetheless seeks to deliver a significant and important change. There is currently an absence in statutory leave laws and workplace protection laws for women who suffer the grief of an early miscarriage. There are also no provisions in Irish law for leave for any woman or man who needs to take time off work to access IVF and the procedures around that, or other fertility treatments. This is the core of what this legislation seeks to address.

Undoubtedly, there will be those inside and outside the Oireachtas who will raise concerns over the number of days of paid leave the legislation seeks to provide and the impact it will have on employers. However, the right place to have this discussion is at the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade, and Employment during pre-legislative scrutiny hearings, where all sides can contribute constructively and collaboratively and work towards achieving this goal.

As it stands, women in Ireland have to take annual leave, sick leave or unpaid days in order to attend appointments or to recover physically and emotionally from an early miscarriage. It is important to say that when a woman has had a miscarriage, she might not be physically sick and it is dishonest to produce a sick certificate where someone is not physically sick. However, that does not necessarily mean women are able to go to work. They may not have a physical ailment or be required to even attend the hospital, but that does not mean they are able and fit to go to work.

We had this debate regarding the provision of maternity leave for TDs and Senators. I have spoken to people who had to do this not just in this scenario but in others. Having to submit a sick certificate to avail of time off when someone is not actually sick is dishonest. It is not dishonest on the part of the person doing it because the person doing it has no choice, but if someone is not sick, he or she should not have to submit a sick certificate. Neither, by the way, should he or she have to exhaust his or her sick leave for something that is not sick leave. This is a very particular situation and one would hope it is something people either do not experience or is a unique experience for them. In some cases, people will have to go to hospital and will have a medical certificate, but in many cases, they will not. They are grieving, they are confused and they are sore, but they are not sore in a physical way and they are not sick enough to get a medical certificate, so to have to obtain one to take time off work is dishonest. Women do not want to have to do that.

It is estimated that 14,000 women in Ireland experience miscarriage each year, which is between 20% and 25% of all pregnancies. Specific information in terms of earlier losses is difficult to obtain as women who suffer an earlier miscarriage often do not interact with healthcare services, although they are grieving all the same. It does not matter if it happens at six weeks, eight weeks or 20 weeks; the grief is still the same when it happens. Miscarriage is a very traumatic experience and the current lack of legally protected time off to recover after an early miscarriage makes things much more difficult for women. It is a very traumatic experience. They do not want to have to tell the whole world about their business. They want to be able to access their legal and lawful entitlement to time off without having to enter into a grace and favour arrangement with a manager or to go and obtain a medical certificate when they might not be physically sick. They want to be able to take the time they need to be with their partner, husband, wife or whoever that person is, or their family or community, to build themselves back up. In addition, it is good for employers. Women get the chance to recover properly and then come back and give 100% to their work. There is no downside that I can see to this.

Research has shown that the trauma due to miscarriage can affect parents for years following the loss experience, and this can manifest itself in depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Again, that is compounded by the secrecy and the clandestine nature of the situation. It is compounded by the fact that they might have to tell everyone in work what they have just been through, and they might not want to tell the whole world. They might have to go to a doctor to get a medical certificate when they are not physically ill. That stays with them for a very long time, believe me. It is in this context the legislation needs to be viewed. Anything the Oireachtas can do to help women in such circumstances should be pursued.

Infertility affects men and women. Approximately one in six heterosexual couples in Ireland will need assistance getting pregnant. In addition, same-sex couples or single people also often need to access fertility treatment. Fertility care encompasses the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of infertility, and it can often be complex, time-consuming and expensive, requiring numerous assessments, check-ups and procedures. The legislation provides for leave to access fertility treatment so people are afforded time, dignity and empathy as they go through their fertility journey. At the heart of the Bill is a demand for flexibility and the right to be accommodated when going through an early miscarriage or fertility treatment. This is an important and noble aim.

I would like to make reference to the current public supports for fertility treatments. Last summer, Ireland began providing publicly funded IVF treatment for the first time. It was long overdue and was a welcome first step. However, there are concerns regarding the limitations

being placed on the availability of treatment, in particular the provision for only one publicly funded cycle, which is unfair as it limits access to couples with no children. This scheme needs to be built on and it needs to be made more inclusive. It is also important that capacity is built into the public system to ensure speedy access to treatment. As it stands, that is not the case.

It is true that there is a lot of work to be done to make our workplaces more accommodating for everybody who is at work and more family-friendly. We talk a lot about family-friendly workplaces and I know the Ceann Comhairle has done a lot of work in this area, for which I commend him. However, we cannot keep coming in here and talking about family-friendly workplaces and inclusive workplaces, and about how much we value the contribution made by women in the workplace, and then, when it comes to something fairly basic, such as the entitlement to paid time off or the entitlement to be honest and not be forced to be dishonest in obtaining a medical certificate, it seems it is never the right or appropriate time.

Before I conclude, I note there are not many Members in the House this evening. I do not think that is because there is no interest in this subject. I genuinely believe it is weather-related and that Members want to get on the road because they are anxious about the weather. I would not want anyone to think there is a lack of interest in this issue. It is a very live issue and one that people are very engaged in. It is one we hear about and deal with in our constituency clinics all of the time. I encourage the Minister of State to reflect on what the delay of 12 months actually means because it means putting it beyond the lifetime of this Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Thomas Pringle, who is sharing time with Deputy Joan Collins.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I fully support this necessary legislation to provide for a period of paid leave upon miscarriage for the purposes of availing of reproductive healthcare. I was glad to see this Bill passed in the Seanad and was very disappointed to read the Government amendment to kick the can down the road instead of allowing for women, upon miscarriage, to have up to 20 days of paid leave, and allowing ten days leave for workers undergoing fertility treatment. I do not see any reason this Bill should not progress. Allowing sufficient time for the development of Government legislative proposals before the end of 2024 is not good enough.

Approximately 15,000 women miscarry in Ireland each year. By kicking this down the road, the Government is taking necessary grieving time away from thousands of women. The loss of a baby is often a very lonely and devastating experience. There is a huge sense of emotional loss and heartbreak for many of the 50 women who go through this each day, as well as many of their partners.

On top of having to experience this, they are then having to face the pressure of getting on as normal as though nothing has happened, at a time when many women need privacy and space. Fertility issues, whether they are to do with miscarriage or ongoing IVF treatment, require time and space, and people going through this should be afforded dignity and empathy. If this Government were serious about prioritising mental health, it would allow for legislation such as this to pass, as well as strengthening all types of bereavement leave.

As it stands, employees have no legal right to time off for bereavement and I would call on the Government to ensure that employees have a legal right to bereavement leave to ensure that miscarriages are included under this. Separately, those who are undergoing IVF treatment

should be given the leave they require to undergo that treatment. Although I welcome the Government's announcement that couples will have access to one publicly funded round of IVF, it does not make sense that they are not given the necessary leave to undergo this process. This needs to be reviewed, as does the decision to only provide this treatment to women under the age of 41 and with a particular BMI, as well as the decision to not provide this reproductive assistance to same-sex couples and single people and couples who cannot provide their own egg and sperm. We need to ensure that IVF is a viable option for people, especially given that approximately one in six heterosexual couples in Ireland has fertility problems. That is a statistic that has been increasing for some time and is expected to continue in this way.

