



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 16 Aibreán 2024

Tuesday, 16 April 2024

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

***Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.***

Appointment of Ministers and Ministers of State

The Taoiseach: I wish to announce for the information of the Dáil that having informed the President that Dáil Éireann had approved my nomination of Deputies to be members of the Government, the President on 9 April 2024 appointed them accordingly. On the same day, I nominated Deputy Micheál Martin to be the Tánaiste and assigned the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Defence to him. On the same date, I assigned the other Departments of State to the other members of the Government as follows: the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Department of Transport to Deputy Eamon Ryan; the Department of Finance to Deputy Michael McGrath; the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform to Deputy Paschal Donohoe; the Department of Education to Deputy Norma Foley; the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to Deputy Catherine Martin; the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to Deputy Darragh O'Brien; the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Rural and Community Development to Deputy Heather Humphreys; the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine to Deputy Charlie McConalogue; the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to Deputy Roderic O'Gorman; the Department of Health to Deputy Stephen Donnelly; the Department of Justice to Deputy Helen McEntee; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to Deputy Peter Burke; and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to Deputy Patrick O'Donovan. On 9 April 2024, the President also appointed Rossa Fanning SC as the Attorney General.

On the same date the Government appointed Deputy Hildegard Naughton to be Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach with special responsibility as Government Chief Whip and at the Department of Education with special responsibility for special education and inclusion; Deputy Jack Chambers to be Minister of State at the Department of Transport with special responsibility for international road transport and logistics and at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications with special responsibility for postal policy; Senator Pippa Hackett to be Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine with

special responsibility for land use and biodiversity; and Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill to be Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach and at the Department of Foreign Affairs with special responsibility for European affairs and at the Department of Defence.

On 10 April 2024 on my nomination, the Government appointed Deputy Kieran O'Donnell as Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform with special responsibility for the Office of Public Works; Deputy Ossian Smyth as Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform with special responsibility for public procurement and e-government, and at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications with special responsibility for communications and the circular economy; Deputy Colm Burke as Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drug strategy; Deputy Martin Heydon as Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine with special responsibility for research and development, farm safety and new market department; Deputy Anne Rabbitte as Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with special responsibility for disability; Deputy Sean Fleming as Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs with special responsibility for international development and the diaspora; Deputy Joe O'Brien as Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and at the Department of Social Protection with responsibility for community development and charities and at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with special responsibility for integration; Deputy Alan Dillon as Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with special responsibility for local government planning; Deputy Malcolm Noonan as Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with special responsibility for nature, heritage and electoral reform; Deputy Mary Butler as Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for mental health and older people; Deputy Thomas Byrne as Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and at the Department of Education with special responsibility for sport and physical education, and with special responsibility for the Gaeltacht; Deputy Niall Collins as Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with special responsibility for skills and further innovation; Deputy Neale Richmond as Minister of State at the Department of Finance with special responsibility for financial services, credit unions and insurance; Deputy James Browne as Minister of State at the Department of Justice with special responsibility for international law, law reform and youth justice; Deputy Dara Calleary as Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment with special responsibility for trade promotion and digital transformation; and Deputy Emer Higgins as Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment with special responsibility for business, employment and retail, and at the Department of Social Protection.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a point of information, I ask the Taoiseach why he is appointing Deputy Eamon Ryan as Minister for the environment.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, that is not a point of information.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He has destroyed rural Ireland, farming and everything else and it is time he was moved out of there. The Taoiseach had an opportunity.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is out of order. I ask him to resume his seat.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Scoliosis is a debilitating and painful condition for a person's spine twists and curves. It can cause the ribcage to press against the lungs and internal organs making it increasingly difficult to breathe. It is especially tough on young children. Where children do not get the surgeries they need on time, the consequences are devastating. The longer they wait, the more complex the procedures they will eventually need and without timely care, children end up in wheelchairs. Some children wait so long that they become inoperable and they have run out of time. Too many children and their parents face this agonising wait. The suffering and the mental distress is just unimaginable. In 2017 the Taoiseach promised that by the end of that year no child would wait longer than four months for scoliosis surgery. That was seven years ago and that promise has been broken again and again. To be clear, the four-month target was agreed between the Taoiseach as the then Minister for Health and the HSE based on international best practice. That promise made by the Taoiseach then was broken. He failed to build the capacity needed here and in 2019 he ended the scheme through which children could travel abroad to have their operations faster.

Last night, my colleague, an Teachta Cullinane, and I again met parents of children of scoliosis and spina bifida. They are very angry, hurt and they feel completely betrayed. They asked me to relay their words to the Taoiseach directly. They said they wanted to tell Simon Harris that Government has actively consistently and comprehensively failed their children. They said to tell him that they as parents did all of the right things, everything they could do, and yet their children are subjected to serious and ongoing harm.

The Taoiseach met these families back in 2016 and many of the same children are still in the system today experiencing delays to the treatments they need so badly. Moreover, parents live every day with the fear of their child becoming inoperable. They say that many of the parents are kept in the dark by Children's Health Ireland, CHI, and they see hard-working consultants under huge pressure and without the resources they need. Parents suspect and fear that many more children may have run out of time and have become inoperable. They want the Government to fund a second opinion for their children, independent of CHI. The Taoiseach can see that their trust has been shattered by all of the empty promises. Níl aon ghá le gealltanais fholmha do pháistí le scoliosis agus spina bifida. Is é an rud atá uathu ná nósanna imeachta leighis anois.

Yesterday, the Taoiseach restated a promise to children with scoliosis and spina bifida but these children do not need any more promises. They need the operations. The Taoiseach stated that every resource possible will be provided "to make sure no child finds themselves waiting in pain and agony". These children, however, are waiting in pain and agony today and as I heard this promise from the Taoiseach seven long years ago, I have three questions for the Taoiseach. First, is the Taoiseach promising once again that children will not wait more than four months for spinal surgeries? Second, is the Taoiseach reinstating the scheme for children who can travel abroad to get their operations? Third, will Government fund that second independent opinion, independent from CHI, that parents are now demanding for their children?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Gabhaim buíochas le Deputy McDonald and I thank her for raising what is

an extraordinarily important, stressful, and worrying issue for many families in Ireland. As the Deputy has rightly said, I have met many of the families, there are many families that I know and many children whose faces and names I still remember. Nobody, not Deputy McDonald or me, nobody on this side of the House or on that side of the House wants to see any child waiting in pain. On that we can all absolutely agree.

The Deputy is absolutely correct in stating that when I was Minister for Health, I did place a real focus on this issue. It was said to me by the then director general of the HSE that the executive would put a plan in place to ensure that no child waited longer than four months. That plan originated, as the Deputy correctly says, from clinical advice, and I believe similar clinical advice exists within the NHS. That was the clinical advice then and it is the clinical advice now. Of course, there can from time to time be complexities, as all of us know, as regards individual cases and multiple medical conditions and how they interact. Having said that, that is where the four months came from. What I definitely know is that by placing that focus on scoliosis, we saw a very significant reduction in the number of children waiting over four months. If we are to start Leaders' Questions by engaging in good faith, I think the Deputy will acknowledge when she looks at the figures that after I gave that commitment, the progress that was made in a short period in very significantly reducing the number of children waiting over four months was real and was felt and there were weekly reports produced. The Covid pandemic happened and waiting times worsened. Waiting times worsened for all procedures, including scoliosis.

My colleague, the Minister for Health, has been putting a real focus on this issue, continuing that work and trying to re-engage and refresh on it, including with new clinical leadership. I very much welcome the fact that he has appointed Mr. David Moore, a consultant surgeon in this area, to be a clinical lead, which all of us should welcome because I think that clinical expertise will make a real difference.

We have seen a very significant increase again in the number of spinal procedures now carried out. For example, in 2022, 509 spinal procedures were carried out. This compares with 380 in 2019. It represents a 34% increase in the number of procedures and a 22% increase for the year 2023. We now have the paediatric spinal surgery management unit in place, and so far this year, in 2024, we have seen over 120 spinal procedures take place. The Government remains absolutely committed, as I know everyone in this House does, to doing everything we humanly can to assist children with wait times and to assist their parents, who go through such a stressful and worrying time as well.

The Deputy has asked me three questions, so let me endeavour to answer them. As I have said as regards the first one, the four months remains the clinical advice and the clinical target and, therefore, that is what the Government here and governments around the world must work towards.

Second, yes, my understanding is that Mr. Moore, the consultant surgeon, is now looking at the issue the Deputy has raised as regards treatment abroad options. It is important that that is considered, and I welcome the fact that the Deputy, on behalf of parents, I think, makes that suggestion here today.

Third, I will engage with the Minister and the HSE on the idea of an independent opinion because it sounds like a suggestion made in good faith.

The Deputy should know this. This is an issue which will continue to receive extraordinary

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levels of care, investment and attention from the Government. I know also that the Minister for Health is convening a dedicated paediatric spinal task force with an independent chair. I know the idea of an independent chair was seen as essential by many of the advocacy groups. That independent chair is Mark Connaughton, who is a senior counsel, and the chair is now meeting with stakeholders and patient groups and finalising the terms of reference, which is another important step forward.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach says that nobody wants to see children in agony and pain, but that is exactly what we see. I spoke last night to one mother whose child is now no longer a child. They are now 19 and inoperable. Why are they inoperable? They are inoperable because they waited and waited and waited. The mother said directly that they followed all the right protocols and all the care paths - and for what? Words and rhetoric are of no value to them. The only good faith that matters on this subject is the good faith of the Government. That is the issue. The issue here is that we have 4,000 children awaiting their first consultation. That is the length of the list. We have 270 children on the surgery waiting list, 78 of whom have waited and waited far longer than four months. Here is perhaps the worst feature of all: the most complex and the most desperate of cases in many instances have the longest waits. These families - these children, these young adults, these parents - are now in a state of absolute panic.

I want a concrete commitment from the Taoiseach that he will not simply engage but deliver on the independent opinion and on the travel abroad. More broadly than that-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----the parents want to know that now he is Taoiseach, he will finally honour a promise he made many years ago.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy McDonald. First, I answered her three questions sequentially and clearly. I will continue to engage with her on the three answers I gave her. Second, it is a little dismissive to suggest words and rhetoric when 120 procedures this year is not rhetoric and massive levels of investment in theatres and hiring more nurses and doctors are not words; they are real actions. I know it suits the Deputy to suggest these are just words and rhetoric but they are real things we are doing to make a real difference. There is no monopoly on concern. Even in the past fortnight, the Minister for Health has received requests from Mr. Moore, the new clinical lead, in relation to further additional staff and posts and has provided the green light. I will engage with the Deputy in good faith on these exchanges but it is not words or rhetoric; it is real solid action which we are taking to address an extraordinarily difficult thing. She can shake her head if she wishes but that is what it is.

I hope that when Sinn Féin meets and engages with these families and positions itself as having all the solutions to all of the issues, it has the good grace to tell them that when it had an opportunity to put an alternative health budget to this House, it provided €500 million less to the health service than this Government provided.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: How do you square that circle in terms of extra staff and extra investment?

Deputy David Cullinane: That is blatantly not true.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is nonsense.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is misinformation.

The Taoiseach: It is true. It is in Sinn Féin's alternative budget available on *sinnfein.ie*.

Deputy David Cullinane: We will fact-check that for the Taoiseach.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Can we get a fact-check?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please. It is Leaders' Questions, not anybody else. I call Deputy Cairns.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Stop the clock. I am just waiting for them to leave. The "RTÉ Investigates" programme about our abortion services that aired last night was harrowing. It was also infuriating because everybody in this Chamber is already aware of all of the problems with these services. The Government has been sitting on the expert report that pointed out these problems for 12 months. Instead of action, we have had a game of political pass-the-parcel. The expert report was kicked to the health committee before being kicked back to the Government, where it has been since December. Last night, we saw clearly the people who are paying the price for that inaction, namely, women across the State who are traumatised, stigmatised and penalised. The Taoiseach has previously spoken about how he came to support repeal. He said one reason was a briefing he attended by the group Terminations for Medical Reasons. These are women and their partners who received a devastating diagnosis of foetal abnormality and were forced to leave the country for a termination. The Taoiseach stated, "I have never before left a briefing so moved by it ... I was really ashamed at how these people were treated", That quote is seven years old. Despite the repeal vote, nothing has changed for these women. Irish law still forces them abroad for care because often doctors either cannot definitively say complex foetal abnormalities will lead to death within 21 days of birth, as the law demands, or they interpret the law conservatively because of the threat of criminal sanction, that is, up to 14 years of a prison sentence. The result is devastated women like Alison Gibney, who are forced to travel at the most traumatic time of their lives. Then, heartbroken, they are forced to smuggle their much-loved stillborn baby back into the country, as she said, hidden underneath coats in the boot of her car. Or women like Allison Lynch and Christine Monaghan who were forced to leave their stillborn babies in the UK and travel back without them. Why are we allowing this terrible suffering to continue? We are the legislators. We are the only ones with the power to change this. We have a duty to do it. The Taoiseach was the Minister for Health when we had the repeal vote. As Taoiseach, he can take the advice of his own expert report and reform the law before more women and families experience even more trauma. I recognise the importance of operational reform and that more maternity hospitals are now providing the abortion services but I am asking him about something else today. In his reply, I ask him to specifically answer these three questions. Will the Government remove the mandatory three-day waiting period, end the criminalisation of healthcare workers and provide more clarity when it comes to providing abortion in cases of foetal abnormalities?

The Taoiseach: I will specifically answer those three questions, but I am conscious that people follow these debates and discussions at home and in the time available to me I want to say a few things.

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First, six years ago abortion was constitutionally banned in this country, so a lot has changed. We had a referendum, the result of which was decisive. Since then we have steered legislation through this House. Draft legislation was published in advance of the referendum so that people would know what the law would look like if they voted “Yes”. We introduced it in this House and in the other House and we passed it. Since then, despite a global pandemic that had a very significant impact on the delivery of health services, we have seen the expansion and embedding of those services. From a relatively small number of our hospitals, it got up to 12, then 17 and it is the hope and expectation of the Minister for Health that it will get to all 19 hospitals by the end of the year. Safe access zones was another legislative issue that came at us in terms of wanting women and health professionals to be able access services unimpeded. We passed the legislation in this House and I expect it will pass Committee Stage in the Seanad this evening. We continue to see a small increase in the number of GPs, community providers. I think there has been an additional 20 providers in the course of the past 12 months and that matters with respect to geographic access across the country.

The Deputy is correct that we commissioned an independent review, which we have received. The Oireachtas health committee considered it. It was sent back to the Department and Minister for Health in December. As the Deputy acknowledged, the bulk of the recommendations are in the operational space, which she also acknowledged are important. They have largely been put in place and are being embedded across the health service. There are some recommendations that are not in the operational space, but rather the legislative space and it does fall to these Houses to decide how to act on them.

On the three specific questions, they are about issues the Government has not yet considered. However, the Minister for Health will engage at the Cabinet committee on health about them shortly. They deserve serious consideration though. The way the Deputy framed them is quite responsible regarding wanting to tease through some of the nuances of how the legislation is operating. That is different from some of the views presented in this House, which suggest that the draft legislation we put before the people stating this would be the law if they voted “Yes” should not count for something. I take as constructive the points the Deputy made about the three-day waiting period, the issue of how doctors feel with respect to the criminal justice system and the issue of - the Deputy used the phrase “clarification around” - fatal foetal abnormalities. The Government will give consideration to the legislative proposals, but I am also struck, as is the Minister for Health, as the Deputy rightly said, that in politics your word matters and when you publish draft legislation-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: Gabh mo leithscéal.

It does matter because when you publish draft legislation alongside a referendum, stating that it will be the law if people vote “Yes”, it has to count for something. I welcome the constructive way in which the Deputy engaged on the matters. I am not being coy about the three matters. I am being honest. The Government has yet to consider them, but we intend to discuss them at a Cabinet committee on health shortly.

Deputy Holly Cairns: To hear that a year after a report was given to the Government it has not been considered is extremely worrying. I heard the Minister for Health say yesterday that we have to be cognisant of what people voted for in the repeal referendum and in any plan to reform the law and the Taoiseach referenced it now too. I do not know if they are suggesting

that they think the majority of people who voted to repeal the eighth amendment wanted to continue to force women who need terminations for medical reasons to travel abroad. I have to say that the very brave women who spoke out about needing a termination for medical reasons during the repeal referendum campaign won more hearts, minds and “Yes” votes than the Government’s heads of Bill.

However, for arguments sake let us say it is about the heads of the Bill and the Government wants to honour that, the heads of Bill committed to having a review to see whether there were any serious issues with the current legislation. Some very serious issues have arisen. The fact is that people are still being forced to travel abroad and that women are being forced to wait three days to access medical care. The latter is something we do not see in any other kind of provision for care. It has no place in our law or in modern medicine and it needs to go.

On those three issues, does the Taoiseach think they need to be changed? Will he outline to the House, when considering them, what position he is coming from? Does he understand why these things need to be changed and why considering it now, a year later, is far too long for the women who have been forced to travel and for the ongoing suffering? Every day women are still travelling.

The Taoiseach: I, too, pay tribute to those who spoke out. As the Deputy correctly said, I was very influenced and informed in my own views. I am also very conscious, as the Deputy said, that they played a much larger role than any politician in this House, most particularly myself, in bringing about a successful “Yes” vote because they spoke to the people of Ireland and the people of Ireland responded compassionately. I also participated in debates, however, as did the Deputy’s party and other parties, when we told people that a “Yes” vote was a vote for this and not for that. We have to reflect on that. Within that context, some of the things the Deputy said have merit. We put in place a review clause because we want to make sure the legislation is operating as intended. The perspective I come from on this is very straightforward. It is about wanting to provide healthcare to women. It is about wanting to be non-judgmental and compassionate. It is the same approach I brought when I campaigned for repeal and worked across party lines in a minority Government to pass the legislation.

It is not that the Government has a report and has not been doing anything. A very significant amount of work has been done with that report in the operational space. Also, from a legislative point of view, the priority has been safe access zones. I will continue to keep the Deputy and the House informed on our thinking on this.

Deputy Bríd Smith: On the Taoiseach’s first day of Leaders’ Questions, it is quite a coincidence that he is being questioned by both the previous speaker and me on the abortion legislation. Last night’s programme exposed the ongoing denial of abortion rights to a significant number of women in this country six years after repeal. It was interesting that it opened with a clip of the Taoiseach in Dublin Castle on that historic day when the massive “Yes” vote was announced. He told the crowd, “Under the eighth amendment, [we said to] women in crisis ... take the boat [or take the plane], today we ... [say], take our hand.” The programme then showed how women today are still being forced to take the boat or the plane. It has happened to hundreds of women since repeal.

Three brave women told their very moving, sad and tragic stories last night. I commend them for doing what they did and their courage because it has implications for the future for all women with crisis pregnancies in this country. Having been given the devastating news that

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their much-wanted babies will not survive, women are then told they cannot access abortion care here and will have to travel. Then, they have the tragedy of having to leave the remains of their babies behind to come back and collect them later or hide them under a blanket in the back of a car in case customs interrogate them. Women are still being treated as criminals for accessing basic reproductive healthcare. As Ms Marie O'Shea pointed out on the show and to members when she appeared before the Joint Committee on Health, doctors are being intimidated by a 14-year prison sentence hanging over them like a chill factor in case they fall outside the terms of the legislation.

The Taoiseach made his political name as Minister for Health during the repeal campaign. During the Dáil debate on the abortion legislation, he repeatedly said how important it was that the legislation be kept under review. He stated:

I am purposely seeking a review clause in the legislation as a result of looking at other jurisdictions where legislators thought all they needed to do was pass a Bill and that they had dealt with the issue forever. For us ... that would be a dereliction of our duty. It is appropriate that we return to the issue and make sure the legislation continues to be in line with best international practice. That is what a review clause will accomplish.

Yet, six years after repeal and well over a year since Ms O'Shea's report, we are still waiting for the Government to stop sitting on its hands. It is almost one year since People Before Profit had a Private Members' Bill passed in this House by a majority of Deputies, using the Marie O'Shea report to show how a Bill could be passed to abolish the three-day wait, 12-week limit and 14-year prison sentence for doctors and ensure that no one else is told to take the boat or plane ever again. However, it remains sitting in committee. TDs were given a free vote and they voted for that amendment, so it is not true to say that we are all laggards in terms of trying to make progress.

It is not good enough that the Government is sitting on its hands and refusing to allow the Bill to progress in committee. I wrote to the health committee this morning, having written many times previously, asking it, yet again, to progress the Bill through the committee. Will the Taoiseach do what his predecessor, Deputy Varadkar, did and continue to tell women with fatal foetal anomaly and with those diagnoses that they must take the boat or the plane, or will he show a bit of courage?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Marie O'Shea has said courage is needed. Will the Taoiseach use his famous slogan about new energy to implement a review immediately?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I accept the sincerity of her view. Whether people agree or disagree with her view, it is well known in this House. We should not engage in revisionism. An awful lot has happened. We had a constitutional ban on abortion. We had the eighth amendment. This House was not empowered to legislate at all. We all went out, across party lines, and campaigned. It is kind of amazing now to think that actually happened, given there was a minority Government. People pulled together and we brought about good societal change.

Since then, we have managed to see the services embed. We have managed to see many thousands of women who previously would have travelled or been denied access to healthcare be able to access healthcare in this country. The statistics are published and laid before this

House each and every year. We have established My Options. It is a really important, free, non-judgmental service that provides people with information and access to counselling, as well as advice on how they can access the services that are legal within this country. We have seen the number of hospitals providing the service significantly increase. We have seen the number of community providers increase and geographic access across the country thereby improve. From a legislative point of view, we have prioritised safe access zones. There was a view in this House that we needed to move on that issue. This House passed the legislation. It is on Committee Stage in the Seanad and it is hoped to conclude that Stage this evening.

We put in place a review clause. Yes, I did that. I remember being in the committee with the Deputy when we put in place that review clause. There was a view in the committee, across party lines, that we should do so. The review has come back with many recommendations. A lot of them have already been enacted in the operational space. They have been good recommendations to help to improve the clinical delivery of the service. Some of the recommendations are legislative in nature. The Government will give them due consideration, as I am sure will the Opposition parties.

I note the Deputy's comment regarding her own Bill. She has every right to bring it forward. I do not recall the figures but my memory is that it passed because a majority, or certainly a large number of Deputies, abstained out of respect for wanting the review to be carried out. Factually, the Bill passed Second Stage in the House. That is true. Without speaking for the Deputy, I think it is fair to say her Bill would go significantly further than the review. She is very clear about wanting to abolish the 12-week limit altogether. That is her position. It is not mine and it is not the position we set out when we went before the people. The Deputy has interacted with the health committee, as is her right. It is a matter for the committee to decide how it wishes to proceed with that request. I have outlined very clearly what the Government intends to do, which is to pass the safe access zones legislation, ensure the services are provided in the 19 hospitals, implement the operational recommendations and engage with the Minister for Health and the Cabinet committee on health on the legislative recommendations.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I do not think it is fair to frame the history of what happened to the Bill as there somehow being a minority voting for it. Only approximately nine Deputies abstained that day. There was not a huge number of Deputies abstaining.

I want to pick up on a few things the Taoiseach said. The 28-day limit is really the crucial thing in terms of how fatal foetal anomalies are treated and in stopping the harrowing and tragic testimonies we saw last night. The 28-day limit on when doctors can say there is need of a termination in a case of fatal foetal anomaly was added only after the referendum. It was not in the heads of Bill. People did not vote for it. The requirement for a three-day wait and a repeat visit was never discussed by the citizens' assembly or the joint Oireachtas committee. It was put in by the Government afterwards to try to bring some of its leading members on a journey. It was never discussed by us.

The programme last night also raised the question of rogue agencies. Will the Taoiseach address that in his response? In 2016, after a similar investigation was revealed in the Ireland edition of *The Times*, he said he was sickened by those claims and vowed to regulate rogue agencies. Eight years later, they are still free to operate.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

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Deputy Bríd Smith: I repeat my contention that the Government is sitting on its hands.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for repeating her contention. Obviously, I do not agree with her. Even the three-day wait period has seen clarification on how it operates since the Covid pandemic. That used to involve two in-person visits but that is now not the case. That was something that came about during Covid that was deemed to work clinically well in the health service and was therefore embedded. I am not dismissing many of the points that have been made in this House but outlining the process the Government will go through.

On rogue crisis pregnancy agencies, I was and am sickened. The Deputy tried to imply that I did nothing about the matter but we set up My Options. For the first time in the history of the State, we now have a State freephone service. I encourage people to make this known. It is a non-judgmental service that is available to people, provides massive support and directs people to appropriate and safe services.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I did not accuse the Taoiseach of not doing anything. He failed to regulate-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should please let the Taoiseach respond.

The Taoiseach: I also went further. Elections sometimes interrupt people's tenure of service but in 2019 I also brought about regulations to designate the professions of counsellor and psychotherapist under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act. I established the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board. I appointed its members in February 2019 and they held their first meeting in May 2019. Everybody knows the pressure the Department of Health has been under with the Covid pandemic and the like since. A lot has happened.

Deputy Joan Collins: I agree with the last two speakers on the documentary last night on the O'Shea report but I want to raise the following issue. Earlier this month, we learned that health and social care staff with community and voluntary bodies are still awaiting pay increases agreed last October. I am referring to section 10, section 39 and section 56 workers. There was an agreement for an 8% pay increase and a commitment from the Government to work towards pay parity with public sector workers. Many workers have not received any increase at all. I am well aware of this because I sit on the board of the Canal Communities Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force. In general, funding for task force projects and posts has not increased since 2009. Many salaries were subject to cuts after the crash until 2021, when pay was restored to pre-2009 levels for some workers. I am told this is reflected across most HSE-funded organisations, where pay scales have fallen well behind those of the HSE that they were originally linked to. Pay scales and funding frozen at 2009 austerity levels, or even pre-2009 cut levels, are a disaster for workers and those relying on the services. There are no pay protections, no pay parity, no pay equality, no job security and no pensions or other benefits that their public sector counterparts receive. It is an absolute disgrace. Kevin Figgis of SIPTU stated, "The night we agreed the deal [in October 2023], the Government side were saying it would apply to in excess of 2,000 organisations." He added:

They are now saying they are engaging with a little over 1,000 agencies and we are going: 'What's happened to the rest of them?'

[...]

And what we have now is people who weren't even in the room that night telling us

what was intended, which is unacceptable. We are not going to have the deal reimagined by people who weren't even there when it was agreed.

He added that there is an ongoing attempt to minimise the number of people who benefit from the deal and any future restoration of the pay link with equivalent public sector staff. From everything I have seen, I agree with him. This is a broken system. These workers are essential to the communities and people who rely on them. Many of the services in question should be provided by the public sector but are instead left to the voluntary sector, which is woefully underfunded.

This system is failing on its own merits as the funding streams struggle to see the implementation of a pay deal agreed last October. We need immediate action from the Government to ensure pay increases are passed on. The long-term effects throughout services and the risk of further strike action – action diverted last October as a result of Government inaction – are a disaster for workers and service users. These workers are central to the most vulnerable in our society. They do invaluable work and the Government is treating them like dirt. I refer in particular to community prison links workers paid through the Department of Justice, workers in the youth projects paid by City of Dublin ETB, Dublin City Council-funded workers and the HSE grant aid project staff, who have not even received the 2021 pay restoration payments. What action is the Government taking to ensure the workers of all 2,000 organisations covered by the 2023 deal will receive the pay increases they are entitled to with immediate effect?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Collins. I appreciate the passion with which she discussed the issue. I just do not believe phrases like “treating them like dirt” add much to the debate, though. That is the Deputy’s view.

Deputy Joan Collins: It is their view.

The Taoiseach: It is the Deputy’s view and their view. Here is my view: this Government, which I am proud to lead, very much respects and values the work carried out by these workers. The Deputy is right that there are many aspects of our public services, including health and social services, that rely on people who have been traditionally outside the public sector. We are the better for it as a country. Indeed, many of our services working with some of the most vulnerable in society are reliant on those individuals. They provide services that all of us, as constituency Deputies, know of in our communities and very much value. This Government has done significant work over a sustained period to try to improve, regularise and come to agreement on a variety of issues within the spectrum of matters the Deputy raised. The hospice movement is one example. Transferring it from section 39 to section 38 was a big body of work but it has shown real good faith on the part of Government and will make a big difference to both the staff there and to the sustainability of those services into the future.

Regarding some of the specific issues the Deputy raised, an 8% pay increase was agreed in October 2024 on the eve of strike action. I was pleased that was agreed. A lot of hard work was done by many, including the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman. My understanding is that Tusla has provided those payments and that the HSE is in the process of finalising those arrangements. The Minister for Health and I will seek an update for the Deputy for the people from the HSE who have contacted her about where that is. Following the new public sector pay deal, there will be engagement with both the section 39 and section 56 organisations on further pay issues that arise from that pay deal. I would like to think we are in a better space as a result of the agreement that was reached last October and as a result of the public sector pay deal and the

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engagement that will flow from that. If the Deputy wants to send me specifics, I am happy to come back on them as well.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the Taoiseach. It has been 15 years since the crash. Until 2021, many of these workers had not even received a pay increase. The staffing community of voluntary organisations who are awarded the pay increase of 8% have not received it and have not been paid to date. That is outrageous. Why has it not been paid and when will it be paid? This needs to happen urgently. It undermines and makes a complete mockery of our system of industrial relations and collective bargaining. When agreements are made, they must be honoured. It must be noted that the agreement is applicable only to sections 10, 39 and 56 bodies. Projects and initiatives that have service-level agreements with the HSE are included. Those that have grant-aid agreement are not. Many other services are excluded from the agreement.

Will the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health, who is sitting beside him, seriously consider setting up an implementation body with the unions, those involved in the different organisations and the Government to actually look at this? It is a very complicated system. The funding goes astray. The HSE and Department of Health have the funding, which is given to the HSE. The HSE gives it to the Department of Justice, the ETBs, Dublin City Council and all these areas. This has to be looked at in detail and implemented as quickly as possible for these workers and those services.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I will undertake to engage with my Government colleagues. As she has rightly indicated, this cuts across a number of Departments. Many of the organisations fall within the Department of children. I have outlined on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, that Tusla has made payments. Some fall within the Department of Health or the health agency family. Some are within the Department of housing and its agencies. We have two things to do arising from this question. The first thing we need to do is to ensure that all of the agencies move forward as quickly as possible with regard to the agreement that was reached in October. The Government wants to see that happen. I will get the Deputy an update, following on from this, on that.

Secondly, as I referenced in my earlier answer, as a result of the new public sector pay deal, we have an opportunity and obligation to engage with the representative bodies of those staff working in the sections 10, 39 and 56 bodies. That is probably the best way to proceed. I am not sure we need a new implementation structure. I think there is a mechanism in place for engagement as a result of that. If the Deputy wants to correspond with me, I am happy to come back to her on that.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday’s business shall be:

- Motion *re* Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the

Council on international protection, asylum and migration (*without debate*)

- Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024 (Second Stage) (*if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 5.30 p.m. or after 1 hr 41 mins, whichever is the later*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Cancer Strategy, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the European Union, of an agreement between Canada and the European Union on the transfer and processing of Passenger Name Record data*

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of an agreement between Canada and the European Union on the transfer and processing of Passenger Name Record data*

* *The above two motions to be debated together and brought to a conclusion within 57 mins*

- Statements on Road Safety (*not to exceed 2 hrs 27 minutes*)

- Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024 (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded) (*to adjourn at either 8 p.m. or after 2 hrs 36 mins, whichever is the later*)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Disability Justice, selected by People before Profit-Solidarity.

Thursday's business shall be the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024 (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded).

Thursday evening business shall be the Motion *re* Report entitled "Report on the examination of recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly report on biodiversity loss" (*Committee on Environment and Climate Action*).

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that private members' business may be taken earlier than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of the proceedings on Second Stage of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024, or where those proceedings conclude before they must be interrupted, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, oral Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Education, and topical issues, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

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2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on international protection, asylum and migration shall be taken without debate; and

3. the proceedings on Second Stage of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 5.30 p.m. or after 1 hour and 41 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Tuesday.

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(i) in the event the Taoiseach is unable to attend for questions pursuant to Standing Order 46(1), the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) may take place earlier than 1.49 p.m., with consequential effect on the commencement time for Government business; and

(ii) the weekly division time may be taken earlier than 8.45 p.m., but not earlier than 7.30 p.m., with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. in relation to the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the European Union, of an agreement between Canada and the European Union on the transfer and processing of Passenger Name Record data and the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of an agreement between Canada and the European Union on the transfer and processing of Passenger Name Record data, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the motions shall be moved together and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 57 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

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

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State - 10 minutes;

- speech by representative of Sinn Féin - 10 minutes;

- speeches by representatives of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People-Before-Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group and the Independent Group - 5 minutes per party or group;

- speeches by non-aligned members – 2 minutes; and

- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(iii) members may share time;

3. the Statements on Road Safety shall not exceed 2 hours and 27 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(i) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 135 minutes, and the Resolution of the Dáil of 20th September, 2023, providing for two minutes for non-aligned members;

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

(iii) members may share time; and

4. any resumed proceedings on Second Stage of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned at either 8 p.m. or after 2 hours 36 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday.

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the scheduled interruption of any resumed Second Stage proceedings on the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024, or where Second Stage of that Bill concludes within its allotted time, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the Motion *re* Report entitled "Report on the examination of recommendations of the Citizens Assembly's report on biodiversity loss", and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil: Provided that if Second Stage of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024 concludes before Thursday, topical issues on Thursday shall be taken on the conclusion of the SOS.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not agreed.

On the schedule here today, we have a motion without debate about the EU asylum and migration pact. I appeal to the Taoiseach to facilitate the maximum amount of debate in this House on a serious matter. The Government has made a shambles of the whole immigration area. Communities all across this State have been failed. The asylum seekers themselves are being failed. We are asking for the maximum participation and opportunity for those of us in the Opposition who are seriously concerned with the Government's approach. I assume the Taoiseach can agree to that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We are all very conscious that it is six years since repeal. It is one year since Marie O'Shea's report was published. It is four months since the Oireachtas health committee gave its report to the Minister for Health on the implementation of the O'Shea report recommendations. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Aoife Hegarty and the "RTÉ Investigates" team for last night's exposure of ongoing gaps in the provision of abortion care services to women who need them. Of course, we owe a debt of gratitude to those brave women who

came forward and told their stories in last night's harrowing programme. I am very concerned to hear the Taoiseach's response today that the Government has yet to consider some of the key recommendations for legislative change made in the report. I absolutely acknowledge the improvements in operational delivery and the increase in the number of hospitals and GPs. This is greatly welcome for women in crisis pregnancy who need the service. This week we need to hear from the Minister for Health as to precisely when and how the Government proposes to implement the recommendations through legislation. We do have on the books the Bill of my colleague Deputy Howlin to regulate rogue crisis pregnancy agencies. I have just received a response to a parliamentary question from the Minister for Health stating it will be years before the current process of registration of counsellors will have effect in regulating rogue agencies out of existence. We saw very seriously concerning reports about the continued operation of such agencies last night. We need urgent debate in the House on a timeline for implementation of these crucial recommendations.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We need time allocated for an urgent debate on the implications of the ending of the Covid payment for healthcare workers. Many of them face losing everything, including their health, career, financial security and, in some cases, their homes. We applauded the bravery of these healthcare workers when they selflessly went into work on our behalf. We commended them on that. Now it appears they are being abandoned. Does the Taoiseach accept that the Government needs to fulfil its duty of care to these workers? Can we have a discussion this week on how we address this issue? We cannot leave these workers abandoned. It needs to be dealt with this week.

Deputy Bríd Smith: We echo the call for a debate on the European migrant pact, obviously for different reasons. We do think we have to have the debate. The issue I want to raise is the question of the use of Shannon Airport by the US military. I was there on Sunday at a protest. There is great concern in the country about the escalating and increased use of Shannon Airport by US military flights. As the situation in the Middle East becomes more precarious with the possibility of an outright war, it will mean the increased use of one of our key airports in that war. We still do not know whether weapons hardware is carried on the planes because the State does not carry out inspections. We need a debate on this issue.

Deputy Verona Murphy: With regard to the motion on the European migration pact, it is imperative that we have a full and frank discussion. This can only be done where we have objective witnesses brought before a committee who can help us to establish whether there are constitutional or legal implications for the country and its people. I ask respectfully that the Chief Whip takes it back to the Business Committee and amends the motion to include expert witnesses being brought before the committee.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I raised this at the Business Committee last week, as the Ceann Comhairle knows. I said I would object. I dissented from agreeing the business. The Rural Independent Group and I have been concerned about this not in the past week or days but for more than 18 months. We have been looking for a debate here and we have been denied it. We urgently need a debate. We cannot have a motion without debate referring the migration and asylum pact to a committee without debate in the House. We demand a full debate in the House, hopefully this week, before it is referred to the committee. It is of the utmost importance that we have full scrutiny of it and full understanding of the massive implications it has for many areas of life in our country, including our housing situation and everything else. We just cannot cope with it. We have to have a debate before it goes to the committee.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Will all of south Tipperary have to be owned by one man and trust funds linked to him before the matter is debated in this House and measures are taken to prevent that concentration of land ownership because of the economic and social consequences of that? Just because one is a large donor to the parties in government, it should not preclude one from examination by this House.

The second point I wish to make, regarding the EU migration pact-----

An Ceann Comhairle: You can only raise one matter.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Well, I have heard others raising two.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, go on.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The migration pact is not one Bill, but it is several. I believe it would be beneficial to this State to opt into some of them, but some of them would be very detrimental. My concern is that this will come back from the justice committee with a motion that we apply and endorse either all measures or none of them. That would be profoundly undemocratic, and I believe it would be detrimental to the interests of this State.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I also want to call for a debate on the European migration pact. It is one of the most contentious issues of today. I fear that if the Government does not allow for a debate to happen in this House, it will unfortunately then leave it to the public to debate it themselves outside this House. That would not be beneficial or appropriate either, so I would like to call for a debate on that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I can only take one speaker from each group; I cannot take more than one. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputies for their contributions. In relation to the EU migration pact, let us be really clear: we will have a very long debate in this House, we will have a vote in this House and there will be ample opportunity for that.

For those who are watching in, the motion that is before us today is simply to refer the pact to the committee for scrutiny. That is what we generally do. It goes to a committee, it is scrutinised at a committee, and it will come back here before the Dáil. Let me assure Deputies on the record of the House that when it comes back, not only will we wish to fulfil their requests, but we wish to have a proper debate on the migration pact because it will be very interesting to see how different people wish to grapple with the issue of migration. There is a lot of very important stuff in the EU migration pact. I am committing plenty of time in the Dáil for this, and of course it will also happen in the Seanad-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Separate votes

The Taoiseach: ----- but the appropriate thing is for it to go before the justice committee. How the justice committee decides to assess-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: Can we amend the motion?

The Taoiseach: Give me-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: We need objective opinion.

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The Taoiseach: Just give me one second. Deputy Verona Murphy has been at this for long enough to know how it works. I do not tell the justice committee what to do. There would be uproar if I started telling the justice committee-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Come on.

The Taoiseach: No, go down-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: No-----

The Taoiseach: Go down to the-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Michael McNamara: No instances-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Will you let the Taoiseach answer, please?

The Taoiseach: The way these things usually work is that the committee sets out its own work.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The majority.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Majority.

The Taoiseach: Every Member of this House is welcome to go to the justice committee, make contributions and put forward their views in relation to it.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Contributions to what? It is just a Minister's briefing - from a biased Minister who has already said she approves of opting in.

The Taoiseach: In relation to the EU migration pact, there is a motion to refer it to the justice committee. The justice committee can scrutinise it. It will come back here, and the Government will give it ample time. Deputy Murphy can make her contribution both before the justice committee-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Anti-democratic.

The Taoiseach: -----and here in the Dáil.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Anti-democratic.

The Taoiseach: There were a number of other suggestions for debates. I am happy to facilitate a debate in this House at the appropriate time on abortion services. We should take that issue to the Business Committee. I am sure Members will want to discuss that matter. Similarly, some of the other issues around land use and Shannon, etc., can be explored at the Business Committee.