The State needs to introduce legislation, but it cannot stop there. It needs then to give employers the support necessary to actually implement the legislation. I know that many employers in Donegal are struggling with increased costs at the moment, and it is the Government's responsibility to alleviate those financial strains so that employers are in a position to properly look after their employees. At a time when it is impossible for people to get a mortgage on a single income, we need to at the very least make working easier for people, particularly women. In a year when we are looking at making Ireland and its Constitution more equal for women, making it difficult for women to work or stay at home, and almost impossible for them to both, which most are expected to do, is unacceptable. Women should be given choice and not forced into impossible roles.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate my support for this Bill and express my disappointment that the Government is refusing to progress it to the next Stage.

Deputy Joan Collins: First, I would like to thank the Labour Party for bringing this important Bill before the Dáil today. Yesterday, the Government pushed forward two amendments to our Constitution in the name of gender equality, ignoring all opposition, to set-up a referendum on International Women's Day. Today, it kicks the can down the road on legislation that would make a real, material difference to women's lives and to gender inequality in the workplace. It really lays bare what this Government cares about, namely, symbolic expressions of progressivism without any real intent to materially improve people's lives or situations. It has rushed through the 39th and 40th amendments to the Constitution. There was no wait for pre-legislative scrutiny or committee hearings and no wait to consider the differences between its proposals and the Oireachtas group or the citizens' assembly. Yet, it has introduced an amendment to this Bill to include a 12-month wait for legislation that makes an important, material difference to women's lives.

Some 14,000 women go through an early miscarriage each year, 20% of whom will experience post traumatic stress disorder after their loss and 16% to 18% will suffer from anxiety and depression. Twenty days are not too much at all to ask for when you have experienced such a loss, and yet this Government will not embrace and welcome this Bill and work with in committee to progress it.

As has been said, one in six heterosexual couples will experience trouble conceiving. Many will turn to IVF or other reproductive care options. There are significant financial implications. There are significant time implications. Again, ten days is not at all too much to ask to help in this process to ease the stress and the pressure. Yet, again, this Government seems to think that is far too much for women or their partners to ask.

The 2019 member survey by the INTO makes this issue even clearer. Some 60% of their

members had experienced reproductive health issues in work. More than 75% used school breaks to schedule care as they had no other way to take time-off for it. This has a direct effect on people's lives. The vast majority of INTO members in 2019 - 88% of them - supported negotiations for reproductive care leave. More than 93% of members who had experienced reproductive health-related matters supported it. This legislation came out of this survey, I believe.

This is a big part of women's lives. It is increasingly having more and more of an effect. We need real action on this and pushing this Bill down the road for 12 months when the Government has an opportunity to address this now is a complete failure to take any action at all.

There is significant support for this from unions. The INTO supports this, as does Fórsa and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions supports reproduction care leave. Trade unions are the biggest organisations in the country that represent women. The Government is ignoring a problem that unions and their members are telling it is staring it in the face. If it was in any way serious about gender equality, or on addressing the historical issues that have restricted women's ability to live free, independent lives in this country, it would be rushing legislation like this through, and not questionable referendums.

If we want to support women in the workplace and their ability to control their own lives, we need to provide real, material changes and supports. The Government is not doing that because, in my opinion, it cares far more about getting in an empty, progressive win before the next election than it does about making meaningful or materiel changes to people's lives.

The Minister gave a list of problems with this Bill, all of which could be teased out on Committee Stage. We could move very quickly on Committee Stage to tease these issues out. We could see this Bill coming through within the year. Instead, the Government is just burying it and it is shameful.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank all Members for their work on this Bill to date, the contributions today and far beyond. I know many Members, both in this House and the Seanad, spoke passionately on this issue.

I would like to begin my closing speech by acknowledging, on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, as well as on my own behalf and on behalf of the Government, the importance of progressing proposals in this area. We all want to make progress in this area, which is really important, as has been stated. The emotional impact of pregnancy loss is tremendous and, unfortunately, it affects far more people than most people realise. If it has not come to our own families, we will certainly have a circle of friends who have been affected by it and, in some instances, we will not know about it. There are the people who we know who are affected by this but there are also so many more. Therefore, the Government is very determined to make progress in this regard. This is a very important legislation and we have to be mindful of finding the right vehicle and way of doing it so that it serves the purpose we want for it.

As the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, mentioned earlier in this debate, there are existing provisions within the Maternity Protection Acts 1994-2004 and the Paternity Leave Act 2016 for pregnancy loss experienced by those in employment. However, there is no provision for the loss of a pregnancy prior to 24 weeks of gestation.

The Government recognises that the policy issues reflected within this Bill need to be addressed, and that is a really important point that gives great merit to this Private Members' Bill.

However, as I have outlined, these policy issues are extremely complex. Significant research, consideration and assessment are required in order to prepare robust, appropriate and fit-for-purpose legislation that is built on evidence-based policy.

As argued earlier in today's debate, the Bill presents a number of potential regulatory impacts. There are a number of further considerations which must be made before progressing legislation, including ensuring consistency with current legislation and the potential impact on employers. These considerations and potential impacts require detailed assessment and scrutiny in advance of progressing legislation. As part of this assessment, a full regulatory impact assessment must be carried out.

A number of Members throughout this debate raised the legal basis for domestic violence leave, which I want to address. I am informed that the domestic violence leave is provided for in statute via an amendment to the Parental Leave Act in the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, which was brought into law by colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, in 2023. This is just to answer those points that were raised earlier.

In relation to the time needed, time must be given to allow for full consideration of a recently completed research study commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, which will inform the development of Government policy and legislative proposals in line with the principles of the Private Members' Bill. Affording Government this time will support the development of an evidence-based policy position and fit-for-purpose legislation.

Finally, the Government is of the view that the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate or logical legislative vehicle to provide for the proposed new entitlements. The Act is designed to transpose the European working time directive and deals specifically with provisions regarding employees' time at work. Stand-alone legislation or amendments to legislation related to the type of leave proposed in this Bill would be more fitting.

It is on this basis that I urge the House to pass the amendment moved by the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, which proposes that this Bill "be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months". This will allow time for a proper assessment of the regulatory impacts of the Bill, full consideration of commissioned evidence-based research and the consideration of the most appropriate legislative vehicles for the provisions. As I said earlier, we are all united in wanting to make progress in this area. Providing this additional time will support the development of Government legislative proposals, in line with the principles of the Private Members' Bill, before the end of 2024.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I am sharing with Deputy Bacik. I want to pay tribute to: my party leader, Deputy Bacik; Senator Sherlock; my constituency colleague, Councillor Alison Gilliland, who has been to the forefront of this move; and unions such as the INTO and Fórsa, which have been supportive of our move in pushing this Bill forward.

If this issue predominantly affected men, not only would it have been legislated for a long time ago but it would probably be in the preamble to the Constitution. What we effectively have here is a silent wound and trauma that is not given proper attention or focus. That is reflected in the fact that the Minister of State can honestly stand and say we can talk about it again in 12 months' time. As my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, said earlier, I have brought forward Bills which I was told would be progressed in 12 months' time and I came back into the

Chamber 12 months hence and nothing had happened because it is a ploy and a tactic; it is not genuine. We come here as a political party with a genuine Bill that will enhance workers' rights and the Minister of State comes back with the suggestion that we will talk about it again, but not even in three months' time. If it was in three months' time we would consider that maybe he was sincere. We would consider that he had to do his research, talk to his civil servants and advisers and talk to employers and unions and that we would then go to Committee Stage. That is not the case. We will come back in 12 months, when the Minister of State and I know that this Government will not be in existence.

We have to demystify the language around this area. How many men of our generation shift uncomfortably in their seats whenever periods, menstrual cycles or anything of this nature like miscarriage, abortion or menopause are mentioned? Men of my generation want to be in any other room than a room where those things are mentioned. It is for that reason that we do not have statutory paid leave for women who go through a pregnancy loss or who go through the traumatic experience of trying to get pregnant on our Statute Book. If it was men who were predominantly affected by this, the Minister of State knows it would be legislated for.

This is fundamentally an issue of gender equality. We support, as my party leader has said, the Government's moves, on International Women's Day, to change the archaic and sexist language in the Constitution around women's place in the home. However, this is a practical and humane approach to women's place in the workplace. They should not have to effectively lie to produce a piece of paper about a sick note when they have gone through a personal pregnancy loss for whatever reason. They do not have that statutory right to leave before 24 weeks, and that is something we are trying to correct here. My colleague, Deputy Nash, has spoken eloquently about the difficulties around IVF and the travel that couples have to go through.

We have to demystify and destigmatise this area. This is reflective of the fact that we have so few women involved in public life and who sit in these seats. In the Swedish Parliament, female participation is 45% and on that basis they have a hugely more progressive view of Bills like this. I can only imagine, if this was not on the Swedish statute book and if it was brought forward as a Bill, what the reaction would be if a Government Minister in the Minister of State's position said we would talk about it in a year's time.

This is a crucial gender equality-based Bill. It is a crucial workers' right and a progressive move. It reflects poorly on the Government that its answer to us is that we will talk about this in 12 months' time. If the Government genuinely felt it should be done, it would be done. If it affected men, it would be done and it would have been done a long time ago.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank my Labour Party colleagues, Deputies Howlin, Nash, Smith and Ó Ríordáin, who have spoken so eloquently on this Bill. I will pick up where Deputy Ó Ríordáin finished; this is a matter of gender equality. I thank colleagues across the Opposition who have supported this Bill and who have seen it as a measure to introduce better provision for women in the workplace in particular. I said earlier that about 14,000 women in Ireland experience pregnancy loss each year. This does not just affect women; it affects their partners and it affects couples. We know that between one in four and one in six couples experience fertility issues and that more than one in five pregnancies end in miscarriage. This is a huge issue that affects a huge number of people but it is also a women's rights and a workplace rights issue.

This Bill was first debated in the Seanad in 2021 and three years have passed since then. Now the Minister of State is proposing another year's delay before we even come to a further

debate on the Bill. How many more women will experience miscarriage in that time? How many more couples will be looking for IVF and going to multiple appointments without any provision in the workplace for leave? I have listened to the Minister of State's remarks and to the remarks of the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and we in the Labour Party accept that the legislation can be improved on. There have been changes to workplace law since we first introduced this Bill. There are new statutory frameworks around leave and we are prepared to work with the Minister of State to use other means than the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 framework through which we can introduce this provision. The important thing is the provision for compassionate leave, not how we do it or the vehicle. We can move to do it through maternity protection legislation; I take the Minister of State's point on that and that would remove the onus from the employer. We can do it through those other structures.

I have prided myself on collaboration with Government and Opposition colleagues throughout my career in the Oireachtas, as have my Labour Party colleagues, whether it has been on Coco's law; collective bargaining rights; children's citizenship rights; ending discrimination against LGBTQ teachers; or prohibiting female genital mutilation. My Labour Party colleagues and I have worked with others to bring our Private Members' Bills into law. We are keen to continue doing this and to use this Bill to work with the Government to ensure we have compassionate leave when it matters most. It matters most for those many women and couples who have contacted us.

We know the Government has conducted research. We know that research is concluded. I referred earlier to Professor Keelin O'Donoghue and the study on pregnancy loss under 24 weeks but we have not heard from the Government on when it proposes to publish that research. We know it is concluded and we have heard preliminary findings. The Minister of State has referred to the recommendations in the report. I have submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, seeking a response on when the study will be published. The Minister of State's briefing, which we were provided with this evening, says it will be published shortly but neither the Minister of State nor the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, said in their speeches when that would be.

I ask the Minister of State to follow up with us on this point before the vote on the amendment the Minister of State is proposing, which will take place next week. The Government cannot get away with introducing an amendment to delay further consideration of this Bill. It cannot use that fantastic research study as its excuse for a delaying amendment and then not even commit to publishing that research or letting us know what the recommendations in it are. I would like to join my Labour Party colleagues in making a last plea to the Government to reconsider its position. We will not see a vote on the Government's delaying amendment until next week so let us use that time to work with the Minister of State and other Government Departments that are affected to produce a plan to introduce paid leave for early pregnancy loss, reproductive healthcare and compassion in the workplace. Our political system can change lives radically for the better, or it can look the other way. Kicking this Bill down the road as the Government is trying to do amounts to looking the other way and not hearing from the women and the couples who are living the reality of pregnancy loss and fertility issues.

I will finish by recounting something that was said to me by a woman who experienced or suffered or endured what we call an early miscarriage. She said that language of early miscarriage does not reflect her feeling or the feeling of her partner in losing what was a much-wanted pregnancy. As she said to me, often that so-called early miscarriage has followed many years of pregnancy losses and multiple rounds of IVF treatment, of endlessly trying and failing to

conceive a baby. Depriving women and couples in her position of any time off or any official recognition in the workplace because the pregnancy was lost before 24 weeks or because of foetal weight issues lacks compassion. Our Bill would provide compassionate leave for women and couples in that position when it matters most. It would create a modern understanding of this experience in the workplace. Women like the woman who spoke with me can of course apply for sick leave in such a situation, but they are not sick. They can take annual leave, but that is not what annual leave is for. I am appealing to Minister of State to let us enable proper, formal recognition in the workplace of this form of loss, namely, of pregnancy loss and fertility treatment issues, and let us legislate rather than delay for a further 12 months. It is unnecessary and it is not compassionate.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

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 Steven Matthews - To discuss the need to provide an extension to Temple Carrig school to accommodate the demand for secondary school places in the wider Greystones area.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the decision to cut day services from five days to three at IWA, formerly An Castan, Commons Road, Navan, County Meath.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss an application to build a 10-bed residential home on the former Owenacurra mental health centre in Midleton.

Deputy Dessie Ellis - To discuss the retrofitting of council houses with solar panels.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - To discuss reducing the rate of VAT to 9% for food items in the hospitality sector.

Deputy Martin Kenny - To discuss the inclusion of Sligo in the defective concrete blocks grant scheme.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss the decision to use the Racket Hall hotel in Roscrea as an accommodation centre for international protection applicants.

Deputy Robert Troy - To discuss measures to protect small businesses.