Deputy Shortall raised the important issue of long Covid payments, as well as the importance of that to the workers we applauded in this House. I am pleased to inform the Deputy of our decision to extend those payments for three months.

Deputy Michael McNamara: What about your donor's land bank?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: I do not have any donors. Stop it with your slurring of people.

Deputy Mary Butler: Hear, hear.

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

Deputies: They are not agreed.

Question put.

The Dáil divided by electronic means.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Because of the narrowness of the vote, that this is a matter of great importance and that the gap is fewer than ten, under Standing Order 83(3)(b), I am asking for a vote other than by electronic means.

An Ceann Comhairle: As the Deputy is a teller and the difference in the vote is fewer than ten, the division will proceed.

Question again put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 67; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staan</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	

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<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		

<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Hildegarde Naughton and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach has regularly held up as an achievement during his time as Minister for higher education the area of apprenticeships. We all agree that they are essential. I wish to raise with him an issue, however, because, despite all his rhetoric, our craft apprenticeship system is in fact in crisis. The number of craft apprentices waiting to undertake their off-the-job training has risen to about 9,000 a year. People are waiting because of a shortage of craft instructors. This has very real implications and consequences for young apprentices, including the level of pay they receive. We also now see significant dropout rates, amounting to almost 1,000 apprentices every year since 2020. Some of them are packing their bags and heading for Australia, so this is a very serious matter. Qualified apprentices are, as the Taoiseach said last year, “critical for our societal well-being, and ... critical for our future”. I share that view, but he needs to tell us directly what he will do, which he has not done so far, to put a stop to this and ensure that those thousands of young apprentices can get their off-the-job training, can remain here and can qualify and contribute here rather than in the southern hemisphere.

The Taoiseach: I share Deputy McDonald’s view on the importance of apprenticeships. I was very pleased as Minister for further and higher education to see the highest number of newly registered apprentices ever in the history of the State last year. That is a good thing. We have also seen the expansion of the number of apprenticeship programmes. That is also a good thing. The Deputy is right that some people are waiting too long. The numbers are now falling, though, and SOLAS has produced a plan, which I know Deputy Mairéad Farrell will be familiar with, to eradicate the backlog for those waiting longer than they should be in terms of their phase 2 training. I will get Deputy McDonald the most up-to-date figures. I will write to her on the matter.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Today is the Taoiseach’s first day answering questions in this House in his new role. I wish him well personally. It is my first opportunity to do so.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to raise with the Taoiseach an issue that is a real concern around the mental health of young people and children. Paul Gordon of the National Youth Council of Ireland has said today that millennials, Generation Z and Generation Alpha may be the first to have worse outcomes than their parents since the foundation of the State. A National Youth Council survey shows that a third of respondents under 30 rarely or never feel optimistic about their future, citing the housing crisis and mental ill-health as reasons for this.

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I will continue to raise the housing crisis in this House - we know the serious impact it is having on the mental health of young people - but I want to focus on the issue of social media and their detrimental impacts. Tonight an RTÉ “Prime Time” programme will expose how TikTok’s algorithm, designed to increase revenues for a private company, is showing content which apparently promotes self-harm and even suicide to children as young as 13. How does the Government propose to address this serious issue? How does it propose to regulate social media companies to ensure that this sort of harmful impact on children is not felt? I am conscious that the Tánaiste, in his speech at the weekend to his party’s Ard-Fheis, referred specifically to the detrimental impacts on children’s mental health of their being exposed to content through social media. All of us as parents are alarmed about this. What will the Government do about it?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Bacik for her good wishes. I look forward to working constructively with her in this House. I really appreciate her raising this issue. I will watch the RTÉ documentary very closely this evening because I share the views and concerns that she has echoed and that the Tánaiste echoed at the weekend on the impact of social media on the mental health and well-being of our young people. We now have Coimisiún na Meán established and we have regulations and laws from Europe on digital media. We also have CyberSafeKids, with which the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Ministers, Deputies Donnelly and Foley, have engaged. I will ask all relevant Ministers to bring forward an up-to-date position on what more we can do in this space. The Tánaiste’s message at the weekend is one I support and, I hope, one we can all support. The companies need to get real on this and get on top of it. If they do not, we need to be ready to act. I have not seen the programme tonight - none of us have - but what I have read about it is deeply harrowing. We will need a response, and I will be back to this House with one.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Last week, amid all the speculation about whom the Taoiseach would promote, there was a lot of talk about geography and, clearly, that has influenced his decision-making around that. Does the Taoiseach accept that this promotes the practice of parish pump politics, or certainly the perception of it, where a Minister and holding ministerial office are more about delivering goodies for your constituency than about considering the public good? Does he accept that Ministers must have a national remit and that they should be fully accountable for the spending of public money? Will the Taoiseach give a commitment that he will draw up guidelines for all his Ministers on the announcement of funding for particular projects or the location of particular public infrastructure such that those decisions will be taken on the basis of objective decision-making-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. You are way over time.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: -----and that there would be a rationale for those decisions?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I would welcome the Taoiseach’s commitment to doing that.

The Taoiseach: I assure Deputy Shortall that I appointed people both to Cabinet and as Ministers of State based on their ability. Obviously, leaders and taoisigh can consider a variety of issues. I would point to gender. Every female Fine Gael TD seeking re-election is now a Minister or Minister of State, so that is a commitment to gender. Geography does have an important role to play in politics - it is not all just the greater Dublin area - and having different perspectives brought to the Cabinet table and decision-making tables is important. I do not

think there is a need for new guidelines on this, but I will lead a Government that will adhere to the public spending code and will of course put a rationale and criteria in place as regards our spending decisions.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Family carers play a crucial and irreplaceable role in homes across our country. Without them there would be a catastrophic crisis in care for people of all ages. Family carers are ordinary men and women who are motivated by love. This love drives them to put a family member's needs before their own. They sacrifice their own plans and desires because a family member needs their care. This enables their loved one to be cared for while continuing to live in the home. When it comes to rewarding them for their vital role, however, family carers are subjected to means-testing. Their vital work is completely disregarded. The fact that they save the State substantial money on institutional care is conveniently ignored. This is wrong, unfair and unjust. Means-testing for carers must be abolished. Our Regional Group will bring forward a Private Members' Bill next week. I ask that the Government support the Bill and make arrangements to drop the necessity for means-testing and prove to family carers that their work is valued.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Lowry for raising this important issue as regards carers. My colleague, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, has increased the income thresholds for carer's allowance such that from June a couple earning up to €900 per week and having €50,000 in savings will still be able to qualify for the full carer's allowance payment. The Minister has also established an interdepartmental group with the Department of Health tasked with looking at the area of means-tested payments to family carers, an area the Deputy suggested. The work of the interdepartmental group will be informed by a broader review of means-testing more generally which is under way in the Department of Social Protection. The work of the group will be considered in the context of the national carers' strategy. I expect to have that report to be able to make informed decisions before the budget. We will consider the motion the Deputy's grouping will table next week as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Saturday will see an important protest in Tallaght to save the post office at The Square. There are similar campaigns to save post offices in Phibsborough, Rathmines, Roscommon, New Ross and Tipperary. These are the post offices next up for privatisation by An Post. In the case of Tallaght that means the current post office will close and a new post office will open at a different location but will be smaller, have fewer staff and counters and will offer fewer services. The workers are being treated abysmally. After that, once it is privatised, it could go entirely, as did Rathfarnham post office recently, Templeogue post office and hundreds of other privatised post offices over the past five years. This privatisation agenda needs to stop for the good of communities who need their local post services and for the good of the workers. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister to meet the CEO of An Post and express the Government's opposition to this privatisation agenda and ask for it to stop?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Murphy for raising the issue. I will seek an update for him from the Minister and the CEO of An Post.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am very concerned about any plans to pause or review plans for ASD classes in rural areas. In a response to a parliamentary question the Minister for Education stated that, due to falling demographics at primary level, the Department "considers it prudent to maximise the use of existing spare accommodation capacity ... in the first instance, before considering any applications for further accommodation needs." She added: "It is also likely that most of the new additional ... classes may be required in [big] population centres."

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Burncourt National School, which is waiting for sign-off for modular accommodation for a sanctioned class, and St. Michael's Junior Boys School in Tipperary, a town with no ASD unit at primary level, are both meeting a brick wall in progressing new classes. In Newcastle, An Caisleán Nua, my local school, has had an application for additional accommodation ongoing since 2017 and has been further delayed. This is simply not good enough. These areas have approval in some cases and they just cannot get the work and get the positions for those children who need these services badly.

The Taoiseach: I will seek an update on that situation. The Government's perspective is that it wants to increase autism classes. I do not mean this in relation to Deputy McGrath's comments but we should not just use the term "ASD" because autism is obviously not a disorder. The Government is committed to increasing the number of autism classes. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, to engage with the Deputy directly.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Some 150 children attend Mullingar regional hospital for diabetes treatment. It covers counties Offaly, Longford, Westmeath and surrounding areas. The weekly clinic and nurse on-call service are now gone. That is critical. I have spoken to parents with babies aged from two or three months to six months old. These are children who are not talking yet and cannot tell their parents how they are. Chaos is ensuing. This is a dangerous situation. I ask the Taoiseach to go to the Minister for Health today to get this resolved because I am very fearful of what will happen with that service being withdrawn and not being fulfilled for those parents. Alarms are going off at night every two hours for some parents trying to balance their children's blood sugars. Will the Taoiseach speak to the Minister today to get this issue resolved for those parents?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: One hundred and fifty children 03:29 attend Mullingar regional hospital ??/ for diabetes. It covers Offaly, Longford, Westmeath and surrounding areas. The weekly clinic and the nurse on call service are now gone. That is criticfal for the simple reason.. i spoke to parents, especially with babies from two, three to six months, children that are not talking yet and cannot tell their parents how they are. Chaos is ensuing. this is a dangerous situatoin. I ask the Taoiseach to go to the Minister for Health today to get this resolved because I would be very fearful of what will happen with that service being withdrawn and not being fulfilled for thos eparents. Alarms are going off at night every two hours for some parents tryinhg to balacne their chidlren's blood sugars. I ask the Taoiseach if he will immediately today speak to thte Minister to get thsi issue resolved for those parents.

The Taoiseach: I will, and I have because this is an important issue. There is a scarcity of specialist-trained paediatric nursing staff. This has posed significant challenges to the continuity of paediatric services at the regional hospital in Mullingar in recent years. My understanding is that the hospital has maintained the provision of existing services catering to more than 12,000 children. I think there is some positive news on this matter. An interim plan was discussed with the clinical lead at a meeting last week. Hospital management has provided a commitment to finalise a solution to address the long-term staffing-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: There is no clinic today.

The Taoiseach: -----needs - hang on one second - and avoid any impact on paediatric diabetes patients and their families. I will keep a close eye on this. I will talk directly to the Minister for Health and come back to Deputy Fitzmaurice directly.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I congratulate the Taoiseach and wish him the very best in his new position.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I raise the inability of thousands of people in County Clare to get flood insurance for their homes and businesses. I recall when, in 2009, the lower River Shannon spilled its banks and flooded streets, pitches and many areas. However, only two homes in the whole county of Clare actually took water inside the front door that winter. Yet, the response of the insurance industry has been risk equalisation, an awful term. The practice works very well on the health front - everyone gets health cover but they pay for it - but not when it comes to homes. If someone's home has been bone dry and never took in a drop of water and if the topography of land is different such that one home is 20 ft higher than another, why can people in Shannon town, Shannon Banks and Westbury - about 6,000 people - not get flood cover at the moment? It gets worse, though. When they try to sell their homes and due diligence and conveyance are carried out, the sale often falls through because the solicitor will tell people not to go near the home because the owners cannot get flood cover. What can the Government do to address this?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Crowe for his good wishes and for highlighting the issue of flood insurance and the challenge in accessing it for his constituents. I know this is a very real and sensitive issue in his part of the country and a number of other parts as well. Just last week, I appointed Deputy Richmond as Minister of State at the Department of Finance with responsibility for insurance. I will ask that he arrange to have an early meeting with the Deputy on this matter.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I congratulate the Taoiseach on his elevation to his office and wish him well in his time in that office. I also congratulate my county compatriot, Deputy O'Donovan, on his elevation to Minister. My question also relates to flooding in County Clare. I see Deputy Crowe has left the Chamber. It is about the flooding of the railway line between Galway and Limerick just south of Ennis at Ballycar. As Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan sat on this for two and a half years. I hope the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, in his new role with responsibility for the OPW, makes it his highest priority. Will the Taoiseach impress upon the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, as I will, the importance of this infrastructure and services between Galway, Ennis and Limerick? We need a long-term solution locked in. A solution has been identified, as has the cost. It has been agreed between stakeholders; it just needs to be pushed on by the OPW.

The Taoiseach: I certainly will. I have been listening to reports on this issue in the media in recent weeks. I know it is an extraordinarily frustrating situation for people relying on accessing the railway line from Galway to Ennis and Limerick. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to keep a close eye on the issue and to encourage the stakeholders to get on with the plan. I will come back to Deputy Leddin directly.

Deputy Chris Andrews: For months, the Government has watched Mount Street turn into a tented city. Fine Gael's neglect of the inner city continues. Many residents do not feel safe around Mount Street or, indeed, anywhere in the city. Small local businesses next to Mount Street are on the brink of closing down because of the shambles this Government has created. The people I represent are sick of this Government and of being treated so disgracefully and neglected. If this happened on the streets in Greystones or Ballsbridge, we would see decisive

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action but because it is the inner city, it is being ignored and neglected. Families are living in flats riddled with dampness and mould. The continued neglect of the inner city needs to stop. Everyone agrees that what is happening on Mount Street is shambolic. Talk is cheap. What will the Government actually do about it?

The Taoiseach: What Deputy Andrews will not do is slur my home town. We should not be divisive on these issues. There are real challenges regarding Mount Street; the Deputy is quite correct. There are real challenges concerning international protection, the International Protection Office being located in the vicinity of Mount Street. The Government is working around the clock to try to find alternative solutions, some of which-----

Deputy Chris Andrews: Baggot Street hospital is empty.

The Taoiseach: -----by the way, are in my constituency. Rather than seeking to divide the House or pit one community against the other-----

Deputy Chris Andrews: Baggot Street hospital is empty.

The Taoiseach: -----it is the people of County Wicklow, as Deputy Whitmore and I know, who are now trying to assist in providing responses. This is about a whole-country response. I very much take the point about the need to continue to invest in the inner city. We will very shortly set up a Dublin city task force. I would welcome the Deputy's thoughts and input into that.

Deputy James O'Connor: First and foremost, from one baby of the House to another, I congratulate the Taoiseach on his appointment. I wish him well. He is the youngest Taoiseach the country has ever had and the issue I raise is one our generations share as a major issue, namely, housing and getting more housing built. The Government has done huge work under Housing for All which has been successful as regards increasing the capacity, but we need to look at modular housing for young working professionals to increase housing stock. Industry feels that we could deliver 14,000 additional A-rated homes per annum if the Government were to get behind this for commercial use, not only for those in the asylum process or for temporary emergency accommodation for those who come here fleeing conflict. We need to look at it in a wider context because industry can deliver in this area. Will the Government look at this to increase housing stock further?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his good wishes.

The Government definitely has an open mind on this. There are potentially lessons that can be learned from some of the responses we have put in place to assist people in the humanitarian situations arising in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world. I see the excellent use of modular or rapid-build housing in many places such as Backweston and Mahon in County Cork. I raised the use of modern methods of construction as an item at a meeting on housing yesterday. We certainly have an open mind in relation to it.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I congratulate the Taoiseach on his election to the office he holds. I wish him well for the future. This is my first opportunity to do so. You know you are getting old when the Taoiseach is younger than you.

I will raise a serious matter. As the Taoiseach may be aware, bogus self-employment has been a serious problem affecting workers at RTÉ for a long time. In some cases, it has dragged

on for decades for people. Meanwhile, people find themselves in stressful scenarios, such as RTÉ dragging them through lengthy proceedings to have these matters addressed and still some people are not satisfied with their circumstances. The Oireachtas committee on media will meet next week. Individual workers, according to advice from the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, will not be allowed to give individual testimonies about their experiences. They will be protesting outside the gate. Will the Taoiseach consider meeting some of these workers to give them a hearing because they feel that they have not been heard? Will he oversee a whole-of-government response to this issue? A number of Departments are involved and the matter has been dragging on for too long without being resolved.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his good wishes.

As he may be aware, in late 2020, the Department of Social Protection commenced an investigation into the PRSI classification of RTÉ's contractors. RTÉ provided the Department with lists of 695 workers who were engaged on a contract basis in 2018, 2019 and 2020 and these form the basis of the investigation. The scale of the investigation in RTÉ is significant and further workers may be brought into the scope of the investigation as it proceeds. It is in the interests of workers, RTÉ and the Department that the investigations are progressed in a timely and efficient manner. In conducting these investigations, a fundamental objective is, first, to ensure workers do not suffer a loss of entitlement to social insurance benefits as a consequence of misclassification and, second, to ensure employers collect and remit the correct amount in social insurance contributions. Where the investigation identifies that this has not been the case, the worker's record is corrected and employers are required to remit the correct value of contributions backdated as appropriate. To date, 138 scope decisions have issued, of which 93 were determined to have an employee status and 45 to be self-employed. I will write to the Deputy with further information on this. I am happy for the Government to engage.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are out of time now and there are five speakers left, so I ask for their co-operation with brevity.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I will follow up on a comment the Taoiseach made earlier about the supposed good news and the clinical lead of the paediatric diabetes service in Mullingar. With the greatest respect, the information the Taoiseach put on the record of the Dáil is not entirely correct, because that letter was not seen by the clinical lead, Professor O'Grady, until after it had been issued to parents. The proposed solution that has been put forward today is to move the paediatric diabetes nurse from Portlaoise to Mullingar for a period of three weeks. With the greatest of respect to this lady - I have no doubt she is very good at what she does - I am told that she has no training in pumps or pump management. If the 145 children who attend the Mullingar service have an issue with their pump, there is no support available to them. The parents, especially of children as young as two years of age who have been recently diagnosed, are beside themselves with worry at this point. They cannot go to their GPs.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Their GPs will tell them they do not have the expertise-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: -----to be able to read the rates and that they need the service to be properly resourced.

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An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Again, this is not the first time this matter has been raised.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, we are way over time. I ask the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: This service was in exactly the same position three years ago, almost to the day.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I asked for co-operation. We are way over time. Please.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate Deputy Clarke raising the issue and the seriousness of it. The information I put on the record of the House is the information I was given, that an interim plan was discussed with the clinical lead at a meeting last week - that is what my note tells me and I can only relay that to the House - and that hospital management provided a commitment to finalise a solution to address the longer term staffing needs of the service to ensure stability and avoid any impact on paediatric diabetes patients and their families. On foot of what the Deputy has said, I will ensure her comments are conveyed to the Minister for Health and that he responds to her directly.

Deputy Patrick Costello: The issues surrounding apartment and fire defects have highlighted in some instances the deficiencies in the Multi-Unit Developments Act. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to review this legislation. Given the Government's time is drawing to a close, will this review start and, more important, finish before the programme for Government finishes?

The Taoiseach: There is nothing yet. The Government will run until March 2025, but I will get an update from the Minister about the important issue the Deputy raised. I know he has raised it before and that people are looking for timely news about it. I will get him a written note.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I raise the plight of the Gaeltacht community in Waterford, An Rinn and the whole parish. The GP services have closed recently. The refurbished Garda station is now shuttered and the gardaí have been transferred. There are no gardaí there and now the post office is to close. An existing retailer in An Rinn is looking into a post office contract and was asked to contribute €44,000 to an An Post fit-out scheme to service a completely unsustainable contract, which is basically worth €4 to him for a 47-hour week. The Government constantly communicates its desire to protect our teanga. Údarás na Gaeltachta has spent €50 million in the past five years but not a penny was spent in the Waterford Gaeltacht. Will the Taoiseach take action to direct that subventions be provided by An Post and-or Údarás na Gaeltachta to make viable this community post office and support the service in An Rinn agus an Sean Phobal?

The Taoiseach: While I am not directly familiar with the issue, my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, tells me she spoke to the new Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, Deputy Thomas Byrne, this morning and he has committed to take a look at the issue. We will revert to the Deputy directly about it.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Restaurants Association of Ireland has raised serious concerns about the fact that 212 restaurants have closed. This equates to a loss of €288 million to our

economy. The Irish Hairdressers Federation has also expressed serious concern and raised the need for the VAT rate to be reduced to 9% again. This would protect jobs in restaurants in our small towns and villages and in hairdressing salons. We need to do it and I call on the Taoiseach to ensure that in the forthcoming budget the VAT rate will be reduced to 9%.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the seriousness of the issue the Deputy raised and the pressure small businesses are under. I intend to work with Government colleagues to see how we can support small businesses. The budget will be published in October. The budget conversations seem to start earlier every year, but I take on board the seriousness of the matter the Deputy raised and I am happy to engage with her as we get closer to budget day. The summer economic statement in June or July will be the next point in budget discussions.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: From one Wicklow TD to another, I wish the Taoiseach the absolute best in his new role.

I feel like a broken record when I address this issue. The Taoiseach is familiar with it. It is the 20 or so students in Greystones who do not have a secondary school place yet for September. We have been repeatedly told that a solution will be found for them. We are only five or six weeks away from secondary schools closing and the primary schools will close a few weeks later. These students do not know where they will be going in late August. Entrance exams are happening at the moment. Applications for the school transport scheme close in less than two weeks' time. Will the Taoiseach give a timeframe indicating when those parents and students will be told they will have a place for school?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising this issue that she raises regularly, as she rightly should. It is a stressful issue for people in Greystones, for parents and specifically for the young people who are wondering what the name of their school will be. I spoke with a school principal in Greystones about this yesterday and to the Minister for Education directly today. We need an urgent update. The Minister shares that view and I will be using my offices to help to bring about clarity and certainty for students in our constituency and, as Taoiseach, for any student in the country who is not yet sure of a secondary school place. I am happy to talk to Deputy Whitmore directly about it.

4 o'clock

Fair Procedures in the Administration of Justice Bill 2024: First Stage

Deputy Patrick Costello: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide and guarantee that administrative decision makers operating under Article 37 of Bunreacht na hÉireann are obligated to dispense of their quasi-judicial functions in accordance with due process and fair procedures, to give the Minister power to designate such bodies and to give the Minister power to issue regulations in relation to procedures to ensure that quasi-judicial determinations are subject to the guarantee of certain adequate fair procedures being in place.

The genesis of the Bill is the decision of the Supreme Court in the Zalewski case in recent years. Before I start into it, I must thank a young barrister by the name of Kevin Kelly who

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assisted me quite ably in the drafting of this legislation. In the case, Mr. Zalewski went to seek redress from the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, where, quite simply, he did not receive any reasonable fair treatment or clear, fair, transparent procedures.

This was appealed through the courts up to the Supreme Court, which agreed quite clearly that he did not get these fair procedures. In his decision, the Chief Justice said that the standard of justice administered in quasi-judicial bodies under Article 37 of the Constitution cannot fall below the standard of justice administered in the courts under Article 34. This is a hugely consequential judgment because, essentially, there is a huge problem with the role of quasi-judicial bodies. I could spend a long time talking about that.

Essentially, however, we are pushing more of our justice administration on to these quasi-judicial bodies where the same level of fair procedures and balance, fairness and justice is not administered. The Chief Justice said quite clearly that this is wrong and that justice administered under Article 37 cannot fall below the standard of justice administered under Article 34. As I said, however, the reality is that it does, and does so regularly.

Interestingly, we passed some legislation in the wake of the Zalewski case to ensure fair procedures. We have only done it for the WRC and Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. However, there are a huge variety of quasi-judicial bodies that it would seem are simply built on sand and at risk of collapsing and being thrown out by the courts for a failure to provide any meaningful fair procedures to those who come seeking justice and redress.

The aim of this Bill is to address that in a broad way instead of in piecemeal fashion. The Bill starts by defining quasi-judicial bodies and what the relevant bodies are. Supplementary to that, it provides power to the Minister to delegate a relevant body as a quasi-judicial body under Article 37. Then, it states clearly that the standard of justice for administrative decision-makers cannot fall below that which is available in a court. This includes a person knowing the full case against him or her and the ability to cross-examine, ability to appeal and ability to compel witnesses. These are the sorts of things that quite often do not feature in quasi-judicial bodies and are an essential part of the administration of justice. Therefore, it creates a standard that must be adhered to. Again, any quasi-judicial body that exists at the minute that does not provide for fair procedures is at risk of being struck out by the courts as unconstitutional. The aim of this Bill is to fix that.

The Government or draftspeople in some Departments have not grasped how consequential and serious this is because they keep creating new quasi-judicial bodies, which are effectively undermining the administration of justice in this country. Quite often, when they do, they do not actually provide for these fair procedures. Again, as I said, they are simply houses built on sand that are liable to collapse.

Finally, the Bill provides power for the Minister to make regulations. These will be similar to orders, of course, that we see in the superior courts and District Court and Circuit Court. Fundamentally, this Bill is about saying that quasi-judicial bodies need to work to a higher standard. This is not about the people in there, the administrative decision-makers, but the structures and rules under which they are operating. They need to be stronger and better or we are not providing justice for our citizens, and we are not in line with what the Supreme Court said whereby justice administered under Article 37 cannot fall below the standard of Article 34. Quite frankly, we frequently fall below that standard. That needs to be fixed and this Bill will do that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):
No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Patrick Costello: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024: First Stage

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a body to be known, in the Irish language, as *An Coimisiún um Thodhchaí na Feirme Teaghlaigh* or, in the English language, as the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm; to define its functions; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

As somebody born, raised and living on a family farm, I am very glad to have the opportunity to introduce the Bill, honouring a key commitment made by my party. This legislation is about protecting the family farm and responding to, and planning for, the many challenges that family farms face. It is also about bringing forward comprehensive and practical recommendations on how this can be done in a proactive and timely way, and taking action to sustain family farms, recognising their value not only to our island but to our communities, both economically and socially.

The agrifood sector is our oldest and largest indigenous exporting sector. As many in this House will know, we export to more than 180 countries around the globe. We have achieved record exports in recent years with goods valued at more than €18 billion exported in 2022. Therefore, it is very obvious that this is something very much worth protecting.

Despite our renowned global reputation for producing food at the highest of standards and the billions of euro we hear about when it comes to exports, particularly the value of our beef and dairy, this is not matched in the profits and viability of our family farms. Farmers have never faced so many challenges and never has there been so much uncertainty, particularly about the generation coming forward. This really should be a matter of deep concern to this House.

We cannot, and should not, leave the agricultural sector to chance, reacting to some crises, leaving some farmers feeling alone and really struggling with no plan for that very real threat some of our family farms feel, especially when it comes to rising input costs and in the face of climate action pressures. We really are at a crossroads when it comes to Irish agriculture.

This legislation will establish a commission, the sole responsibility of which will be protecting and sustaining the family farm, reporting and making recommendations directly to the

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Minister and this House on securing its economic viability and future through generational renewal and succession planning, promoting a better understanding of how we produce food and supporting family farmers in the face of climate action. The commission will engage directly with farm organisations and, in some cases, with farmers directly. We have also incorporated accountability into this legislation to ensure we do not establish a talking shop. The commission recommendations will go before the Dáil. Each recommendation made by the commission will be responded to by Government and any rejected reason and a clear timeline will be given. Establishing this commission commits to the future of our family farms. It signals intent that challenges they face will be dealt with head-on by Government.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The family farm is the cornerstone of rural communities and regional economies across this island. Family farming is almost uniquely Irish, particularly in a European context and, therefore, the Irish family farm must be protected.

We, as a society and as political representatives, have increased the demands on our farmers. We expect them to produce the highest quality food in the world, which they do, and we expect them to do that within the strictest animal welfare, environmental, biodiversity and climate rules in the world, which they do. What is needed is fairness, including a fair Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, fair prices and fair play. Our farming families face an onslaught of challenges, including an immediate fodder shortage. As their margins are hammered by rising energy and grain costs, they are tasked with playing an increasingly important role in our response to the climate and biodiversity crises. When Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael representatives in Ireland and Europe add to farmers' burden by expecting them to do more while receiving fewer supports, they are part of the additional pressure. The challenge for all of us in public life is to put in place a framework that will allow our farming community to meet the challenges we face while also allowing them to remain in business. Successive Governments have failed in that regard.

Sinn Féin's legislation mandates the Government to establish a commission on the future of the family farm. The commission will be charged with examining all the needs of the family farm, including what is required to contribute to biodiversity protection and emissions reductions, as well as the supports necessary, as those reductions are being made, to ensure the continued economic viability of the family farm. Euro for euro, the Government cannot deny that the current CAP budget provides much less funding than it previously did in real terms while putting many more obligations on farmers. The Government's proposed climate action measures pay lip service to assistance for agriculture and rural communities but offer virtually nothing by way of meaningful supports. It is time for a comprehensive plan to ensure the viability of the family farm for generations to come. Nothing we have seen from the Government to date suggests it has a plan to achieve this. The legislation Deputy Kerrane and I are bringing forward sets out a mechanism to deliver such a plan. I commend it to the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):
No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

EU Regulations on International Protection, Asylum and Migration: Referral to Joint Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann, having regard to Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and noting that copies of the following proposed measures were laid before Dáil Éireann on 23rd October, 2020, 23rd October, 2020, 29th October, 2020, 2nd August, 2016, 28th October, 2020, 2nd August, 2016, and 2nd August, 2016 respectively:

(i) Amended proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU,

(ii) Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No. 604/2013,

(iii) Amended proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of “Eurodac” for the comparison of biometric data for the effective application of Regulation (EU) No. 604/2013 and Directive 2001/55/EC, for identifying an illegally staying third-country national or stateless person and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by MS’ law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes and amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1240, (EU) 2019/818 and (EU) 2017/2226,

(iv) Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection and for the content of the protection granted and amending Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25th November, 2003, concerning the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents,

(v) Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council addressing situations of crisis and force majeure in the field of migration and asylum,

(vi) Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast), and

(vii) Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Union Resettlement Framework and amending Regulation (EU) No. 516/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council,

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approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under the said Protocol No. 21, to accept, in the event that the foregoing proposed measures are adopted by the Council pursuant to Title V of Part Three of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the measures so-adopted, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice, in accordance with Standing Order 95(5), which, not later than 2nd May, 2024, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 17 April 2024.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [7944/24]

2. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will next meet. [8950/24]

3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [9141/24]

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [12452/24]

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [13013/24]

6. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [10625/24]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [10628/24]

8. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [14091/24]

9. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [15185/24]

10. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [16355/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 10, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on the environment and climate action was formally reconstituted last week. It oversees implementation of the ambitious programme for Government commitments in regard to the environment and climate change. The committee has met on 21 occasions since July 2020, most recently on 22 February. I intend to schedule its next meeting very shortly.

The committee considers the wide range of issues that require action in Ireland's transition to a low-carbon, climate resilient and sustainable future in which we take full advantage of the renewable energy potential we possess and move away from our dependence on expensive, imported fossil fuels. The Government's objective is for Ireland to play its full part in EU and global efforts to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change and to ensure we protect ourselves from the adverse impacts we are already experiencing and that we know will become more acute.

Climate action is a complex challenge. It demands major policy, regulatory, fiscal and sectoral initiatives across all of the economy, with implications for all communities and for every citizen. The realities of climate change and the commitments we have made at UN, EU and national levels demand a transformation in how we do things. The Government will continue to be ambitious in this area and will work with sectors, communities and households to ensure this transformation is done in a way that is fair and collaborative. We will continue to provide the incentives, protections and supports that are required to help people adjust.

Our ambition is that, working together, we can help to create a better Ireland that is well positioned to thrive, economically, socially and environmentally, in the rapidly changing circumstances climate change is bringing. Much work has been done since 2020. We are now starting to see those efforts bear fruit through reductions in the level of emissions. However, we still have a great distance to travel in the years ahead. The Cabinet committee will continue to oversee those efforts, including the implementation of the climate action plan and other environmental and energy commitments in our programme for Government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As there are many Deputies looking to contribute, I ask for their co-operation. Each speaker will have one and a half minutes.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I congratulate the Taoiseach on his election. I wish him the best of luck in the months ahead.

I raise the issue of emissions. The Taoiseach said in his response that we have, fortunately, seen a reduction in overall emissions. However, one area in which emissions are on the increase is transport. Electric vehicles, EVs, will play a key role in reducing emissions in transport, especially in more rural areas. EVs have their detractors. It has become a favourite pastime of some people to bash them or spread misinformation about them. However, they still have a key role to play. Comparing the first three months of this year with the first three months of 2023, there has been a drop in sales of EVs of 10%. That might be down to a lot of factors but one it definitely can be attributed to is that the grant has been reduced from €6,000 to €3,500 per EV. I ask that the grant be restored in full to once again incentivise the purchase of EVs. They play a key role in reducing emissions in the transport sector.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There is a target to double the amount of energy generated from onshore wind between now and 2030 but delivery has fallen off a cliff edge under the Government's watch. The planning system is not fit for purpose. Wind energy guidelines are a case

in point. The existing guidelines were published in 2006, which is a lifetime ago in terms of technology and everything else. In the meantime, as communities grow increasingly frustrated, we are told a landmark High Court ruling on wind farm noise, which has the potential to delay projects further, has been referred to the Attorney General. This situation is a mess of the Government's making. There are balances to be struck between the rights of communities and the need to develop renewable energy. Will the Taoiseach provide an update on the Government's response to the High Court ruling? When will updated wind energy guidelines be published?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am on record as saying that I would have much preferred for a general election to have taken place when the previous Taoiseach resigned. However, I wish the new Taoiseach luck in his role. There is no shortage of issues in front of him at this time.

I raise the ever-present issue for many elected representatives of problems in our dealings with Uisce Éireann. Lately, I have been dealing with issues locally in the likes of Tom Bellew Avenue in Dundalk. I will not go into the details of the problem with a valve, which we are told will be replaced at the end of June. The valve can sense when demand fluctuates and this impacts on water pressure when people use their showers and all the rest of it. I will be getting answers at some stage regarding other estates where residents have the same issue. We are told there is no problem. I could also talk about Bay Estate in Dundalk. I have raised multiple issues. After the flooding, we asked about the drainage area plan and I submitted multiple questions. I am asking for the Taoiseach's aid in this matter because, unfortunately, there has been a refusal to have a meeting. Uisce Éireann keeps telling me to use its email address for elected representatives. That is not good enough. I have had reports back from the company and have questions. I would be forever following up with my secondary questions, so I need to have a meeting with the company. I have asked the chief executive for one in the past while. I will give one of the answers I have got on my own estate, Bay Estate. It claims the estate is in a very poor state of repair, with frequent blockages, and prone to groundwater leaking into the network. It adds that it is proposed to undertake surveys first and then follow up with rehabilitation works under the infiltration reduction programme. However, I have major questions on capacity with respect to dealing with floodwater and wastewater, and I really need a meeting.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I was not aware until a bus driver who works for Dublin Bus contacted me that a major transport conference is taking place in Dublin this week. It is the Transport Research Arena conference, which I believe the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, are at to discuss sustainable transport. The driver asked me why there are no bus drivers at the conference. The same driver keeps me informed about issues affecting bus workers. He outlined what is required if the authorities want to know how to make public transport actually work and indeed recruit and retain bus drivers, which is critical to having a system that is more reliable and with more frequent services. A huge part of the problem leading to a lack of reliability in public transport in places like Dublin is that the company cannot recruit and retain enough bus workers because the conditions are crap. If someone is working in the privatised part of the system, it is worse. Therefore, there is very little incentive to work for the companies that run the routes that are privatised. The driver I spoke to made a very good point. He asked where the representation for bus workers is at the discussions on how to modernise and make sustainable and functional the public transport we need if we want to get people out of cars and into public transport. The same thing could be said about representatives of taxi drivers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is a growing movement around the world, including on this island, to defend the rights of nature. Increasingly, people understand that without the protec-

tion of the rights of nature, there cannot be a human right to a healthy environment. Human rights and the rights of nature go hand in hand. On Thursday, campaigners for the rights of nature will gather at 11 a.m. outside the Dáil ahead of the debate we will have in the afternoon on the Oireachtas environment committee's report on the work of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. Our committee, in line with the citizens' assembly, recommended that a referendum be held on inserting the rights of nature and the right to a healthy environment into the Constitution and that an expert group be established during the lifetime of the Government to begin preparing the referendum questions. Does the Taoiseach support the holding of such a referendum? Have there been any moves to establish such an expert group? If not, will he ensure there is movement on it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has six minutes.

The Taoiseach: I will do my very best. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I am learning that these questions have covered a wider area than that covered by the tabled questions, which concern when we will hold the next meeting of the Cabinet committee. It will be scheduled shortly.

I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for his kind wishes. I look forward to working with him. I thank him also for highlighting the importance electric vehicles. His view is one that I share. I believe it is also one that the Tánaiste shares. We all signed up to a programme for Government that was anti-carbon, not anti-car, and therefore have to consider how we can use new technologies to enable people who require cars to use them more sustainably. The financial barrier to ownership of an EV is an issue. It is probably not the only one but it is one that I know people are factoring in. Issues regarding the level of a grant will be a matter for the budgetary process, as the Deputy will have expected me to say, but he is getting his speak in early on the matter. I will certainly reflect the Deputy's views to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and also seek his views. The Government's scale of ambition for EVs remains the same and therefore we need to consider every lever we can pull to continue to drive on – pardon the pun – the progress we need to make on electric vehicles. There has been good progress but much more needs to be done.

I thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising his question. I will get him an answer directly on where we are and the timeline for the wind guidelines; however, offshore renewable energy remains a very major part of-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Onshore.

The Taoiseach: Onshore; my apologies. I will get the Deputy an update on the wind guidelines. I am aware that the Attorney General's advice was being sought. I will ask when we should expect the outcome in that regard and revert to the Deputy directly.

I learned a long time ago that it is easier to offer Deputy Ó Murchú a meeting than not do so, so I advise Uisce Éireann to follow the same approach. It is important that State agencies be accessible to elected representatives. Of course, the format in which such meetings can take place can vary. People can use Zoom and everything else these days. The Deputy clearly has a number of important issues of concern regarding Uisce Éireann for his community and constituency. I hope Uisce Éireann can facilitate his request. I will certainly take it up on his behalf with the line Minister.

Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to the conference taking place in Dublin. I am not across it but I take the Deputy's point. Listening to the voices of workers is a very good thing to do. I

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am obviously not the organiser or issuer of the invites but I recently had a conversation at Dublin Bus on apprenticeships, how to attract more people into the industry, the issue of preparing for the very significant transformation the bus fleet is going to undergo, the skills that will be required to maintain it and the job opportunities that exist, but also the challenges presented by having to learn new skills. I will relay the Deputy's views to the Minister for Transport and the Minister of State. It is important in general, when approaching the issue of climate action, to adopt the approach of trying to bring people with us, listen to them, talk to them and engage with them. Certainly, workers are a very important part of that.

Deputy Paul Murphy referred to the rights of nature. I am a supporter of the nature restoration law. I will continue to articulate that view in Europe. I will be at the European Council this week and I will be making the point on the new European strategic agenda, which is basically the five-year roadmap for the vision and values of Europe. The climate needs to be stressed much more strongly in the draft document than it currently is. I am aware that there are some views on that.

I understand the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss published its report in March 2023 and agreed 159 recommendations, 73 of which were high level and 86 of which were sector specific. That gives us a sense of the depth and breadth. The recommendations of the assembly were deliberated upon by an Oireachtas joint committee. I believe it had a series of engagements with stakeholders, including the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. The latter published its report in December and it contained 86 recommendations. My note tells me that 93% of the recommendations of the citizens' assembly and 95% of the calls to action of the children and young people's assembly have been implemented or are in progress. The phrase "in progress" is one we always need to watch in politics.

On the specific recommendation on a referendum, Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030, published in January, contains an action whereby the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will explore ways in which the rights of nature could be formally recognised, including, potentially, in our Constitution. I understand it is due to conclude its deliberations this year, and these will inform Government thinking.

Cabinet Committees

11. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [8206/24]

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [13014/24]

13. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [13016/24]

14. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [13984/24]

15. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [14092/24]

16. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the econ-

omy and investment will next meet. [14157/24]

17. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [15165/24]

18. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [15186/24]

19. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [15144/24]

20. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [15147/24]

21. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy and investment will next meet. [16761/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 to 21, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on the economy and investment was re-established by the Government on 10 April and its next meeting will be scheduled for the coming weeks. The committee last met on 15 February of this year. It comprises the Taoiseach; the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and for Defence and the Ministers for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Transport, Finance, Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and the Media. Other Ministers and Ministers of State are invited to participate as required or where the agenda is relevant to their departmental responsibilities.

The committee oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments aimed at sustainable economic recovery, investment and job creation, including Harnessing Digital, which is Ireland's national digital strategy.

Despite many external challenges, I am pleased we continue to live in a country that is seeing a very strong economic performance, with more people at work than ever before, female participation in the workforce close to an all-time high and very low levels of unemployment. Thankfully, inflation continues to fall, while households and businesses have been supported, quite rightly, through a range of cost-of-living measures.

Our economic model continues to be founded on a well-established and successful pro-enterprise policy framework, providing a stable and sustainable regulatory and tax environment, sound management of the public finances, and significant investment in the infrastructure and skills required to ensure our future competitiveness.

As with all policy areas, economic issues are regularly discussed at full Government meetings, not just at Cabinet committee meetings. Of course, all formal decisions on our economy and, indeed, all formal decisions of the Government are made at full Cabinet meetings.

Deputy Mick Barry: We are told that we are living in the bright, shiny Ireland of the 2020s. Turn on many a tap in Cork city today and you might think that you had been transported back to the 1920s. Why? It is because of what is coming out of those taps. It is brown water, orange water, dirty and discoloured with sediment from the inside of water pipes that are more than 100 years old in some cases. I would reckon myself that a majority of people in Cork city now do

not trust their water supply. This problem is not new. It has been going on for two years. Up until yesterday, the Tánaiste had made no criticism of Uisce Éireann. It was like he was auditioning for a role as the quiet man. Yesterday, even he felt compelled to speak out. Here is the thing, Taoiseach. Clean, safe water is a human right and the Government cannot just pass the buck to Uisce Éireann. When will the Government do something real about this?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would also offer to Deputy Barry that manganese seems to be an issue with water discolouration. Louth County Council and Irish Water have done much work on pilot schemes. Some of my follow-up questions for Uisce Éireann relate specifically to that.

House prices and rents are at record highs. There is a rising market. Analysts are now saying that the rate of house price inflation is set to accelerate even further. This is forcing an entire generation of young people to emigrate. Meanwhile, Government has missed all of its affordable housing targets for the fourth year in a row. Moreover, many of these homes are not affordable. I will talk about Cois Farraige, Blackrock, just outside Dundalk, which is Louth County Council's first scheme in years. A price of €305,000 is certainly not affordable for many people. Only five out of ten offerings were taken up. There were at least 26 applications but most of them did not reach criteria. Louth County Council itself stated there is an issue with the criteria. Can we look at the criteria, the costs and the targets relating to affordable housing? It is not working at this point in time.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: When we talk about the economy, we have to talk about the value of big sporting occasions and events to the Irish economy, especially in the regional and peripheral areas. It was sad to learn over the past couple of days that Ireland's bid to host the World Rally Championship is in jeopardy. Is there anything the Taoiseach can do in his high office to intervene and try to save this? I understand the hands of the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, are tied in that he has been told he has to get advice about the economic value but I can tell the Taoiseach this from my own perspective. I am from Clonakilty, where we host the West Cork Rally. It is a much smaller rally but the economic value and buzz that the event brings to my region is incredible. It is not just the crowds, the people or atmosphere but every hotel, restaurant and café is full from Cork to Bantry. The economic spend is phenomenal. It would be a great shame if we missed out on this opportunity. There is a vibrant rally community here in Ireland. Irish rally is on the crest of a wave with William Creighton winning the Junior World Rally Championship. We need to build on that momentum and try to do our best to ensure that this event goes ahead.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, report suggests that half of young people are very unhappy with their housing situation and more than half feel their mental health is seriously being affected by this issue. They have good reason to feel that way. I will give two examples. This week, I met a family who are being evicted. They are a working family who got a notice to quit on grounds of sale. They are in receipt of the HAP now but they are being evicted. If they are made homeless and put into emergency accommodation, they will not be entitled to HAP because they are over the threshold. If you are on HAP, your income can go up because you are working and your rent increases a bit. It is the same in social housing. If you are made homeless because you are over the threshold, when you need the help most, you are told you cannot have any of it and are not entitled to social housing either, so you are trapped in social housing. It is crazy.

I know another working mother who, for similar reasons, has been in emergency accommo-

dation for four years with her son, in one-bedroom accommodation. Those sorts of anomalies have to be addressed because working people who have done nothing wrong are now getting trapped because they are a bit over certain thresholds in a hopeless situation. They are homeless and have no chance. Incidentally, the only accommodation available to them is €3,000 a month. Their combined income after tax is €48,000, so to pay the rent that is being charged in the area without HAP support, they would be paying 75% of their income on the rents that are available.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach told his Ard-Fheis that he would move mountains to get the children out of the box room and into a home of their own. We know what the consequences for the children are of being in the box room. The NYCI report talks about over half of young people having low mental well-being, precisely because they are stuck in the box room with no prospect of having a home or space to themselves. We know why we have got to this point. In essence, it is because we have had housing policy driven by a perverse version of trickle-down economics. It is the idea of giving money and incentives to developers and big landlords and hoping that will get the market moving and get housing going. It has not worked up until this point and the housing crisis has got worse and worse.

The indications of Deputy Harris's reign as Taoiseach marking any sort of turning of the page on that are not good. One of the first decisions it seems the Taoiseach has made, and he might confirm it, has been to extend the waiver of development levies. He might say how much that is going to cost the State. Originally one year, so I presume also another year, was going to cost in excess of €300 million. That is €300 million which could be public money, which could be sitting in local authorities and used to build housing. Instead, it is being left in the pockets of big developers. This is not the way to address the housing crisis. This is the way that has been tried and failed over and over again. Instead of giving public money to private developers, we need to actually build and retrofit homes on a significant scale.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: One of the biggest economic and social scandals this country has seen is the defective blocks scandal. Last night, hundreds of homeowners in Mayo gathered at the Great National Hotel in Ballina to tell us how the defective blocks scheme is not working for them. The anguish of trying to access this scheme that is clearly not fit for purpose was palpable. The buck now stops with the Taoiseach. They are looking to the Taoiseach, as Head of Government, to end the nightmare because the Minister and his Department officials are just not listening. He is certainly not hearing what I and my Sinn Féin colleagues have been telling him for months now, or indeed for years in the case of some of us.

Their question to the Taoiseach is as follows. Since 2013, homeowners in Mayo have been campaigning to deliver a fit-for-purpose scheme that would deliver 100% financial redress and 100% support to enable homeowners to rebuild their homes. Does the Taoiseach commit to putting forward the necessary changes to deliver a resolution to the priority issues in the document that I have now given to him? Does the Taoiseach see the issue that his housing Minister is failing to see? Otherwise, as Gina, one of the homeowners, rightly asked last night, what are we meant to do?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for the wide range of issues. First, I assure Deputy Barry that the Tánaiste is anything but a quiet man. I have no doubt but that he will give the issue of the water supply and what the Deputy states is a lack of public trust in the water supply his absolute attention. I certainly will follow the matter up with both Uisce Éireann and the Minister for housing. I am happy to come back to Deputy Barry on that issue.

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In response to Deputy Ó Murchú, I am clear that there is much more we need to do when it comes to housing but in saying that, I am also very clear there are other important things to say too. We are now building social housing at a rate and pace that we have not seen in this country since the 1970s. In my lifetime, we have never been building social housing at the scale we now are. We have more to do. We need to revise our targets. I have certainly outlined my own view on the level of ambition I think we need to get to between 2025 and 2030. We need to deliver between now and the end of the decade. We have a way to go on affordable housing but we can now point to positive and significant increases year on year. I remember when my party came to government for the first time in this cycle in 2011, there were fewer than 7,000 homes built in Ireland that year. Last year, more than 30,000 homes were built and this year, I believe we are on track to break our targets again in terms of exceeding delivery. We will continue, no doubt, to debate housing, quite rightly as we should, and how we best deliver it for our people. When we take the politics out of it I know that is what everybody in the House does want to do.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan spoke about the World Rally Championship. I have a note on this but it is in my office and I do not have it with me. I am very well aware of the work the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, have been doing on this issue. It appears that it may not be a possibility for the next world rally but I am very clear that this is something Ireland is extremely interested in making happen. It is very important there is intensive engagement, as I know there will be and as the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, and the Minister, Deputy Martin, wish there to be. I am taken by the point Deputy O'Sullivan made about the benefits of such sporting events to regional and rural Ireland and the spin-off benefits that he clearly articulated in terms of small businesses such as cafes and the hospitality sector. I will get a written update on it for the Deputy shortly.

I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for highlighting the National Youth Council of Ireland's report, which outlines the level of frustration, angst, disappointment and concern young people feel about their housing prospects. On one level, the Government cannot be surprised by it because it is the biggest societal issue faced by young people. What I would say to those young people is they are now back living in a country where, year on year, the number of homes being built is massively increasing, as is the composition and diversity of those homes in terms of social, affordable and private-to-purchase homes. There are a number of schemes in place and we have different views on them and that is okay. We have put in place a number of schemes to try to help people get some of their own money back towards a deposit. We certainly intend to keep these schemes in place. I sincerely thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for raising some of the anomalies with regard to the housing assistance payment. He put it quite well. I will take a look at it and speak to the Ministers for housing and social protection on this situation.

To respond to Deputy Paul Murphy, we have not yet taken a formal decision on the waiver. I expect us to take a decision on it very shortly. It has not yet come to government. Deputy Murphy and I have differing views on it and I respect that, but it is my position that I would like to see it continue. I see it as a measure that reduces the cost of building and, therefore, helps to stimulate supply. I hope that the commencement figures which are out later this week, on Thursday I believe, will begin to show the real impact it is having. I do not think it is a case of either-or. We need to provide a whole variety of housing. There are people in my constituency who require and should have social housing. There are people who want an affordable starter home. Many of those kids living in the box rooms have mums and dads who want them to be able to buy a house. I do not think, respectfully, and we will have these debates, that we should ask whether it is social and public or private. It needs to be both.

Deputy Conway-Walsh has just handed the Mayo pyrite families document to me. I will look at it with the Minister for housing and I will revert to her directly.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

22. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the 60th annual Munich Security Conference. [8364/24]

23. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent Munich Security Conference. [8774/24]

24. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 60th annual Munich Security Conference. [9016/24]

25. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent Munich Security Conference. [12451/24]

26. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent Munich Security Conference. [15187/24]

27. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 60th annual Munich Security Conference. [16356/24]

28. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent Munich Security Conference. [15145/24]

29. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent Munich Security Conference. [15148/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 22 to 29, inclusive, together.

The previous Taoiseach attended the 60th meeting of the Munich Security Conference, a leading forum for the discussion of security and defence issues, on 16 and 17 February. The then Taoiseach participated in a panel discussion on neutrality where he set out the value of Ireland's military neutrality in a world of increased geopolitical insecurity, including new cyber and hybrid threats. He also highlighted the work of the recent consultative forum on international security policy. He spoke about how our focus on diplomacy, peacekeeping and international development can contribute to European and international security.

He also had a series of bilateral meetings, including with King Abdullah II of Jordan, the Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria, the UK Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, and a delegation from the Elders group led by former President Mary Robinson. Both in public events at the conference and in his bilateral meetings, there was widespread concern at the direction of developments, including Russia's war on Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, especially in Gaza, and prospects for global security in light of the large number of elections that will be held this year. At their meeting, the UK Labour Party leader Keir Starmer and Deputy Varadkar welcomed the restoration of the Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Seán Haughey: This was the first time a Taoiseach attended the Munich Security Conference. It raised some eyebrows but it was right for Ireland to be part of the debate on European foreign and security policy issues at this dangerous time. I refer in particular to the

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illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine, the terrible events taking place in Gaza and the escalating tensions in the wider Middle East. Ireland can play a positive role in this foreign and security policy debate.

It is clear that Europe is becoming more and more concerned about its security and defence. Remarks by former US President Donald Trump have increased these concerns. Security and defence are not military matters only. We need European co-operation on issues such as terrorism, cybercrime, disinformation and the protection of critical infrastructure among other things. Irish neutrality was questioned at one of the sessions of the conference. Neutrality emphasises conflict prevention, however, and conflict prevention also helps achieve effective security.

That said, I really want to ask the Taoiseach about the situation in the Middle East. The Taoiseach has already met EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other EU Heads of State and Government. Have we managed to get further support for a review of the EU-Israel trade association agreement and for recognition of the state of Palestine? What does the Taoiseach think is the likely EU response to the recent attack by Iran on Israel? This is focusing minds at this time.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are dealing with the fact the western world has questions not only about security but also credibility. We know there have been absolute failings if we are speaking about the US, Germany, the British and many countries throughout the EU. We know that what Benjamin Netanyahu is involved in is absolute genocidal slaughter. We know there are absolute fears about an escalation and the issues with regard to Iran at this time. There are two issues with Mr. Netanyahu; there are his particular views, which are reprehensible, and there is also the fact that here is a guy trying to save his job. The Palestinian people are paying with their lives.

We all welcome what has happened with regard to the moves towards recognising the state of Palestine. We want to see it. We know there have been positive relationships and interactions with Malta, Slovenia, Spain, Belgium and Norway. Are these the countries we are speaking about? Are there more? Do we have a timeline with regard to recognition? I would also follow up on whether we think there will be some element of review of the EU-Israel association agreement.

I would like there to be governmental support for the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill. There are promises with regard to ISIF of divestment from €2.9 million of the €4.2 million of Irish State money in companies that are benefiting from apartheid Israeli settlements. We need to make sure this is complete and that we follow through. I would like to see the legislation being the means but I do not particularly care once we do the right thing. We will have continuity of protests every Wednesday. The Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign, IPSC, is protesting in the Market Square, Dundalk. It has scheduled an event in the Redeemer centre on Thursday. We need to see everybody in here and outside putting on all the pressure they can. While only certain countries, particularly the US, can make things move, we have to do those bits that we can.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There will be another national demonstration this Saturday in support of the people of Gaza and Palestine. The very simple demand will be for sanctions on Israel now. The simple inescapable fact is that the genocide that Israel is inflicting on Gaza and the horrors that have been inflicted on its people could not happen if Israel did not get EU favoured trade status, weapons from Germany, the UK and the United States, and impunity for

decades for crimes against the Palestinian people. This is a fact. Without this sponsorship, support and impunity, this horror would never have happened. That is the responsibility of western governments. I want to let the Taoiseach know about a really shocking example of the lengths that some of Israel's sponsors will go to in order to suppress free discussion, as well as the complicity of western governments. This occurred during the Palestine conference that took place in Berlin at the weekend, a few weeks after the Munich Security Conference, where a conference that was organised by Jewish Voice for Peace, JVP, human rights campaigners and Palestinian rights campaigners was stormed by hundreds of German riot police. People speaking at it were to include a UN special rapporteur, a former Greek finance minister, me, as a representative of this Parliament, Dutch MPs and many Jewish people, who are opponents to what Israel is doing. In fact, one of the first people to be arrested was a Jewish activist with a banner that said: "Jews against genocide". He was arrested for carrying a banner that said: "Jews against genocide" by a German Government that claimed the conference was "antisemitic".

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You could not make this stuff up. An open letter has gone around to the Taoiseach and all Deputies in this House to protest to the German ambassador about that suppression of free discussion and freedom of assembly. I encourage Members to sign that letter.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The attendance of the Taoiseach's predecessor, Deputy Varadkar, at the Munich Security Conference, was significant. It was part of a drive that has been ongoing under Deputies Varadkar and Micheál Martin to erode whatever is left of neutrality and to display to the world that we are serious about this stuff, and that they should not worry because we will grow out of the immature neutrality.

My basic question is regarding whether the Taoiseach intends to continue in the same vein. Deputies Varadkar and Micheál Martin crossed a number of lines that had not previously been crossed. Yet, the one that Deputies Varadkar and Micheál Martin very much had in their sight is the question of the triple lock. The triple lock is the only legal provision that meant that a Government that clearly supported the US in its invasion of Iraq and facilitated the invasion of Iraq through its use of Shannon Airport, could not legally send ordinary Irish soldiers to go, fight and die in a war for oil and profit in the Middle East on behalf of the US.

A recent opinion poll very interestingly showed people's attitudes towards an EU army. The higher the income group a person is from, the more in favour they are of an EU army. The lower the income group a person is from, the less in favour they are of an EU army. Why is this the case? Quite obviously, it is because it is those who are in lower-income groups who will be disproportionately involved in going to fight in these wars. Is the Taoiseach still intending to proceed with this attempt to dismantle the triple lock, which protects some part of what is left of our neutrality?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to conclude.

The Taoiseach: There were a lot of very important issues, so let me try to take them. First, in response to Deputy Haughey, on the day on which I assumed this office, I spoke to the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to outline to him Ireland's ongoing support for the people of Ukraine, for their territorial integrity and for the European values of freedom. I had further discussions with European colleagues in Warsaw and Brussels on the importance of

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Europe continuing to stand in full stead behind Ukraine.

The Deputy asked specifically about Iran and Israel. It is right and proper that the Tánaiste and I, on behalf of the Government, have condemned the large-scale attacks by Iran on Israel. These reckless attacks were a significant escalation of the situation. They were a flagrant threat to international peace and security and we continue to call on all parties to show maximum restraint because the stability of the region is at grave risk. As any further escalation will have catastrophic consequences for millions of civilians, both Ireland and the European Union should be using our voices and influence for restraint and de-escalation.

As for the recognition of the state of Palestine, it is my intention, as well as those of the Tánaiste and the Government, that Ireland will recognise the state of Palestine. I had two opportunities to meet the Spanish Prime Minister last week, including when I welcomed him to Government Buildings last Friday, where we had a detailed discussion in this regard. It is the position of the Government that we wish to recognise the state of Palestine. Both the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, and I agreed last Friday that we would continue to co-ordinate our efforts to recognise a Palestinian state, alongside a number of like-minded countries. It is important that recognition should be done in a way that can have the most positive impact on the situation on the ground. I do not wish to put a specific timeframe on the record of the House now other than to state my own assessment, which is that time is coming much closer. I believe that if a number of countries were to recognise a Palestinian state at the same time, it would give weight to that decision. Tomorrow, I will travel to Brussels for the European Council, which will be held on Wednesday and Thursday, where I will continue to have an opportunity to engage with Heads of Government of like-minded countries. We do not have a published list, which Deputy Ó Murchú asked for, but indeed, he has mentioned a number of countries that have indicated publicly a similar open-mindedness to perhaps recognising the state of Palestine.

As a country, we are and always have been clear that the only way to achieve lasting peace and stability in the region is through the implementation of a two-state solution with Israeli and Palestinian states living side by side in peace and security, with Israel having a right to security, peace and safety and Palestine having a right to safety and peace as well.

On the specific question on the association agreement, my predecessor, Deputy Varadkar, signed a letter, again with Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, to the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, asking the European Union to review the association agreement with Israel, specifically from the point of view of human rights, as well as compliance with international human rights law. That is an appropriate thing to do. This is a country that values international human rights law. When I met President von der Leyen last Thursday, I took the opportunity to raise this issue with her directly. I outlined to her the rationale behind that letter. Our point was that because we all want to see a ceasefire, we therefore should always consider all the levers at our disposal to help bring about the pressure to create a ceasefire. A collection of other countries have done similar. I believe the US and the UK have both given consideration to a similar review. I think the President will reflect on my comments but she also pointed out that it is open to foreign affairs ministers to consider these matters at the Foreign Affairs Council, FAC, which I believe is due to have an engagement with the Israeli foreign minister shortly. I will continue to keep in close contact with the Tánaiste about this.

To be clear, Ireland and the Irish Government remain fully committed to our policy of neutrality. It is entirely possible, plausible, credible and, in fact, necessary that we, as a neutral member state, not excuse ourselves from discussions on defence and security. That is quite

important. We have an obligation. The first obligation of a government is to the security of its state, its people and their safety. That is something that we should not shirk from and that is not the same as being militarily aligned. There is no question of Ireland's eroding or leaving its position of military neutrality. That is not the position of the Government. I do not believe it is the position of this House and I do not believe it is the position of the majority of people in this country. Yet, I do think it is important that as a country we do not shy away from having a discussion about defence and security within those confines. I commend the Tánaiste on his leadership in this regard. On the triple lock, I support the direction of travel outlined by the Tánaiste because I do not think it is appropriate that a country like Russia can effectively have a veto on where we send peacekeeping troops. At the moment, we can either trust the Irish Parliament and the Oireachtas, or allow Putin to decide where we can send our peacekeeping troops. The Deputy and I have a different view on that but that is clearly my view. It is one that the Government will bring forward through legislation but it is important that we tease all these matters out in this House and that is certainly our intention.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the question on divestment?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is there to be no answer for me?

The Taoiseach: Sorry, can the Deputy remind me? These questions go far away from the attendance of my predecessor.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I asked about the conference in Germany.

The Taoiseach: I do not think it would be appropriate for me to comment on the record of the House on policing decisions that have been made in another EU member state but I will familiarise myself with the letter that the Deputy says has been sent to me. I have yet to see it.

In relation to divestment, I welcome the decision that has been taken by ISIF last week. I appreciate Deputy Ó Murchú's comments about not being overly concerned about how these things are done, as long as these things are done. Let me seek a view from the Minister for Finance and I will correspond with the Deputy on that.

Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill 2024: Second Stage

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

Auto-enrolment has been spoken about in Ireland for 25 years. I believe it was the late Seamus Brennan who first raised it.

5 o'clock

I am delighted at long last to be introducing the legislation in the Dáil which will give effect to auto-enrolment in Ireland. Today is a major milestone and it is the culmination of years of policy development, consultation and discussion with stakeholders, and decision-making on how best to supplement income for people in their old age. Enactment of this Bill will pave the way for around 800,000 workers to be brought into a retirement savings scheme for the first time. Indeed, implementation of the automatic enrolment retirement savings system represents probably the single biggest reform of the pension system in the history of the State.

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Implementation of auto-enrolment is needed because both pension coverage and pension adequacy, particularly in the private sector, are too low. It is estimated that only one third of private sector workers are actively contributing to a pension scheme. This will mean that approximately two thirds of private sector workers may be totally reliant on the State pension for their income when they retire. For me as Minister, this low a level of pension coverage is not acceptable.

At this point, I reiterate that the State pension is, and will remain, the bedrock upon which the Irish pension system is founded. This is the policy intent of this Government and it is a view that I know is shared across the House. However, the State pension is about ensuring that retired people stay above the poverty line. To ensure that workers can maintain an adequate standard of living in their retirement, individuals require additional savings for their retirement. While some employers provide occupational pension plans and other retirement savings arrangements for their employees, there is a large gap in retirement savings, which this Bill seeks to address. The goal, then, of auto-enrolment is to increase pension coverage and pension adequacy in Ireland.

Pensions are complex and people tend to put their pension on the long finger. A key feature of auto-enrolment is that it flips the current voluntary system of saving for retirement whereby people will have to consciously opt out rather than opt in. The experience from other countries clearly shows that the numbers who opt out are very low. Ireland is the only country in the OECD that does not yet operate this or a similar system as a means of promoting retirement savings. In this regard, Ireland has been an outlier in terms of pension coverage for too long, but this is now going to change.

This Bill provides for a new, highly automated retirement savings scheme that will automatically enrol workers based on payroll data. Initially, employees aged between 23 and 60 years who earn over €20,000 per year and who are not already paying into a pension scheme will be enrolled. Participants will be allowed to opt out or suspend their contributions after a mandatory six-month participation period. They will be brought back into the system again after two years unless they have an alternative pension arrangement.

I have listened to the concerns of businesses. For this reason, contribution rates will be phased in gradually over a period of ten years. Starting in 2025, employees will contribute 1.5% of their gross earnings, which will be matched by their employer and topped up by the State. These rates will gradually increase every three years until reaching a maximum contribution rate of 6% per employee and 6% per employer, plus 2% from the State, from 2034 onwards. This steady phasing in allows time for employers to budget and plan, and for employees to adjust to the new system. In order to encourage workers to participate, people who choose to remain in the system will have their pension savings matched on a one-for-one basis by the employer. The State will also provide a top-up of €1 for every €3 saved by the worker. This means that for every €3 saved by the employee, a further €4 will be invested by the employer and the State combined, resulting in a total saving of €7. It is estimated that a worker on the national average wage, contributing consistently for 40 years, could build up a savings pot of approximately €750,000, including investment returns, over the course of their working life.

The Bill also provides for the establishment of a new State body, the national automatic enrolment retirement savings authority, to administer the scheme and act as a buffer between participants and the financial investment companies which will be tasked with growing their savings. The authority will act in the best interests of participants, collect contributions, ar-

range for the investment of contributions, manage participant accounts that will be accessible through an online portal and facilitate the payment of savings at retirement.

I will now go through the Bill by section. Sections 1 to 5, inclusive, provide for the Short Title and commencement, the definition of common terms, the making of regulations for the purposes of this Bill and provisions in respect of the serving of documents, and deals with the expenses incurred in the administration of this Bill.

Sections 6 to 9, inclusive, set out the definitions for Part 2, the establishment day provisions, the creation on establishment day of a body to be known, in English, as the national automatic enrolment retirement savings authority. The Irish language version is included and the principal functions of this new authority are set out. These functions include the enrolment of participants; the collection of contributions from participants, their employers and the State; the investment of those contributions; and the payment of retirement savings out of participants' accounts. Section 9 also outlines that the authority shall be independent in the performance of its functions and that it operates in the best interests of participants.

Sections 10 to 21, inclusive, provide for the arrangements for the board of the new authority. These include the number of board members, the term of office, the conditions of membership of the board, how certain individuals become ineligible or disqualified as members, arrangements for the removal of board members, meeting arrangements, arrangements for the working of various committees of the board, including an audit and risk committee and an investment committee, and for the remuneration and expenses of board members and committee members.

Sections 22 to 24, inclusive, set out provisions in respect of the disclosure of material interests and non-disclosure of confidential information.

Sections 25 to 29, inclusive, provide for the appointment process for the chief executive, the functions of the chief executive, his or her accountability to the board, the delegation of certain functions by the chief executive to a member of staff of the authority, the circumstances where a person becomes disqualified from being a chief executive, and the arrangements for the removal of the chief executive. Section 30 provides for the staffing of the authority.

Sections 31 and 32 provide for the appointment and engagement of consultants and advisers and the engagement of the services of any other provider. Section 33 provides for the chief executive to be accountable on relevant matters to the Committee of Public Accounts, while section 34 sets out the arrangements for the chief executive, or an employee of the authority nominated by the chief executive, to attend before an Oireachtas committee.

Section 35 provides for the setting of fees payable to the authority for administrative costs and investment management services, while section 36 provides the authority with the power to borrow money. Sections 37 and 38 provide the arrangements for the authority to prepare a strategy statement every three years and a plan on an annual basis. Section 39 requires the authority to keep proper annual accounts and to submit such accounts for audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Section 40 provides for the submission of an annual report on the performance of the principal activities of the authority, while section 41 provides for the submission of further reports that the Minister may consider appropriate to any particular matter relating to the functions of authority. Section 42 requires the authority to publish statistical data relating to participation

in the auto-enrolment system and other statistical information as may be prescribed, while section 43 provides for the authority to monitor and review the operation and effectiveness of the auto-enrolment system.

Sections 44 to 46, inclusive, provide for the Pensions Authority's supervision of the authority, including the submission of a supervisory report, and provide for the authority to pay an annual fee to the Pensions Authority for the cost of conducting this supervisory report. Section 47 provides for the definition of a number of relevant terms used in Part 3 and relates to enrolment and contributions.

Section 48 addresses what should happen in the event of the death of an employer with regard to the enrolment of employees and contributions. Section 49 provides that a person becomes a participant on the enrolment date assigned to that person, while section 50 provides for the eligibility conditions under which a participant will be automatically enrolled. These include the age threshold of 23 years and the earnings threshold of €20,000 a year. The individual should also be an employee in an employment which is not an exempt employment as defined in section 51, that is, not covered by an existing scheme in that employment.

Section 52 sets out the arrangements regarding standards for existing schemes. It also provides that the authority, in consultation with the Pensions Authority, will draw up these standards in due course, that is, by year seven of operations at the latest.

Section 53 provides for those who are not participants to have a right to opt into the system, should they wish to do so, under certain conditions, while section 54 provides participants with the right to opt out, under a given set of circumstances.

Section 55 sets out the requirement for the authority to automatically re-enrol individuals who opt out, should they continue to satisfy the conditions for re-enrolment, after two years. Section 56 provides for the amendment of the age limits and earnings thresholds through regulations. Section 57 defines that a participant who is under pensionable age is a contributing participant.

Sections 58 to 61, inclusive, provide for the payment of the participant, employer and State contributions to the authority at the appropriate rate, as set out in section 61. Section 62 sets out the arrangements for the suspension of contributions. It provides that the period of suspension may begin not less than six months after enrolment or re-enrolment and not less than six months after the end of any earlier period of suspension. Sections 63 and 64 provide for the authority to repay contributions in certain circumstances, including the participant's own contributions where they have opted out.

Section 65 provides for the Minister to prescribe a different upper earnings threshold. Section 66 provides for regulations to be made by the Minister on a range of technical matters on the operation of the enrolment and contributions part of the Bill. Section 67 provides for the definition of terms in Part 4 of the Bill relating to the investment of contributions. Section 68 sets out the arrangements for the authority to appoint investment management service providers, with section 69 requiring each investment management provider to provide three funds, each of which must be aligned to a risk rating, ranging from higher to medium to lower risk.

Section 70 sets out how participants' contributions are assigned to the funds with the appropriate risk level. Where a participant chooses a fund type, they are assigned to the funds with that level of risk. Where a participant does not make a choice, they are placed according to the

default strategy in the appropriate fund type based on their age.

Section 71 provides the Minister with the power to make regulations allowing for investment to be split across funds of different risk levels. Sections 72 to 74, inclusive, set out the arrangements for the management of participants' contributions and the investment rules to be observed by the investment managers. Section 75 specifies the requirement that contracts with investment management providers must contain provisions relating to environmental and other matters. Section 76 requires the authority to keep an account for each participant recording the information specified.

Section 77 amends the Investment Intermediaries Act 1995 to exclude the authority from its scope. Section 78 sets out the definitions for Part 5 payments out of accounts. Section 79 sets out the processes for notifying the authority of the deaths of participants. Section 80 gives the Minister the power to make regulations to provide for the transfer of participant moneys to retirement savings products such as an annuity or an approved retirement fund.

Sections 81 to 84, inclusive, set out the process for the redemption of a participant's investment holdings, the process for payment to a participant at or after pensionable age and the process for payment in the event of death of a participant. Sections 85 to 88, inclusive, set out the process for applying for early access to funds in the event that a participant retires through incapacity or in exceptional circumstances of ill-health, and for the redemption of their savings.

Sections 89 to 99, inclusive, set out the necessary provisions for the application of the Dormant Accounts Act 2001 to savings in the auto-enrolment system. A participant's auto-enrolment savings account becomes an unclaimed balance 15 years after the authority has issued a notification of eligibility for withdrawal and where there has been no application for withdrawal or a communication from the participant or their personal representative. In such circumstances, an unclaimed balance is to be transferred to the Dormant Accounts Fund, which is managed by the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA. This transfer does not prejudice the rights of any person under this Part and an unclaimed balance can be claimed through application from a participant or a participant's personal representative.

Sections 100 to 104, inclusive, contain the legislative provisions for the authority to provide communications and services by electronic means to participants on a default basis and by other means, where requested. Section 105 sets out the form and content of the annual statements to be provided to participants and aligns these provisions with the arrangements for current pension schemes. Section 106 provides for the application of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 to the authority. Sections 107 and 108 contain the legislative provisions relating to the sharing of information between the authority and a specified body, as well as with the service providers that the authority will procure for the administration and investment services.

Section 109 makes provision for the disclosure of certain information to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment or the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, under certain conditions. Section 110 provides for amendments to the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, relating to section 265 of that Act, which relates to the sharing of information. It also provides for the authority to be inserted into the list of specified bodies set out in Schedule 5 of that Act. Section 111 provides for the processing of personal data and special categories of personal data in line with the general data protection regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018, while section 112 provides that the Minister may prescribe, by regulations, a number of specific processes relating to data protection.

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Sections 113 to 119, inclusive, provide for the arrangements for reviews and appeals to determinations by the authority in respect of enrolment, re-enrolment, exempt employments, opting in, early withdrawal arising from ill health, and questions of assessments based on gross pay. In certain cases, those seeking further appeal have recourse to the High Court on a point of law or to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, FSPO.

Sections 120 to 124, inclusive, set out the arrangements for compliance and enforcement, including the appointment and powers of authorised officers, and the issuing of compliance notices and fixed payment notices. Section 125 provides for the protection of legal privilege. Section 126 allows the authority to maintain a list of persons on whom a fine or other penalty has been imposed by a court under the Bill for two years. Sections 127 and 128 set out provisions to protect employees from penalisation or from being hindered in participating in the auto-enrolment scheme. Sections 129 and 130 bring incidents that arise in contravention of sections 127 and 128 under the remit of the Workplace Relations Commission and set out amendments to the Workplace Relations Act 2015 to facilitate this. Sections 131 to 137, inclusive, set out the provisions concerning offences committed in contravention of the Bill.

Finally, sections 138 to 141, inclusive, set out certain miscellaneous provisions, including the formula for calculating interest on unpaid contributions, how the authority may apply for a court order for an employer or employee to pay arrears of contributions, as the case may be, and other provisions regarding moneys owed to the authority.

I thank Deputies for their patience. I always find that going through a Bill section by section is tedious, particularly in this case when there are over 140 sections to be covered. This in itself shows the scale of the work that has been required to get this legislation to this point. I strongly believe that auto-enrolment will be a transformative scheme for our people. When implemented, the new scheme will ensure that every employee will have access to a system that will enable them to build retirement savings in order to sustain their standard of living after their long years working in paid employment.

In the context of discussions surrounding the cost of business, I recognise that employers should be able to plan ahead and budget for the introduction of auto-enrolment, and I appreciate the concerns of employers in this regard. To this end, I assure them and Deputies that significant consideration has been given to feedback from stakeholders on these issues. In particular, as I have said, the design of the auto-enrolment system now provides for phasing in of the contribution rates over a decade rather than over six years as was previously planned. For employers, this approach gives very clear certainty as to the rates that will be applicable so as to facilitate the gradual absorption of these labour costs, thereby easing the burden on employers in implementing this reform. Moreover, most employers will be spared any real administrative burden because the Government has decided to set up a national automatic enrolment retirement savings authority, which will undertake most of the administration of the new system. This represents a significantly lower administrative burden for employers, in terms of both cost and resources, than operating an alternative pension scheme. It is also considerably lower than the administrative burden that auto-enrolment systems in other jurisdictions impose.

The introduction of auto-enrolment has been a key priority for me since my appointment as Minister, and I am delighted to finally bring this Bill before the House today. Ireland has been waiting decades for auto-enrolment. We are at full employment and the economy is performing well. Now is the time to press ahead and deliver auto-enrolment. The 800,000 people who currently have no occupational pension cannot afford for us to wait any longer. Every country

that his introduced automatic enrolment has reaped the benefits. If people have more money in their retirement, that is good for businesses, good for the economy and, ultimately, good for society. I commend the Bill to the House and I look forward to hearing Deputies' contributions.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Auto-enrolment has been discussed for a lengthy period and, in principle, it is something my party supports and has argued for. However, we are not satisfied with the structure outlined in the Bill. Consequently, we will not be supporting the legislation on this Stage. If substantial changes are made during its passage, we will consider doing so on a later Stage. In principle, auto-enrolment is necessary because many workers, unfortunately, do not have adequate pensions to see them through their retirement. Increasingly, and I think the minds of the members of Government may have been concentrated by this, we are seeing more and more people as they approach pensionable age and their retirement finding themselves in more precarious situations than previous generations. Many are renting, and that number is only going to increase. The general assumption underpinning the State's pensions has been that by the time people reached pension age, their accommodation had been settled, whether they were paying a local authority or differential rents or had paid off their mortgages. This is no longer a safe assumption. Unfortunately, more and more older people are finding themselves in precarious situations because of the mishandling of the housing crisis by this Government and previous Governments.

More generally, there is a huge reliance on the bedrock of the State pension, which want to see strengthened. We also want to see a greater contribution to allow more people to be in a secure position and, therefore, we support the principle of auto-enrolment, as our previous spokespersons in this area, Deputies John Brady and Claire Kerrane, outlined. We have two primary difficulties with the legislation. It is our view, fundamentally, that if we are going to develop a new stream of pensions, any framework the Government is trying to establish needs to be built on strong foundations. We are concerned that the foundations this Government is relying on, namely, private funds, are not strong. We are concerned that this approach will be a gift to the private pensions industry and we will face significant risks for many workers who will rely on the auto-enrolment schemes in future.

Not long ago, during the Celtic tiger years, many people found that the pensions they had been paying into for a long time, whether defined benefit or, more typically, defined contribution, were not worth anything like what they had imagined them to be worth. Many people then had to keep on working for longer and make different decisions in terms of their accommodation. Many people also had to remortgage. Difficult decisions were made during the Celtic tiger years because people were let down by private pension funds. That is not a strong foundation on which to build the auto-enrolment scheme.

We have outlined our views on how auto-enrolment should be structured for some time. I refer to our submission in response to the Minister's strawman document. I am sure she has received it and is aware of what we said in it. This was an essential element of our views and concerns. It is our view that the fund we are talking about, which will be worth an enormous sum, should be managed robustly and with the certainty of an adequate and worthwhile pension in retirement. That must be guaranteed. The very least citizens should be assured of is the secure management of their pension savings. As I said, the financial crash saw many members of defined pension schemes left at the mercy of the markets. That type of an approach to auto-enrolment would put pension funds at risk and would not ensure an adequate supplementary pension in retirement. We do not wish to see the private pension sector being gifted the hard-earned savings of Irish workers to increase its profits through substantial fees. We are opposed

to workers' savings being used to shore up private providers operating on the basis of profit.

Our very strong preference is that the NTMA, which is already responsible for managing a number of funds, including some recently announced by the Government, would be responsible for managing these funds and investing them to the benefit of citizens. Rather than focusing on its own profits, the NTMA would prioritise the financial well-being of citizens' contributions to ensure their comfort in their old age. It could also ensure that money in the fund is put to work for Ireland, and the interests of the State and our people, by investing in green energy, housing projects and other worthwhile secure investments. Instead, under this proposal, contributions will be collected and handed over to the private pension industry. That is the primary concern we have with the Bill.

It is also worth noting that we are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. We agree in principle with people being auto-enrolled in a pension scheme. However, people will not have the option to opt out for six months, which is a substantial period. Those on €20,000 will pay €5.76 a week, or between €20 and €30 a month. If people are looking at their last €20 or €30 at the end of the month as the bills come in for their electricity, gas, rent, mortgage and so on, that amount could make a substantial difference. I appreciate that people have the option to opt out, but in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis the fact that people may potentially have to wait six months to opt out is challenging for these workers. We have a concern in this regard also.

The Minister and I have had several exchanges on the right to retire at 65. During our last couple of exchanges, I welcomed some of the Minister's comments because she did not indicate any principled objection to it. She pointed to the transitional payment and I pointed out this was a difficulty for a variety of reasons. The Minister did not point to any financial obstacle and said she would consider it. I welcomed that she seemed to take a less rigid position than her predecessor on the right to retire at 65. However, the Government has not moved on the issue, as it should. People should be entitled to retire at 65 after decades of work. Many of the people contemplating doing so will have been working on their feet for long days from the age of 15, whether as home helps or cleaners or in the trades. Having worked hard, they may potentially have to sign on the dole or continue to work beyond the age of 65. There should be a right to retire at that age and that is the view of many people. The Government has not moved on the issue. The Minister has said she would consider it. I urge her again to continue to consider it if she has been considering it. It is the least that people who have been working for many years deserve.