Deputies Ivana Bacik, Chris Andrews - To discuss the condition of facilities and infrastructure at the Enable Ireland Sandymount School. To discuss damage to the roof of Enable Ireland Sandymount School.

The matters raised by Deputies Matthews, Troy, Bacik and Andrews and Kenny have been selected for discussion.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): As Deputy Bacik is here, we will begin with her.

School Facilities

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and thank the Minister for taking this issue. I have raised the condition of facilities and infrastructure at the Enable Ireland Sandymount School. I put on record that while I welcome the presence of the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, I am disappointed the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte is not here to take this issue and I know that was a matter of the Ceann Comhairle's making. I have engaged with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, on this and she has a very particular interest in the conditions here and is concerned about gaps in the provision of disability services and therapies in the Sandymount school, as am I.

I commend the amazing work that has been done at the Enable Ireland Sandymount School, especially the work of the principal, Jennifer Doyle, and her staff. This school is located on Sandymount Avenue in the heart of my constituency of Dublin Bay South. All those who live in the locale will be very well aware of it, as will many others who live further away, because it does a huge amount of work in providing education but also therapeutic support, treatments and interventions for children, many of whom have significant challenges and special needs and who require significant supports.

I had the pleasure of visiting the school most recently for its Christmas fair on 8 December, at the invitation of the principal, so I could see the facilities for myself and meet many of the pupils, parents and of course the staff who provide the supports. I wanted to hear from them directly about the work they are doing and the sort of issues they face. As I have said, many of the children require significant supports and have very particular needs. There is also an especially poignant issue in that some of the children have life-shortening conditions and there have been some very sad losses. I express my sincere condolences and sympathies to the families and the communities of those children who have so sadly died so young, in some cases, and who were pupils of the school.

On a happier note, in December I had the pleasure of viewing for myself the new playground facility that has been constructed at the school and of which the school and indeed the pupils are extremely appreciative. We viewed the playground and saw the hugely transformative impact it is having for children attending the school and for whom it provides a really important way of having play amenities available to them. However, while the playground is new and very impressive, the condition of the building is unfortunately far from impressive. The building is in an appalling condition. There are holes in the ceilings and walls. There are leaking ceilings and I saw the buckets the school staff are placing because rain is coming through. Conditions are deteriorating at a very rapid pace. I also saw how some of the most critical and normally most heavily used rooms, such as soft play areas for example, are simply out of use. The children have no access to these rooms and that is really impacting upon the quality of not just their education, but their treatment and any therapeutic intervention the school is offering to them. We cannot stand over this in Ireland in 2024. I am asking that the Government intervene to provide improvements in the conditions so the school has the necessary supports to fix the leaks

and the buildings and ensure the children can have fit-for-purpose conditions in their school.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): I thank the Deputy. Before the Minister of State responds, it was Deputy Andrews as well as Deputy Bacik who presented this matter. The time is up, though it would have been shared normally.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am sorry.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): No, it was also my mistake. With the agreement of the House, I will give Deputy Andrews two minutes. I thank Members.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I am going to need a defibrillator first.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): Take a breath, Deputy, and a drink of water.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I am sorry about that. I understood it was later on.

Deputy Robert Troy: I think we all did.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): We were a bit quicker than that.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We are too efficient.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Too efficient. I appreciate that. I did not hear my colleague's contribution, but the Enable Ireland Sandymount School has 40 students. Each one is medically dependent. There is a lovely, warm, caring atmosphere in the school. The staff go above and beyond for the current students. For five of the children, their class is closed because there are serious leaks in one of the rooms in the middle of the hall. This means the school has had to move the class to the library. This is of course far from ideal. The five students are all in wheelchairs and the classroom they normally use is a soft play room, which allows the children to get out of their wheelchairs, stretch and reset themselves. The students need the breaks from the wheelchairs as they are really important for them and, as I said, the students are very vulnerable. The breaks out of the wheelchairs cannot take place in the library. This also means the library itself has been decommissioned and is not accessible to the rest of the school, which is again far from ideal. The school hall is also closed due to leaks, which have been getting increasingly bad over the last six months. The Department is aware of the conditions and the conditions are dire for the students and school staff. The principal and staff go above and beyond day in and day out.

5 o'clock

There was an issue with school transport at the start of the year which caused huge distress for everyone. Now we have these particular issues and they need to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): Just to clarify, the Minister of State has four minutes to respond and then Deputies will have a minute each.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputies for raising the important issue of Enable Ireland Sandymount School. I am responding here on behalf of the Minister for Education.

Enable Ireland Sandymount School is a co-educational, special school providing a primary and second-level education to students aged from four to 18 with physical and other complex needs. The school property is not in the ownership of the Minister for Education. I can confirm to the Deputies that the Department of Education is not in receipt of a current application from the school for the additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme. The purpose of the Department's ASA scheme is to ensure essential mainstream classroom accommodation and accommodation for pupils with special education needs is available to cater for pupils enrolled each year where the need cannot be met by the school's existing accommodation. At primary level, this situation generally arises to cater for a school's accommodation requirements where an additional teaching post has been sanctioned by the teacher allocation section or the requirement for a new class for pupils with special education needs has been identified by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE and all available alternative accommodation within the school is already being used for classroom purposes.

Provision for children with special educational needs is a priority for the Department of Education and in that context it works very closely with the NCSE on forward planning for increased special education provision in the form of additional special classes and special school places. The main focus of resources over the past decade and for the coming period is on the provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics. As a result, the current priority under the ASA scheme is the provision of essential classroom accommodation to meet demographic demand or where an additional post is being appointed.

Since 2020, the Department of Education has invested in the region of €3.5 billion in our schools throughout the country, involving the completion of more than 840 school building projects, with construction under way at approximately 300 other projects. School building projects at construction involve an overall State investment of more than €1.2 billion. We also have in excess of 210 modular accommodation projects that are very well advanced for delivery or at construction stage. This is a record level of investment in our schools and highlights the Government's very strong track record of delivery in providing additional capacity and modern facilities for our school communities.

Enable Ireland Sandymount School applied to the emergency works scheme for funding under category 2 for roof works on 22 December 2023. Defects in the roof membrane and the degradation of silicone sealants has led to rainwater ingress which caused deterioration to the building fabric and finishes. This roof membrane was initially put in place in 1998. In addition to this, the roof lights are degrading and brittle and will require replacement. These issues have led to the school closing four areas of the building, namely, the PE hall, one classroom, a soft play room and toilets. These rooms have been out of use since September 2023. The school noticed the initial water ingress in the winter of 2022 and since that time has carried out remedial works to the problem areas. However, additional remedial works are now required.