Coming back to the specific proposal at hand, there is no doubt that we are looking at a changing landscape for workers compared to ten or 20 years ago. The cost-of-living crisis has a major impact on the amount of money that workers can afford to set aside for a pension. We can no longer assume that people will own their homes when they retire. This means that an adequate pension that can cover real costs, including, potentially, the cost of a mortgage or rent into retirement, will be crucial.

We support the general principle of auto-enrolment. If substantial changes are made in the legislation and to the structure in question, we would reconsider our position. Right now, though, we are not satisfied that this house is being built on solid foundations. We believe there is a much better way to do this with the NTMA and it is to a body such as that we should be entrusting our workers' pension contributions. It is for this reason that we are not supporting the legislation at this point.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am thankful for the opportunity to make a contribution. Sinn Féin supports the overall idea of auto-enrolment. We have consistently advocated for the introduction of a fit-for-purpose auto-enrolment scheme. In this State, we are very late to this type of pensions policy, as the Minister acknowledged. It is essential, however, that an undertaking as significant as this is done right. It is extremely unfortunate that this legislation has not been done right. It does not follow best practice. It does not ensure the highest protection for the contributions of ordinary workers and it outsources what should be managed by the NTMA to the private sector. This is not, therefore, legislation that we can support in its current format.

The refusal to allow low-paid workers to opt out in the first instance and, thereafter, to deny them the ability to claim back their money for half a year is not fair or practical. It begs the question as to whether any low-paid workers were consulted on or made a contribution to the design of this policy.

A worker earning €20,000 a year would be down up to €30 a month. While there may be some who will scoff and sneer that this amount is insignificant, I can tell the Minister that a visit to any constituency office in the State would reinforce the notion that such an amount is the difference between being able to provide school lunches for children or keep the electricity on. At a time of a cost-of-living crisis we do not believe that the mandatory engagement of the scheme for people for a full six months is the correct approach, in particular for those on low incomes. People should have autonomy to leave if they wish and they should be trusted to be able to make the decisions that are best for them and for their family. There is a big difference between what someone earning €20,000 a year and what someone earning €70,000 a year can afford to put by each week. The key thing is that people should be auto-enrolled but they should be able to leave without too much delay or hassle. This is another example of poor judgment by this Government thinking that it knows what is best without consulting or understanding the circumstances of ordinary workers and their families.

A second concern is one we have raised on several occasions, which is how the pension fund will be managed. We have concerns about the fund being managed privately instead of managed by the NTMA. As the NTMA already provides a range of asset and liability management services to Government, it really beggars belief that it has not been allocated the management of pension auto-enrolment. This is vintage Fine Gael - outsource to the private sector regardless of the consequences. Low-income workers will be at the business end of this. My colleague, an Teachta Ó Laoghaire referenced the financial crash. I was working as a full-time trade union organiser at the time of that financial crash. I sat with workers from large companies whose pensions had been absolutely decimated. Grown men in their 50s and 60s were sobbing their hearts out because the private sector had simply squandered their hard-earned savings. They were facing the dole office for a year as introduced by a previous Government and then the State pension. They had saved and had made those sacrifices. That was money that was not available to them or their families and it was absolutely and recklessly squandered. If the Minister wants to consult with them, I am sure they would be more than happy to meet her. They will tell her what the private sector companies did and how little concern they had for those pensions of workers who had saved for what they thought would be a comfortable retirement.

Since 2018 Sinn Féin has consistently proposed that the State should play a leading role at the heart of the auto-enrolment scheme and we had proposed that the NTMA would be central to this in managing these funds and investing them to the benefit of citizens. Rather than focusing on its own profits, the NTMA would prioritise the financial well-being of citizens' contributions to ensure their comfort in their old age. It could also ensure that money in the fund just put

to work for Ireland, such as new knowledge-intensive sectors, green energy and indeed housing projects. We have seen the impact of previous pension disasters as has been the case with DC on DB pension schemes where workers were left at the mercy of the market. These people would be happy to meet the Minister and explain to her why this is the wrong approach. They were left extremely vulnerable with employers able to walk away in some instances.

We firmly believe that the Government must ensure the robust management of this fund to ensure that employees are protected. This has not been done and instead workers' hard-earned contributions will be collected and handed over to the private pension industry. We cannot accept this and we will not support it. It is extremely important that we get auto-enrolment right if it is to reward workers and greatly improve their lives post retirement. Therefore, we believe the NTMA should be responsible for managing the funds and that people, especially those on low incomes, should have a right to a swift opt-out if they are under financial pressure.

We should not lose sight of the reason we are here. The previous Taoiseach spoke about the social contract and how that social contract had been breached. One of the ways that the social contract has been breached is the manner in which people who have worked all their life who should be in a position to own their own home have been locked out of home ownership by this Government and successive Government policies. The Government is now telling them that they had better make provision for their retirement because they will be paying rents until they no longer need somewhere to live. That is why we are here. It is not out of any concern or care for low-income workers. We know why we are here. We will not support the handover of large portions of people's hard-earned savings to the private sector because we have seen what happened previously.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The issue of pensions has been discussed for a long time and the Government has now got around to publishing its plan, following on from the initial submissions that were sought for years ago. The Government is trying to address the fact that Ireland is the only state in the OECD without a pension saving scheme for workers after 25 years of its being talked about. However, we need legislation that is fair and equitable to ensure that pensions are secured for future generations. Unfortunately, this is a missed opportunity and we in Sinn Féin cannot support this Bill for a number of reasons. The first reason is that the Bill will lock low-paid workers into a scheme for the first six months, meaning that they have no choice but to tighten their already tight belts until the six months have passed where then they will be able to opt out. That is unfair on those who are struggling to make ends meet. The reality is that many people live week to week, but this Bill completely ignores that fact. The cost of living may feel like it has abated for those on higher incomes but many are still living on the breadline and that reality cannot be dismissed. The Bill assumes that they can afford to go without €20 or €30 of their income for six months but we know that many simply cannot.

The Government has indicated that the Pensions Authority will supervise the scheme. We have concerns that this scheme may involve the private pension industry. In our submission back in 2018 we proposed that the State play a lead role and that the NTMA would be central to this in managing these funds and investing them for the benefit of its citizens. We still believe that this is the best way forward. The NTMA would be best placed as it would prioritise the financial well-being of citizens into the future.

Employees and the protection of employees must be a central concern throughout this whole process but unfortunately that spirit is not reflected in this legislation.

We have all seen the impact of previous pension disasters on workers cannot be left in the hands of the free market. It is important that workers have faith in the system before it gets off the ground. A pension is something people rightly hold dear. It is their future and their security. It allows people to retire after decades of hard work and allows them to maintain their standard of living so they can enjoy the later years of life.

What we are discussing is fundamental reform of how pensions work. It is a missed opportunity on the part of the Government not to safeguard low-paid workers. The Government needs to listen to the criticism coming from the Opposition and go back to the drawing board on this issue. That is why we cannot support the Bill as it stands.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Auto-enrolment is an issue that has long been talked about. We are glad that we now have a Bill before us. We have reservations about some aspects of the more detailed elements but broadly speaking are supportive of its provisions. The impetus behind auto-enrolment is to address the pension coverage gap and to take steps towards improving the financial security of people in retirement. This aim is to be welcomed. The 2022 census data shows that about 20% of those beyond retirement age live in relative income poverty. That is around 145,000 pensioners who represent just over a fifth of the total population living in poverty, second by age cohort only to children. Auto-enrolment could prove a significant step in addressing that level of poverty in retirement if it is done correctly.

Those workers who do not have an occupational pension scheme and who cannot afford private pensions, face an obvious income cliff edge when they retire. Reliance on the State pension as a sole source of income will result in a huge drop in both income and general living standards for many in retirement. At present Ireland is the only OECD country not to have some form of mandatory pay-related retirement savings mechanism. Ours is the only country that outside the State pension relies on a more or less voluntary approach to pension savings. It is not unreasonable to conclude that this approach has failed. We would not be here talking about this nor would we have been talking about it for the past number of years if we had not reached that conclusion already. We have never really reached widespread pension coverage under the voluntary system. Approximately two thirds of workers are covered outside of the State pension, be it through an occupational scheme or a private scheme. There means one third of workers are not and who will be relying solely on the State pension. That is far too many to be left behind. We are talking about equity here as much as we are talking about anything else. Workers should not have to get lucky with that their employer offered an occupational scheme nor should the other option of a private pension be the preserve of those only on good incomes. It is notable according to Central Statistics CSO data that more than four in ten workers cited affordability as the main reason they do not have a supplementary pension.

We need to recognise as well that those private or occupational pensions are receiving a benefit from the State through tax incentives that are not being afforded to those without them. This is effectively denying people on low income a State benefit because they do not have the luxury of an occupational pension. It is not that we believe occupational pensions should be a luxury, or the ability to be able to afford a private pension. We can see that those in what we traditionally classify as low-paid jobs are among the lowest for coverage. For example, in the hospitality and accommodation sector, only 32% of workers have some form of supplementary pension whereas those classified as professionals have a coverage rate of 83%. It is obvious that those tax incentives have failed to attract a sufficient number of low and middle income earners to these types of schemes. I am glad that we are introducing a form of mandatory retirement savings.

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It is clear, not just that we need to increase coverage generally, particularly for those in low-paid jobs, but that the voluntary system itself has failed. In fact, it discriminates against those in such roles and it is crucial when this new system is operational that workers on the auto-enrolment scheme are treated equally in tax benefits. It is our hope and our belief in the Labour Party that the system of auto-enrolment will improve coverage, particularly for those on those low incomes and address the income inadequacy in retirement.

The proof will be in the pudding when we look to other countries that have introduced it. Since our next door neighbours brought in auto-enrolment in 2012, pension coverage has increased from 47% to 78% and their pension landscape has changed massively. In the ten years or so since it became operational, it narrowed the enrolment gap across incomes, occupations and age groups. In real terms, total pension savings have increased and many employers go beyond the stipulated minimum contribution rates. Similarly, New Zealand's KiwiSaver's scheme has achieved some 80% of coverage. A report from the UK scheme released recently highlights the successes in addressing the pension gap but it also provides some suggestions we would do well to learn from here before we begin our scheme and I will come back to that.

Before moving on to the particulars of the Bill itself I want to briefly make general points on the State pension and its relationship with the new auto-enrolment scheme.

First, I would welcome from the Minister an assurance that there will be safeguards put in place that will ensure that this new retirement savings scheme will be in addition to the State pension so that at no point can some future government unilaterally decide to make it a replacement. We also need assurances that the Government remains committed to achieving a benchmark of 34% of gross average earnings for the contributory State pension, as set out in the roadmap for pensions reform. I hope this new measure, welcome as it is, is not used as a distraction from that ambition. At present, we are still a significant distance away from that target. The kites have already been flying for what would be this Government's final budget so we might see in the coming weeks and months whether Government intends to follow through with on that ambition.

Second, I would also appreciate an assurance for workers from the Minister that those contributing to the new scheme will not face a means test for the State pension in the future. Safeguards must be put in place in that respect also.

All that being said, we are broadly supportive of the principles of auto-enrolment and are optimistic about its potential to bridge the pension gap, increase workers' pension coverage and reduce and prevent old-age poverty but we have reservations about some of the details in the Bill. The point was made by the Irish Congress of the Trade Unions, ICTU, that there is a loophole in the Bill that could see employers getting away with not making contributions to employee's pension for a number of years if that employee already has a personal retirement savings account, PRSA. The seven-year period before an employer has to make contributions needs to be significantly shortened. It is effectively punishing employees who try to be proactive and set up a PRSA for retirement for savings.

Similarly, we join with ICTU in calling for stringent protections against employers using the new scheme to dilute the existing pension arrangements that workers might have through occupational schemes. We cannot have a situation where existing employer contribution rates are decreased in cases where the auto-enrolment rates are lower. Protections must also be put in place to prevent employers from closing off occupational schemes and their contribution to new hires.

We also have concerns around the rules for self-employed people. Bogus self-employment is rife in Ireland and I am concerned that this mechanism will be used by employers to exacerbate the issue. I am sure many of us have met workers from RTÉ in the past year who were placed on bogus self employment contracts and have been left without a pension. We do not want to create a financial incentive for employers to put workers on the same sort of contract to avoid having to make contributions to the auto-enrolment scheme. There is already a low level of coverage among self-employed workers so the Labour Party is of the position that they should be automatically enrolled and that the businesses they are providing services to would be liable for employer contributions.

I fail to see the rationale behind the minimum age threshold for inclusion in the scheme. The minimum age threshold for PRSI payments is 16. Young workers are some of the most exploited in the country and it seems deeply unfair to me that they would be excluded. At seven years, from when a young worker begins working and when they are included, is not an insignificant amount of time that somebody could save for a more financially secure retirement. The age threshold for inclusion in the scheme should be aligned with that for PRSI payments.

On the operational element of the scheme, particularly with respect to the pension investment fund provided, it needs to be careful to ensure that people can have confidence in the scheme. The Bill establishes a new body to administer the system, the national automatic enrolment retirement savings authority, and that this new body will put out a tender for providers. We would welcome from the Minister details on what the parameters for consideration to be awarded a contract would be. We do, however, welcome that the board of the new body will include worker representation.

It is important to remember, however, and it is not unfair to say, that people in Ireland are generally suspicious of financial institutions given our own recent history. Members of defined contribution pension schemes were completely shafted during the financial crash. People need to be assured that their pensions are secure and that they are being properly managed. The national automatic enrolment retirement savings authority is a positive provision in that regard but will need strong legislative underpinnings to ensure people can have those assurances and the confidence that their funds are protected from mismanagement. A good start to get people to buy into the system and to give that bit of confidence a boost would be to lower the annual management fee. The current 0.5% fee seems excessive to me and will be perceived as such. Trust between the public and financial institutions has been damaged and if this scheme is to be successful, people cannot feel that they are being fleeced by pension providers and investment funds from the get-go.

There are other elements that we have a particular view on but we make back to them on Committee Stage. We will reserve the right to make amendments on that and other issues I have raised today in due course. In general, however, we are supportive of this Bill. We can see the benefits when look to other countries such as New Zealand or Australia that have introduced similar schemes. They have seen a transformative impact in pension coverage on the back of auto-enrolment and we hope we can achieve the same result here. We have to get this right. It has been a long time coming and I want to see it work. We will work collaboratively with the Minister, the Government and other Opposition parties in that regard.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I welcome the Bill. It was a key recommendation of the OECD's review of the Irish pension system that we had to increase that supplemental pension coverage. That word "supplemental" is important. Deputy Duncan Smith alluded to it but I do

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not believe it is within our compass to make any promises about future governments, however. The system is designed to be supplemental and it does not in any way, shape or form reduce the responsibility of the State. What we are talking about here is providing a minimum floor, which is what the State pension is designed to do, as opposed to income adequacy or a replacement rate of income. That is what we are hoping to do here under the AE system.

Under AE, employees will have access to workplace pensions, a savings system scheme co-funded by the employee, the employer and the State, and it is a response to 25 years of inaction, as outlined by the Minister, but also to the demographic challenges that were outlined in very clear-eyed terms by the Commission on Pensions, which the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands scrutinised in some detail. This is a job of work that needs doing because, as the Minister outlined, two thirds of people in the private sector do not have private pension provision. That is 800,000 people who, when they come to retirement, will face a cliff edge in their incomes.

The joint committee, of which I am the Leas-Chathaoirleach, put a considerable amount of work into the pre-legislative scrutiny of this legislation. We had six individual sessions meeting with groups such as ICTU, Irish Life Assurance plc, Pensions Authority, Irish Business and Employers Confederation, Insurance Ireland, ESRI and, of course, officials from the Minister's Department. It was a considerable piece of work because we knew that it was very important legislation. I am somewhat disappointed to note from analysis done by the Library and Research Service that of the 21 recommendations that were put forward by the Oireachtas joint committee, only two have been accepted in full, six have been accepted in part or are reflected in the current draft of the Bill and 13 have not been accepted either in full or in part. We did not make any of those recommendations willy-nilly; a considerable amount of work was done on this. I am therefore disappointed in terms of not only the work we do as a committee but also the inputs we get from civil society groups and the wider sector when we ask them as a committee to come in to speak to us about the contents of a Bill. It is difficult to make the case that they should take that type of engagement at pre-legislative scrutiny stage seriously when so few of the recommendations are accepted.

I am a little nonplussed by the Sinn Féin criticism of the Bill. We did speak in committee about the potential of the role of the NTMA. It is difficult to know whether the NTMA would in fact have the capacity to do what Sinn Féin speaks about. I do not quite see how it is a protection because even if the NTMA were to act as the intermediary, it would still be investing in the private sector. How that would insulate that investment from shocks within the wider investment system is unclear to me. Perhaps Deputy Ó Laoghaire would like to send me on the document he spoke about in his contribution.

I, however, will focus in on one specific provision, or lack thereof, within the Bill. This is one of the recommendations we made as an Oireachtas joint committee and it is about the key issue of what the money can be invested in. As regards the feedback we have on that recommendation, I refer to a Library and Research Service document on this. It is important to note that the NAERSA - I am sure we will have to come up with a better name for that at some point - will not be administering a new State fund but, rather, will be administering hundreds of thousands of individual savings accounts that will be the personal property of the AE participants. This is with regard to our recommendation that investment funds be prohibited from investing either in fossil fuels or in the arms industry. These are, of course, individual pension pots, but I disagree that the State does not have a responsibility to respond to the responsibility that comes with that level of investment. The State will make a significant amount available for this pen-

sion provision into the future and, along with that money, our values, the values of the State, should be reflected in that.

It would not be the only time the State does something like that. We have frameworks for responsible investing already in place at scale. That is included as part of balancing hedge portfolios. For example, ISIF has divested from several areas, such as cluster munitions, tobacco manufacturing and nuclear weapons. Basically, we do not want Irish money involved in those types of investments. The Fossil Fuel Divestment Act also prohibits ISIF from investing in companies that derive more than 20% of their turnover from the extraction, exploration or refinement of fossil fuels - the likes of coal, oil, gas and so on. We have a structure within the NTMA. The Irish sovereign green bonds working group, with a wide membership of the NTMA and several Departments, came up with a framework for investment with six eligible green categories set out in the ISGB framework. I will not go into them in that kind of detail but I do feel strongly that while we have written ESG considerations into this Bill to the effect that it should have regard to climate and other frameworks, we need to make it explicit within the Bill that a considerable amount of Irish money will be put into this on behalf of the Irish Government and that there should be restrictions as to where this money can be invested. If we have a number of pension pots, that is, if we have that low risk, medium risk and high risk, then let us define one of them whereby we have this kind of ESG or this divestment characteristic and make it the default. We know from international evidence that most people defaulting into this will come in through auto-enrolment and will stay in the one place. Let us try to reflect the values we hold as a nation in the way we invest our money. I strongly feel that we should include that in this legislation.

Deputy Martin Browne: We are living in an ageing society, and it is important we get auto-enrolment right. It is important to provide a financial vehicle to help people to supplement the State pension to enable them greater financial security in retirement, so we must get it right. It is to reward workers and improve their lives post retirement.

I refer to the mandatory nature of the automatic opt-in for six months. As devised, this Bill gives little recognition to the challenges faced by people on lower incomes, especially when the high cost of living gives those workers little room to manoeuvre financially. We have to recognise what this means for people on around €20,000 a year. If this Bill were to take effect, it would result in a deduction from their pay of €5.76 a week, so they would be left with no choice but to bear a deduction in their incomes of between €20 to €30 a month for six months before they could opt out, regardless of whether they could afford it. For families living from paycheck to paycheck and at the pin of their collars to make ends meet, this fails to recognise their situation and forces this deduction on them for six months without giving them the autonomy to make their own decisions. People know what is best for them in their individual situations, and it is not for the Government to dictate that they should be locked in for six months. People should be auto-enrolled but they should also be able to leave if they want with as little delay or hassle as possible.

The Bill does not provide for the payment of a State incentive during periods of maternity leave or for a mechanism to make additional voluntary contributions by partners. While I note this may be facilitated once the system is bedded in, we are being asked to act on blind faith. Credits are also not provided during caring, which needs addressing.

Finally, the way the fund would be managed is troubling. For years we have laid out our opposition to private pension providers being responsible for this investment. Back in 2018, we

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advocated for the NTMA being central to managing these funds for the benefit of citizens and to prioritise their financial well-being rather than gifting this to private pension providers, which ultimately have a different set of priorities. I support the introduction of auto-enrolment but not as set out here. It is too important to take any chances with, and I feel that, as it is currently set out, the risk is too great.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am grateful for the opportunity to make some points on this Bill and our pension system more generally. I do not want to come across as if I am suggesting that auto-enrolment is without benefit. Many hardworking people with no pension savings will be saving for the first time and will be better off as a result.

Overall, however, I wonder about the repercussions. How does this contribute to things like a decent income for all older people, alleviating poverty for our elderly or financial sustainability for the State? The debate should not be just about the effect for a few individuals who stand to gain a bit from being enrolled in a pension scheme but for all our society. There are plenty of positives in how the Minister and the Department are planning to structure this that we did not expect to be the case when we started this initiative. The central process and authority that will manage contributions have the potential to provide better value and the potential for better long-term returns than would be the case if some firm from the pension industry had been given the job of managing the system for what would no doubt have been a very substantial fee. That is really positive to see.

There are also some problems, some of which have been raised. I will highlight my concerns with them. For people on low incomes, is there any need to be making pension savings given that the State pension will replace a large portion of their income? Is there any sense in trying to enrol someone earning €25,000, for example? Why are the newly enrolled or auto-enrolment people being given more favourable support than some people already in the system? Certainly, having two parallel systems of pension tax relief is not equitable. Different taxpayers get different benefits, and for some taxpayers this new system may be more beneficial than their current workplace pension scheme. The Commission on Taxation and Welfare recommended equalisation of tax relief for pension contributions for reasons of equity, but instead a third rate is being added. This complicates matters unnecessarily. Add to that the fact that the earnings threshold for auto-enrolment of €80,000 is different from the current system's €115,000. I think €115,000 is far too high but, again, I do not see the justification for two different rates.

6 o'clock

For drawdown at retirement, some account could be taken of some employees who may have arduous or hazardous jobs. A proportion of the fund should be made available at an earlier age for people who, for example, may be in their 50s but have spent their whole lives being blocklayers. I would also have liked the option of a public investment fund to act as a registered provider. The NTMA could have provided a public investment fund in which members could choose to invest some of their contributions or, perhaps, all of the State's top-up contributions could have been allocated for this fund. This could be used to invest on a commercial basis in a way that supports economic activity and employment in the State, perhaps in the area of green energy or housing projects, that is, things that would make this a better country to live in long into the future. Other countries have mechanisms to direct savings towards investments with social gains. We need to look at this too. I also see a need for the ongoing monitoring of employees and how they adapt to the new scheme. From an employer perspective, the increased cost of auto-enrolment could be an incentive to encourage employees to become self-employed

or encourage them to opt out of the system. Those are some of the concerns I have.

I have a few things to say about the whole principle of auto-enrolment and, more generally, the principle of how we support pension savings and why. What are we getting from this? What do we want to achieve with this big new departure in our pension scheme? Typically, the argument in favour of auto-enrolment revolves around the need to encourage retirement savings. The arguments most often given as to why we would want to incentivise pension savings usually involve two ideas. They are the need for people to have a reasonable continuation of their standard of living once they retire and the need to reduce the long-term financial burden on the State. I will look at each of these two ideas in turn. First is the idea that auto-enrolment is needed to help maintain living standards in retirement. Of course, this sounds like a fine idea and is very difficult to argue against. The idea that people do not want to see a big drop in their incomes when they retire or that they want to maintain a relatively consistent level of spending in old age is not a new one. There are all these policy initiatives and expensive tax reliefs aimed at getting people saving in order that they can get a certain percentage of their income while they are working. However, annuities are expensive, as we know, and the vast majority, even those saving loads, never manage to save enough in a defined contribution scheme to get close to half of their pre-retirement income. For the majority, the State pension will always be their main source of income in retirement. Meanwhile, research by TILDA, which does longitudinal ageing studies in Trinity College Dublin, suggests that “Retirement income replacement rates are [generally] not associated with quality of life [after] retirement.” Instead, it found that it was actual income in retirement, not the proportionate change in someone’s income when retired, that affected quality of life the most. TILDA found that all aspects of quality of life, including control, autonomy, self-realisation and pleasure, all increased consistently with household income. The emphasis I need to make again is that it is actual income that is important, not the proportion of your pre-retirement income. The proportion of your pre-retirement income no doubt has some effect but does not seem to be the most important thing for most people. This suggests to me that policies aimed at achieving a certain rate of replacement of pre-retirement income should not be given as much priority as policies looking to achieve a minimum income floor for retirees. That minimum floor is something the State pension, not private pension savings, is best positioned to provide.

The other argument given on the need for auto-enrolment is the need to reduce the long-term financial burden on the State. This is the argument most often given in its favour and also in favour of other incentives to increase private pension savings. We have heard it in a multitude of different forms but it usually sounds something like the following. First, the number of older people in our society is increasing. Second, the ratio of workers to pensioners is going to fall significantly in the coming decades. Third, as a result, the cost of the State pension will become unsustainable and, fourth, automatic enrolment is part of the strategy for reducing this burden on the State and is the best way to ensure people save for their retirements. It all sounds very logical until we examine it further and go deeper. A feature of the Irish State pension is its connectivity to the labour market. Eligibility for a pension from the State is based on either social insurance contributions, or PRSI, or else on means-testing. In other words, you qualify for a State pension based on your labour market history and payment of PRSI over several decades or you qualify based on a means test that shows you do not have enough to provide for yourself in retirement. So, yes, in theory, encouraging people to save for retirement helps to reduce their reliance on the State and the financial burden on the Exchequer of paying these pensions will be reduced. However, once we go deeper, saving for a pension is really expensive. As a rough rule of thumb, every €20 saved will buy a pension of about €1 a year for a man aged 66. That

will be a flat pension, not one that increases, even though we know the cost of living increases over time. People who can afford to save enough over a long period to buy themselves a decent pension almost always have been in the labour force for several decades and almost always are the very same people who will qualify for a full State contributory pension based on their PRSI history. By the time they retire, they will have received thousands or even tens of thousands of euro in tax relief. This is allegedly with a view to saving the State money when they reach retirement but the fact that they may have saved a good pension for themselves will not reduce the cost to the State. On the contrary, these same people likely now also qualify for a full State pension. The individuals involved will be better off than if they had not saved. They will have saved their State pension and whatever money they receive from their private pension, which, incidentally is a pension semi-funded by Irish taxpayers through the generous system of tax relief that we have. Let us be clear; the savings to the State are exactly zero.

How about those who receive a means-tested pension, known as a non-contributory pension? By definition, they have not qualified for a contributory pension because they have not made enough PRSI payments and they do not have the money to achieve a decent standard of living in retirement themselves. Based on such a PRSI history, it is safe to assume their connectivity to the labour market over previous decades has not been strong, for a variety of reasons. They would not then have been in a position to avail of the tax-based incentives currently in operation or the joint pension schemes as part of the auto-enrolment process. Again, there is no saving for the State among this group either. There may be situations in which those people can contribute sporadically to auto-enrolment schemes over the period during which they are in employment. However, research would suggest that people with such a precarious link to the labour force tend to be in low-paid employment and so are prime candidates to opt out of auto-enrolment for very obvious reasons. Meanwhile, what little money they may be able to save might even end up being counted against them when it comes to taking the means test for non-contributory pensions. Perhaps, in that specific case, there would be a saving to the State but it would be minimal and would come at the expense of some of Ireland's poorest. We already know that the cost of tax relief for private pensions runs not into the hundreds of millions but into the billions of euro. That is the case every single year. Auto-enrolment will increase that by hundreds of millions of euro each year. We also know that more than 70% of pension relief goes to the top 20% of earners. For the most part, tax relief for private pension schemes are an expensive means of subsidising retirement savings for the better off in society, with little or no financial benefit to the State. The cost to the State will only continue to increase with the implementation of auto-enrolment at a time when about 20,000 extra people qualify for the State pension every year. The Minister for Finance is denying those in receipt of the State pension any more than an extra €12 quid a week in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis.

There is little to no fiscal benefit to the Exchequer in either the short or long term unless the eventual aim is to slowly erode the value of the State pension over time and to force people to rely on their private pension savings instead. That is something which my party, the Social Democrats, will strongly oppose. As I said at the outset, I am not saying that auto-enrolment is without benefit. Many hardworking people with no pension savings will be saving for the first time and will end up better off as a result, which is welcome. I am trying to look at this issue in the round, not just at some individuals but all of society and how auto-enrolment might fit into a more equal Ireland free from deprivation and poverty. A better use of some of the resources being earmarked for auto-enrolment would be to direct them towards funding the State pension to a level that would guarantee that older people can retire with enough money and income to live a life of dignity and to retire without the prospect of exposure to poverty in their retirement.

This is especially important given some other developments around the State pension. Last year, I drew the Minister's attention in this Chamber to the possible effects on pensioner poverty of the proposed total contributions approach for calculating State pension benefit. The approach gives payments on an automatic *pro rata* basis to people who do not qualify for the maximum pension. That is very different from the bands used under the current system, which increases the payments people receive if they do not qualify for the maximum pension.

At the time I asked the Minister what analysis of the effects of this change she or her Department did. What I got was a scripted answer that did not directly address my questions, but suggested the answer was none.

The State pension is the single greatest reliever of old-age poverty in Irish society. We can agree on that across the Chamber. As recently as 2019, the CSO estimated that 85% of people aged over 65 would be living below the poverty line if it were not for our social welfare system. In 2003, pensioner poverty was an incredible 40%. It had fallen below 10% by 2010, driven almost solely by the doubling of the State pension rate over the course of a decade. As the importance of a State pension in relieving poverty was never clearer, I am hugely concerned by the implications of the total contributions approach, TCA. The likely implications are worrying. The new TCA will lead to much lower pensions for a huge number of retirees, most of whom have no idea that this change is on the way.

Under the old system, pensioners get the maximum rate of State pension if they average at least 48 weekly PRSI contributions per year over the course of their working lives. Those falling short of 48 weeks get a lower pension, but, as I said a moment ago, the good news for them is that the reduction is not proportionate. For example, for people who have an average of only 40 PRSI contributions, and not 48, the pension falls by just €5. That is a drop of just 2% and not the 16% that would be expected of a *pro rata* system. Some 30 PRSI contributions is 62.5% of what is needed for the maximum pension, but the €250 such pensioners would receive is 90% of the full amount. This generous tiering reflects an understanding that a heavy penalty for falling short of PRSI contributions could have severe repercussions for workers for whom the State pension may be the only income in retirement. The new TCA is not nearly as understanding. The TCA calculations are based on total PRSI contributions, not averages. People who have 40 full years of contributions get the full rate of the pension and those who have fewer than 40 get a reduced amount. However, under the TCA the much more moderate reductions are gone and pension calculations are strictly *pro rata*. This will create huge differences for many people.

For example, under the TCA, people with 20 years of PRSI contributions, that is, 1,040 weekly contributions, will get half the State pension or €139. Compare this to the current system where someone with the same 1,040 contributions over a career of 20 years would qualify for the full State pension. Someone with 1,040 contributions averaged over 30 years would qualify for €250 and someone with 1,040 contributions averaged over a 40-year career would qualify for €236. Let us compare that difference again. It is €139 under the TCA versus €236 or €250 under the current system. These are huge differences with big implications for retirees. In any society, a minimum income is needed for older people to retire with dignity and a lower State pension payment for a significant number of people will lead to more poverty among pensioners. Acknowledgment of this was presumably the motivation behind the design of the old system, where the tapering off of the level of pension is much less severe than under the new TCA.

There has been a total failure of the Government to communicate the implications of this

change to the public. Many people are working on the assumption that gaps in their employment history will lead only to small reductions from the maximum pension when they retire and are totally unaware of what the TCA will do. The Government needs to consider the implications of this for thousands of people who are yet to retire. Here we are, cutting pensions for retirees using the TCA, but funnelling hundreds of billions of euro into private pensions savings. I am not saying that people who get that benefit do not need it but it seems there is a disconnect between where the money is being pushed and who is likely to need it the most. The TCA could be adjusted. We could bring it into bands, similar to the current system. If the TCA were not strictly *pro rata*, people who fall short of the full pension would lose out by less. That is very important.

The Government should consider the number of years of PRSI contributions that are necessary to achieve the maximum pension, as 40 years is simply not achievable for a huge number of workers with the prospect of credited contributions. The discussion around pension reform should focus more on what can be done to reduce the current rate of pensioner poverty further. Moving speedily to a new system that can only exacerbate the problem will serve Irish society and our most vulnerable citizens poorly. The funding that will be dedicated to auto-enrolment is an important factor in this regard.

I will conclude by noting that while encouraging people to save for retirement is not a bad thing at all, a few things need to be highlighted. It will increase the cost to the State and will not save money. The only way auto-enrolment decreases the pension burden on the State is if retirees are forced to rely more on their private savings through a reduction in the State pension. Auto-enrolment is a net cost to the Exchequer and to taxpayers. It is effectively yet another expensive subsidy to the private pension industry that stands to make huge additional profits from investing auto-enrolment moneys. It has lobbied strongly for this for more than a decade. Auto-enrolment simply cannot be considered a substitute for keeping the State pension at an adequate level. I urge the Minister to look closer at the TCA and the implications it might have.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: This is an important debate. When people start talking about pensions, the eyes, especially of young people, tend to glaze over. They do not think about the future until they get nearer to that age, as some of us have. Some of us have passed it. I am ten years past 65 at this stage but I am lucky because I have my health and a good job and I am happy with that, but many people do not have that. The number of people aged over 65 at the last census was more than 800,000 people. While, thankfully, people are living longer, a significant portion of them have chronic illnesses and the lower people's income is, the more likely they are to have comorbidity or a series of illnesses that can lead to disability and poor health.

We really need to talk about this. I heard Deputy Gannon's contribution and I welcome this debate. It is hugely important. I hope on Committee Stage we will have an even longer discussion of all these issues. They cannot be taken in isolation because they are tied into longevity, which is what we are talking about, that is people living longer. When the age of 65 was set - I think by the Germans, I will give it to them because I forget which nation it was - most people had passed away by the time they reached 65. That is not the case now. We are living longer and because of that, we have more people retiring. We also will have fewer people in the workforce as we move forward and the burden on the people who are working will increase to support the number of dependents they have.

While I agree absolutely that the State pension is a hugely important funding mechanism for many people, the fact is that it will never be enough. I know many pensioners on the State

pension and while it is welcomed by those who have it, they have significant other costs. This debate focuses in particular on those people in employment aged 23 to 60, who do not have a pension scheme. It is absolutely vital with the income they have, which would otherwise be either the State pension, either contributory or non-contributory, that they are in a position to opt into increased savings if they so wish, that is, if they earn less than €20,000. It is mandatory if they earn more than €20,000, but it is not absolutely mandatory. In other words, they can opt in and out depending on the situation. That allows choice and that is wise.

There are a lot of good things in this. We cannot and should not shoot it all down on a narrow base. What can we do to improve the situation? The biggest worry people have as they get older, apart from the cost of living, is that there is probably an increasing number of people who are renting as they get older. Twenty years ago, people aged over 65 - the vast majority of retirees - either owned their house or had bought it from the local authority. That is no longer the case. There will be increasing demands on the reducing income of older people, especially those on lower incomes, to be able to survive. One of the weaknesses in our society is that we do not have adequate or appropriate home care for older people. While the funding might be available with the HSE for the number of people who need home care because of the income they have at the moment, they cannot get it and they end up in inappropriate care, in many cases in nursing homes. We have to have a comprehensive look at all the services for older people and how we pay for them. I presume that at the end of all of this, 20, 30 or 40 years hence, people will have a greater choice and more income and hopefully be able to survive better than they can now. At the same time, however, we must look at how greater support services will be funded. In this case, we might look at a country like Denmark, which has made radical changes in healthcare for all its citizens. They have free home care for people who stay at home. They have actually closed an awful lot of their nursing homes. They have reduced the number of acute hospitals, but they have specialists depending on geography. They have specialist hospitals that look after acute health. If we are not in a position to provide funding for the care of older people as they age, that is a huge downside of our present system. I believe that the principle of what the Minister is doing is right and I support it. Deputy Gannon raised many very important points in his contribution that need to be thought out and maybe debated more fully here.

If people do not have a pension scheme, what are they supposed to do? They are almost always going to be people in temporary and part-time employment. They are people who work in very physically demanding jobs. It is hugely important that we give them an opportunity to have more income as they get older. One of the big debates in the previous general election, as we here all know, was the fundamental question of increasing the pension age. Therefore, if we increase the pension age, there will be more income for the State to provide services. That is not the case, and I understand that is what people want. Therefore, we have to find further and other means of raising funds.

When the Minister is sitting at Cabinet will she ask her colleagues - I am asking them anyway - to look again at the long-term needs of our population and address them? While this would put more money in Pat's and Mary's pockets, there will still be significant demands on the State, which we will be unable to meet if we have not got the tax base. That is a hugely important issue. To raise people's social contribution in the long run over a lifetime as a proportion of their income would mean that as people get older, they would have the support services in place. That is what is happening in Denmark. It is worth looking at. Denmark to me is an ideal society in that respect, but it is more expensive and there are obviously more demands on

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the taxpayer to meet that. It is a very welcome debate, however. I am not part of the committee, as such, but it would be important to articulate many of these ideas there.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It has been put by many colleagues in the House, particularly Deputy Ó Laoghaire, that a considerable number of us in Sinn Féin would have supported that overall idea of auto-enrolment. It is something for which we would have pushed for a considerable amount of time. An argument can even be made that we are late to the game in that regard. Like an awful lot of other schemes, however, the whole idea is that we get it right.

I am going to reiterate what has already been said because it is absolutely vital in this particular case. We obviously cannot support this and the first and foremost reason is that low-paid workers will not be allowed to opt out and claim back their money for a whole six months. A worker who is earning €20,000 per year would be down roughly €5.76 per week. That is on average basically €25 per month. We all know this. Anyone who is knocking on doors at the minute who did not know beforehand now realises the issue that is out there with the cost-of-living crisis. That relates to housing in all its senses, childcare, transport and the cost of fuel, heating and shopping. In some cases, people even say it is the cost of absolutely everything. The fact is that there is no flexibility and there is a particular issue around the six months. This is something that has to be looked at. We are all into the idea that this is to protect workers. This is about ensuring protection.

Obviously, I will add my voice that I would hate to think that anyone would consider dropping the old-age pension into the future on the basis of what we are doing here. However, rather than private funds that are seeking to make money for themselves, we actually need to look at the likes of the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, to manage these funds from a point of view of looking after the people out there because if that is what we are attempting to do, that is what we require absolutely.

While I have the Minister in the Chamber, I have to raise an issue that was brought to me by Anne and Kathleen, who do great work in my office, but beyond that also by a lady who rang me. It is the idea of the new hubs. We are talking about jobseeker's allowance, community welfare payments and even the new housing payments and all the rest of it. The issue with regard to the hubs at the minute is that there seems to be a particular-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Which hubs is the Deputy talking about?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is with regard to people now having to send their stuff, whether it is by email or otherwise. They go into the Intreo office, and it is obviously posted on. I think it is Galway for us. There are also prepaid envelopes. However, a number of people have told me that the stuff has not arrived in time. The number of people who have told me their applications have been cancelled without them being informed and whose materials have been lost is absolutely huge.