Once the Department received the application it was reviewed by the emergency works scheme's technical team who found the area of roof covered by the application to be larger than required to address the immediate issues. Under circular 0068/2020, the emergency works scheme cannot provide funding for full roof works. The circular provides for an urgent remedy to prevent the immediate risk to health, life, property or the environment and to prevent the school, or part thereof, from closure. In this regard, the Department has advised the school to carry out a dry test which will indicate any damaged areas of the roof that are in need of repair. Remedial works may then be carried out on these specific areas as an interim measure. A longer term solution such as a roof replacement, where appropriate, may be facilitated under the sum-

mer works scheme. At this time the Department is awaiting the results of the dry test.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Minister of State for the update but it is simply unacceptable that four areas of the building are out of use and have been thus since September. For some administrative reason, the emergency works scheme cannot provide funding for full roof works so this is now being put off, potentially until the summer, meaning that the children will not have access for the full school year to four rooms. This is not a large building so the children are being deprived of a very significant part of the their facilities. I appeal to the Minister of State to raise with the Departments of education and equality the need to carry out the remedial works urgently and not to wait until the summer works scheme comes into play. It is so important that children have access to the full facilities that should be available to them in the school. Currently, they are being deprived of those facilities.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I appreciate the response but this must be resolved as a matter of urgency. Children have been displaced into other rooms and the library has been closed off completely. This is a huge hindrance to the entire school and all of the students. It affects everybody in the school. The Minister of State said the Department has advised the school to carry out a dry test but nobody going into that school needs to carry out a dry test. There are serious leaks in the building, the rooms are clearly leaking and it is obvious where the leaks are coming from. It is clear what is causing the problem and it needs to be fixed as a matter of urgency. The students in this school are particularly vulnerable and they need this space, including the soft play areas. It is unacceptable that the children in Enable Ireland Sandymount School have been left high and dry. It is clear what the issues are and the Department needs to just get on and do it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Again, I thank both Deputies for giving me the opportunity to outline the Department of Education's position. The Department has been engaging with the school, as is evident from my response, regarding the level of detailed knowledge around the challenges that exist in the emergency works scheme application received. The Department will continue to keep the school informed throughout that process.

The point about the dry test is that the emergency works scheme is not for large-scale roof replacement, if that is what is required. It is for short-term, interim measures that schools can take to remain open and operational. I fully accept what the Deputies are saying about the extent of the impact on the students, staff, parents and everyone involved here but, ultimately, the vehicle for that full scale, bigger job is the summer works programme. The school will already be aware of how to apply for that scheme.

In terms of the emergency works scheme, if there are certain parts of the roof where small measures or interventions can be done now and which would get some of those areas open again, the Department is open to that. The results of the dry test will feed into that consideration, but the broader job, as I understand it, is more likely to fit in with the summer works scheme.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): For the record, we are now going back to the first Topical Issue on the list in the name of Deputy Steven Matthews.

Deputy Steven Matthews: This is also related to education and schools and I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, for dealing with it. I was informed that the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, would not be available today. I accept that and trust that the Minister of State will relay my comments and requests back to her.

Since I was elected I have been engaging with parents in north Wicklow, especially in Greystones, Delgany, Kilcoole and Newtownmountkennedy. These are areas that have undergone quite a large population increase. A lot of the new housing we are seeing is being built in the north Wicklow area and it is good to see housing being built. Every time I go there canvassing there are new houses and new people moving in. That is good and I welcome that. However, my concern is we are not keeping pace with the provision of the services that go with housing. We often focus on making sure there is water, power and roads but we sometimes forget about those other services that make a house a home, one of which is school places.

We have a number of schools in Greystones. I have been meeting with parents, parent groups, principals and students over the past three to four years. One of those schools is Temple Carrig, which is a beautiful school. My nephews went to school there. It has a capacity of about 750 but at the moment it is operating at in or around 900, so it is well over capacity. The school is somewhere through the process of getting the nod from the Department to apply for planning permission for an extension. I will relay to the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Foley, the urgency attached to that.

For the past three to four years, we have gone through the process of being short of school places. It has been a real pressure on parents and children who hope to go to those schools, in addition to siblings, teachers and everybody involved. We have this scramble every year. Greystones Community College is another school in Greystones. There is planning permission for a 1,000-unit school, which is fantastic, but I suspect that is delayed somewhat and that we will experience a shortage of school places again. I know we will experience it this year, but we will have it next year and the year after. I think that school is supposed to be delivered in quarter 2 of 2025. We are now in quarter 1 of 2024. With the best will in the world, and all the shovels in the world, that school will not be up and running by quarter 2 of 2025. I suspect we are looking at later so we will have this school pressure again.

There are a number of other schools. St. David's is a beautiful school that has undergone a full refurbishment. I was there last week. It has an absolutely beautiful finish and is a credit to the Department, and the staff and community there, but it is already at capacity. This affects the whole hinterland of Greystones town and the areas that make up the Greystones municipal district. A little further down the road, Coláiste Chraobh Abhann in Kilcoole has also got a planning permission somewhere in the process but we do not know when that will go out to tender. The problem is each school is putting pressure on the others because in areas such as Newtownmountkennedy and Roundwood, which is even further out in County Wicklow, pressure is being put on Kilcoole and Kilcoole puts pressure on the three schools in Greystones. Temple Carrig needs its planning permission and Greystones Community College needs that permanent new-build 1,000 pupil school.

I request the Minister of State to relay this to the Minister. I have done so myself but I want to put on the record that we need to prioritise the assessment of the Greystones Community College tender, and get that contract awarded and that school built as quickly as possible. The

Department needs to respond to Temple Carrig, which is leading on this project, to give it the go-ahead to apply for planning permission for that badly needed extension.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue. I empathise with him and his constituents. As a Kildare South TD, I know all too well the pressures his constituents in County Wicklow face around school provision and demographic growth. We suffer the same in the adjoining county of Kildare as people in Wicklow do. The Deputy has articulated those challenges in respect of Temple Carrig School and the Greystones area very well.

I issue this response on behalf of the Minister who is unfortunately not able to make it. However, it gives me the opportunity to set out for the House the position with regard to demand for post-primary spaces in Temple Carrig School and the wider Greystones area for September 2024 and onwards.

I assure the Deputy that the provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary level, including children and young people with special educational needs, is an absolute priority for the Department of Education. Since 2018, and up to the end of October 2023, a total of €145 million has been invested in school infrastructure in County Wicklow. This significant capital investment includes a recently delivered major building project to expand St. David's secondary school in Greystones. State-of-the-art, modern school accommodation for 750 pupils was provided at this school.

The Department of Education is currently progressing a major building project for Temple Carrig School in Greystones under the national development plan. Temple Carrig School in Greystones is also a co-educational school established in 2014, as the Deputy will be aware. A project is under way to provide accommodation at this school for 1,000 pupils, which is currently at stage 1, preliminary design stage. A project for four modular mainstream classrooms has also been approved. These classrooms are now on-site and the project is completed.

In line with the Department's demographic projections of post-primary school place requirements, there has been a continued growth in enrolments throughout many school planning areas in County Wicklow. In response, the Department is providing further significant additional post-primary capacity, including a new 1,000-pupil school for Greystones Community College. Greystones Community College was established in 2020 as a regional solution for the Kilcoole and Greystones area. The project to deliver this new school building is at stage 3, tender stage. The permanent building project will deliver a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school with accommodation, including four classrooms, for children with special educational needs. The project is being delivered under the Department's design and build programme and is currently at tender stage. The invitation to tender issued in April 2023 as part of a bundle of projects issued to the Department's framework of design and build contracts. The tender process currently takes approximately eight to 12 months. Tender returns have been received and are currently being evaluated. Once a contractor has been appointed, it is anticipated that construction will commence shortly thereafter.