One lady was absolutely distraught on the basis that she was dealing with huge issues regarding medical care for her kids. She had put in this information. She was working alongside the local authority in that regard and then she suddenly discovered that everything was closed. As I said, I will bring the issue and information to the Minister-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----but it is something that needs to be dealt with.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: If I had more time-----

An Ceann Comhairle: However, you do not.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----I would be dealing with the issue regarding the ex-Córas Iompair Éireann, CIÉ, workers. I know something is happening in the audiovisual room with regard to this, but the issue was brought to me by Liam and Pat, who would obviously be very good constituents of mine. Go raibh maith agat.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are some operator I tell you, Deputy Ó Murchú. I call Deputy Bríd Smith.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: You would want to watch them Border boys.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: And so say all of us.

Deputy Bríd Smith: As my mother used to say, brave are the chancers. You are some chancer.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am deeply hurt.

Deputy Bríd Smith: This is something I have been talking about on behalf of various workers since I came in in 2016 and as workers' spokesperson for People Before Profit. There has been a real war on pensions, particularly defined benefit pensions, over the past ten years or so. The narrative is that we are living too long, and we cannot afford this, so we have to tackle it. Therefore, instead of longevity in life being something to celebrate and be excited about, and instead of making provisions for people to have longer mortality and be healthier as they go beyond their working age, we are seeing this everywhere right across the world as a burden. I want to argue that this is completely the wrong way to look at ageing and pensions and how we fund our ageing populations. Obviously, our ageing populations are funded in the first place by the work people have done all their lives. After all, the contributions they make to PRSI or, indeed, private pension schemes are deferred wages. That is what it amounts to. The wages they would have been taking home are deferred because they are put away for them for when they are due to retire. What the private pension companies have been doing is really going to war on the defined benefit schemes by taking them down and decimating them in most of the private companies and even some of the semi-State companies. However, I know from watching and being engaged with this that governments are also very concerned about the longevity of the working population and have attempted to bring in longer periods of a person's working life. Therefore, we went from 65 to 66. There was an attempt to go from 67 and then to 68. The Government got a bloody nose on that one and people had to sit down and think about how we are going to deal with the ageing population and the future of the pension scheme. Most important, although this has in theory the veneer of a progressive move, it is ultimately about trying to subsidise the State pension. It may not appear like that in the immediate term, but the bit-by-bit chipping away could, should and probably will mean from the perspective of Government that it will not be paying out the money it is paying out now on the State pension. That is a concern. That is a big concern for workers, people who try to represent them and all of the population as people's age increases.

There are currently 500,000 people receiving the State pension and for many of them, it is

their only source of income. The State pension for many is all they have, with no additional family help or social supports. They struggle to afford the basics of food and housing, in particular, if they do not own their own house.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Everyone here can testify to the increasing number of people in their 50s and 60s - I find they are mostly women - being made homeless after renting in private accommodation all their lives. With many landlords selling up, these people cannot afford, and certainly will not be able to afford in their retirement years, the exorbitant and brutal rents being charged right across the country, in every city and town. According to Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures, one in five people over the age of 65 is at risk of poverty. At 20%, that is a lot of people. One in three people living alone is at risk of poverty, according to the CSO. People living alone have less money to play around with. ALONE and Threshold recently found that people aged over 65 who are still renting in the private sector spend more than 35% of their income on rent, with one in four living in poor-quality accommodation that is unsuitable for their needs.

We need serious reform of the current State pension. For a lot of people, it is inadequate to enable them to live a decent life. It is absolutely unacceptable, in one of the richest countries in the world, while running budget surpluses and providing all sorts of giveaways to multinational corporations, that we fail or neglect to look after our elderly population. As far as we can interpret the Bill before us today, it is a patchwork solution for a broken State pension. The Government appears to be offering a distraction by mainstreaming private pension funds instead of providing adequate State pensions. The automatic retirement saving system seems to make it easier for people to save for retirement. However, it facilitates investment in private pension funds that come with additional risks to pension funds and with administrative fees. It may be very costly for people and for the State. By introducing the Bill, the Government is taking initial steps towards removing the State pension from circulation into the future. The Bill will see approximately 800,000 people automatically enrolled into the new retirement saving schemes. The plan is to begin with the introduction of new schemes from January 2025. However, given the extensive administrative and implementation requirements, it is hard to believe the schemes will be up and running in the ten months remaining for their establishment. Will the Minister update us on the progress of all the structures and administrative arrangements that will have to be wrapped around the schemes?

Initially, employees will contribute 1.5% of their gross earnings to the savings pot, which will be matched by the employer and topped up by the State. The rates and contributions will gradually rise until, from 2034 onwards, 6% of gross earnings will be paid by the employer, another 6% will be paid by the employee and 2% will come from the State. According to the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, there will be a slight increase in the rates of people at risk of poverty as a result of automatic enrolment pension contributions because those contributions will mainly come from low-income families already struggling to make ends meet. We run the risk that people who already do not have enough money to buy the necessities in life will be forced to decide either to opt out of the pension scheme or cut back on expenditure on essentials like food, clothes, etc. for their families. Without appropriate safeguards to protect low-income workers and their pensions, we could see people opting out of the scheme in order to pay for bills they could not otherwise afford.

In effect, the scheme may only work for those on higher incomes. The requirements disproportionately penalise younger workers and women. The reason for the exclusion is unclear given that younger workers and women are the lower earners. Many younger workers will not

be aware of the benefits. As we all recall, when we are young, we never think of a pension because it just does not occur to us. It is good that young people are being encouraged to pay into a pension but they will be excluded from the scheme on the basis that they are earning so little. That will not encourage them to believe this is the way to go.

I question the reasons for setting the minimum income at €20,000. According to the CSO, this will affect one in five people. The requirement limits access to the pension scheme by low-income and vulnerable households and individuals, part-time workers and women predominantly taking care of their loved ones at home. The income threshold may offer incentives to employers to keep wages low in order that they do not have to fulfil their obligation to contribute to the employee pension fund. There is a serious case to be made that the restrictions on enrolling in a pension scheme based on age and income need to be reviewed if we are to help the most vulnerable to save for the future.

The Bill sets out an investment strategy according to individuals' risk rating. A greater risk may lead to a greater pension fund return but, equally, it leads to a greater risk of losing money. It might sound a bit harsh but we need to be careful not to gamble on the Stock Exchange with people's futures. Gambling is a real problem in this country. The Government needs to be challenged on what it is doing with the Gambling Regulation Bill. What is being proposed in this Bill is like gambling but on the Stock Exchange. Where a greater risk is involved, it may lead to an endangering of the pension funds of poorer people and those most excluded from society.

Many people have low financial literacy. We should not expect people to make lifelong decisions and take risks with their pensions based on their feelings, information they might be given or what they are being told on the Internet. It is crucial that people are offered appropriate financial advice in an efficient manner. This is something for which the Pensions Authority probably should be responsible.

Regarding the pensions investments themselves, it is important to note that because most people are not actively engaged with pension plans, they do not know how to protect their investments in a safe and secure way. Of course, most people want a decent pension that at least maintains the standard of living they have when they are working. They do not want to face a future of poverty. Most people do not want investment managers to start playing around on the Stock Exchange with their hard-earned wages, that is, the deferred wages to which I referred. The risk is huge for all of us.

It is also unclear which types of financial assets will be considered for investment. The Bill refers to good practice when investing funds. It needs to set out specific environmental, climate and social governance requirements in this regard. I understand there was a recommendation at committee that the funds not be invested in fossil fuels or the arms trade. That needs to be spelled out in the Bill rather than just being a recommendation to which we would morally like to adhere. What happened to that recommendation and will it be inserted in the Bill?

On investment arrangements, the Bill does not specify what portion of pension funds will be invested in foreign or national assets. This is an important point. How much of a pension fund will be invested abroad instead of the money remaining in Ireland? Even in terms of how the capitalist system works, would it not be much more wise to invest in funds and businesses that are based in the country in which people are living and working and from which they are trying to extract their pension? We need specific considerations of that issue.

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We also need to look at the fees that are being associated with private pension on behalf of those who are automatically enrolled. Those fees can be very substantial and they should not be paid for by individuals. I can think of one recent example, in RTÉ, where the fees for administration of a pension scheme are being passed on to the retired workers. It is a very recent move, and one that could easily be copied, that administration fees are being paid for out of the money in the pension fund.

Regarding taxation, it appears automatic enrolment contributions will not be eligible for tax relief, as is the case with conventional exemptions on pension contributions. Will the Minister clarify that? As I understand it, automatic enrolment contributions will be subtracted after take-home pay is estimated and all other taxes are paid. If that is correct, it means we will not have a practice that incentivises people. Other pensioners are being given the right to have their deductions made before tax and to benefit from tax relief. In the case of automatic enrolment, however, it seems it will be calculated on gross pay and taken out after the net amount is paid. Why is that happening? If it is happening, can it be changed?

Our primary concern is that the State pension is at risk and that it is unacceptable in times of great economic performance and high inflation that we are giving retired workers only €13,000, on average, per year to live on. The State pension should be enough for retired workers to live on and be equal to what the Government defines as a living wage, which today is 60% of median earnings. That would give a pensioner €25,000 per year instead of €13,000. Instead of fixing our public pension system, we are being offered a private pension scheme, which will be costly to everyone, especially the most vulnerable.

I want to finish by talking about retired workers themselves because-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time, so I have to ask the Deputy to propose the adjournment. She will have six-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: Could I not take half a minute?

An Ceann Comhairle: No. The Deputy will have over six minutes left when we come back. We are running an hour behind time.

Deputy Bríd Smith: So the Ceann Comhairle wants me to shut up now and come back and do six minutes tomorrow.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Would it be okay to speak for two minutes now and not come back tomorrow?

An Ceann Comhairle: That means we will be an hour and two minutes late.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Compared to an hour, two minutes is nothing.

An Ceann Comhairle: All right, go on.

Deputy Bríd Smith: My very last point is on the retired workers themselves. I have introduced a Bill to amend the Industrial Relations Act to give retired workers the right to be represented where their pensions have been interfered with. It is shocking to think that they can say nothing, as happened during the austerity years to all our public sector workers, particularly

those in the semi-States. In goes the State and takes out the workers' pension fund and they never get to say tickety-boo about it. The decent thing to do, if we are to proceed down this road, would be to give the workers the right to representation should their pensions be interfered with by anybody, including the State.

Debate adjourned.

National Cancer Strategy: Motion [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Minister for Health coming?

Deputy David Cullinane: He is not. It will be the Minister of State from the Waterford constituency.

An Ceann Comhairle: Very good.

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recalls that the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026, the third such strategy, was launched in 2017 with a then-estimated cost of €140 million additional current expenditure by 2026;

notes that:

— the Government has only properly funded the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 in two of the last five years and has not revised the funding requirements in light of inflation, unpredicted demographic changes, or the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic;

— only one of the 23 objectives of the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 has been met according to the latest progress report; and

— according to the European Cancer Inequalities Registry, Ireland has the second highest rate of cancer incidence in Europe and is ranked mid-table of the 27 European Union member states for cancer survival, and performs poorly in comparison to western European peers in terms of uptake of cancer screening programmes;

further notes:

— remarks made to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health on 10th April, 2024, by the Chief Executive Officer of the Irish Cancer Society, Ms Averil Power, that:

— “Inadequate Government funding and the impact of Covid-19 on cancer diagnosis and treatment means that we are no longer confident that will be the case. In fact, we are concerned that Ireland’s cancer outcomes may have stagnated or even disimproved since the strategy was published”;

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— “In some areas, things have significantly disimproved since 2017. Waiting times for radiotherapy have increased, with expensive equipment lying idle in several hospitals due to an ongoing shortage of radiation therapists. Inequality between public and private patients is growing, particularly in terms of access to new medicines”; and

— “Our key recommendation to the committee today is a call for multiannual funding. One cannot plan for workforce, for capital or for anything properly without multi-annual funding”; and

— remarks made to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health on 10th April, 2024, by the Chair of the National Cancer Strategy Steering Group, Professor John M. Kennedy, when asked why life-saving equipment was left lying idle due to the shortage of radiation therapists, that:

— “The basic answer is we are not training enough of them because we have not reacted to the increased requirement over the past several years. That is true in many areas of infrastructure in the health system. It is the predominant reason”; and

— “Owing to the difficulties we have with unscheduled care, by which I mean sick people coming to the ED, time-critical surgeries are continually delayed because we cannot get patients into the hospital for them ... because the hospital was overwhelmed by urgent care”; and

— responses given to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health on 10th April, 2024, by the National Director of the National Cancer Control Programme, Professor Risteárd Ó Laoide, confirming that the Health Service Executive sought €20 million in funding for the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 in 2024 but “did not get anything for 2024”;

considers that the failure to properly fund the strategy, to properly plan and grow the workforce, and to resolve hospital overcrowding are the consequences of conscious political decisions made by this and previous Governments;

condemns the Taoiseach, Simon Harris TD, for his failure as the Minister for Health and as a member of this Government to properly fund the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026, and as the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to put in place a workforce plan to address staffing deficits in the health service; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately revise the health budget for 2024 to provide the funding needed to deliver the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026;

— commit to full multi-annual funding of the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026;

— end the recruitment embargo across the Health Service Executive;

— fund the 1,500 acute hospital beds which are needed to reduce overcrowd-

ing; and

— implement a medium- and long-term workforce plan for the health service to address staffing deficits, including in cancer services.

Cancer is a leading cause of death in Ireland. It is a sobering reality that one in two people will develop it at some point in their lives. The facts are that Ireland has the third highest mortality rate from cancer in western Europe and the Government is failing to get ahead of the problem. The first and second national cancer strategies were the poster children of success in the health service, and rightly so. Many of us have commended the real progress made under them. The reason progress was made was that funding was given to put in place the additional supports, staff, infrastructure and healthcare capacity that could deliver better health and cancer outcomes for patients. There have been tremendous improvements in cancer care since the first strategy. I pay tribute to all the staff who work in cancer services.

The problem, as outlined very clearly by the Irish Cancer Society last week and also outlined in a letter penned to all the major newspapers and news outlets today and yesterday by 21 clinicians and medics who work in cancer care, is that, under the current national cancer strategy, they do not have confidence that continued improvements in cancer outcomes are going to happen. In fact, they say there will be regression in many areas. They rightly pointed out that, in five of the seven years of the current strategy, it has not been properly funded. For 2024, €20 million was needed to fund the strategy properly. What did the Government allocate for it for the entirety of this year? It gave zero in additional funding. For the past several years, the national cancer strategy has not got any additional funding, meaning all the additional staff needed and all the additional measures that need to be implemented to ensure cancer patients can have the health outcomes they need have not been put in place. Medics should not have to raise these issues for the Government to act. The Government can take issue with anything I say and can even take issue with what the Irish Cancer Society says, but it cannot take issue with all those medics at the heart of developing the strategy and delivering cancer services. These medics are telling the Government that all the issues that I and others are raising, such as hospital equipment not being properly utilised and a lack of radiation therapists, radiographers and cancer care staff, are all having an impact on cancer outcomes. There is nobody in this State who has not lost someone to cancer. As the Minister of State knows, I lost my own mam a number of years ago, as have many. It is really traumatic for anyone to lose a loved one to cancer.

All we and society want is to ensure that we do our best to provide the best services. We should juxtapose that with the position of the Government, including Simon Harris, the current Taoiseach. It has decided, despite a request from the National Cancer Control Programme, NCCP, for €20 million in 2024 to start to make the improvements necessary, to say “No” and give it zero euro. What does that say to all those staff who are working in cancer services who are crying out for help? We can see this when they write letters to Taoiseach. What does it say to cancer patients and their families who are at their wits’ end coming to terms with a diagnosis and having to go through all the necessary treatments? It is a real slap in the face. We have had 13 years of Leo Varadkar, Simon Harris and Stephen Donnelly as Ministers for Health. We see a major problem with overcrowding in our hospitals and are aware that one of the consequences of this is that hospital managers are forced to cancel procedures. We know that many of those are cancer procedures, as we have heard from the chair of the steering group of the national cancer strategy at a meeting of the Oireachtas health committee last week. We are aware that in all the years in which Simon Harris was Minister for Health, he failed to properly fund the national cancer strategy. In fairness to the current Minister, Deputy Donnelly, he did make a difference

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in the two years in which he did fund the strategy. Six hundred and seventy staff were hired. Then the funding was stopped and there was nothing after that. You cannot stop and start; there needs to be a continuous flow of funding.

From my perspective, we need a change of direction in healthcare. We need new ideas and leadership. We have had 13 years of failure from three Ministers – Leo Varadkar, Simon Harris and Stephen Donnelly – and it really is time for a step change, new ideas and a new direction in healthcare. I propose the motion.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I pay tribute to the cancer support groups in my constituency, including Ballyjamesduff Cancer Support Fund, CUAN cancer support in Cavan, and Crocus cancer support in Monaghan, and also the Moylagh JFK 50 Mile Challenge committee, which has raised over €1.2 million for cancer services and research over the past 11 years. These groups provide vital services and support for cancer patients and their families, with little or no central government funding. I commend my party colleague Deputy Cullinane for introducing this motion in the Dáil.

The current national cancer strategy was published in 2017 and has the potential to significantly improve Ireland's cancer outcomes; however, the Government has failed to properly fund the national cancer strategy in five of the past seven years, including every single year in which Simon Harris was Minister for Health. As a result, while some improvements have been made, the National Cancer Control Programme has not been able to deliver fully on its ambition. The NCCP and the HSE sought €20 million in additional funding through budget 2024 to deliver the strategy but received zero. The Government must immediately revise the health budget for 2024 and provide the funding needed to deliver the strategy. It cannot say it was unaware of the consequences of the underfunding. The National Cancer Control Programme has reported that the lack of funding will have an impact on cancer outcomes and that it no longer has confidence in the strategy's chances of improving cancer survival rates. According to the European cancer inequalities register, Ireland has the second highest rate of cancer incidence in Europe and is ranked only mid-table of the 27 EU member states for cancer survival. It performs poorly in comparison with many other western European countries as well with regard to uptake of cancer screening programmes. Early detection and treatment are vital if we are to improve the outcomes for people with cancer. We are calling on the Government to revise the health budget for 2024, provide the funding needed to deliver the strategy, end the recruitment embargo and implement a deliverable workforce plan for the health service.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: With the Ceann Comhairle's indulgence, I will first acknowledge the passing of former Cork North-West Deputy, Gerard Murphy, who died today. My condolences. I served on Cork County Council with him for two years. He was a very courteous and wise man. My condolences to his family and indeed to Fine Gael.

Very few people in this country are not touched by the ravages of cancer. It causes untold damage. Over the course of past cancer strategies, significant progress was made in some respects. In the course of the last cancer strategy and under the stewardship of three Ministers for Health, Deputies Harris, Varadkar and Donnelly, we have gone backwards. Over the last 13 years, the Ministers, Deputies Harris, Varadkar and Donnelly, have made the health service worse. Cancer services are not being funded properly. In five of the last seven years, the strategy has not received enough funding. In the years where it was funded, as Deputy Cullinane has pointed out, a difference was made. In five of the last seven years, it was not funded adequately. Only one of the 23 objectives in the current strategy has been met. There is much

concern among people who are working in the area of cancer. Twenty-one clinicians wrote a letter expressing serious concern that things will likely regress. It is simply not good enough. There are numerous problems, many of them to do with recruitment.

It is so frustrating. With the housing crisis, people get frustrated about empty and boarded up houses. What could be more frustrating for people with cancer who are waiting for treatment and let down by the system than to hear about equipment not being used? In Cork, one linear accelerator is never used. One CT scanner is idle and never used. It has been lying idle for three years. How galling is that to families who have cancer? It is absolutely maddening. I have no doubt that they find it the same.

Things are beginning to regress in several respects. The clinicians are identifying that. That is a concern. It is simply not good enough. Deputy Cullinane has outlined the plan that Sinn Féin has to resolve this. It includes ensuring there is adequate funding and, crucially, addressing the recruitment embargo, which is such a blunt instrument and is doing significant damage across the health system as a whole.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I am really concerned by the latest progress report that states that only one of the 23 recommendations highlighted back in 2017 has been met. When we look at how cancer treatment is rolled out in other European countries, we are ranked mid-table for cancer survival. In some areas, we are going backwards due to the struggle with training, recruitment and retention of staff. Last Wednesday, the chair of the national strategy steering group attended the Joint Committee on Health. He outlined how pressures on emergency departments were impacting on the scheduled, time-sensitive surgery for cancer patients. At the same committee, the CEO of the Irish Cancer Society, Averil Power, called for multi-annual funding to be put in place. She pointed out the wait times for radiotherapy as one example of where we are regressing.

We are failing cancer patients by not properly funding this strategy. We need the Government to revise the health budget for 2024 and to provide for the strategy. We need to see a commitment to multi-annual funding. Sinn Féin is calling for an end to the recruitment embargo in the HSE, which is having a detrimental impact on patient care. We need an increase in funding that reduces overcrowding so that cancer services can focus on scheduled surgeries, in particular, and treatment more generally. We need to train and hire more professional healthcare staff to address staff shortages.

The people attending hospital to receive cancer treatment need a Government that is willing to put them first. This motion is giving the Government the opportunity to do just that.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This Government needs to end the recruitment embargo and implement a workforce plan for the health service. People shake their heads in disbelief at the recruitment embargo. The Government needs to train more radiation therapists and hire the staff needed to utilise all radiotherapy equipment. It is a scandal that expensive life-saving equipment is lying idle due to staff shortages. The Government needs to fund the 3,000 hospital and community beds needed to deal with overcrowding and avoid hospital cancellations. It needs to properly fund the cancer strategy on a multi-annual basis to drive improvements in cancer detection and survival rates.

The Irish Cancer Society sent us a document today which states that the current national cancer strategy, published in 2017, “has the potential to significantly improve Ireland’s cancer

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outcomes through investment in cancer prevention, detection, treatment and survivorship supports.” However, it has only received proper funding in two of the seven budgets since then.

Why do we need to do those things? It is because cancer has affected every single family in this country. One word comes to mind every time we hear the word cancer, which is fear. It is fear about the diagnosis, how bad it will be, what stage it is at and whether it has been detected early enough. There is fear about the road ahead and the impact of the treatment process, including on the person’s family. There is the stress of the income loss and how the person will cope if the worst happens. What people should not fear is the state of the health service itself, getting a diagnosis in time to prevent it from getting worse, and that there will be any delays in their diagnosis or treatment. That fear is elevated for people who rely on the HSE and do not have private health insurance.

A report from some years ago always sticks in my head. It laid bare the facts of our two-tier healthcare system. The death rate from cancer in Mulhuddart in my constituency is nearly three times that of Castleknock. Those two areas are geographically beside each other. In fact, just the Ongar Road separates them. Cancer death rates from 2009 to 2011 varied from 381 people per 100,000 in Blakestown to 128 people per 100,000 in Castleknock. Access to timely healthcare is critically important to outcomes.

This Government has failed. It has failed those people who need that treatment. That is why we need a general election and a new Government.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: There is nobody in this country who has not been affected by cancer in some shape or form. It is a devastating disease, not only for those who are fighting it but for their loved ones too. Around 42,000 people a year will get a cancer diagnosis. Each and every one of them deserves the best possible chance of not only surviving the disease but of enjoying a good quality of life afterwards. That will only happen if we have a properly resourced national cancer strategy. That same strategy has not received adequate funding in five out of seven years, which means the Government has failed to make available the necessary funding for cancer protection, detection, treatment and survivorship supports.

Across the country, radiation therapy machines are currently lying idle due to a chronic shortage of staff. Screening has not been expanded as planned. Target times for tests are not being met. Surgeries are frequently delayed to shortages across hospitals. We are even missing the modest target of having 6% of cancer patients participate in clinical trials. We are one of the slowest countries in western Europe to make new medicines available to public patients. The Government is simply failing. We now rank 13th of the EU-27 for cancer survival. Thirteen years of Simon Harris, Leo Varadkar and Stephen Donnelly have made the health service worse. We have the highest waiting times and chronically overcrowded hospitals. Our services are not being funded. Expensive life-saving equipment is lying idle.

What needs to happen now is clear. We need to properly fund the cancer strategy on a multi-annual basis to improve detection and survival rates.

7 o'clock

We need to end the recruitment embargo. The Government needs to speak with workers and put a realistic and deliverable workforce plan in place. The recruitment embargo needs to end but really what we need now is a general election. The Government has failed on this as it has failed on so many issues. If the Government needs any proof as to how that failure is affecting

the day-to-day lives of even children in this country come down to Mullingar and have a conversation with the parents who engage with the paediatric diabetes service.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Last week I raised with the Tánaiste the deliberate decision by the Government, and it was deliberate, to deny adequate funding to cancer services and the cancer strategy. Today's debate offers an opportunity again to put the facts on the table. The Government has failed miserably to properly fund the cancer strategy in five of the past seven years. The HSE sought €20 million to improve cancer services for this year but did not receive a red cent from the Government in the recent budget. We know that expensive and life-saving equipment funded by the taxpayers is lying idle and unused in hospitals as a result of staff shortages brought on by the Government. Radiation therapy, as we all know in the House, is crucial to shrink tumours and ultimately remove cancerous cells but we have heard there are machine closures in our hospitals throughout the State due to staff shortages. For example, in Cork University Hospital a linear accelerator and a CT scanner have never been used. They have been sitting idle for three years. It is an absolute scandal. It is happening on the watch of the Government.

Yesterday 21 leading cancer doctors and researchers wrote to the Taoiseach. Among them was one from my county, Dr. Lukasz Milewski, who is a consultant medical oncologist at Letterkenny University Hospital in Donegal. The warnings by this doctor and others cannot be brushed aside by the Government. They warn that cancer screening has not been expanded as planned. They warn the targeted waiting times for cancer are not being met. They warn that cancer surgeries are frequently delayed due to shortages in staffing beds and theatre space. Yet there was not a red cent from the Government, or any one of the Ministers who sat at the Cabinet table, to provide funding to the national cancer strategy in each the past two years. What does this tell us? It tells us the Government is completely failing people on health, particularly those who have cancer. It is an indictment of the Government.

The long and the short of it is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael cannot be trusted with our health system. The evidence of this is to be found in every community. Over the past 13 years Deputy Varadkar, the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Donnelly have been our Ministers for Health. Their record is high waiting times, hospital overcrowding and underfunding of critical cancer services. There is an alternative, which is to provide proper and multiannual funding for our cancer strategy to improve outcomes for patients, to end the recruitment embargo and to fund the 3,000 additional beds in our hospitals and communities that are so desperately needed. This is what Sinn Féin in government would do. It is what Deputy Cullinane has brought before the Dáil. It is what every Member should support. They should turn their backs on the Government, which has failed desperately the people who are relying on a proper health service. It has driven it into the ground over the past 13 years. It has deliberately decided not to fund cancer services. It is allowing equipment to lie idle. It is a shame and a scandal and it needs to end now.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I move:

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

“recognises and notes:

— the work of our healthcare workers in improving the health outcomes for patients with cancer;

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— the improvement in survival rates in Ireland during the current National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026, with more than 215,000 people living in Ireland following a cancer diagnosis compared to 150,000 in 2017 when the Strategy was brought to Government;

— the strong performance of Ireland compared to other European countries in reducing the rate of deaths from cancer;

— that studies for the period 2011-2019 found that Ireland reduced cancer mortality by 14 per cent for men and 13 per cent for women, compared to the European Union (EU) average of 10 per cent for men and 5 per cent for women;

— the substantial investment that has been made into the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 since the formation of this Government in 2020 of €40 million, with a cumulative total of over €120 million in additional funding spent on the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 since 2020;

— the recruitment of an additional 670 new staff to national cancer services since 2017, leading to improved access to treatment for cancer patients;

— the provision of improved treatment for cancer patients since 2020, including new treatments now available in Ireland for the first time, tailored anti-cancer therapies, and new radiotherapy treatments;

— the development of new infrastructure for cancer since 2017, including new radiation oncology facilities at Cork and Galway with a total capital spend of over €120 million, and the extensive cancer infrastructure projects which are currently ongoing within the Health Service Executive;

— the investment into screening services since 2020 of €30 million in new development funding, including €20 million to support the opening of the National Cervical Screening Laboratory in December 2022;

— that Ireland's screening programmes rank highly for uptake rates in comparison to the EU member states which have these screening programmes in place: BreastCheck seventh out of 23 member states, CervicalCheck third out of 19 member states, and BowelScreen sixth out of 16 member states;

— the ambitious target set by this Government to eliminate cervical cancer by 2040, which Ireland is on track to achieve;

— the sustained funding of cancer research of €37.6 million between 2020 and 2023, which represents 14 per cent of the Health Research Board's overall funding portfolio;

— the funding allocated in the last three years to new medicines, including 61 cancer drugs, of €98 million, and the total spend on cancer drugs in the last three years of over €600 million;

— the support given to smoking cessation initiatives of over €60 million from 2020-2024, and the extensive body of legislation enacted since the formation of this Government to address tobacco consumption as the biggest single cause of cancer

in Ireland;

— the initiatives progressed under this Government to address alcohol as the fourth highest modifiable risk factor for cancer in Ireland, including the further commencement of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 to introduce minimum unit pricing, health labelling of alcohol products, the regulation of advertising and sponsorship, and the reduced visibility of alcohol in mixed trading outlets;

— the Government is committed to increasing capacity in our public hospitals; 1,182 new acute hospital inpatient beds have opened since 2020, which includes 56 beds opened so far in 2024; and

— there was a significant increase in the number of additional student places available on health-related courses in 2023; in total over 660 additional student places have been provided in medicine, nursing and midwifery, pharmacy, and other key healthcare courses in the academic year 2023/24; and this includes over 220 student places across Nursing and Midwifery and Allied Health Professional courses in Northern Ireland.”.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss funding for the national cancer strategy. I thank the Deputies for tabling this Private Members’ motion. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly is not available to respond to it as he is in the Seanad with legislation. The unfortunate reality is that a large proportion of people in Ireland will interact with our cancer services. This could be as a patient or as a friend or family member of a patient. This is why the Government and the Minister for Health have advocated for and ensured funding for cancer services in Ireland. I will set out clearly what has been spent on cancer services over the lifetime of the Government.

Successive national cancer strategies have shown the benefit of continued investment in national cancer services. The benefits for Irish cancer patients come from earlier diagnosis, better treatment and improved rates of survival. Seven years into the national cancer strategy, 40 of the 52 recommendations - I repeat that is 40 of the 52 recommendations and not one as was said across the floor - are now implemented and work is progressing on the remaining recommendations.

The Government’s commitment to implementation of the national cancer strategy is evidenced by significant investment in recent years. We have seen significant progress on the implementation of the strategy with clear evidence-based policy direction from the Department and strong implementation by the HSE’s national cancer control programme.

The Government has invested an additional €40 million into treatment services under the national cancer strategy, and the total cumulative additional funding into treatment services under the strategy since 2017 is more than €230 million. This funding has enabled the recruitment of more than 670 staff to our national cancer services since 2017, including an additional 200 nursing staff, 100 consultants, and 180 health and social care professionals in designated cancer centres. Additionally, €30 million has been invested in screening since 2020, including €20 million for the development of the new national cervical screening laboratory which opened in December 2022. This means that our national cancer services have been strengthened, that more patients are receiving treatment, and that waiting times to access treatment are reduced.

Capital funding of more than €120 million has been used to provide state-of-the-art radiation oncology facilities in Cork and Galway, which opened in 2020 and 2023, and to update

cancer infrastructure in chemotherapy wards and laboratory facilities for the benefit of patients. In the past three years, additional investment of €98 million in new medicines has included approvals for 61 new cancer drugs. This brings total spend on cancer drugs in the past three years to more than €600 million. Taken as a whole, this represents a significant investment towards the implementation of the aims of the national cancer strategy. Since 2017, the total additional funding across screening, prevention, treatment, new cancer drugs and cancer research is more than €180 million.

The strategy recognises the impact of catching cancer early on a patient's prognosis, and the importance of preventing cancer where possible. Current estimates show that four out of ten cancer cases can be prevented by a change in lifestyle or environment. Since the beginning of 2020 the Government has spent more than €60 million on measures to assist people with quitting smoking. This funding allows people to receive smoking cessation medications and it funds our national quit line as well as staffing and other programmes.

In 2022, the HSE national cancer control programme launched the Early Diagnosis of Symptomatic Cancer Plan 2022-2025. The plan focuses on raising awareness of the signs of cancer among health professionals and the general public, with a particular emphasis on marginalised groups. Nine out of ten cancers are diagnosed when individuals present to their GP with symptoms and electronic referral is in place for breast, lung, prostate and suspected skin cancer. More patients are being seen now than ever before in rapid access clinics, with more than 53,000 attendances in 2023.

The strategy sets out a vision for continuous improvement of cancer services, following on from the progress under the previous two cancer strategies. A particular focus is the centralisation of cancer surgery, which is now 85% complete. This means that expertise and resources are concentrated in designated centres, ensuring that patients have the best care available for cancer surgery.

Early intervention in cancer is extremely important, and as part of the urgent and emergency care plan this year time-sensitive cancer surgeries are given priority where possible. The NCCP engages closely with designated centres to monitor the activity of surgical services, and by the end of 2023 more than 17,000 cancer surgeries had been carried out, which was more than 1,000 more than in 2019. Since 2020, new cancer treatments and models of care have been launched in Ireland thanks to the increased funding for the national cancer strategy, including CAR-T for certain blood cancers, PRRT for neuroendocrine tumour patients and the SABR advanced radiotherapy treatment now available in our new radiation oncology centres.

The Government has also allocated significant investment to ensuring new medicines are available for cancer patients. A total of €98 million additional funding was allocated for new medicines over the past three years, which includes funding for 61 cancer drugs. The total spend on cancer drugs in the past three years has been more than €600 million. I am setting out the facts. When this strategy was brought to Government in 2017, there were 150,000 people living after a cancer diagnosis in Ireland. That number is now at 215,000, a 43% increase under this strategy. Thankfully, I am one of those people. This is a massive achievement, and it means that the aim under the strategy to increase patient involvement and maximise quality of life becomes even more important.

Over the lifetime of this strategy, the NCCP has developed models of care for psycho-oncology, which incorporate best international practice and ensure that psycho-social supports

for cancer patients and their families are to a very high standard. This has included specific models of care for children, adolescents and young adults which recognise their different needs from adults. These models of care have the aim of improving outcomes for cancer patients who face a heavy burden throughout their treatment and beyond, into recovery. The NCCP has also developed guidelines for community services that have been adopted by the NCCP Alliance of Community Cancer Support Centres. The Minister for Health allocated €3 million in funding to these centres for 2024, recognising the impact these centres have on cancer patients and their families in communities throughout Ireland.

The ongoing transformation of cancer services is a priority under the strategy. This is enabled by integrating research into cancer care where possible, and making use of innovative methods to improve how our national cancer services provide care. The national cancer information system, NCIS, is live in 18 out of 26 sites nationwide, with the remaining hospitals expected to be completed this year. The NCIS is essential for risk reduction and the optimal and safe delivery of multidisciplinary systemic anti-cancer treatment. It also allows for electronic prescribing and administration of cancer drug treatment in public hospitals. The NCIS enables an integrated approach to patient care across multiple sites, which benefits patients as their record travels with them.

Since 2020, the Health Research Board, HRB, has invested €37.6 million in cancer research. This represents almost 14% of the total health research investment. Of this funding, €21.6 million went towards support for developing cancer clinical trials infrastructure, to help achieve one of the aims of the strategy which is to increase patient participation in clinical trials. In addition to this funding, this year, the HRB announced a provision of €1.2 million in funding for cancer research projects operating on a North-South basis as part of the cancer consortium, which involves co-operation between Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the United States' National Cancer Institute.

As I mentioned earlier, under this strategy there has been an improvement in cancer survival rates in Ireland. Looking back to the period between 1994 and 1998, the five-year survival rate for patients diagnosed with cancer was 44%. This increased dramatically to 65% for people diagnosed with cancer between 2014 and 2018. Ireland is performing strongly in comparison to other European countries in its reduction of cancer mortality. European comparisons for the period from 2011 to 2019 found that Ireland reduced cancer mortality by 14% for men and 13% for women, compared to the EU average of 10% for men and 5% for women. In addition to this, recent estimates by the European Cancer Inequalities Registry, ECIR, suggest that Irish cancer mortality rates have fallen below the EU-27 rate. This is proof of the benefits of our long-term strategic approach to cancer, with strong policy oversight from the Government and a national cancer control approach led by the NCCP.

As cancer will affect one in three of us in our lifetimes, support for cancer services and cancer patients will continue to be prioritised as part of the overall health budget. This Government has invested heavily in the national cancer strategy and associated initiatives in recent years, enabling the further development of our national cancer services.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Gabhaim míle buíochas to Deputy Cullinane for the opportunity to speak on this vital issue. Since in inception in 2017, the national cancer strategy could have been a shining example of how to do things properly. However, the continuing failure of this and previous Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments to properly fund it means Ireland's cancer outcomes are in danger of going backwards. Ireland now holds the dubious honour of having

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the third-highest cancer mortality rates in western Europe and is ranked 30 out of the EU-27, which the Minister of State has just spoken about, for cancer survival.

It is unlucky for those, perhaps. It is unlucky for those 42,000 people who are diagnosed with cancer every year and who trust in the health service here to help them. It is unlucky for those who are seeking treatment when vital, hugely expensive medical machinery is left lying idle, as we discovered last week, because of insufficient funding or no staff to operate it. Why is there no staff? Is it because of the recruitment embargo that has been imposed by the Government, perhaps? Why is there insufficient funding? Is it because Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have for years failed to properly fund cancer services? Imagine your child's treatment being cancelled because of this. The answer to all those questions is an absolute "Yes".

The Minister of State's claims that there are significant advancements in cancer treatments are ridiculous. There were three in five people receiving radiation therapy by 15 days post-diagnosis in 2023 compared to four in five in 2018. That is a drop of 20%. Let us imagine being one of those people in that 20%. Thirteen years and three failed health Ministers is too much. It is time for real leadership to do what cancer sufferers need. It is time to have Sinn Féin in government and it is time for Deputy Cullinane to be a health Minister.

Deputy Martin Kenny: First, I commend Deputy Cullinane on tabling this motion. We always recognise that many people in our communities and families have had the devastating news of a cancer diagnosis and have experienced the trauma of that. There is no family across the country that is not touched by that. Of course, we recognise that great work is being done by many people in our health service to try to make things better and, in many cases, there are very good outcomes.

We had a cancer strategy in 2017, and the then Government put it in place. We all recognise that everyone was on board. This was going to be something that could turn things around for what was up to then and probably still is, unfortunately, the devastating situation in our cancer services around the country. Yet, the reality is that the Government refused and failed to fund that adequately. It has only gotten the funding in two of the past seven years, and we then wonder why we do not have the outcomes. When the Minister of State was speaking, she spent a long time on how good things are and about the good outcomes, etc. Let us imagine if the Government had gotten had gotten the proper funding how much better it could have been. That is the reality that most people are recognising here. The Government is not putting the funding in place. It is not providing the kind of service that is required to ensure we can look after people properly across the State.

With regard to staff vacancies, almost one-third of the radiotherapy posts are vacant. Let us think about what impact that will have on people who are on waiting lists and waiting for treatment. There is all this very expensive equipment that is lying idle in various hospitals around the country, as well as the impact that has on patients. There is also the impact it has on the psychological aspect that cancer patients and their families are going through. They know that there is the potential out there for life-saving services to be provided to them, but they simply have not been funded. That is devastating and the Minister of State needs to take a long, hard look at this situation. It is simply not acceptable to continually spout off all kinds of statistics about how great things are-----

Deputy Mary Butler: It is a fact.

Deputy Martin Kenny: -----when the reality is in front of us. The Irish Cancer Society made it very clear; the reality is that the funding has not been put in place to deliver the cancer strategy that the Government - and the Minister of State supported the previous Government as well in 2017 - has put in place. We need to see this situation being resolved.

Finally, we are calling on the Government to immediately reverse the health budget for 2024, and provide the funding that is needed to deliver on the national cancer strategy. That is what need to do. That is what we need to ensure happens. We need to ensure there is multi-annual funding for the national cancer strategy. We also need to end the recruitment embargo. This is one of the key things the Government can do. It can end the embargo on our people around the country because we cannot recruit the level of staff that is required to provide the services to people so we can save lives.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Browne: I also want to thank Deputy Cullinane for tabling the motion. The Minister of State said in her contribution that she would give figures; I am also going to give figures. First, we have had 13 years with Deputies Harris, Varadkar and Stephen Donnelly as Minister for Health that have made the health service worse, with higher hospital overcrowding, hospital waiting times and wasteful spending.

Cancer services are one sector that the Government has not funded properly, because it has failed to fund the cancer strategy in five of the past seven years, even though we have the third highest rate of cancer in Europe. Here is another figure for the Minister of State: 70 out of 240 radiation posts are still vacant. Some members of staff are working ten hours per day just to facilitate the longer cancer waiting lists and burnout is a real issue. A lack of career development is also a major deterrent in the retention of these staff. In a survey of radiation therapy, RT, professionals carried out last year, 60% said they will not be working in that profession in five years. That should sound alarm bells with the Minister of State and the Government, but it is not. They seem to have no interest in it.

Cancer surgeries are being cancelled because of hospital overcrowding. We need to end the recruitment embargo straight away and recruit or retain enough people in that sector. Sinn Féin has a plan and will deliver better health services. It is time for new ideas and leadership in health, with Deputy Cullinane at the helm.

No one in this Chamber has not been affected by cancer. We look on a weekly basis at how the Government is running the system and it is no consolation to anybody who has been through that experience that the Government is still in charge. We need a new government with Deputy Cullinane in charge.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Cancer remains one of the leading causes of death across the State. It is particularly prevalent in areas of the country that are more economically disadvantaged. A report published by National Cancer Registry Ireland in 2023 showed that people in such areas have an almost 30% higher risk of dying from cancer within five years of diagnosis than those from less economically vulnerable areas. The Irish Life insurance company, in its annual claims report from 2015 to 2023, showed that cancer has resulted in the largest percentage of cause of death claims. For example, 65% of specified illness claims in 2020 were due to cancer. In 2021, 61% of specified illness claims were due to malignant cancer. More than one in three death claims in that year were due to cancer. Breast cancer was generally the number

one overall cause of specified illness claims for women, and for men, prostate cancer was the main cause of cancer-related claims. By every metric, cancer is not just the leading cause of death but also has a great impact not only on individuals but on their families, communities and society in general.

Cancer imposes a substantial economic burden on the State so it is imperative that a proper cancer strategy is put in place. This important strategy is crucial as we have an increasingly ageing population, along with improved long-term cancer survival rates. It is particularly important for those who have the greatest need, such as the elderly, those on low incomes and those with no family support. The lack of implementation of a cancer strategy is evident in the inadequate funding for treatment, along with increased waiting times for treatment and radiotherapy, as well as specialist staff shortages, especially in radiology, and along with serious hospital capacity issues. It is clear that this Government is failing people diagnosed with cancer and it goes without saying that they do not have the luxury of waiting until this Government gets its act together.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank Deputy Cullinane and the Sinn Féin team for tabling the motion, which is about a life-and-death issue. I can safely say there is no one in this Chamber, or outside it, who does not have a relative or friend, or who does not know someone, who has either survived cancer or died because of it. Ireland ranks 13th out of 27 countries in terms of cancer survival. In fact, Ireland has the third highest mortality rate in western Europe.

Cancer is on the increase, with an average rise of 3% in the general population every year. These statistics should ring alarm bells in every corridor in the Department of Health, and with the Minister for Health, but, unfortunately for many people who cannot afford private tests, it is an even harder uphill battle. Inequality in cancer care is prominent and growing on a daily basis. Between 2016 and 2019, 14% of all cancer diagnoses were made in emergency departments, usually for older patients in a later stage of the disease who are, more often than not, from deprived areas. The Irish Cancer Society stated that waiting times are translating to inequality in the healthcare system. At the end of 2023, 260,000 people were waiting on a list, 135,000 of whom had been waiting for longer than three months. Action is required now. The Government should end the recruitment embargo. Approximately seven out of 240 radiation therapy posts are filled. This has the direct impact that valuable life-saving machines are not operating at their full capacity and across the country RT machines, which cost millions of euro, are lying idle because of the lack of qualified staff.

According to the HSE national service plan for 2023, just over three in four people assessed received radiation therapy within 15 days. This is vital for the fast-growing tumours. In 2018, four in five people were being seen on time.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. It is important that we are honest about the failings of this Government on cancer care. I had hoped that the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, perhaps on Daffodil Day on 22 March or as part of, or instead of, a countermotion, would have announced a commitment to funding a national cancer strategy in the upcoming budget. It would not have been seen as flying a kite or a cynical act. It would have been broadly welcomed, given the debacle we had last year and in previous years, and the desperate need we have for funding of our national cancer strategy. Alas, it does not seem that the Minister is minded to do that at this point. The closer we get to the budget without such a commitment, the more we all fear a repeat of last year and the year before.

In budget 2024, funding was not allocated. Since the national cancer strategy was most recently updated in 2017, it has received just €40 million in new developmental funding when we know it requires €20 million annually. It is not penny-wise and pound-stupid but penny-stupid and pound-stupid. In fact, it is penny-pinching of the highest order for a disease that has touched, either directly or indirectly, the lives of everybody in this country.

The reality is that this Government has only properly funded the national cancer strategy in two of the past seven years. As the motion rightly points out, it has not revised the funding requirements in light of inflation, demographic changes that were not predicted or the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, if we were to put a report card against this Government on cancer care, it would make for shocking reading. On the national cancer strategy, it would have to be granted a failing grade. We have only achieved one of the 23 objectives of the strategy according to the latest progress report. That also would require a failing grade. Ireland performs poorly in comparison with our western European peers in the uptake of cancer screening programmes. It is failing in that regard. Waiting times for certain treatments, such as radiotherapy and colonoscopies, are increasing. We are failing in that regard as well. It is absolutely unacceptable that the Government has gotten cancer care so wrong, particularly with so much money in its coffers and those of the Minister for Health.

Earlier this year, I asked him about the impact on a number of cancer care programmes of the decision not to award any new development funding to the national cancer strategy in the most recent budget. I was told that cancer services are a top priority for this Government. We are more than four years into the life of this Government - in fact, it is entering its final few months - and seven years have passed since the most recent update of the national cancer strategy, but we have seen no evidence or particular action to show it is a top priority for this Government or Minister.

Last month, I asked the Tánaiste to commit to multi-annual, ring-fenced funding for a national cancer strategy. To his credit, he said in his response it was something we had to do and see but, unfortunately, we have not yet seen that commitment. He spoke of the importance of the introduction of national cancer strategies and the impact they had in the 1990s and 2000s. He is correct that those strategies played a significant role in lowering mortality rates and progressing care. Between 1998 and 2018, when the first two national cancer strategies were completed, five-year cancer survival rates increased from 44% to 65%, as the Minister of State mentioned. That makes it all the more confusing that this Government's commitment to these strategies is faltering in respect of funding.

When representatives of the Irish Cancer Society were before the Joint Committee on Health last week, their call was crystal clear. There is a need for a commitment to multi-annual funding. The problem with the way we are operating at the moment is that we simply cannot plan for workforce, capital or anything else without a multi-annual funding model. These services are being asked to work with one hand tied behind their backs and with resources that pale in comparison with what they need. It is not the way a modern health service should operate. The inefficiencies this causes were laid bare to the committee last week. Life-saving equipment is being left idle across hospitals and there is a real shortage of radiation therapists in our health service. The reasons are simple: poor planning and underfunding. As noted by the chair of the national cancer strategy steering group, Professor John Kennedy, we are not training enough radiotherapists because we have not reacted to the increase requirement in recent years. Across the St. Luke's radiation oncology network, there is one linear accelerator, which is shut, and a skin cancer machine that is only operating part time. Cork University Hospital has one linear

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accelerator and one CT scanner that have never been used. Both have been sitting idle for three years. At University Hospital Galway, a second scanner has been delivered in the past week but there is uncertainty as to whether it will be operational due to staff shortages. We know that radiotherapists are stepping up to plug gaps that they should not be expected to, having now agreed to facilitate longer working days to make up for staff shortages. In some instances, they are working in excess of ten hours per day in order to facilitate and work through the ever-growing cancer waiting list.

These workers need to be provided with support, which can come in a variety of ways. First, we need to see an increase in graduate places. In 1998, the number of college places for radiotherapists in Trinity College Dublin and nationally was 12. In 2024, it has grown to 42 nationally. Training more workers needs to be a priority moving forward. That should include starting a second postgraduate programme in the west that would have a meaningful impact in tackling the increased levels of burnout we are seeing in this area. According to a survey of radiotherapists carried out last year, 60% said they will not be working in the profession or do not see themselves working in the profession in the next five years. This has to be addressed or the waiting lists that these overstretched workers are working so hard to bring down and manage will increase further.

We also know that the inequality between public and private patients is growing, particularly in respect of access to new medicines. While funding for new medicines is vital and we should be ring-fencing funding rather than having a situation similar to budget 2024 when there was no committed funding and the Minister told us funding would instead be found in savings, we also need to look at how long it is taking to get these new medicines into the hands of the people who need them. In Ireland, it takes on average two years from the date of application to patient availability. When it comes to oncology drugs, the time to availability is longer, with a median of 704 days, and we rank 32nd out of 37 countries in a survey published by the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations in 2023. We are lagging so far behind.

The pressure on emergency departments, which we know is at astounding levels, is also having a serious impact on the care that those with cancer are receiving. We usually talk about a winter surge but now we know we have a year-round surge and pressure on our emergency departments. This is because our health service is not getting the necessary funding or resources, and nothing encapsulates this as much as the current recruitment freeze in the HSE, which needs to end. We also need to see some honesty from the Government on this being a recruitment freeze. Every time the freeze has been raised by members of the Opposition, we have seen members of the Government, particularly the previous Taoiseach, deflecting and trying to wave away concerns by saying it is not actually a recruitment freeze and more people have been hired than were planned or needed. We know that is not the case.

Despite the Government's claim to the contrary, the ball has been dropped on cancer. It is time to get down to brass tacks. The Government will say that mortality rates for all cancers have dropped by 11% in Ireland in the past ten years. While that statement is true, it ignores that the latest survival data we have, from 2019, shows that Ireland has the third highest mortality rate in western Europe. That was pre-Covid, and the related impact on cancer services, which the Government has acknowledged, has been significant. The Government will also say that cancer survival rates are steadily increasing but Ireland still ranks 13th out of the EU-27 in terms of survival. I certainly do not feel, and I do not think the Minister of State or anyone in this House feels, that we should be settling for a mid-table ranking for cancer survival.

The significant advancement in treatments for cancer that the Government has touted since taking office ignores the idle machines I referred to and the evidence that some care is going backwards, including statistics that show that in 2023 more than three in five people accessed their radiation therapy within 15 days, which is vitally important for fast-growing tumours, according to the HSE national service plan. This is in stark contrast to 2018, when it was four in five people who were being seen in that time. Again, we are going backwards.

There has not been a recognition from the Government that screening has not been expanded as planned. Target waiting times for cancer tests are not being met. Cancer surgeries are frequently delayed due to shortages in staffing, beds and theatre space. Investment in infrastructure has been lacking despite increased infection control issues and rising cancer incidence.

With regard to what we need to see now, I echo the calls made in the motion and by the Irish Cancer Society for a sustained, predictable, multi-year funding model. This is vital to ensuring the full implementation of the national cancer strategy, while also determining the level of resource required over an appropriate timeframe to fully implement the recommendations in the national cancer strategy and ensure the key performance indicators, KPIs, are being achieved.

Alongside this, we need to see infrastructural investment in combination with an audit of our current cancer infrastructure; ring-fenced capacity for cancer diagnostics and treatment away from acute and emergency care; increased staff in parallel with increased college places; dedicated theatre time for genetic services; an assessment of the feasibility of other methods of investigating risk; and an urgent examination due to the unacceptable colonoscopy waiting list, including the use of fit tests for people on routine waiting lists.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I thank the Sinn Féin Party for tabling this motion, which the Social Democrats will be very happy to support. It is deeply regrettable that the implementation of the national cancer strategy is clearly no longer a priority for this Government. At last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Health, the message from the Irish Cancer Society was received loud and clear - the strategy is being starved of funding.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: For a long time, our cancer strategies were the success stories of the health service. They were prime examples of what the HSE could achieve if sustained investment was matched by political will. Patient outcomes were greatly improved by the first and second strategies, launched in 1996 and 2006, respectively. According to the Irish Cancer Society, between 1994 and 1998, just 44% of Irish people were alive five years after a cancer diagnosis. By 2018, those survival rates had increased to 65%, which was a huge achievement.

The second strategy delivered a major restructuring of cancer care services. Critical to the success of that strategy was the steady leadership of Professor Tom Keane, who always made a distinction between strategy and implementation. He saw the dangers of, as he put it, "endless talk", and placed his focus firmly on delivery. That is why we saw such success. Unfortunately, this kind of foresight appears to be absent now in respect of the current strategy.

When the strategy was launched in 2017, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, promised substantial current and capital funding over the ten years of the strategy. However, that turned out to be just another empty promise from our new Taoiseach's tenure in the Department of Health. Instead of providing ring-fenced, multi-year funding, this strategy has only received funding for implementation in two of the last seven years. Bear in mind that over

that period of seven years, the coffers were overflowing. Ministers did not know what to be spending money on. Governments did not know what to allocate money to at budget time and large amounts of money were frittered away. For the last seven years, adequate funding has only been provided for the implementation of the cancer strategy and the life-saving measures in it. That necessary funding was only provided in two of those seven years. How on earth can that possibly be justified? There is a direct link between this failure to fund the strategy and several missed targets, delayed surgeries, staff shortages and, now, the shocking rise in cancer rates. That is an appalling reflection on this Government's priorities.

When it comes to the success or otherwise of any strategy, data is crucial. After all, you cannot manage what is not being measured. Unfortunately, data collection is a major shortcoming when it comes to the cancer strategy. Last month, the Parliamentary Budget Office published a report on investment in cancer services and found that there is no official aggregated data regarding health spending on cancer. This means that it is not possible to determine the total level of investment in or spending on cancer services. This is absolutely ridiculous. We need to know how public moneys are being spent.

Similarly, there is very little up-to-date information on the core objectives of the strategy. Only one of the 23 objectives had been met in 2022, while there is no data available for many of them. Furthermore, it has been 15 months since the last progress report was published, making it very difficult, if not impossible, to hold those responsible to account. Presumably, this is the thinking in not collecting this data and not making it available. One of the recommendations that we know has not been delivered is the expansion of BowelScreen to all those aged 55 to 74. This was to be delivered by the end of 2021. While the age target has been brought down to 59, we are still way off the target of 55.

To make matters worse, then, the uptake target within that age cohort has actually been reduced from 60%, which is in line with international best practice, to a mere 45%. There is, therefore, reduced funding and reduced data collection and reporting, and now a cynical reduction in targets as well. Another area of major concern is increasing wait times for radiation therapy. In 2018, 80% of people accessed their radiation therapy within the recommended timeframe, which was 15 days. By 2023, rather than this timeframe improving, the target had slipped to just 60% of people achieving the 15-day objective. These worsening wait times are a result of a shortage of radiation therapists across the country.

In Galway University Hospital, one of the five HSE radiation treatment centres, the radiation therapist vacancy rate is almost 30%, while in Cork University Hospital, the vacancy rate is an absolutely shocking 39.4%. I am glad to see that the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke, who is from the county, has arrived into the Chamber. I will repeat the statistic, with which I am sure he is familiar, that the vacancy rate for radiation therapists in Cork University Hospital is a shocking 39.4%. Almost four in ten of those posts remain vacant. This increasing level of vacancy has resulted in machines lying idle, very valuable machines it must be said, while patients wait for treatment. In St. Luke's Hospital, where the vacancy rate is 25.1%, a radiation therapy machine is being left completely unused. Similar problems exist in St. James's Hospital and in the hospitals in Cork and Galway, where machines are either underused or, in some cases, severely understaffed and not in use at all. The SIPTU representative for radiation therapists in St. Luke's Hospital, Olivia Brereton, has said outsourcing is being used to offset the closure of these machines. This outsourcing, while unsurprising, is not the solution. We should stop looking to outsourcing to solve every problem in the health service. It is not the solution, not least because of its costs. The Irish Cancer Society has found that the cost of outsourcing patients in

Galway amounted to approximately €6,000 per patient.

In December 2022, we had a situation with the ongoing delay with the independent review of the radiation therapy profession, which is the cause for concern. That review was initiated in December 2022 and we are still waiting to see it published. This, of course, does not bode well for patients or staff, who need the Government to urgently get to grips with the staffing deficit. There are several aspects to this context. There is, obviously, of course, the fact that there are not enough third-level places. A major barrier to increasing the number of these places, however, is securing additional clinical placements and practice tutors in the health sector. I understand that additional tutor posts will be allocated to support placements, and this is welcome, but will it be delivered in time for the September intake?

I raised this issue of problems across the board with recruitment in the HSE with the then-CEO some two years ago, who denied there was any issue with clinical placements. That is a major factor in relation to difficulties in recruitment and must be addressed as a matter of urgency-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: -----not least in relation to radiation therapists. We are told it is being dealt with, but it seems it is still under consideration and awaiting a Government decision.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There is no justification for this situation. These are people who are essential to saving people's lives.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank Deputy Shortall.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: These are people who have serious cancers yet the Government has failed to act to tackle this obvious issue that needs to be dealt with.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Deputy is running over time now.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There are also issues in relation to delays with visas and when it comes to accreditation with CORU. The solutions are there. What we need now is action from the Government.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Its failure to take that action and to be serious about the cancer energy is absolutely unforgivable at a policy level and certainly for the many families depending on the Government to take action.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Deputy is well over her time.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is completely inexplicable.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I commend Sinn Féin on this very important motion. I attended the Joint Committee on Health last week where the issue concerning the situation with cancer services was discussed. Representatives of the Irish Cancer Society presented a very sombre

view of cancer services in Ireland. There is much to be proud of in our public health system, but there is also a lot to be concerned about in our system that treats people who have cancer. Cancer is a very prevalent condition. One in two of us will have the condition, which is to say that 70 or 80 TDs in here, who make up the composition of the Dáil, will possibly have cancer. This is a sobering thought. We will also encounter cancer through the experiences of our relatives and loved ones. It is, therefore, very prevalent. Obviously, we are also living longer. This is a great thing but we need medical intervention at the right time. This is very important. The national cancer strategy is a great concept but it has certainly stalled in recent times, especially since 2017. Again, the Irish Cancer Society critiqued where it is, in some ways, stalled and, in some ways, has actually gone backwards. This is very worrying in terms of the prevalence of cancer and the rapidity of intervention in this regard. When people get timely intervention with cancer, then the outcomes are extremely good.

There is also the issue of the inequalities in our health system. People in the private health system will have better access to screening and diagnosis and to new medicines. This is a stain on our society. I refer to the divide between public and private treatment in relation to whether people live or not. This is really what it comes down to and this issue of access is a blight on our health system. There are also the usual social determinants in relation to health inequality, wealth inequality and lifestyle factors. These are major factors in determining who gets cancer and who does not, and this can play a major role in terms of the prevalence of cancer.

The Minister is gone, but I also wish to raise another issue. I raised it at the health committee last week as well and it is important. Cancer is a broad spectrum in terms of its diagnosis. In Ireland, we have a breast screening programme that starts at the age of 50 and covers those up to 69. In recent years that has gone from 65 to 69, which is a good thing, but there is a school of thought that screening should begin before 50. In some European countries this screening starts at 40 or 45. Some 23% of all breast cancers were diagnosed in women under the age of 40. We should be thinking about expanding this programme for those under 50. We have seen a really good example in Sweden, which brought the age for the screening programme down to 40, and the age of mortality and diagnosis went down by a quarter. There is considerable credibility in the screening programme, particularly for breast cancer.

As some other Deputies have said, some of the equipment that has been bought at great cost is not being used in particular hospitals around the State, which is pretty unbelievable. We have very advanced medical equipment not being used because people are not being recruited or retained to use this equipment. It is really damning that equipment, which could and should be used in trying to save people in the public health system, is not being used. That is a really bad indictment.

The national cancer strategy needs to be reviewed and it needs a new impetus. It is a great concept but it needs a review and it needs to be updated. I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke, well in his new role.

Deputy Seán Canney: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this subject, which is important not just to everyone here in the House, but also to every family in Ireland. I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke, on his appointment. This is my first time speaking to him in the House; best of luck to him.

The cancer strategy we have is a good strategy. I think everybody agrees that we should be proud of the strategy as written on paper. Where we are running into trouble is that the imple-

mentation of that strategy leaves a lot to be desired. There are many reasons for that. One of the biggest reasons is that, as the Irish Cancer Society has pointed out, we need to have a multi-annual funding mechanism that will allow for cancer treatment and the strategy itself to be developed to meet the demand. Second, we need to make sure that we quantify the resources we require so that we can actually put them in place. Earlier we heard that equipment is being left unused. Some very expensive equipment is only being used on a part-time basis. It is very inefficient to spend a large amount of capital money on equipment and then just use it for perhaps 40 hours a week. We need to deal with that and we need to ask why we allow this kind of thing to continue to happen.

I will give a small example. Last week, we got an X-ray facility, which is a simple thing nowadays, set up in the primary care centre in the Tuam. The equipment was bought four years ago was left in a room because there were problems trying to get a room built into what we call a lead-lined X-ray facility. That is just a small example of how long it takes us to get infrastructure developed. That is the crime that we are committing. We have created this huge process by which we talk about everything, we invite in a lot of consultants and pay them dearly to tell us things that we already know we want. I mean consultants like environmental consultants, planning consultants and all that type of thing.

I will give a good example and in the west. University Hospital Galway serves 1 million people in the region from County Donegal right down to County Clare. It is showing the worst results in terms of cancer treatments. It is supposed to be a centre of excellence under all of our strategies as written on paper. Everybody agrees that the infrastructure is not there to deal with the services we are supposed to provide. People are coming from Donegal in ambulances and taxis to get their treatment in Galway. We do not think it out right. We need to make sure that we have the infrastructure in place.

Everybody, including those in government, wants to make it happen. The board has been set up to try to deliver what is needed for Galway. If we are going to deliver it in the same time-frame as it took to deliver an X-ray facility in Tuam, we will not see it for 40 years. I estimate it will need an investment of €1.5 billion. People will say that is an awful lot of money, but for the people of the west it is not. It is their right to have access to services they require.

We need to get on with the job of delivering everything that is required, including a new accident and emergency unit, a new maternity unit, a new paediatric unit and a new cancer care centre. People who have visited, including many Ministers for Health, including the current Taoiseach, all agree that the facilities there are not fit for purpose. In five years, we will not be surprised to hear on the news of issues relating to the delivery of cancer services in Galway or any other services to the people in the west. It will be worse than what we are talking about in Limerick unless we take corrective action now. It is a regional economic issue. People should have a right to the same access to cancer services and the same chance of survival in the west of Ireland. I want to give that message to Government.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I join Deputy Canney in wishing the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke, the very best luck for the remaining term of the Dáil in his new role.

I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this very important motion. I very much welcome the opportunity to make some brief comments on it on behalf of the Regional Group. I commend and pay tribute to our healthcare workers working in this particular specialty - our surgeons, medical oncologists, radiation therapists, palliative care teams and everybody working on the support

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side. I want to pay tribute not just to their clinical skills but also to their humanity in interacting with patients when diagnosing cancer and also in interacting with the patients' families.

Some 42,000 cancers are diagnosed in Ireland every year. Unfortunately, one out of every two Members of this Chamber may encounter and interact with the services over their lifetime, which is a devastating statistic. Ireland has a disproportionately large incidence of cancer. We feel we should disproportionately allocate resources on that basis. From a demographic point of view, it is not reassuring. Our population is increasing and is ageing, meaning it is very likely that we will need more cancer-treatment resources.

As Deputy Canney said, we have an excellent strategy. It is the third strategy and the first two were good. This builds on them with the emphasis on prevention, early detection and effective treatment. That is exactly where we need to go. In many ways the hard work has been done. All the brain power has been expended, we have a plan and we just need to focus on implementation. There have been some positive elements. For instance, the smoking cessation strategy has been excellent. We have gone from 18% to 5% of children smoking now. Obviously, 5% is still too much, but there has been progress.

I was in Naas General Hospital on Friday when the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, showed up to open a new 11-bed isolation ward, the Swan ward. This shows that there is some progress, but judging by yesterday's letter by the 21 clinicians, that progress has stalled. It has stalled for a number of reasons but mainly due to funding. That should never be a reason for stalling progress. If anything, funding may be the easy part particularly in Ireland where we have a budget surplus. As we are putting €6 billion aside in a saving scheme this year, there should be no reason we cannot afford an extra €20 million.

I have questions to which the Minister of State might respond if he has time in his wrap-up at the end.

8 o'clock

Will the Government publish a Supplementary Estimate for €20 million this year to fund the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026? It will be money well spent. If it cannot, will it reprioritise some of the money already allocated to the health budget to focus on the national cancer strategy? Ideally, we should have multi-annual planning, as Deputy Martin Kenny mentioned. I am unsure what the resistance to multi-annual budgeting is. Perhaps the Minister of State could shed some light on that but it seems perfectly logical to me, if one is planning a programme, that one has a very predictable source of finance over a number of years so that they can be implemented properly.

The obvious question is what do we spend the extra €20 million on. First, it should be on colonoscopies. We know that the waiting lists are very long from a colorectal cancer point of view. If addressing this means mobilising private hospitals on a Saturday and Sunday, they are well capable of doing that extra work if they are refunded for it. That would be money well spent. Number one then is to tackle the colorectal-colonoscopy waiting lists.

Number two, as mentioned by Deputy Shortall, we need more radiation therapists. There is an issue with clinical placements but there is also an issue with university placements.

Number three is to focus on dedicated pathways. It should never be the case that cancer treatment is postponed or even cancelled because of a lack of theatre time, beds, or the pres-

tures in the acute hospital system.

Finally - and I see one of the Minister of State's officials there and he may be kind enough to take a note of this - we need more primary care resources, particularly with GPs. This is an idea which has been mentioned a few times but we could probably capitalise on it. We know that many of our junior doctors go to Australia or New Zealand after their graduation. There is an Erasmus scheme on most college courses at the moment, whether one is doing business or engineering, where one is encouraged to go abroad for six or 12 months to gain extra expertise. We know that GP training pathways are four years long in Ireland at the moment. Is there any reason the Irish College of General Practitioners, ICGP, cannot reach out to their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand to ask if we can send our trainees over there for six or 12 month period and that we have a reciprocal arrangement back in Ireland? It would certainly increase the stay-ability of our new GPs here in the country and prevent people from going to Australia and not coming back.

In summary then, will there be a Supplementary Estimate from the Government this year for the national cancer strategy and, if not, can we reprioritise healthcare spending to focus on that strategy? I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach.

Deputy Michael Collins: I would like to first of all welcome the Minister of State to his new position and wish him the very best in the future.

The aim of the national breast screening programme is to detect cancer early and to provide treatment for women who show no symptoms of the disease. There are only five mobile breast units in the whole of Munster and while we all agree that they are doing marvellous work, there are not enough mobile units nationwide given that breast cancer is the second most common cancer in women. That early detection is vital for a good outcome. It is very important to invest in this highly effective screening service by increasing the number of mobile breast units nationally.

One of the mobile units comes to Bantry every 18 months. I have been contacted by a number of ladies who have appointments in the next few weeks and months for their bi-annual mammogram. The screening is directed at women who are aged between 50 and 69 years of age and who are at the greatest risk of developing breast cancer. The mobile BreastCheck unit will not be back in Bantry until the summer of 2025. Therefore, these women, many of whom are full-time carers and cannot spend a full day away from their duties to attend Cork Breast-Check clinic, will skip their appointments and put themselves at risk of going undetected. The five Munster mobile BreastCheck units are currently based in North Cork, Killarney, Limerick, Waterford, and Saint Finbarr's Hospital, Cork but with the increase in population and the high rates of breast cancer in Ireland, it is very important that we continue to increase the number of mobile units to meet this demand. Ireland's cancer outcomes are at risk of declining due to the strain on health care services. People with cancer deserve optimal care for survival and quality of life. Properly resourced cancer services are essential, with protected pathways unaffected by other health service pressures. Like everyone else, I am calling for a reversal of the decision for no new recurrent funding for the national cancer control programme in 2024 and to commit to sufficient multi-annual funding for the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026.

In the few seconds speaking time I have left, I mention Cancer Connect, a service in west Cork and all over Cork County now, which is bringing patients to Cork University Hospital, CUH, and is an excellent service. That service was promised €50,000 by politicians in the Min-

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ister of State's Government. It has not got a brown cent and the people providing this service are doing this on a voluntary basis, where people are giving of their time. It cannot continue like that. I ask that the Minister of State look into that please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I congratulate the Minister of State very much and I wish him every good luck in his role.

I thank firstly all of the medical personnel who help people who go through their journey of cancer. I pay a particular word of thanks to the people who work in Kerry on Daffodil Day and to all of the volunteers who voluntarily raise funds. I thank the people involved in the Kerry-Cork link cancer bus which carries people who are suffering from cancer on their journey to the centre of excellence, which is very important.

A very important issue was raised recently with me by individuals with concerns. Currently, bowel cancer screening is open to those aged 59 to 69. Despite commitments made both in the national cancer strategy and the programme for Government in 2020 that this would be prioritised, the Department of Health declined to give a timeline for when the age of eligibility for bowel-screened cancer will be expanded and extended to the targeted 55 to 74-year-old group. That is very important. I cannot see how people could actually think that there is not a possibility of a person getting bowel cancer just because one goes beyond a certain birthday. That does not make sense.

Despite the lack of proper treatments and access to cancer care diagnosis and treatment, we now know that expensive equipment to deliver radiotherapy to cancer patients, for example, is lying idle due to a lack of staff and the inequality gap between those in the public and private system. That is increasing according to the Irish Cancer Society.

I thank the Irish Cancer Society very much for the excellent work it does. There are people in paid positions but there is also an army of people who work on a voluntary basis. I pay tribute to the nurses and to the night nurses who take people through the journey when their time in this world is coming to an end. They are so kind and are like angels sent down from heaven when they go into a house. When they stay overnight, for example, with a person who has a terminal illness, we are forever indebted to those angels of people who help others at their most vulnerable and weakest time. I thank them from the bottom of my heart for that.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to wish the Minister of State well in his new role. All the very best.

I want to thank in particular the Kerry-Cork link bus which takes people to the centre of excellence at CUH for treatment. I also thank all of the volunteers. Again, last Sunday, they put on a massive performance leaving Millstreet and finishing up in the Gleneagle Hotel in Killarney with all of the people involved. They deserve gold medals, to be honest.

We have to especially thank all of the other people who raise money for cancer treatment. The palliative care service in Tralee, which I understand is the best centre in the whole of Ireland, treats people who finish up there on the last days of their lives and receive such good treatment and care. The service also looks after the families.

Early diagnosis is so important. Some people are waiting with undue delay for magnetic resonance imaging, MRIs and scans. The HSE sought €20 million more for cancer treatment this year and, I am sorry to say, that this €20 million was spent by the Government on a refer-

endum that helped nobody. The Government squandered €29 million, in fact.

We see so many young men and women passing away and leaving young families after them. Often, many of these people only get two months notice of their disease. The last person I knew received two and half weeks. Something has gone wrong, and there is something wrong with the testing or whatever. It is not the diagnosing because these people knew there was something wrong with them for weeks and months before this, but they are not told or it is not found out until it is much too late.

I am sorry; I have gone over my time.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish the Minister of State well in his new role. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I commend the invaluable work done by cancer support service volunteers and staff in counties Laois and Offaly, in my constituency. They are the most dedicated people, and I acknowledge that on the public record.

The National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 recognises cancer support services as a valuable resource to cancer patients and their families outside of the acute care setting, as indeed is the HSE's national cancer control programme in its own works, with a network of community cancer support centres. It has been my experience, however, that while the strategy has very noble aims, there is often a great degree of uncertainty around multi-annual funding provision. This is an element I would really like to see addressed. I would like to see the support services having certainty and being able to plan. Of course, they can do that only if they are guaranteed their funding. We need to be in a position to offer our community cancer support services, as I said, the kind of certainty and ability to engage in forward planning that is so vital to their work and to the patients who benefit from the services.

Fund-raising is critical and will always be necessary to a certain degree, but even in this respect there are issues around the impact of the Gambling Regulation Bill on charities' fund-raising ability. Charities' raffles are being classed as a form of commercial gambling. How is that acceptable or appropriate in this context? Will the Minister of State provide a guarantee that cancer support services will not be adversely impacted by the Gambling Regulation Bill 2022? Will he also recommit to examining the issue of multi-annual funding and giving more certainty to our cancer support services? They do fantastic work and I commend them.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: As usual, I thank Sinn Féin for this motion. I cannot understand why the Government has tabled an amendment because what this motion seeks are very basic things based on the national cancer strategy. For the life of me, I cannot understand how the Government can stand over such an amendment.

I speak here today in the context of Galway, where a brand-new scanner sits unused and where, in the accident and emergency services today there were 60 patients on trolleys, some of them in the ED, making it impossible for the staff there to do their work. Hidden away in the wards we had 11 patients. Last week, we had 72 in UHG, and on another day in the same week we had 71. Just over a year ago, when HIQA staff visited Galway, they were aghast at the overcrowding when there were just 20-something on trolleys. I am not sure what words they will have now to describe 61 and 71 on trolleys in Galway. Of course, treatment for cancer and diagnoses are impacted by the state of the hospital, what is happening in the hospital and its overcrowding. At any given time when HIQA was there last year, there were something like 24 patients who could not be discharged because they had nowhere to go.

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In the meantime, Clifden hospital is closed, with respite beds and step-down facilities closed and beds closed in the middle of the Gaeltacht, croílár na Gaeltachta, in Áras Mhic Dara and in Merlin Park. For God's sake, how could we have respite beds and step-down beds and a hospital closing in the west where the hospital is under such problems?

When an options appraisal was carried out, we were told that 64% and 94% of the infrastructure in the hospital in Galway and Merlin Park, respectively, was categorised as requiring a total rebuild or a major upgrade to function properly. Rather than looking at a brand-new hospital, we go higgledy-piggledy on a congested site, putting up more and more structures instead of long-term planning on Merlin Park's side.

Be that as it may, we are here now with the cancer care strategy and with all those extraneous variables affecting the strategy. We are on our third strategy. The two previous strategies led to some improvement. Now we are in the unprecedented situation where the Irish Cancer Society is telling us that the strategy is not being implemented and 22 doctors and professors have put their names to a letter. It is unprecedented. The only other time I saw that was when doctors put their names to a service in Galway. I forget the name of it. It related to breaking bones and so on. It was unprecedented. Here we are then, with the third national strategy, and in the seven years it has been in being, it has been funded properly only twice. The implementation and the monitoring of the implementation are at best vague. The professor who did one of the forewords, Professor M. John Kennedy, stated that the recommendations of the strategy were to be reviewed towards the end of 2021. I do not see where that has happened. What was that for? It was "to ensure that our aims and direction are appropriate to deliver optimum outcomes for patients".

I do not have time to outline the letter of the 22 doctors and consultants. It states that screening has not been implemented, targeted waiting times are not being met and so on - bullet point after bullet point. Back in Galway, there is a 30% shortage in radiation therapists - they are all exiting the service - and a machine lying vacant.

Then we have the Parliamentary Budget Office very kindly outlining this strategy. It tells us, which is incredible, that only limited disaggregated data is available. It states that the lack of data makes it difficult to examine the overall national level of spending on cancer care or to link investment in cancer care services with performances or outcomes. It, therefore, cannot analyse what the performances or the outcomes are as regards the funding going in.

I will stop in a couple of seconds but I stand here in absolute exasperation, in a wealthy republic, that this is the state of our health service year after year, notwithstanding that there was a cross-party agreement on a committee that showed the way forward. We are talking about sovereign funds and investing in sovereign funds when we should invest in our health services.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, on his new role. We served together in the European Parliament. Who would ever have thought we would serve in this Parliament together? Politics is a strange game.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion because it highlights the fact that the cancer strategy has not been properly funded for three out of the past five years. When it comes to survival rates, Ireland is around mid-table in the EU-27, and when it comes to western EU member states, we have the third worst mortality rate.

At a recent meeting, Professor Michael Kerin, who is the director of the Saolta network,

based in Galway, said that the highest incidence of cancer and the highest mortality rate from cancer are in the west and north west. Ireland is performing poorly relative to many western European countries in regard to cancer mortality, and the west and the north west are at the bottom ranking in Ireland. How does the Minister of State think that makes people in the west and north west feel? How does he think that makes people who are newly diagnosed with cancer feel? How does he think it makes people in the middle of their treatment or finishing their cancer treatment feel when they look at those statistics? That is just not acceptable, and the Minister of State will have to agree that it is just not right. All we can do, however, is start from today and make every possible effort to properly fund our cancer services and to attract and retain the specialised staff we need to run those services.

I will concentrate on the regional aspect of the cancer strategy because, as I said, there is an absolute need to prioritise investment in cancer services in the west and north west. We have the worst outcomes and it is the responsibility of this Government to deal with that. The national development plan has Galway as the cancer centre of a cancer network encompassing Sligo University Hospital, Letterkenny University Hospital, Castlebar and Portlincolumbkille hospitals. Some progress, to be fair, has been made. A project lead was appointed this week to support this model of care. What is crucial is that it is properly funded and resourced from day one so that we can have a world-class cancer service in the region. This must include rapid access clinics to diagnose cancer. Many cancers are picked up by screening or in GP surgeries but we need a specialised diagnostic centre, which will be vital to ensure precise diagnosis. That will then lead to a more precise care plan delivered by multidisciplinary teams that will comprise experts from the cancer centre in Galway and experts from whichever hospital is closest to where the patient lives.

A positive development in cancer care in the past number of years is that we have more precise diagnosis and treatment. Cancer surgery is no longer just one surgeon who deals with many different kinds of cancer but specialists aided by robotic and image-guided surgery in a specialist centre to deliver the best outcomes. That will often be delivered in the cancer centre and all the related care, what are called systemic therapies, including chemotherapy, haematology, oncology, immunotherapy, oral and cancer medications, and ambulatory services will be delivered as close as possible to where a patient lives by a multidisciplinary team and certain surgeries will be delivered in local hospitals. However, none of those interlinked multidisciplinary teams that deliver the best possible outcomes for patients can be put in place unless a national cancer control programme is properly funded and, as far as I am concerned, needs to be properly funded in the west and north west. This summer, the Organisation of European Cancer Institutes will visit Galway, Sligo and Letterkenny to accredit those hospitals as part of comprehensive cancer services. The issue is that in Galway, cancer patients are competing with patients in the emergency department for bed space. That is not acceptable. We have the very best of nurses and doctors delivering a cancer service but it is not properly funded. We cannot wait any longer in the west or north west.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I support this important motion on cancer care and welcome the opportunity to contribute this evening. An estimated 42,000 people in Ireland are diagnosed with cancer each year. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the fantastic work done locally, day in, day out, by the West Clare Cancer Centre. Last year, Ireland was found to have the third highest cancer mortality in western Europe by the European Cancer Inequalities Registry and was ranked 13th out of the EU 27 in cancer survival. Shockingly, the current national cancer strategy launched seven years ago has only twice received annual funding to-

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wards its implementation in the lifetime of this Government. Even more alarmingly, in the past two budgets, no new development funding was granted. At last week's meeting of the health committee, Ms Averil Power, CEO of the Irish Cancer Society, outlined several unmet targets in the current strategy, which is clearly due to a sustained lack of funding, and identified areas where Ireland is incredulously going backwards. That is deeply concerning. How is that the case when we know investment in cancer services works and not only saves lives but saves the State in the long run? It is imperative that the Government ensures properly resourced cancer services with protected pathways that are not disrupted by the many other pressures on the health service.