In addition to the above projects, there is also the existing school in the adjacent Kilcoole school planning area, Coláiste Chraobh Abhann, for which a major project has been approved to expand the school to 1,000 pupils. This project is currently at stage 2b and is being delivered by the National Development Finance Agency. The annual enrolment process for new junior infants at primary and new first years at post-primary is a very large-scale operation that is transacted at close to 4,000 schools throughout the country, involving some 140,000 pupils.

In the context of post-primary enrolment pressures at Greystones, the Department is aware of pressures for school places for the 2024-25 school year. A critical next step for the Department of Education is to establish the actual number of additional first-year places required for 2024 in order for an appropriate solution to be put in place. In that context, schools in a number of areas of enrolment pressure, including Greystones, have been requested to share data on applications for admissions. This data has been received by Department officials and is currently being analysed with a view to establishing the actual requirement for places. Preliminary assessments indicate that duplication of applications and applications from outside the local area are very much contributing to enrolment pressures in the town.

I have further details in the response that I will come back to in the supplementary answer.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the Minister of State for that response. It is good to get it down on paper, especially since I had not realised that €145 million had been invested in infrastructure in County Wicklow schools. When I go around the county and see those new schools being built, such as St. Coen's in Rathnew, or St. David's, as the Minister of State referenced, I realise the advancements that have been made in school provision. The quality of those builds when they are done is incredible, as is the space that is in them. When I think back to my own school experience, these schools are incomparable.

The Minister of State mentioned the tendering process takes between eight and 12 months. Is there a way we can speed up public procurement on our projects? A school in Cork, Wicklow, Limerick or wherever will be a school with a 1,000-pupil capacity. It will be in or around that. Except for different sites with different topographical issues affecting construction, we should be getting to a standard design and speeding up the process. My concern is the length of time it will take the Department to award the contracts. Building takes time, as the Minister of State knows. I presume it takes 24 months to build a school. It is in or around 18 to 24 months. We will be in the same position. We are still seeing houses being built in Greystones, Delgany, Kilcoole and Newtownmountkennedy, which is good and what I want to see, but I am concerned that we will not provide those school places quickly enough. I urge the Minister of State to take back those concerns.

In fairness to the Department, it met with the five County Wicklow TDs. We went through this with the officials. They have engaged with us and it is good but I urge the Minister of State to bring it back to the Minister and ask that the go-ahead be given to Temple Carrig to apply for that planning permission. That is urgent. It is not a high cost to go for planning permission and have the process move along. I also ask that the awarding of the contract for Greystones Community College be speeded up. Those are my two asks.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will bring back the request the Deputy made to the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. who has special responsibility for special school places, which is obviously a key part of the Deputy's ask as well.

To reassure parents in the area who are following this debate, I will highlight that the collaboration and engagement that are now taking place are very important. I commend the schools and their patrons on sharing the data. As I know from my area, when there is a shortage of places, parents will rightly consider hedging their bets and applying to a number of different schools. That one boy or girl will only take one place next September but will appear four or five times on different waiting lists. That inflates the problem and makes it feel even bigger than it is. It is very important that we share the data at this time of the year, cut through it, and

if there is a shortfall see exactly what that shortfall is.

I am very much reassured by the Department and the Minister's response that regular ongoing engagement - I am delighted to hear there has been engagement with local representatives as well - between the Department and school management boards is continuing. First, it is about assessing whether there is a shortfall and exactly where it is, and then making sure it is addressed. There is a strong pipeline of projects being delivered across school areas in the area. That €145 million investment in Wicklow really shows that the proof of the pudding is the investment by the State in education facilities across the county in recent years. We will not be found wanting in looking to meet the really significant demand that is there.

The Department has been in contact with schools and patrons and is aware of the evolving situation with respect to the first year places in Greystones for September 2024. Applications for admission and engaging with schools and patrons is an ongoing process in that respect. Officials from the Department will continue to liaise with each of the patrons and the schools to find a workable solution to ensure that no student is without a place in September 2024. I expect there will be further clarity provided for the families and the school communities in a couple of weeks.

Small and Medium Enterprises

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for accepting this issue for debate and I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond, for coming to the House.

We are all very aware of high-profile closures in the past number of weeks. I will focus on one in my constituency and a communication I received from another business in my constituency. The Corner House Bistro was a hugely popular restaurant in Athlone. The owners, Linda and Joe Connolly, decided to close it doors a couple of weeks ago with the loss of jobs for 20 staff. The owner of the Wholesome Kitchen in Mullingar, a restaurant in my constituency, wrote to me earlier in the week stating:

> I'm writing to you in relation to the new measures that have been and are being introduced which massively increase operating costs for small businesses … I'm incredibly worried that a lot of businesses will not be able to sustain such high costs, with too much introduced all at once … We employ a total of 40 people locally, we're very lucky that WK is a successful and profitable business, however it cannot absorb these costs.

The writer goes on to outline what these additional costs will be: a VAT rate increase will contribute a cost of €82,500 per annum; payroll due to minimum wage increase and work permit increases will be €47,300 per annum; sick pay benefits €11,400 per annum; auto-enrolment pension payments are €12,800 per annum; and extra public holiday pay will be €3,200 per annum. Food and packaging costs continue to increase and energy costs are still massively inflated. That is the situation for the Wholesome Kitchen, and I have the owner's permission to raise it on the floor of the Dáil this evening.

I have spoken with industry representatives. They say that only downward communication comes from the Department and that the Department only seems to be engaged when it reaches crisis point. We have been promised a report by the Minister of State's Department on the cumulative impact of labour costs but it is yet to be published. Is there a recognition that changes

in Government policy to sick pay, minimum wage, and pension auto-enrolment are contributing to the increases? All of these are important and need to be done but do they need to be done all at once?

The energy grant has been discontinued, despite the fact that energy costs are still much higher now than a number of years ago. There is also the VAT increase. I could understand this in regard to accommodation but not so much in regard to food. Businesses are facing a huge issue on 1 May when they must restructure or signify how they will pay their debt warehousing. I welcome the commitment by the Minister for Finance, Deputy McGrath, earlier this week that there will be flexibility in this regard and changes. I ask that this flexibility and the proposed changes are published without delay because these business need certainty. They are making decisions on what they are going to do and how they are to survive over the next number of months. The Minister of State has met the Restaurants Association of Ireland, RAI, which I welcome. It has published a five-point plan. To its credit, the Government announced a business support scheme in the budget in October but that was October and we are now halfway through January and still waiting full details of that. Businesses are still waiting to receive that grant.

I hope that in his reply the Minister of State will outline how the Government will publish those grants and when businesses can receive them. Will he consider a VAT reduction, particularly for the food side of the hospitality sector?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Robert Troy: Will the Minister of State ensure a communications-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Verona Murphy): The Deputy can come back in.