I also want to take this opportunity to raise a serious matter brought to my attention by Tina. Tina was diagnosed with breast cancer 11 years ago. On Friday, she went to get her mastectomy bra, as she has always done. However, to her horror, this time she was told she must now provide proof of having breast cancer. Both Tina and a staff member were incredibly upset by this situation. The staff member is clearly familiar with Tina. It was completely unnecessary and wholly embarrassing. Tina reacted while she was speaking to me on the phone, asked, "Should I take a picture of my boob? Would that be enough proof?" It is a disgrace that she felt that way. Will the Minister of State look into this matter? It is causing major distress and pure resentment towards this Government. Tina was told that others have had to get a letter from a GP. Will the Minister of State bear in mind that patients will have to pay for this letter from their GP? Many in County Clare face serious issues with access to a GP.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Colm Burke): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the issues raised by the Deputies tabling the motion. I would like to begin by echoing my colleague, Deputy Butler, in her opening remarks, and to thank her for the constructive and positive contributions to this important motion on the issue of funding for the national cancer strategy. I apologise that the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, cannot be here this evening, as I understand he is dealing with legislation in the Seanad. I acknowledge the input of all Deputies. It is clear that we are all motivated to ensure that the national cancer strategy is properly supported for the benefit of patients and their families. There were one or two issues - I am going off script in saying this - relating to radiation therapists. I became aware of that issue in September. I arranged for a meeting with the two universities - Trinity College Dublin and UCC - with the Minister in October. There were proposals and submissions by TCD to increase the number of trainees in radiation therapy from 30 to 50 and by UCC to raise the number from 12 to 24. The course in UCC is a master's course of two years. Those proposals were submitted to the Minister in early February. I was involved in making sure action was taken on that.

The National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 is the third such cancer strategy in Ireland. These successive strategies have shown the benefit of continued investment in national cancer services. It bears repeating that this Government has shown its commitment to implementing the strategy through significant investment in 2021 and again in 2022, for a total of €40 million. The new development funding provided in those years has been added to the total budget for cancer services. Since 2017, more than €230 million in cumulative additional funding has been invested in the strategy. This means that our national cancer services have been strengthened, which is important, as the incidence of cancer is expected to increase in Ireland in the future. When discussing funding for our national cancer strategy, we must remember the 23,000 people who receive a diagnosis of invasive cancer each year. Cancer is a public health issue, as one in three of us can be expected to be diagnosed in our lifetime. The additional funding that has

gone into services under this Government has been of direct benefit to cancer patients. Funding of more than €120 million for capital projects has meant that more people can receive radiotherapy in the new facilities in Cork and Galway. Funding of €98 million in the past three years has meant that patients have better access to new medicines, including 61 cancer drugs. The spend on cancer drugs in the past three years alone was more than €600 million. As has been said, there are now more than 215,000 people living in Ireland following a diagnosis of invasive cancer, which is an increase of 65,000 since 2017. This shows how our strategic approach to cancer has made a real difference for people, with strong policy oversight from the Department of Health and implementation by the NCCP.

Under the national cancer strategy since 2020, the Government has invested an additional €30 million in screening services, including €20 million for the national cervical screening laboratory. Our national screening programmes are highly ranked in comparison to other European countries, and we have set the ambitious target of eliminating cervical cancer as a public health concern by 2040. This is a target we are on track to achieving, thanks to the efforts of everyone involved.

Since the beginning of the current national cancer strategy, there have been improvements in treatment. This includes the introduction of many new treatments, the provision of treatments previously only available abroad and safer delivery of existing treatments. CAR T-cell therapy is now being provided in Ireland for adults, in St. James's Hospital since 2021 and in CHI Crumlin since 2022. CAR T-cell therapy is a recent groundbreaking therapy which involves infusing patients with a genetically modified version of their own cells. CAR-T-cell therapy is currently available in Ireland for several cancer types. However, it is expected in future that therapies and use cases will grow substantially. This is why investing in CAR-T infrastructure was so important at the early stages. This was made possible through funding of €3 million for anti-cancer therapies provided in 2022. This year, we have had the introduction of radio-labelled therapy or PRRT at St. Vincent's University Hospital. The treatment is for people with neuro-endocrine tumours and delivers precise radiation to cancer cells, minimising damage to surrounding healthy tissue. The service was launched in March of this year and is planned to expand incrementally over two years to get it fully operational. Once it is fully operational there will no longer be a need for any patients to travel abroad for PRRT. The expected annual cost of treatments is €3.5 million for 50 to 60 patients per year, reflecting the commitment to delivering treatments for rarer cancers, as well as the most common types of tumours.

Along with new treatments there have been many innovations in cancer care delivery. These innovations have allowed for better outcomes for patients. Centralisation of cancer surgeries to a smaller number of high-volume specialist centres is at 85% completion and it is expected to be complete by the end of this strategy. Centralisation of surgery is important for patients as it means that surgeons have the right level of case volume and expertise to provide the best possible outcomes for patients. Most recently, centres have been designated for sarcoma, skull base and gynaecological oncology surgical services. Cancer surgical services are also increasing in activity, with an additional 1,000 surgeries carried out in 2023 compared to 2019. Other recent innovative practices include updated clinical guidelines for treatment of cancer patients which make more effective use of existing resources. An example of this is hypofractionation for breast cancer patients receiving radiotherapy, which ensures effective treatment can be delivered with fewer doses. This allows more patients to be treated using the same resources and reduces potential side effects for patients. Some €9.8 million was allocated in the HSE capital plan last year to support radiotherapy treatment at our centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway.

Alongside all this work, the national cancer control programme, NCCP, has introduced new models of care in many different cancer areas. This was one of the recommendations of the national cancer strategy. Some recent examples include the launch of the systemic anti-cancer therapy model of care in 2022. This provides a blueprint for the development of services and delivers additional treatment regimens which ensure that treatment can be tailored to the needs of the individual patient. Other models of care include those for psycho-oncology for both adults and young people, ensuring that we can provide psycho-social supports which meet patients' specific needs. This is particularly important now as we have so many more people living with and beyond a cancer diagnosis. Survivorship courses are now delivered through the alliance of community cancer support centres and €3 million in funding was allocated to those centres in 2024. At the other end of the cancer patient spectrum, we have the hereditary cancer model of care which has developed a pathway for people who might have an inherited predisposition to cancer to access testing, counselling and potential treatment. These models of care will ensure that our national cancer services continue to be improved for the benefit of patients.

As cancer is expected to affect one in three of us in our lifetime, support for cancer services and for cancer patients will continue to be prioritised as part of overall health budget. The Government has invested heavily in cancer services in recent years and this has resulted in wide-ranging benefits for patients. Once again, I thank all the Deputies involved in today's debate, both those who made contributions and those who tabled the motion. I will also take a moment to thank those working in cancer services, in hospitals and in the community, for the care and treatment they provide to patients. In fairness, a lot of good points were made by Deputies tonight and I intend to take them back, but a lot of progress has been made and while we have a lot of challenges, we have delivered a very good service to a large number of patients across the entire country. It is important that we work towards continuing to improve that service.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We have had 13 years of Fine Gael in government. We have had 13 years of Deputies Harris, Varadkar and Donnelly as Ministers for Health who, in many instances, made our health services worse. The experience of health for many people under this Government means lengthy waiting times, hospital overcrowding and wasteful spending. Nowhere are the Government's failures so evident and so indefensible as in the cancer services. Expensive, lifesaving equipment lies idle because of staff shortages. That is indefensible. Cancer surgeries are now being cancelled because of hospital overcrowding. That is indefensible. Yet, we have Ministers attempting to defend the indefensible. Rather than owning up to their failures, they try to explain away the truth, that the Government has underfunded the national cancer strategy in three of the past five years. Worse still, when Deputy Cullinane of Sinn Féin set out the route to solving the crisis the Government created, it closed its ears.

There are solutions. They have been set out in this motion. They include properly funding the cancer strategy to improve detection and survival rates; ending the recruitment embargo; bringing our doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers home where we need them, in our hospitals; and funding the 1,500 additional beds that are needed to make our hospitals safe. Above all, however, we need a change of Government. We need a Government that will prioritise our health services and do everything possible and necessary to ensure that every single cancer patient has the best chance of full recovery. It has to be said, these folks are not up for the job. It is time to make way for those who are.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Cullinane brought this motion forward because cancer services are not being properly funded. The Government has absolutely failed to fund the cancer strategy for five of the past seven years. As has already been said, we are dealing with

expensive lifesaving equipment lying idle due to staff shortages. Cancer surgeries are being cancelled because of hospital overcrowding. It has been stated explicitly that the Government must fund this strategy, end the recruitment embargo and fund the 1,500 beds, but like many of my colleagues, I do not see any of this happening until there is a change of Government and a Government that is up for business.

The issue I will bring up with the Minister of State is an issue that blew up on Joe Duffy's radio programme and in the House, down to the work of Alison McCabe of Breastcare by Alison. It relates to post-mastectomy products and the fact that the HSE was considering halving the funding for them at one stage. In fairness, it is one of the few times I saw this place operate to some degree. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, got up and said that this was not going to happen, and he made a number of promises. I want the Minister of State to come back to me with regard to the review process. I want to make sure that people like Alison are involved in that particular review. I have been in contact with them. I was very lucky to be able to visit where she does absolutely great work for women who have been through mastectomies and who have dealt with huge pain that has been caused by cancer. We need to make sure this review is absolutely patient focused and that there is input from patients, and that we do not have any of the changes with regard to the application process that would put it back on those particular patients. We need to make sure that service providers, such as consultants, breast care nurses and mastectomy fitting professionals like Alison, are all happy to engage in this. We need that information and we need to make sure it happens, and that funding goes up.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: First, I want to acknowledge the brilliant work of the world-class surgeons, clinicians, consultants, oncology nurses and palliative care staff we have across this island. The cancer expertise we have on this island is absolutely remarkable. I also want to commend the work of the All-Island Cancer Research Institute and wish its representatives well in the high-level joint Euro-American forum coming up at the end of this month.

The fact of the matter is that the demand for cancer services is not being met in a timely and safe way because of the lack of political will to invest in the very basic infrastructure, particularly along the western seaboard. Target waiting times for cancer tests are not being met. Cancer surgeries are frequently delayed due to shortages of staffing, beds and theatre space. Expensive equipment lies idle. In Mayo University Hospital, the capacity in the oncology day ward cannot meet the current demand for the service. There are ten treatment chairs that can have a turnover up to 30 patients on any given day. This contributes to long delays for patients waiting treatment. The current staffing levels do not meet the demand for patient complexity. Those on maternity leave and long-term sick leave have not been replaced. There is only one toilet for all those patients. The lack of space and overcrowding is intolerable and risky. Why are we forcing staff and patients to wait for hours to have their treatment?

This Government and the previous one have failed to value community, district and regional hospitals. The cancer services are not properly funded, and the Minister of State knows that. We can have all the spin we want in this Chamber, but I am afraid the basics are not being met. We cannot use the expertise we have across the island or the very basic infrastructure that is needed to deliver it. I am asking the Minister of State for multi-annual funding to enable those experts to do their jobs.

Deputy David Cullinane: Sometimes you have to own your own failures. I am looking at the countermotion from the Government. Not only does the Government not own its own failures, but in a breathtaking and very arrogant and deliberate way, it actually misrepresents what

has been said by all those healthcare professionals who have come out very strongly with regard to the lack of funding for the national cancer strategy and, indeed, the Irish Cancer Society.

In its countermotion, the Government states that there has been an “improvement in survival rates in Ireland during the current National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026.” The most recent data that was published was in 2019. That data is relevant to the previous strategies and not the current one. The Government talks about the 670 new staff that have been employed since the strategy was put in place in 2017, and that is correct. That came from the additional funding that was provided in those two years in 2021 and 2022. That shows what can be done, and those staff have made a real difference. Then, however, the Government chose not to fund the national cancer strategy in all the other years.

The Government talks about improvements in new treatments and new medicines and cancer therapies for patients and yet what it does not acknowledge are the very low access rates to new medicines when we compare it to other European countries. It talks about the development of new infrastructure for cancer since 2017. Of course, what it does not talk about is that in St. Luke’s Radiation Oncology Network, we have one linear accelerator, which is closed, and a skin cancer machine that is only working part-time. In University Hospital Cork, we have a linear accelerator and CT scanner that have never been used. A new scanner has arrived in Galway but that still has not been used. All this equipment is lying idle under the Government’s watch.

The Government talks about staffing and additional recruitment in areas. It talks about every specialty except, of course, the ones relevant to this debate, namely, radiotherapy therapists, radiation therapists and radiographers. We have a dire shortage. The Minister of State said he brought a proposal to the Minister. It is not just a proposal we need. We need funding. We need those areas to be funded and then delivered.

The fact is that we have had 13 years of Simon Harris, Leo Varadkar and Stephen Donnelly as Ministers for Health. They have made the health service worse. We see it every single day with people waiting in hospital corridors and on hospital trolleys, massive overcrowding and, as we know, cancellation of hospital appointments, including cancer procedures, because of the Government’s failure to deal with overcrowding. Cancer services are not being properly funded, including in 2024. Expensive lifesaving equipment is lying idle. Cancer surgeries are being cancelled. Therefore, the solutions we are putting forward to the Minister of State are to fund the national cancer strategy on a multi-annual basis; end the recruitment embargo, train more healthcare professionals and bring them home to have them work in the health service to ensure that we have the radiation therapists and radiographers we need to bring about improved outcomes for cancer patients; and fund the 3,000 beds we are asking the Government to fund - 1,800 hospital beds and 1,200 community beds - to really deal with the capacity problems in our hospitals. We need a Minister for Health who will stand up for people and stand up for cancer patients, children with scoliosis and those patients who are waiting far too long in emergency departments. After 14 years of three failed Ministers for Health, we need a change of direction.

Sinn Féin has a plan to deliver better health services. I, for one, cannot wait for the Minister of State’s party to have the guts to go to the people. Let us have a general election. Let us have that battle of ideas. I hope that at the end of that, we will have a Government that will put cancer patients and people first because they deserve much better.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That completes the debate. Is the amendment agreed to?

Deputy David Cullinane: It is not agreed.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Steven Matthews - To discuss the need to update existing legislation regarding rights of way.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - To discuss recruitment for children's disability network team, CDNT, services in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 5.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne - To discuss the classification of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder as a disability in Ireland.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the creation of a Dublin city centre task force to tackle violence.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss transgender healthcare in Ireland.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the condemning of the building belonging to Raphoe community playgroup.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - To discuss the need for a higher financial threshold for persons living on off-shore islands as part of the financial assessment relating to eligibility for medical and GP cards.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss the need to progress three autism spectrum disorder, ASD, class projects in County Tipperary.

Deputy Marian Harkin - To discuss the construction of a new Garda station in Sligo town.

Deputy Verona Murphy - To discuss actions to address the chronic coastal erosion issue in Wexford in particular.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss the serious situation farmers find themselves in due to continuous wet weather.

Deputy Réada Cronin - To discuss when the modular accommodation promised and ap-

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proved for Scoil Mhuire Community School in Clane.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - To discuss proposed changes to the 220 bus route at Grange Manor, Owen, County Cork.

Deputy Joe Flaherty - To discuss the future of the paediatric diabetes clinic at Mullingar hospital.

Deputy Chris Andrews - To discuss the negative impact of the sale of the landmark An Post building in Rathmines.

Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss the rising flood water levels at Lough Funshinagh, County Roscommon.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the delay in the development of pedestrian and cycle access in the L2455 Lehenaghmore Road improvement scheme.

Deputy Jackie Cahill - To discuss the future of the community nursing unit in Nenagh.

Deputy David Stanton - To discuss the need to establish a full border control post designation at the port of Cork capable of handling food products.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss future plans for the *LÉ Eithne* and its potential to be a focal point of a naval museum.

The matters raised by Deputies Steven Matthews, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, Pat Buckley and David Stanton have been selected for discussion.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is a Cork bias going on there, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not think Sinn Féin can complain.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I congratulate the new Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. I do not think I got an opportunity to do so. Go n-éirí léi ina ról nua agus.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Go raibh maith agat.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá fáilte roimpi.

State Examinations

54. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education to address the concerns raised by organisation (details supplied) in relation to the 2023 draft specifications in leaving certificate biology, chemistry and physics. [16255/24]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I ask the Minister to address the concerns raised in the report presented to her Department and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, in response to the 2023 draft specification in leaving certificate biology, chemistry and physics.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Senior cycle redevelopment is an ambitious programme of work that aims to ensure students experience senior cycle in a way that reflects who they are and the world they live in now and in which they will live in the future. I acknowledge that with the introduction of curricular change, teachers and school leaders want support in order to give their students the best possible experience. As a former teacher and as Minister for Education, I certainly feel the same.

I welcome the continued interest in and engagement of the organisation referenced by the Deputy, the Irish Science Teachers Association, ISTA, with the ongoing subject development processes for chemistry, physics and biology. I am aware of the report on the draft specifications ISTA submitted as part of the recently concluded public consultation on those drafts, which was shared with my Department. The organisation has been directly involved in all stages of the development process over a number of years through the participation of its nominees, who are science teachers, in the three subject development groups established by the NCCA. The groups draw on a wide range of expertise, including that of subject teachers as well as other subject experts.

I recognise how important having the appropriate level of detail in a specification is for teachers. That is why I clearly requested the NCCA, in developing all new and revised subjects, to ensure that curriculums contain a higher level of detail than has sometimes been the case in the past. The NCCA has published a detailed research paper on the technical form of curriculum specifications that has informed its work. Ahead of the new specifications being introduced, comprehensive teacher professional learning supports will be provided by Oide, the integrated professional support service, during the next school year. The State Examinations Commission, SEC, is also committed to providing sample assessment materials to support the preparation of teachers.

The Deputy will be aware that a majority of leaving certificate subjects already have components beyond written examinations, with many of those other components weighted at, or, in some cases, above, 40%. In introducing additional components to all subjects, I am broadening the range of skills we can assess, recognising different types of learning and reducing the emphasis on terminal written examinations. The weighting will ensure that teaching and learning are not focused on a narrow set of competencies associated with written examinations and that students will be rewarded for developing and demonstrating different skills. For the new science curriculums, these components involve students completing a piece of work as evidence of their ability to conduct scientific research on a particular issue.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister for her reply. While my question did not directly relate to examination components, they are a specific part of the concerns that have been raised and on which I want to focus. In the course of any new development process, there really should be a moment where people pause and are big enough to ask whether they have got the process right or if there are things that need to be changed. ISTA's document states:

Of the 101 learning outcomes in the "contextual"... strands... a total of 69 learning outcomes (68.3%) are unclear. Due to this lack of clarity, it is impossible for teachers to ensure that their students achieve these learning outcomes - and impossible for students to know if

they have achieved them.

The concerns raised are very specific. They include referring to “primary data” when it is not necessary to use that term and referring to “secondary data” when that term is not relevant to the actual question. There is also a lack of clarity around laboratory practical investigations, which are mandatory, and the number of such investigations that will be required to meet the learning outcomes.

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that the ISTA membership, by way of its nominees, all of whom are science teachers, was part of the subject development groups and, as such, was very much an integral part of the design of the curriculums and the framework. Notwithstanding that, a further step has been taken by the NCCA in terms of the consultation aspect. This is an appropriate measure to ensure everybody, including ISTA, has an opportunity to cast an eye over what is being proposed. Anybody, not just this particular organisation, who wants to lend a view on how things should or could be done differently may do so. Obtaining the wisdom of the collective is the purpose of the public consultation process. It is why the results of the consultation, including the material provided by this particular organisation, is being fed back to the NCCA, which will adjudicate it appropriately. There has been ongoing engagement by the NCCA with all the stakeholders, including teachers, on the subject development process. We will see in due course what the outcomes will be of the deliberations on the public consultation.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: With the greatest of respect, ISTA did more than cast its eye over the draft proposals. It has produced a 212-page document that is incredibly detailed in places. The part I referred to is only to do with the actual physics content. The Minister mentioned the components aspect. Some numbers that caught my attention are that the research investigations will account for 40% of marks in fifth year, with 20 hours to be done in a laboratory and the entire course to be delivered over 180 hours. On the subject of laboratories, it is not just teachers or this particular organisation expressing concerns. Parents have referenced this point as well. We are running a very unclear line in terms of resources and the fair allocation of those resources to schools. This will put the students who are most disadvantaged at a further disadvantage. If the laboratory in a DEIS school or any other school is not of the same standard as the laboratories in other schools in the community or the same area, the pupils in that school will, simply due to finances, not be able to achieve the same outcomes as students in the schools that are better resourced.

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to be clear regarding the allocation of resources. The Deputy referenced the use of laboratories. That specifically relates to the component of science in practice. It should be noted that what is currently set out regarding the science in practice investigations, some of which can, of course, take place in the laboratory, is not prescriptive in stating that they should solely be restricted to laboratory-based work. That is an important consideration.

The Department has been very clear that we will engage on an ongoing basis with schools to see how best to support them in the implementation of any or all aspects of senior cycle reform. I again point out that this consultation is an integral part of the process, prior to the final publication of the agreed specifications. It is an opportunity for organisations like ISTA to give their considered view. Those views will be taken into consideration by the NCCA in compiling the final specifications and their publication. That was the whole purpose of the public consultation. I have every confidence that it is working, given we have received such a broad-ranging document.

Public Sector Pay

55. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will support the introduction of a Dublin allowance for teachers to help to address the teacher retention crisis in the Dublin area. [16343/24]

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, on her appointment to the Department of Education. Will the Department support the introduction of a Dublin allowance for teachers to help to address the crisis in teacher retention in the Dublin area?

Deputy Norma Foley: While we are offering congratulations, I congratulate the Deputy on the birth of his second daughter, Sadhbh. I wish him and his partner, Nicola, well. As I said to him earlier, he is surrounded by women. He is blessed among women and it will be very good for him. I sincerely wish him well. It is wonderful to be welcoming a new baby girl.

The quality and commitment of Irish teachers is the bedrock of our education system and has been key to unlocking Ireland's potential as a knowledge economy. A range of measures are in place to ensure that teaching remains an attractive profession and that schools are supported in recruiting the staff they need. Pay and workplace reform measures for public servants have been governed by a framework of public service pay agreements for a number of years, with the new agreement in place until June 2026. The value of public pay deals to the Government and the taxpayer is in ensuring pay costs are managed in a sustainable and orderly way and in a climate of industrial peace. By and large, public pay agreements have delivered on these objectives over the past 12 years. The agreements have allowed a programme of pay restoration for public servants, with new-entrant pay being gradually restored over the years. The previous agreement, Building Momentum, provided for increases of 8.5% to 9.5% over the entire agreement, with workers on lower pay receiving higher percentage increases.

The new public sector pay agreement provides for further baseline increases of 9.25% for more than 100,000 staff in the school sector as well as retired staff. In terms of teacher pay specifically, these increases will raise the pay of a teacher on the top point to around €85,000 per annum. The starting pay for a teacher will be approximately €46,000 per annum, which is almost €20,000 higher than would have been achieved in 2011. In addition, there have been other recent measures under Building Momentum to increase pay and allow new-entrant teachers to move up the pay scale more quickly.

The Government is committed to the delivery of quality public services. We will continue to approach public service pay in a balanced way that is reasonable and fair to both public servants and taxpayers. The Government acknowledges that the housing issue and the current price pressures in society present particular challenges and are a source of concern for all public service workers, including staff in the education sector.

9 o'clock

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I thank the Minister for her kind words. It is very much appreciated by my family, to whom education means the world, that the Minister for Education mentioned my daughter on the floor of the House. Her sister Anna is very excited.

On the matter at hand, the INTO has spoken at its recent conference about 2,000 long-term vacancies within the primary school sector, as the Minister knows. It predicted this last No-

vember. The reason I keep mentioning the potential of the Dublin allowance is that there has been pay weighting in London since 1920. In fact, in 2002 teachers in London went on strike for increased weighting. What I propose has been in the understanding of the education system in London for over 100 years and we need to have that understanding here as well because far too many schools are understaffed, particularly in Dublin. I went to one such primary school, in the west of the city. It is operating at 45% of its staff capacity. Therefore, we have to find mechanisms to retain and recruit teachers who will stay. It is effectively a housing issue but a Dublin allowance might be part of the solution.

Deputy Norma Foley: Housing, led by my colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien, remains a key priority of the Government. The strategy Housing for All delivers on the programme for Government commitment to step up housing supply and put affordability at the heart of the housing system. A suite of measures, including cost-rental, affordable and social housing, is being provided for and significant progress has been made, but more needs to be done. That is acknowledged. More will be done.

I appreciate the Deputy's bona fides on the Dublin allowance for staff. Whatever is done for one sector within the public service would, in the interest of fairness, have to be done across all sectors. I previously pointed to the fact that the improvements in pay for staff are on a par with, if not greater than, those currently provided for through the London allowance, as the Deputy referred to it. I get the principle of what the Deputy is saying but believe his proposal could have ramifications across the entire public sector. Therefore, it is not as clear-cut as it appears.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: The ramifications are that we have schools that are not being staffed and staffrooms that are struggling to keep schools operational. Circumstances are not the same across the country because housing and childcare in Dublin are much more expensive. Everything in Dublin is much more expensive. The cost of living is much more expensive. As has been recognised in London, such costs have a knock-on effect on the availability of staff to run basic public services. I suggest that teaching is the most important service that we provide to society, bearing in mind children's day-to-day activity and how they view themselves and their cohorts. If we cannot staff schools, it means an absolute crisis. This is an issue in Dublin particularly because of the high cost of living. The issue is that we will have circumstances in which schools will not be staffed and children will not be taught effectively, resulting in the discontinuation of the precious connection between children and their teachers. That will have ramifications in the future. If teachers cannot afford to live here, we and the Government have to address it.

Deputy Norma Foley: I do not take away from the challenges the Deputy referred to. We have been cognisant of them. The Deputy will appreciate that in the recent budget we announced a €2,000 support bursary for the PME students who will compete in 2024. We also introduced 1,000 posts of responsibility, again to support teachers in their workplace. We provided for free upskilling courses in subjects that present a challenge. We have engaged with student teachers, more than 3,000 of whom have found routes to make themselves available to schools. We have also found pathways forward with retired teachers. There is an increase of more than 49% in the number of retired teachers making themselves available to provide additional supports in schools. We will do more and more in this field. I am not for one minute saying there is no merit to what the Deputy says about additional resources, having regard to the geography. However, the proposal, notwithstanding what the Deputy has said, would validate a cohort living in one area more than another. It would also validate one sector of the public sector more than another. The whole thing would have to be looked at in the round for the public

sector.

School Accommodation

56. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education her plans to tackle the oversubscription of secondary schools across Ireland. [16256/24]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Could the Minister outline to the House her plans to tackle the oversubscription of secondary schools across the country?

Deputy Norma Foley: I assure the Deputy that the provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary levels, including those with special educational needs, is an absolute priority for the Department and, indeed, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department's demographic projections utilise various data sources, such as current enrolment figures, child benefit records, census information, residential development data and migration patterns, among others. Projections are developed across 314 school planning areas and at a more granular settlement level in urban areas with higher residential construction activity and population growth.

My Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in that area. It is important to note that enrolment pressure may not result from a lack of accommodation but may be driven by other factors. These can include the duplication of applications, whereby pupils will have applied for a place to a number of schools in their area, and school of choice, whereby pupils might not get a place in their preferred school although there will be places in others in the area. Some areas have single-sex schools, and while places may be available therein they may not be available to all pupils. There is also the question of the external draw, whereby pupils come from outside the local area. In this context, oversubscription of a school or schools is not necessarily representative of a deficit of school places.

Approximately 75,000 first-year students enrol in post-primary schools across the country every year, and in the vast majority of cases there is sufficient provision across the schools in their areas to meet the local school place needs. While total post-primary enrolments are expected to remain at a high level in the coming years, the demographic profile is such that first-year numbers have begun to decline in over two-thirds of school planning areas. Such a decline is expected across the majority of school planning areas in the coming years.

Since 2020, the Department has invested in the region of €4.5 billion in schools throughout the country, involving the completion of over 800 school building projects and with construction currently under way on approximately 300 other projects, including 31 new school buildings. The 300 projects in construction involve a total State investment of over €1.2 billion.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The question I have for the Minister is quite straightforward. She speaks of the demographic analyses of her Department to project enrolment but I do not believe the basis of the calculations is correct. It needs to be adjusted. The Minister spoke about child benefit. This will still be paid regardless of whether a child lives in Wexford and then moves to Sligo. Therefore, it does not serve as the basis for something that can stand up to very much

scrutiny. The reason parents are duplicating applications is that they are not confident their child will get into the nearest school to them. This was recognised in the initial stages of the school transport review. The criterion was extended to include the second-nearest post-primary school. This has been recognised by the Government over the years.

Through the 300 projects the Minister mentioned, how much additional capacity will be delivered? How much of the funding put aside in the past two years was to build or repurpose existing accommodation, and what is the existing capacity that will be delivered under that?

Deputy Norma Foley: There is a quite robust planning unit within the Department, specifically within the planning and building unit. It has a very comprehensive geographical information system, a system that relies on a variety of data, not just data on child benefit. It also relies on other information available, including CSO figures. There is very proactive engagement on the ground with local authorities, particularly those planning to have new housing developments come on stream. There is also direct engagement with school authorities and patron bodies. Therefore, there is a very full and robust view of the requirements, notwithstanding that they can vary from time to time owing to the fact that there can be exceptional circumstances in an area. We have seen this in the past while for a variety of reasons.

Over the past four years, more than €4.5 billion has been expended. There is a variety of projects, including additional accommodation, new builds, and modular accommodation if required in the short term. I am sure the House knows that most of the modular accommodation is very modern and as good as anything we would get with bricks and mortar.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I understand the financials that the Minister has issued and has spoken about, but I still do not hear a definitive number for what the increase in capacity will be. People, particularly those outside urban areas, are choosing to come to live in smaller towns and villages. They are most welcome to leave the bigger cities, set up in those towns and villages, make them their homes and work and raise their families there. Increasingly, we are seeing that these people are not able to get their children into local schools. That is a reflection of society. A significant number of people do not own their own homes; they rent instead. This means that they may choose, for whatever reason, or be forced into a position of needing to seek alternative accommodation, which has an impact on the towns and villages to which I refer and the enrolment capacity that is available in there.

The Minister mentioned duplicate enrolments. There is a CAO-style application system in Limerick. Instead of just highlighting the problem of duplicate enrolments, what does the Minister intend to do to reduce the impact of them?

Deputy Norma Foley: As previously outlined, there are 314 school planning areas, or just school areas, if you like. The planning and building unit would say that in less than ten of those school areas are there challenges and difficulties for people. I want to say clearly that I do not for one minute underestimate the stress and challenge that presents for parents who are intent on and need to get their children into school and have to go through the process.

On duplication, I fully understand why a parent would apply to a number of different schools if they feel there is pressure in an area. There is an opportunity, and the Deputy is quite correct. We have seen it work in other areas where there is a sharing of information or a central application system. We have piloted this in various areas around the country. It works quite well, and there is an opportunity. Basically, what we are asking schools to do is share their information

with the Department. That is what schools are doing. Each school has autonomy over its own admissions, but it is very helpful when schools provide information directly to the Department.

School Staff

57. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education her current and future actions to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis in primary and secondary schools in the wake of Ireland's annual teacher conferences which took place recently. [16490/24]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I ask the Minister the measures she is taking to reduce the teacher shortage crisis that we are experiencing in primary and secondary schools.

Deputy Norma Foley: We are on a roll of congratulations, so I want to congratulate the Deputy on his recent marriage. I wish him well.

Ensuring that every child's experience in school is positive and that they have qualified, engaged teachers available to support them in their learning is a key priority area of action for the Government. In budget 2024, a variety of commitments have been given, which includes an introduction, as I outlined previously, of a professional master of education incentive scheme for all newly qualified teachers graduating in 2024. Eligible teachers can receive an incentive payment of up to €2,000. There is expansion of upskilling programmes, free to teachers with no charge, aimed at increasing the number of qualified teachers in high-demand subjects and reducing out-of-field teaching.

New programmes include Irish, French, politics and society and computer science. These complement the existing upskilling programmes in maths, physics and Spanish. Trinity College Dublin will deliver a new Irish upskilling programme for post-primary teachers starting in late 2024, available at no cost to eligible teachers. There is provision of an additional 1,000 posts of responsibility in the school system for the 2024-25 school year, recognising the vital role of school leaders in enhancing educational outcomes by fostering a positive school environment and empowering educators and learners within their communities.

In addition to these recently introduced measures, as Minister, I have also worked with other stakeholders to introduce other additional measures, including approving 610 extra places on initial teacher education programmes for primary level, thereby ensuring flexibility in initial teacher education programmes to allow student teachers to support schools, with over 2,700 registered under route 5 with the Teaching Council of Ireland in 2023. Measures also include continuation of primary supply panels, encouraging retired teachers to make themselves available for substitute cover, with a 49% increase in that area, as I said earlier, reduction of restrictions on job-sharing for teachers and those on career breaks with regard to making themselves available as substitutes, and enabling post-primary teachers to provide up to 35 additional hours of substitute cover per term in their qualified subject. These measures contribute to the lowest ever teacher allocation ratio in primary schools, with a 10% reduction in the average student:teacher ratio between 2017 and 2023.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister for her kind words and subsequently the contribution that she made to the debate. I do not think we can step away from the fact that we have a crisis in our schools that is once again impacting the most vulnerable cohorts of students. If schools are short of teachers, it means that there is a shortage in special educational needs al-

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location. It means that students in DEIS schools who need much more intensive teaching are left without. This is an issue that has been going on for the last two and a half or three years. Any number of solutions have been suggested. I might run through some of them and we can talk them through. The Minister mentioned the €2,000 being given to people in the professional master of education-----

Deputy Norma Foley: The PME.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The PME. From the conversations I have had with people who want to engage in the profession, that is just not enough. One of the prohibitive factors is the time it takes to do the PME. It is two years. In the North, it is only one year and costs substantially less. Two years means that a person is without an income. Permanent contracts, proper investment in special educational needs and reducing class sizes in order that people are teaching in an environment that is safe and constructive to learn and teach in, bringing in a substitute panel for secondary education, addressing the deplorable pay-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over time. He will get a chance to come back in.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. With regard to the PME, the €2,000 is a significant start and gesture.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate that we would all want it to be greater. It is a very good indication of what we had available to us that we would acknowledge the challenges that people face and that that bursary would be made available. On the support for special educational needs, 27% of the entire budget of the Department is spent on special education. That is as it should be. It is more than €2.7 billion. It is right and proper. We have more than 40,000 professionals working in that area. We have 3,000 special classes, two thirds of which were delivered under this Government. We have seven new special schools in place. The Deputy speaks about having the right facilities in which to work and the right environment in which to learn. All of them have that, notwithstanding the wider building provision in the context of the €1 billion available year on year over the past four years.

Regarding pay, I acknowledge that there were significant improvements under Building Momentum. The new pay agreement will mean that the rate of pay at the top of the scheme will be €85,000 and that the starting rate of pay for a new teacher when coming to a school will be €46,000.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We still have a scenario where a teacher will need to do three years in order to get a permanent contract. You cannot expect people to move job or to move into the teaching profession if they know there will be instability in their life for three years. Permanent contracts are going to be essential. The €2,000 package for the PME is very welcome. However, in Dublin and other places, that is just a little over one month's rent for most people. We really have to take the course duration down to a year.

I also want to talk about secondments and where these are taking people professionally, or any number of other innovations that have been applied. I understand the Minister has made some progress on the reduction of class sizes, but that is starting from a poor base. It also comes down to the fact that regardless of the public service agreement, the teaching profession is like

nursing, since we have created an environment in this city and country where the money you are getting paid simply does not cover your rent and bills. Unless we address that, we will be here year in, year out.

Deputy Norma Foley: On permanent contracts, there is a pathway forward. In fact, after two years, people are into permanent contracts, or what are called contracts of indefinite duration. There is a clear pathway.

On costs, I appreciate the €2,000 for the professional master of education is a start. The additional courses like upskilling courses are across a wide variety of different subject areas and are also free of charge. There is no cost to any teacher who would like to step forward.

In the context of career breaks, secondments or anything of that nature, people often choose for a variety of reasons, such as family reasons or illness, to take those measures. Regarding reduction of class size, over three budgets, we have reduced the pupil-teacher ratio at primary level to an historic low of 23:1. That was never before done over three consecutive budgets. Equally, in special education we now have class sizes that are one teacher to six students and two SNAs in the classroom. This is all positive but it requires additional staff.

School Admissions

58. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure that no child is left without an appropriate school place. [16257/24]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Will the Minister outline her plans to ensure that no child is left without an appropriate school place for the coming September?

Deputy Norma Foley: It is an absolute priority of the Department and of mine to ensure that every child in the State has access to a school place that is appropriate to their needs. We are continually investing in existing and new schools to ensure that this is the case. Testament to this is that almost 400 new classes for children with special education were established in the 2023-24 school year and school building projects completed in 2023 delivered more than 7,000 additional mainstream post-primary school places.

Since 2020, the Department has invested in the region of €4.5 billion in our schools throughout the country, involving the completion of more than 800 school building projects. Construction is under way at approximately 300 other projects, which includes 31 new school buildings. These 300 projects at construction stage involve a total State investment of more than €1.2 billion. A variety of capital investments are at a variety of stages. They are swiftly moving forward so that year-on-year €1.2 billion to €1.4 billion has been expended.

There are more than 1 million learners in 4,000 primary and post-primary schools around the country. Growth in overall post-primary enrolments is projected to continue in many parts of the country. However, first year enrolments nationally are expected to have peaked in the current school year and will begin to decline. Nevertheless, due to strong residential construction and planning activity, we can expect to see increasing demand in particular towns and areas. This is fully factored into the Department's forward planning approach, which includes extensive engagement with local authorities in this regard.

In the area of special education, the National Council for Special Education has forecast

continued significant growth in the requirement for special classes at post-primary level. The Department is working towards the provision of an average of four special classes in every post-primary school. While there can be enrolment pressures in some areas, it is important to note that sometimes this may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by a variety of other factors, as I discussed with Deputy Clarke earlier. In this respect, the Department continuously works directly with schools, management bodies and local authorities. Figures based on CSO data and all types of information feed into planning and building so we can properly forward plan.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Any parent with a child with special educational needs will say that when their child's need is met it comes as the result of a struggle, fight or battle of some degree. To date the Government has reacted to a series of crises rather than adequately planning out the future. Some very welcome changes were made in this regard but, despite the energy and effort at the time, we still see children with special educational needs who have not been offered a place for September. I have to question the effectiveness of the forward planning and the appropriateness of the data being used. When we look at the projected figures, the figures that come out are only as good as what has gone in. We need a much clearer line of information with regard to the Department, the principals, the building units and the delivery and, ultimately, appropriate places for all of these children. Without this, time and again we see children with special educational needs being put on reduced timetables. I would like to think that is only my experience but I have yet to see one of these children returned to a full timetable.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank Deputy Clarke. Specifically with regard to special education we have seen unprecedented development. I concede it was coming from a low base. We now have more than 3,000 special classes in the system, two thirds of which were delivered under the Government in the past four years. We also have seven new special schools delivered by the Government and four additional special schools will open in September. An incredible emphasis is being placed on special education. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is newly into the area and I welcome her. I know she is fully committed to ensuring we progress this area.

The teacher allocation that goes into special education is a ratio of six students to one teacher and two SNAs. There is no question we are prepared to open additional classes. We are prepared to open new special schools where they are required. I absolutely accept it is very difficult at times for parents to navigate the system. For this reason we have invested an additional €13 million in the National Council for Special Education to provide additional SENOs who will work on a one-to-one basis with parents to navigate the system for them and make it that bit easier.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister. This is not just about navigating the system so that we do not have parents such as Sarah Dooley, about whom I have spoken to the Minister previously. She applied to 20 schools before her little boys were offered a place. This will mean a 90-minute round trip for those children to get to school in September. This is not inclusivity. They are literally excluded from their own community. The Department produced a document on projected enrolment which was recently updated. It specifically emphasised the estimate of enrolments of children with special educational needs as a percentage of total enrolments. It outlines that in 2023, to be confirmed, the figure for primary and post-primary is that 2.65% of children have special educational needs. This is estimated to increase to 4% by 2030. Specifically, one of the documents states the number of those who qualified under M1F2 in 2022 was 23,096 and that figure is expected to increase to 36,900 by 2030. What does the

Minister plan to change on the figures she uses for assessment to ensure these 37,000 children will have a school place in 2030?