Deputy Robert Troy: -----campaign is undertaken to make people aware of the small company administrative rescue process, SCARP, that is available for sustainable businesses to restructure?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising what is an extremely topical issue. It gives me an opportunity to provide an update and some clarity on what has been done and is being done, and, more importantly, what will be done. Fundamentally, we recognise that small businesses are facing a number of acute challenges, particularly those businesses in the hospitality sector and others to some extent in the retail sector, largely due to rising energy costs, inflation and the fact that we have a very tight labour market.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the very many policy and legislative changes that have come from this House and from this Government, with the full backing of industry representatives, workers groups and all political parties. Indeed, most political parties say that we are not going far enough in the increase of the minimum wage, the increase in paid sick leave, and everything else that goes with that. We are, however, not blind to those costs. We are not just saying that these costs simply have to be borne by businesses.

On the point or the charge from industry that communication is top down, I quite frankly reject that. As the Deputy mentioned, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and my own team met the RAI yesterday. That meeting did not come out of the blue. We get contact from them on a weekly basis and we have meetings with them every month where we all sit around the table.

Between the retail forum and the enterprise and entrepreneurship forum, we speak to business representative groups on a monthly basis. We have all been well flagged on the changes we are moving towards when it comes to a living wage and sick leave. Again, this does not mean we blind to the impact. The Deputy referred to a cost exercise carried out by the Government, which was completed just before Christmas, on quantifying the cumulative costs to businesses by the measures taken through legislation. Of course, that exercise did not happen in isolation. It brought all stakeholders around the table to feed into it. I believe the work has been substantially carried out but I have not yet seen the final report. I do not believe it has reached the Minister yet. All of these things have to be independently verified from an economics point of view. The minute we receive it we will act on its basis. I know the top-line figures, or the explanatory memorandum - even though I would not use that term - is that the measures brought in can be absorbed by the vast majority of businesses. There are, however, particularly acute pressures on the high-labour, low-margin sectors, with particular reference to the hospitality area and certain parts of the retail sector.

I now turn to the increased cost of business scheme that was announced in budget 2024. The scheme is worth €257 million and will benefit businesses that paid up to €30,000 in commercial rates last year. It will give them a cash injection of up to €5,000. While this is not designed to ease all burdens on small business, it is an easy and accessible cash injection that will be very welcome to businesses. It will be paid out during the first quarter this year through the local authorities. We are using the local authorities because it is the easiest way to make a direct payment and it is the easiest way to quantify it directly into an account based on commercial rates paid last year. It is not a commercial rates rebate or anything like that. It is merely using that as a calculating method and a direct payment method into accounts. This will help up to 90% of predominantly small and medium businesses across the country.

The Deputy also raised the issue of tax warehousing. It is a major issue for business at the moment. The Revenue deadline of 1 May is fast approaching like the sword of Damocles dangling over far too many businesses. I assure the Deputy that the Minister for Finance is actively engaging with Revenue on the scheme to see what can be done to help businesses in this regard. A proposal is currently being developed and will be finalised in the next two weeks in respect of flexibility. While we recognise the debts must be paid, we do not want to see businesses come through the pandemic only just to close. A couple of other issues were raised and I will deal with them in my further response.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the Minister of State's reply. I do not for one minute question his commitment in his role, which I acknowledge. I am only relaying the frustration that is felt out there by the industry. I welcome the Minister of State engaging with them. It is important that we retain this ongoing engagement with industry. Will he convey to the Minister the need for certainty around the flexibility of the debt warehousing date in order that businesses can plan for the future? The report on the cumulative increase in business costs is imminent. If the report shows that the cumulative costs are prohibitive, can we have a commitment that the Government will look at how it can stage these introductions to enable businesses to meet these costs in a sustainable manner? We need to see the increased cost of business grant rolled out as soon as possible. As the Minister of State acknowledged, it is not the panacea but it will help.

Energy costs need to be looked at again. They have not fallen at the same rate as they rose. Many businesses that are highly dependent on energy need additional supports for another period of time. I have given an example of a very successful business which is telling me it is worried about how these increased costs are coming down the track. It is a good business

because it provides a quality service with quality staff. We need to listen to it.

The VAT reduction on the food element of the hospitality sector should be looked at to protect restaurants and cafés that are open. When I was fortunate enough to serve in the Department I introduced the small company administrative rescue process. It was an administrative restructuring facility for small viable businesses. I do not think many businesses are aware that the facility exists. I encourage the Minister of State and departmental officials to carry out a communication campaign so that sustainable businesses which are burdened with high costs can carry out a restructure and make sure they protect themselves and their jobs.

Deputy Neale Richmond: A number of weeks ago I was very lucky to meet the proprietors of Wholesome Kitchen in Mullingar when I visited the local enterprise office. Deputy Troy was on paternity leave at that time so we were not able to meet together. I know it is a wonderful business providing good employment. I can tell the Deputy it is good food as well because I was in a position to sample a bit. This is why I want to use it as an example of looking at the various options open to us.

With regard to debt warehousing, I very much hope that, as Deputy Troy has asked, we will get clarity on this in the next fortnight. That is a fair ask. With regard to the increased cost of business scheme, it will be completely paid out by the end of the first quarter of this year. It includes every local authority in the State.

With regard to energy, one of the big issues with TBESS was, as Deputy Troy knows, that unfortunately far too many people did not access it. They did not apply for it because it was deemed too burdensome. This is why we are using a different methodology to get grants through the increased cost of business scheme without the need for filling in too much frameworking.

Industry engagement will be maintained. I fully agree with Deputy Troy that the VAT rate for food-based businesses should be looked at. It was considered when the temporary measure was relieved. It was seen in the overall package that took in the entire hospitality sector, and the cost cumulatively for the economy was approximately €450 million. Sadly, too many businesses were simply doing too well and others were not in a position to be represented. I take Deputy Troy's point on board. It is something we discussed yesterday with the Restaurants Association of Ireland. If I have missed anything, I will come back to the Deputy.

With regard to the staged introduction of measures, to be frank, I am very reluctant to go down that path. The indicative response from the report we commissioned showed the vast majority of businesses can take these changes. It is very important that we increase the minimum wage this year and that we move towards the living wage, which is something we all committed to in the programme for Government, and that, equally, we increase sick pay again next year. In sectors where there is an adverse effect, there are other measures we can look at. We acknowledge that the Government is putting a burden on businesses to make very much needed societal changes. For this reason, the Government needs to step up to the plate, be it through taxation or other measures.

Defective Building Materials

Deputy Martin Kenny: As the Minister of State is aware, County Sligo is one of the few counties in the western seaboard that has been left out of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme. Counties Mayo, Donegal and Clare are in the scheme. Over the decades, many people in west County Sligo bought their aggregate and concrete blocks from County Mayo. We know there was a particular quarry in County Mayo that had this difficulty and pyrite has been found in many of these houses.

The Sligo Pyrite Action Group has been campaigning for three years to try to get this sorted out but is making very little progress, to be honest. Its members feel very frustrated and annoyed about it. They attended a meeting of Sligo County Council in early December when they put their case very strongly that the county council needs to get this resolved. It held a small protest outside. They feel very let down that other counties have been taken into the scheme while they have been left behind.

We estimate that more than 200 private houses in County Sligo have this difficulty. There may be even more than this number of local authority houses. Over the past decade, a number of local authority houses in County Sligo have had to be demolished and rebuilt because they had pyrite. This was done quietly behind the scenes and nothing was said about it. There are possibly many hundreds more local authority houses in the same position.

We know the concrete block scheme in place at present is not perfect and there are issues with it. There are difficulties that many of the campaigners have with how the scheme has been set out. At the same time, people in County Sligo whose houses are affected in this way need to get into the scheme and get started. One of the first things they will have to do before they can get any work done is to have the concrete blocks in the houses tested. This can take some time. Most of these people live in west Sligo and they look across the border to County Mayo. They go down to Ballina and see houses being demolished and rebuilt but nothing has been done with their houses.

In the past 12 months, an engineer, John Garrett, was appointed by Sligo County Council. He did a sample test on five houses. The normal symptom is small hairline cracks on the wall which are examined. All five houses he tested proved positive for pyrite. There are hundreds more houses in a similar situation. The only way we can get this resolved is to move forward with it. Unfortunately, to date the Government, the Department and the Housing Agency have said we have to wait until it is checked and that there is no evidence of it. I understand these checks have been done. I corresponded with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, at the end of November. I received a letter from him on 2 December in which he told me the Housing Agency had appointed a chartered engineer that had met Sligo County Council in September and its investigations and calculations were complete. At that stage, it had the report in draft and it was expected to be completed by January 2024. It is now January 2024. We need to see this move forward at pace. We know there are serious difficulties for many people who are very worried and concerned about this.

I spoke to Councillor Thomas Healy, a colleague of mine on Sligo County Council, who chairs one of these groups. He told me there are two houses where people have been told by the engineers that they need to move out. One of these is a woman, who is now renting a house down the road from her own house, on which she is still paying a mortgage. She drives past it every day. She cannot get into the scheme. Clearly there is a problem that needs to be resolved

at pace.

I ask the Minister of State come back with a solution and let me know very quickly that the houses in County Sligo will be part of the scheme and they can get the concrete blocks tested and move forward with this as soon as possible. Unfortunately, there may be many more affected houses out there. There are also a number of apartments that are not part of the scheme either which will be affected by this. There are many other areas, such as commercial premises, that are in a similar situation and people are very worried and concerned. The first part of this is to get private residences into the scheme as quickly as possible.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this very important matter and for the opportunity to provide an update on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, commenced the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 on 22 June 2023, which provides for an enhanced grant scheme, and adopted the related regulations on 29 June 2023. The Act includes significant improvements to the previous scheme and allows for the extension of the scheme to other counties, as required.

Section 5 of the Act contains details on the process for the inclusion of additional local authority areas into the enhanced defective concrete blocks grant scheme. This statutory designation process can commence upon a request by a local authority or the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, whereby the Housing Agency thereafter carries out technical testing of dwellings in a given local authority administrative area.

Following consultation with officials in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Sligo County Council submitted its request for inclusion in the enhanced defective concrete blocks scheme in May 2023. An official from the Department wrote to the Housing Agency in July 2023 requesting, on behalf of the Minister for housing, that the Housing Agency carry out an assessment per section 5(7) of the Act. Section 5(9) of the Act then requires the Housing Agency to produce a report on the results of the assessment, with a recommendation that an order should or should not be made designating the local authority of Sligo for the whole of, or part of, its administrative area.

I understand that the Housing Agency and its appointed chartered engineer met with Sligo County Council on 26 September 2023 to commence its investigations and consultations, as required. The Housing Agency has confirmed to the Department that its investigations and consultations have completed and its report, including a recommendation to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is currently in draft form. It is envisaged the report will be completed in the coming weeks. Once received, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will ensure this report receives attention without delay, and at that point he will be in a position to exercise his powers under the Act and, if appropriate, to seek Government approval to include the whole, or part, of Sligo County Council's administrative area in the enhanced defective concrete blocks grant scheme.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister of State. First, we have learned nothing new. We are aware that this has happened and that on 26 September, Sligo County Council engaged with the Housing Agency and commenced its investigations. According to the last letter I got in early December, the report was in draft form. We now need to see the report being brought forward. I am concerned about the use of the words "if appropriate". It is clear to everyone it is appropriate, because if the aggregate came from the same quarry in Mayo as the houses that

are now being demolished and having to be rebuilt, clearly it is appropriate that the people who, unfortunately, bought their materials from that quarry will be in the same situation and will need to be part of a scheme.

I am also concerned about the reference in the reply to include "the whole, or part," of the county council area, which suggests that somehow or other there will be a further subdivision of a county, in addition to the areas where it is already in place. It is a reality that in a catchment area, people buy their building materials wherever they can get them, usually wherever they get them at a good price and get them delivered. They do not look to the county that they buy them in as they do not see a problem down the road. Putting a hurdle up in front of them is simply wrong and should not happen.

I am also conscious that when this does happen, which I hope is very soon, the local authority will have to play a role in it and it will need to have staff in place to apply the scheme. At the moment it does not have anyone in place to work in this particular area. That is another aspect of this issue that needs to be examined.

I am also aware of the need for enhanced scrutiny of building materials throughout the country. I know we have various agencies that are supposed to be doing that work but difficulties have arisen and some people point out that difficulties still arise and problems might emerge in the future. The Government must get a grip on the regulation of materials that go into people's homes, which are a very long-term investment. It must ensure a system is put in place to hold to account those who abuse the system. That has happened and this is clear evidence of it. I want an absolute assurance from the Minister of State that all of County Sligo will be included in this scheme immediately.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Fair play to the Deputy for trying to get me on the hook for that one. Obviously there is a process, which I outlined very clearly in my opening response. The process is at a very advanced stage and once the draft report is submitted to the Department, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, guarantees that it will be looked at it without delay and a decision made theron.

The purpose of the DCB Act is to implement and give legislative underpinning to a series of measures to improve and enhance the DCB scheme as agreed by the Government on 30 November 2021. This includes 100% grants subject to an overall maximum grant of €420,000 per dwelling. The Housing Agency plays a key role in acting under the enhanced scheme by taking on the financial cost of testing and assessing homes and determining on behalf of the local authorities the appropriate remediation option and grant amount for each dwelling. Upon commencement of the Act, the Housing Agency was required to process a large volume of transitional applications referred by the local authorities from the previous scheme in addition to new applications referred. In addition to this large body of work, the Housing Agency is currently assessing applications to entry onto the enhanced scheme from four new local authorities, including Sligo County Council, and is in contact with a number of other local authorities. The work of the Housing Agency is integral to the success of the scheme and the Department approves an annual budget for the Housing Agency in respect of its role in the enhanced defective concrete blocks scheme. This funding is to cover the operational costs of a regional office, payments due to framework consultants and professional support and costs.

Ultimately, there are two sides to the issue. Given how hard people work to get a mortgage and buy a house and raise a family or whatever their circumstances may be, I cannot imagine

anything worse than something happening to it such as being afflicted with defective blocks. It must be an horrendous situation to have one's home under threat. The State is stepping forward to support such people in many parts of this country. Equally, this is an awful lot of taxpayers' money and we must have robust mechanisms in place to make sure the money is targeted and goes to those who need it. That is what this process ensures will happen. If it is appropriate, the people of Sligo will benefit from it as well.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.45 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 23 Eanáir 2024.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.45 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 23 January 2024.