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to be 100% clear. We are completely dedicated to ensuring that all children with additional needs will have the places that best meet their needs. It is my absolute vision that we will have a scenario in which children with additional needs can attend their nearest school. That is the objective. It is why 3,000 additional special educational classes are in place. As I have said previously, two thirds of them have been delivered by this Government. We will get to a point where a student attends their nearest school.

Part of my vision, and I am very clear about this, is that we will have a scenario whereby we will have a school campus with a mainstream school adjacent to a special school so there will be an opportunity to move over and back between the two. We are putting an enormous amount of effort and emphasis into ensuring we have appropriate provision. We provided 400 additional special classes in 2022-23. We will do likewise this year and the following year to ensure we will meet the needs of all of those who require either a special class or a place in a special school.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Grant Payments

59. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education for an update on the minor works grant; when she expects this to be paid this year for schools in Carlow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16156/24]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am looking for an update on the minor works grant. When does the Minister expect this to be paid for schools in Carlow? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Norma Foley: Since 2020, the Department of Education has invested in the region of €4.5 billion to add capacity and develop and upgrade school facilities around the country for the almost 1 million students and, importantly, the 100,000 staff who learn and work in our schools. The minor works grant is one important element of a record level of capital investment in school infrastructure.

The Department recognises the importance of the minor works grant to primary schools. This funding provides good flexibility at local level to assist schools to manage and undertake works that support the operation of the school. Under Project Ireland 2040, a commitment has been given that the minor works grant will be paid in either December or January of the school year to all primary schools, including special schools.

In recent years the Department's approach has been to pay the minor works grant to primary schools in advance of the start of the following school year in order to facilitate a better lead-

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in period for schools to plan any maintenance or minor works during the summer period. The minor works grant for the current school year 2023-24 was paid in April 2023. I recently announced that a minor works grant of €29 million for the 2024-25 school year would issue to all primary schools, including schools in Carlow, in the coming weeks.

Between 2018 and 2023 in the region of €310 million in minor works grants and enhanced minor works grants was allocated to schools. This includes the additional support in the context of Covid-19 of the payment of an enhanced minor works grant totalling €45 million for primary schools and special schools, plus a once-off Covid-19 minor works funding of €17 million for post-primary schools. The enhanced minor works grant allowed schools that identified inadequate ventilation in a room to utilise their minor works grant or apply for emergency works grant assistance to address issues.

Under the minor works grant scheme, funding is made available to all primary schools on the basis of a €5,500 basic grant plus €18.50 per mainstream pupil and €74 per special needs pupil enrolled in the school on 30 September of the year prior to the issue of the grant. All schools have the autonomy to use this funding for maintenance and small-scale improvements to school buildings and grounds. Given that each school setting is different, the individual schools are best placed to decide how best to use this funding to address their needs.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister. As she knows, the works that can be undertaken under the minor works scheme include maintenance and small-scale improvements to school buildings and grounds. However, many schools are finding that the costs have risen substantially and they are seeing a huge shortfall. The Minister has seen in areas such as housing, and in regard to all grants, that the costs of buildings and materials have now gone up by so much. I am asking her if she will now allow this extra funding to go towards this. I speak to a lot of schools. I want to welcome the grant she has announced for 2024 and 2025. That is very important. Yet, given the scale of things, we really need more funding, because of the costs of materials and the works that need to be done.

There is also a school in Carlow that built a sensory room. It was funded by donations that came from the school's own community. It is in County Carlow and it is a very small community. It cannot keep going back to the community to look for funding to finish it. Is it being considered and included in the minor works grant? We need a lot more communication.

Deputy Norma Foley: In terms of the funding that has been made available to Carlow schools, from 2018 to 2023 schools in Carlow received in excess of €4.5 million under the minor works grant. The grant for the 2024 to 2025 school year, which is, as I said, due to issue later this month, will provide more than €400,000 in additional funding to Carlow schools. On the point of funding being issued to schools, I also recently announced the ICT grant of €50 million to all primary, special and post-primary schools for the 2023 to 2024 school year. In respect of that, schools in Carlow will receive in the region of €750,000 in ICT grants in the coming weeks.

I recognise that we all live in a challenging environment, and I know how important this funding stream is. This is notwithstanding the fact there has been an increase in capitation going into the schools. Equally, there is a unit in the Department, namely, the financial support services unit, FSSU, which deals with difficulties that might arise and with schools that might be having specific challenges. We invite schools to deal directly with the Department. In terms of special education, specific funds are being made available to schools for the development of

their special classes and the ancillary requirements.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: This funding is really welcome. It is so important. I note that it is planned to go to nearly 90 school building projects, which are currently at tender stage. The Minister announced that in the last few weeks. I welcome that. There are two capital projects for schools in County Carlow. One is, as the fellow said, “shovel ready” and ready to go. When will the announcement be made for these new capital projects?

The other issue is the delay. How can we look at things differently when I contact the Minister and the Department? I must contact the Minister every week, particularly regarding one school in County Carlow. I get on to her about all the other schools as well. Could we have more information and communication? When will these 90 planned school building projects that are currently at tender stage be authorised? When will we receive news about them?

There is one more thing. My little grandson is going to Monaleen National School in Castletroy in Limerick. I never bring up anywhere that is not in Carlow, but they have put in for a new school. I am wondering about that, too.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. In terms of the information that is being made available, the Department deals directly with the patron bodies on the ground, whoever they may be. To be fair, there are 4,000 schools in the system, so I think it is an appropriate mechanism. Of course, there is always a mechanism through which the Deputy can ask a parliamentary question in the Dáil, etc. I want to acknowledge that it is important to have a line of open contact with the schools. That is being done between the Department’s planning and building unit and the management of patron bodies that represent the schools.

Specifically, in terms of the ambitious project that is going forward, in the last number of years under this Government, more than 800 projects were completed. There are currently 300 projects at various stages of construction at this point in time. The Deputy is quite correct that I announced €800 million, which will facilitate an additional 90 projects, moving on to construction stage. They will be announced at different times. Some have now been announced and more will be announced. It depends on the stage they were at regarding the valuation of the tender project, etc. That will all happen in due course.

Schools Building Projects

60. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education for an update on when construction will commence on new school buildings (details supplied). [16349/24]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: My question is about when construction on a new school building in Scoil Íosagáin, Buncrana, will finally commence. The school has been waiting approximately 20 years now for this to happen. I cannot stress enough how appalling the conditions within the school buildings are. The Minister has been sent an email from the board of management containing more than 100 pages of documentation, and the photographic evidence is really shocking. This is where they have to provide an education every day.

Deputy Norma Foley: At the outset, I will say that I am very familiar with this particular school. The Minister, Deputy McConalogue, has raised this with me on a number of occasions, so I am very invested in bringing this over the line. I know that is the Deputy’s view also.

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The project that has been referenced by the Deputy is included in the Department's construction programme, which will be delivered under the national development plan as part of Project Ireland 2040. The project for Scoil Íosagáin in Buncrana is a large-scale project which will provide a new 25-classroom school and all associated ancillary accommodation. The building will also include a further eight classrooms and three specialist rooms for children with special educational needs. These will include a sensory and play suite, a home studies room and an art and music room.

Since 2020, the Department of Education has invested more than €4.5 billion in schools around the country. Approximately 800 school building projects have been completed and 300 projects are under construction. Schools in County Donegal have received €123.5 million in investment since 2020, when this Government came into being, with 35 school building projects being completed and a further 25 currently in construction, including modular accommodation.

School building projects under construction involve an overall State investment of more than €1.2 billion, with most of these projects due for completion in 2024 and 2025. This is a record level of investment and highlights the Department's strong track record in providing additional capacity and modern facilities for our school communities. I recently announced €800 million in funding for 90 school building projects that will move from tender stage to construction. Some of these have now been announced. They will all be done by degrees in the coming weeks and months.

The projects moving to construction in this next phase will add in the region of 200,000 m² of additional and modernised permanent capacity across the school estate. They will involve 28 new school buildings and 61 extensions of existing buildings. This level of construction roll out recognises the priority that the Government puts on investment in education, including responding to the increased requirement for special education provision. New medium-term capital allocations for the Department of Education were confirmed in the recent review of national development plan allocations. The Department's planning and building unit is now reviewing its programme plans in the context of this allocation.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I am struggling to find words here. I have just told the Minister that a 114-page document has been sent to her. I have seen it and it contains photographic evidence of the absolutely appalling conditions that teachers and children have to endure. Planning permission was lost because two contractors did not proceed to tender stage. There has been a lack of urgency in the Minister's Department. I have read some of the emails from the school's board of management. It makes for harrowing reading to see the correspondence it gets from the teachers and parents. My question is very clear: when will the Minister's Department issue a letter of intent to the proposed contractor and when will the construction commence? I am really hoping the Minister can give assurance now here on the floor of the Dáil about when that will happen. It is straightforward. There is a trail of correspondence and contact from the board of management with the officials in the Minister's Department and the lack of urgency is simply unacceptable. I am expecting good news here tonight.

Deputy Norma Foley: There is no lack of urgency here; I want that to be very clear. This project has moved at pace under the last four years of this Government. As I have said, under the next phase of the school building programme, individual school building projects will be authorised to proceed to construction, subject to an assessment of tender reports and relevant due diligence by the Department's planning and building unit.

The large-scale specific project for Scoil Íosagáin in Buncrana is currently at stage 3, which is tender stage. The tender report was received from the Scoil Íosagáin board of management and the design team by my Department in January 2024. The analysis and review of same is at an advanced stage. The next step in the project will be the authorisation to issue the letter of intent to the successful tenderer. My Department will be in contact with the school authorities shortly with regard to the next steps involved in the project. The Minister, Deputy McConalogue, has confirmed the letter will issue shortly. Once a contractor has been appointed, it is expected it will take approximately 27 months to complete the project. It will be delivered at pace.

As I have said, more than €127 million has been invested in Donegal. Schools such as the Gaelscoil in Moville have been opened. Moville Community College is under construction. The three-school campus in Buncrana, for which I initiated the compulsory purchase order, CPO, is now going to design.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will come back to the Minister on the three-school campus on another day. In respect of the issue before us, she mentioned the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, but she is the Minister for Education. I want to be clear. Is she saying that in the days ahead, her Department is going to issue a letter of intent to the proposed contractor? Will that be followed very quickly by the signing of a construction contract? She is the Minister for Education, with all due respect, so I am asking her to confirm that to me in the Dáil tonight. We have waited patiently. This proposal has been developing for 20 years. We are at a serious point now. I cannot stress enough that we are at crisis point for the teachers and children in that school. The mouldy conditions are making them unwell. Those conditions are unacceptable. Some of the buildings in which they are trying to teach are approximately 100 years old. It is urgent that she gives us the clear, good news that the project is finally moving to construction and those kids can have the education and facilities they deserve.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. I absolutely understand and appreciate the importance of the provision of a new build for a school. I recognise the importance of such provision in the interests of the school community, including the staff, students and the wider school community, comprising parents and the wider community. It is for that reason this project has moved, as I said. We received the required documentation in January. I made it clear that the project was being moved as a priority. I also said clearly, and I am happy to repeat, that the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, has engaged with me on an ongoing basis in respect of this project. I confirmed to him that the letter of intent will issue shortly. I believe he also referenced that on foot of his engagement with me. I give that confirmed commitment again. The letter of intent will issue shortly. It is a priority that we get the project moving. It has moved at pace under this Government and I look forward to the letter of intent issuing shortly.

Special Educational Needs

61. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will engage with a school (details supplied) regarding the urgent need for an ASD unit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16186/24]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: What has been the extent of the Minister of State's engagement with Scoil Eoin in Ballincollig regarding the urgent need for an ASD unit and will she make a statement on the matter?

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Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I thank the Deputy for the question. Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government. It is also a key priority for my Department and for the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. My Department engages intensely with the NCSE on the forward planning of new special classes and additional special school places. This forward planning work is well under way ahead of the 2024-2025 school year. This work involves a detailed review of statistical data in respect of forecasting demand for special class places, an analysis of available school accommodation, consideration of improved data-sharing arrangements, and a particular focus on the provision of special classes at post-primary level.

Along with two new special schools opening this school year, 391 new special classes - 255 at primary level and 136 at post-primary level - have been sanctioned by the NCSE. Of those, 76 are in Cork, 52 at primary level and 24 at post-primary level. This brings to 496 the number of special classes in County Cork, comprising 351 at primary level and 145 at post-primary level.

In respect of the school referred to by the Deputy, I confirm that my Department received an application in 2021 under the additional schools accommodation scheme. The application was for funding for the provision of three special education classrooms. The Department's school building technical team carried out an in-depth review of the school site in 2021. The review confirmed that the school and the site are at maximum capacity and that it would not be possible to provide the required accommodation on site unless vast amounts of existing accommodation were to be demolished and replaced with two-storey accommodation. At that time, considering all the relevant impediments to delivering the brief of accommodation and the site constraints, the Department was not in a position to provide funding for the significant demolition of the school building. In light of this, officials in my Department contacted the NCSE to advise it of same and to establish the special classes in other schools in the area.

In January 2024, the NCSE confirmed the need for special classes in the area. I will come back in again and add to my reply.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I acknowledge the presence of Deputy Aindrias Moynihan to my left. He has worked on this issue for a number of years. The Minister of State's response is no different from the previous response that was given on 9 April in respect of this school. Traditionally in Ballincollig, ASD classes have been outsourced to villages, such as Ovens, Berings, Farran and other surrounding rural county towns. I have spoken in the past about Ballincollig in particular and referenced the deficit in special needs classes in the area to serve the population of the town and the greater region, which amounts to approximately 20,000 people.

Many people here are slow to acknowledge the fact there has been a considerable increase in the number of special needs assistants, special education teachers and ASD classes in general. I would like to put that on the record. At the same time, however, this project is a matter of urgency. The technical team to which the Minister of State referred in her response met the principal on site in 2021 and, three years on, we are no further in progressing that project.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As the Deputy stated, in January this year, the NCSE confirmed the need for special classes in that area. The NCSE and the Department are working to identify suitable locations for those classes to ensure the children who require access to this provision can avail of it as soon as possible.

Separately, the board of management of the school subsequently submitted a new engineer's condition report to the Department in support of the proposal to knock and rebuild a portion of the school building. My Department's technical team will review the contents of the report and officials from my Department will consult the school authority on completion of the review.

As the Deputy knows, budget 2024 provided funding for up to a further 400 special classes. The NCSE has a significant number of new classes sanctioned ahead of the coming school year, and it is expected that further classes will be confirmed in the coming weeks. Parents will be notified as special class placements become available and are sanctioned for the school year.

As I said, the Department's technical team will review the contents of that report and consult the school authority.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome that. I need to stress again, as Deputy Moynihan will, the urgency around the technical team submitting that report. As the Minister of State knows, those things take time and often require planning permission. It is not just a case of landing a modular unit or building. There are considerable planning requirements from the school's point of view as it arranges resources and so on. This project has been ongoing for a number of years and I reiterate the urgency around the technical team submitting that report as soon as possible.

I also reiterate that Ballincollig, which is a great town or suburb of the city, is playing catch-up in respect of the number of special needs classes it is providing to its population. It is imperative the classroom is given the utmost priority. The officials visited as long ago as 2021 and acknowledged on site the difficulties that exist. It is about time the parents in the area were given the reassurance that their children will be accommodated in the near future.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: There is considerable need for ASD services in Ballincollig schools, and Scoil Eoin has been keen to provide classes for people in their own community so they do not have to travel outside to places such as Farran, Berrings and elsewhere. Finding a location to fit these classes on the site has been challenging, and the option of replacing an existing building, the section beside Station Road, needs to be seriously considered. There is a real win-win opportunity because there are issues in that part of the building. Perhaps the Minister of State could clarify if the costings have taken into consideration the requirements of the building as it stands and the work that might be needed to maintain it. That would play a significant part in influencing the decision. You cannot leave the building as it is because there is work needed on it.

Also, has the Minister looked at other options, and has there been serious consideration given to doing that work and going up an extra storey on that section of building beside Station Road? It really is an option to be considered.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank both Deputies. The NCSE has confirmed the need for special classes in the area, and it is working with Department to identify suitable locations. There are 14 special classes in Ballincollig already. I very much welcome and think it is really positive that the schools want to provide these services for children in the area. We are open to more coming into it, and how that is rolled out is what is being considered at the moment between the Department and the NCSE. They will be reporting back to or consulting with the school when that review is completed.

I want to add that my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Foley, announced plans last week for

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the roll-out of the next phase of investment in the school capital building programme. This additional funding of almost €800 million will support more than 90 building projects in 2024 and 2025, including 138 additional rooms for children with special educational needs.

Education Schemes

62. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education the reason no counsellor is available to a school in north Leitrim under the Counselling in Primary Schools pilot (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16346/24]

Deputy Marian Harkin: Why, after nearly one year into a two-year pilot programme entitled Counselling in Primary Schools, no counsellor is available to schools in the north Leitrim area, even though Leitrim is one of the counties in the pilot area? I have sent the Minister details of one of the schools. Obviously, I do not want the name of the school to be mentioned because of confidentiality but it is one of a number of schools in north Leitrim that have not been able to access this highly valuable and badly-needed scheme.

Deputy Norma Foley: In June 2023 - the Deputy is correct - I was very pleased to launch a €5 million pilot of counselling and well-being supports in primary schools in selected counties. This further supports the range of mental health and well-being supports already provided by my Department and the excellent work already happening in schools in respect of well-being. All of this supplements the mental health supports that are offered by the HSE throughout the country.

The pilot has two strands. Strand 1 sees direct counselling supports being provided to primary schools for the first time. The Department has set up county panels of pre-approved private counsellors providing one-to-one counselling in primary schools in counties Cavan, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan and Tipperary. In total, 733 blocks of counselling have been allocated to schools across the pilot counties, which provides an allocation to 733 children in these counties. To date, 33 counsellors have been recruited across the seven pilot counties. Strand 2 involves the introduction of education well-being teams to provide enhanced in-school supports for a cluster of primary schools in Cork, Carlow, Dublin 7 and Dublin 16.

Some 15 education well-being practitioners have been recruited to the four cluster areas. They have undergone an intensive training programme provided by NEPS and have commenced visiting and supporting schools in recent weeks. The supports being offered are to pupils, parents, and school staff to support well-being and resilience at a whole-school level.

Separately, to supplement support for the post-primary sector, I recently announced a tender to procure services to further support well-being and mental health in post-primary schools. The tender will invite suitable providers to work with the Department to develop and deliver additional supports to complement existing systems and structures in post-primary schools for well-being and mental health.

As the Deputy knows, the provision of counselling to children is a serious and a sensitive matter. As there is no single recognised counselling qualification and no national regulatory body for counselling in Ireland, at this point in time, we are accepting applications from counsellors accredited with six accrediting bodies for counsellors in Ireland, who met the requisite criteria for this pilot project. This is to ensure that the counsellors have the appropriate training

and skills to engage ethically, professionally and effectively with this vulnerable age group.

Counsellors are available to work in all seven counties of the pilot and my Department continue to accept applications from counsellors on an ongoing basis. We are hoping that more counsellors will be added to the panel in the coming weeks. Two counsellors were available to work in Leitrim. I am delighted-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry, Minister. We are way over.

Deputy Marian Harkin: As the Minister said, this scheme came into being last May 2023. That is almost a year ago, and Leitrim is one of the seven counties in this scheme, along with Cavan, Laois, Longford, Tipperary, Mayo and Monaghan. This is a very valuable scheme. It provides counselling outside of the NEPS scheme. You do not need a full assessment from teachers etc. in order to get access to the scheme. It is a much more agile scheme. Teachers have to make a judgment through their interactions with the students and it really is very beneficial. However, it is no good if it is not available to those students. There is nobody on that panel as of now that will travel to north Leitrim to provide the service as announced, and I know four schools that are looking for that service. There is a lot of advertising of this service on social media and all of that, yet when schools go looking for it, it is not there. Parents are contacting schools asking what is happening, and I hope I can get a positive response from the Minister this evening.

Deputy Norma Foley: I can confirm in fact that 733 blocks of counselling have been allocated, benefiting 733 children. What I can say is that it has been difficult to recruit in certain areas. As I said, two counsellors were available to work in Leitrim, and I am pleased to say that on 11 April, an additional counsellor was added to the panel who is available to work in schools in Leitrim. The Department is actively recruiting counsellors to work on this pilot, and I encourage all counsellors who are accredited by the accrediting bodies to make themselves available for this important work. This is a first in the area of primary schools. There is, as the Deputy has said, an absolute need for it. It is working, and it is working very successfully in areas where there are two types of pilots. As I have said, one is where there is one-to-one counselling. It has been easier in some areas to access the counsellors than in others but I am pleased to say we now have the third counsellor in place for Leitrim, and the 15 well-being practitioners that are working under the guidance of NEPS.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The school about which I gave the Minister details, which we are not mentioning here, contacted the Department in February, and again in March it submitted what I think is called the appendix 1 form. It has not heard back from the Department. It would be very useful if the Minister's Department could contact the school to let it know the situation. As the Minister knows, if a principal thinks a child needs this service, it is quite a difficult conversation to have with a parent, and then if they apply for the service there is nothing there. The Minister has told me there is another counsellor available - I think she said from 11 April - to work in Leitrim. I do know that when a counsellor was contacted, they said they could not travel the distance as it was approximately 60 km. I hope that will not be the case in this circumstance, and that whoever this counsellor is will be able to travel to the various schools in north Leitrim that need this service. It is not the schools that need it; it is the children. As the Minister said, it is a good service but it needs to be accessible for students in north Leitrim.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. I reiterate that 733 blocks of counselling have been provided to 733 children. It is new and innovative, and it will take time for it to take root.

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There have been challenges - I would be the first to say it - with regard to recruiting counsellors. The Deputy has specifically referenced her own area there. I am pleased, as I said, that from mid-April we have been fortunate to allocate a third counsellor, and we will continue to recruit in that space. It is interesting that there are two pilots because it will give us greater learning going forward as to whether a combination of the two, or one or the other is the most appropriate with which to move forward.

With specific regard to those who are training under the NEPS psychologists, they can come from a variety of backgrounds, whether it is education, social care or psychotherapy. Some within that field are currently being trained under the NEPS psychologists and they are actually out working in the clusters as well. There will be greater progress going forward but again, I would encourage people working in this field and who have this expertise to consider becoming involved as part of the primary school programme.

Question No. 63 taken with Written Answers.

School Accommodation

64. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education her plans to establish a new second level school in the east Cork area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16461/24]

Deputy David Stanton: What plans does the Minister and her Department have for another second level school in east Cork? This is probably one of the fastest-growing areas in the country at the moment, with thousands of houses planned but many of the schools there are already at capacity, even though they have got fantastic extensions. I would be interested in the Minister's response.

10 o'clock

Deputy Norma Foley: Requirements for school places are kept under ongoing review in the context of available information on population, enrolments and residential development activity. In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, the Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas. A geographical information system is used to analyse data drawn from a range of sources, including CSO census data, child benefit and school enrolment data. This analysis enables the Department to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary levels. The school planning areas in east Cork include Midleton, Carrigtwohill, Fermoy, Cobh, Youghal and Mitchelstown.

Major new residential developments have the potential to alter the demand for school places at a local level. In that regard, as part of the demographic demand analysis, the Department of Education also monitors planning and construction activity in the residential sector. This involves the analysis of data sources from local authorities and the CSO along with the engagement with local authorities and the construction sector. In this way, up-to-date information on significant new residential developments is obtained and factored into the demographic analysis exercise. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes at a local level, where there is a constantly evolving picture with planned new residential development.

Since 2020, the Department of Education has invested over €544 million across 104 projects of various scales in County Cork. This includes a number of significant projects in east Cork, as the Deputy referred to, such as the recently completed project at Carrigtwohill post-primary school, which delivered a new, modern 1,000-pupil permanent school building. An extension to St. Colman's Community College in Midleton has also been recently completed to cater for up to 1,000 pupils. Other projects being advanced in east Cork include expanded capacity at the Christian Brothers Secondary School and St. Mary's High School in Midleton. In addition, St. Aloysius College, Carrigtwohill will expand to cater for 1,000 pupils, while Pobalscoil na Tríonóide in Youghal will cater for 1,200 pupils, and Coláiste Mhuire and Carrignafoey Community College, both in Cobh, will cater for 600 and over 700 pupils respectively.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for her response. I visited the Carrigtwohill second level school recently where the Minister turned the sod a while back. It is absolutely magnificent and amazing. It did take 12 years to open from the time the initial decision was made to build it. Has the Minister seen the two-year progress report on the Cork county development plan that was published last Friday? She probably has not. It indicates that in Midleton there are plans to develop 2,647 housing units and 2,173 of them have got planning permission already. In Carrigtwohill, the number is 1,700 houses and almost 1,000 have got planning permission already. I could go on to all the other hamlets and villages around in a similar vein. My concern is that thousands of houses are being planned. There will be huge numbers of houses, which is fantastic to see. Many of the schools the Minister mentioned already are at capacity as it is, however, so what plans are there to develop a further second level school in east Cork? I would put it to the Minister that an Educate Together school would be worth looking at in this regard.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. Where demographic data indicates that additional school places are required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through a variety of different circumstances. This could include utilising existing unused capacity, which I know, as the Deputy said, is not an easy thing to do in east Cork because such capacity may not be available. Another option might be extending the capacity of a school or schools, or, as the Deputy has requested, the provision of a new school or schools.

If additional accommodation is required, the aim is to try and facilitate this, as much as possible, by way of expansion of existing schools rather than establishing new schools. This is the preference in this regard. The expansion of existing schools is consistent with wider Government objectives under Project Ireland 2040 for an increased emphasis on compact growth. In respect of post-primary schools, new post-primary schools must have a student enrolment capacity of 600 to 1,000 students. A lower threshold of 400 students may apply to Gaelcholáistí, having regard to the alternative of establishing an Irish-medium aonad in an English-medium school.

Given the level of existing and planned provision, the Department is satisfied that the provision of a new school entity at post-primary level in the east Cork area is not required at this time. We will, however, keep it under review. I will specifically refer, going forward, to the plan the Deputy mentioned.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for her response. I would be interested to know if she could forward to me information on the school planning areas. She mentioned there are 314 of them, and I ask her to forward the details of the east Cork one to me at some

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stage. We know that many schools now have got extensions to extensions, and they are at capacity. My concern is that in five, six or ten years' time we will be in real trouble because of the massive and very welcome growth in housing in the area. I ask the Minister to ask her officials to look at this situation again in light of the recent progress report I mentioned, which Cork County Council published only this week. It makes fantastic reading in the context of the development and building of houses and so on, which are so badly needed, but in parallel with this endeavour we need schools. The existing schools are full. They have got extensions to extensions in some of them, while at the same time the population is growing. If we have 5,000 houses and if each of those were to have one child, then that would be 5,000 extra children. This equates to a lot of school places.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be fair, as the Deputy will appreciate, I know this area and I am aware that it is growing. I also know that, to be fair, there has been inordinate and richly deserved investment from the Department into this area. We have seen this across a whole variety of schools, whether this concerns the Carrigtwohill post-primary school, St. Colman's Community College, the CBS and St. Mary's in Midleton or St. Aloysius College in Carrigtwohill, as well as the schools in Cobh. The Department, as I said earlier, does engage with the local authority. We do look at a variety of different data under the GIS, but we do specifically engage with the local authorities. I think it is important that we have an openness at all times to keep an open mind and look at changing trends as they alter and evolve over time, so I will ask the officials to make reference to the latest information that is coming from Cork County Council, with a view specifically to east Cork.

Question No. 65 taken with Written Answers.

Disadvantaged Status

66. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education for an update on the proposal to introduce a DEIS plus scheme for the most acutely disadvantaged schools in the country. [16367/24]

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Minister will know that I have raised this next matter probably more than any other issue in my capacity as the Labour Party's spokesperson on education. I refer to the need for a new designation of what is called DEIS plus for the most acutely disadvantaged schools. It is an initiative that was started in Dublin 17, in schools in Tallaght and Ballymun. The estimate is that about 100 schools around the country would benefit from extra therapeutic support. I ask the Minister if she has considered this matter and if she will move on it.

Deputy Norma Foley: The DEIS programme is a key policy initiative of the Department to address specifically concentrated areas of educational disadvantage at school level. The Department now spends over €180 million annually providing additional supports to just under 1,200 schools in the DEIS programme. This includes an additional €32 million allocated following the announcement to extend the programme from September 2022. This means that approximately 240,000 students, or one in four of all our students, are now availing of DEIS supports.

Within the DEIS programme, 306 primary schools with the highest levels of educational disadvantage are included in DEIS urban band 1. In my time as Minister, I have provided three

improvements to the staffing allocation for these schools. DEIS urban band 1 schools receive access to an enhanced staffing allocation of one teacher for every 17 pupils for junior schools, one teacher for every 19 pupils for combined schools and one teacher for every 21 pupils for senior schools. This means that children in DEIS urban band 1 schools have more contact time with their teachers. DEIS urban band 1 schools also have access to the support of home school community liaison co-ordinators, access to the school completion programme and receive additional funding by way of a DEIS grant.

The National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, provides priority access to its services for schools in this DEIS band. School leaders and teachers in these schools also receive priority access to professional learning through Oide to support them to meet the needs of their pupils. Evidence shows that the DEIS programme has been successful in improving the outcomes for students in schools with higher concentrations of educational disadvantage. For example, the number of children completing the leaving certificate in DEIS schools has closed significantly on the number in non-DEIS schools since the DEIS programme began.

However, I am aware of the proposal referred to by the Deputy and I have met with a selection of the principals of the schools involved. I recognise that more work is required to ensure that all children, regardless of background, have the opportunity to achieve their potential in education. That is why the Department has undertaken a programme of work to explore the allocation of resources to schools to address educational disadvantage.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: When I raised this matter before, the Minister said there would be no OECD review of the DEIS programme until the second quarter of this year. This is why I have been relatively patient in trying to find out if the Minister will listen to what the principals have said. The Minister has said she has met them. The need in these schools is absolutely profound. Making one child out of every four a DEIS pupil does not really deal with the profound levels of acute disadvantage that are in our most deprived schools. The principals have said the impact of Covid has compounded things profoundly. The rates of self-harm and suicidal ideation that resulted from the Covid pandemic were highly problematic. We are talking about intergenerational trauma. Principals are advocating for specialised trauma support. The schools in question represent the life chance for these children. It is the best chance they have. DEIS works; it is a success. The Minister has acknowledged that, and I know she believes it. The INTO has estimated that about 100 schools would greatly benefit from further additional support.

Deputy Norma Foley: I do not disagree with the Deputy. It is important for the Department to have an independent assessment of the work of DEIS and then we will have an opportunity to see where we can go forward. The OECD Strength through Diversity: Education for Inclusive Societies project is currently engaged in a review. It has been here, and was here last summer. It is reviewing the entire DEIS area. It met the schools involved in DEIS, schools that are not involved and DEIS schools that believe they require more from the programme. It is an enormous body of work. The OECD review is being complemented by a programme of work within my Department to develop a future policy for resource allocation to address education disadvantage. This work also involves consultation with a range of relevant stakeholders. Officials involved with this work recently held consultations with more than 200 principals of primary and post-primary schools. This included a number of principals from those most acutely disadvantaged schools and provided rich data for the team to inform its work.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I am not in any way suggesting that the Minister does not

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appreciate the severity of the issues at hand. I have shared stories of my time teaching. The stories of people now on the front line are harrowing. We are losing children because of interventions which could take place and which, as has been acknowledged, would make the difference. It is very upsetting and very emotional to speak to principals who say if an intervention had taken place with a child when she was seven, she would not be having the issues she has now at the age of ten. I appeal to the Minister. I know she is having a review. I know that she has to stand over every cent spent by the Department and that there has to be some kind of scientific analysis as to why these allocations are made. There will never be a better investment in these 100 schools because that actually improves the life chances of these children. The school provides the most routine; it is the safest space they ever enter. That is why I will keep making this call until it is delivered upon.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome the DEIS initiative for schools in areas with the highest deprivation, which is really important. However, I see this even in County Carlow in schools that I am working with now. For example, some of the schools have hot meals but they have no funding for snacks or breakfast. The supports are vital. There is the added struggle for the same students to access the public health system. They are often forced to wait years for initial assessments with therapists. While the work is great and DEIS status for schools is excellent, some schools really need more funding in that area. I know of schools in my area that I believe really need extra funding.

Deputy Norma Foley: I really believe there is unanimity in the Chamber on the value and importance of DEIS and on the difference that DEIS makes to the life of the student. The DEIS programme has provided a range of supports, such as reduced class sizes, additional resources, school completion and home-school-community liaison officers. Very importantly there are two things. There are schools in DEIS whose principals firmly believe that they would benefit from even more DEIS resources, even though they might have the highest band of DEIS. There are also schools not in DEIS at all. We need to be very clear that there are children and young people at risk of education disadvantage and they do not attend DEIS schools; they are in other mainstream schools. We are trying to do a root-and-branch review. We have the OECD review and the work that is ongoing within my Department to ensure that to the maximum of our ability we will be able to raise all boats for all children, namely those who require additional supports within DEIS and those who are not in DEIS but who also require support. We hope to have that shortly.

Questions Nos. 67 to 75, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are almost out of time. Deputy Clarke will not have the full time for this question.

Teaching Qualifications

76. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to remove the Catholic certificate that is required to teach in most schools in Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16253/24]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I ask the Minister if she plans to remove the Catholic certificate that some schools require of teachers.

Deputy Norma Foley: The certificate of religious education is required as a condition of employment in Catholic schools. As an employment matter, it does not fall within my Department's remit. Some of the higher education institutions offer an optional certificate in religion programme that is separate from the bachelor of education.

The recruitment and appointment of teachers to fill teaching posts is a matter for the individual school authority. In accordance with Department circulars 31/2011 and 44/2019, schools are required to ensure that individuals appointed to teach are registered teachers with qualifications appropriate to the sector and suitable to the post for which they are employed.

The Teaching Council, which is responsible for the maintenance of standards in teaching and registering teachers, does not require a separate qualification in religious studies for registration as a primary school teacher. Schools and other educational institutions are required to comply with anti-discrimination and other employment legislation, such as the Employment Equality Act 1998. Section 37(1) of that Act, as amended, requires relevant employers in schools with a religious ethos to show that any favourable treatment of an employee or prospective employee is limited to the religion ground and action taken against a person is objectively justified by reference to that institution's aim of protecting its religious ethos. This provision raises the threshold for discrimination so that schools are precluded from discrimination on any other equality grounds and that any action taken is reasonable and proportionate.

For historical reasons, most primary schools are State-aided parish schools, with the local bishop as patron, although this pattern is changing. At present, 89% of primary schools have a Catholic ethos. Approximately 5% have a multid denominational ethos. The remaining approximately 6% of primary schools have a religious ethos other than Catholic, mainly Church of Ireland. It is recognised, including by the Catholic patrons, that more diverse provision is required to cater for our changing society.

The schools' reconfiguration for diversity process, supporting transfers of schools to multid denominational patrons in response to the wishes of school communities, aims to facilitate more availability of multid denominational schools across the country. The programme for Government reflects the Government's objective of continuing to expand the plurality of schools to reflect the full breadth of society.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I do not want to look at this from the perspective of multid denominational schools. That is a very valid conversation for another day. However, teachers should be hired on their skills, their ability, their experience and their qualifications to actually impart learning to the students in their classrooms. As there is a constitutional right for a learner to opt out of religion, why is this restriction still being placed on some teachers to be able to deliver that? The cold hard fact is that the 2022 census found that Roman Catholics accounted for 69% of the population. That represented a drop from 84.2% in 2011. Regardless of the factors that influence the latter, my opinion is that people who are not identifying as any religion at all play a large part in that. If we truly want our teachers to reflect the children who are sitting in their classrooms, we need to look at this. The saying that "You can't be what you can't see" applies to more than just what is visually obvious.

Deputy Norma Foley: Regarding the point the Deputy raised, it is not a requirement for registration with Teaching Council. There is no requirement for any religious certificate. It is not a requirement for entry to any teaching college. However, section 37(1) of the Employment Equality Act 1998, as amended, requires relevant employers in schools with a religious

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ethos to show that any favourable treatment of an employee or prospective employee is limited to the religion ground and action taken against a person is objectively justified by reference to that institution's aim of protecting its religious ethos. This provision raises the threshold for discrimination so that schools are precluded from discrimination on any other equality grounds and that any action taken is reasonable and proportionate. It is a reference to all schools, not just Catholic schools, including Church of Ireland schools, Muslim schools or whatever other types of schools. I want to be very clear. Where it is associated with the Department through the Teaching Council, it is not a requirement. Equally, it is not a requirement with the teaching colleges.

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Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Land Issues

Deputy Steven Matthews: I want to discuss the issue of public rights of way in the country. I expect this is a matter for the Department of Justice but I nonetheless want to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for being here tonight to take this issue.

The background to me raising this, apart from having some experience in dealing with rights of way issues where we have tried to include them in county development plans over the years, is that a case was brought to my attention recently of two hillwalkers in Enniskerry, two elderly, retired and absolute gentlemen, who loved nothing more than walking through many of the walkways and hills of Wicklow. They became involved in a situation where an alleged right of way had been blocked by the landowner. This evolved into a very complex and long court case situation. The case has been decided and has been publicly documented. The two gentlemen will not mind me mentioning their names, which are Mr. Lenoach and Mr. Barry. These are two highly regarded stalwarts of the community in Enniskerry.

They have ended up in a situation where they owe somewhere in the region of €40,000 as a result of this fine. This is a very bizarre case, extremely interesting for any of us who are reading it from the outside, but obviously very harrowing and stressful for the two gentlemen involved. They are not men of means by any manner and this is a huge debt for them to incur at this stage in their lives. I have met with both of them and have discussed the issues around rights of way. It is a very complex part of Irish law, land use law and our Constitution in which we enshrine private land ownership and the rights which go with that. We also know that we are a nation that appreciates and loves our countryside and we have had these walkways in place which people have used for many years such as Mass paths, access to graveyards, and across old country coach roads, etc.

Currently, under our Irish law, we have not really enacted laws to allow us to progress this

and to establish rights of way and how we deal with those contested rights of way. We rely much of the time on old English laws. We have judges trying to interpret old maps, precedent law and the common law system. It is very complex and convoluted.

Our county councils are obliged - we are going through the planning Bill at the moment - to include rights of way in county development plans. I have been at meetings where we tried to put what we thought were rights of way into county development plans, but landowners have come along and said that they have allowed people access to them but they are not rights of way.

We have a situation where we have a very limited number of rights of way going into our county development plans. I hope the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, can take this back to the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, and the Department of Justice. I really feel we need to start a process where we can simplify this, or perhaps oversimplify it because it is such a complex area. We need to start to establish what needs to be in place to prove something is a right of way. We have to protect landowners' rights, because it is not just a matter of people just being able to walk all over people's land, although some people would advocate that. I believe we should uphold the rights of landowners but accommodate these old rights of way. We must try to find a solution to the problem. Hopefully, we can start the process here tonight.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus leis an Teachta. I convey the apologies of my colleague, the Minister for Justice, Deputy Helen McEntee, who regrets she cannot be here for this issue. On behalf of the Minister, I thank Deputy Steven Matthews for raising this important issue and for giving me the opportunity, hopefully, to provide clarity on it.

Deputy Matthews summed it up very well when he said it was a very complex issue. As the Deputy may be aware, responsibility for the legislation for public rights of way sits with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage. However, inquiries with this Department were made and we have been provided with some information on the matters raised.

The Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, legislates that it is a matter for the relevant planning authority to consider where there is a need for a public right of way. The relevant planning authority may enter into discussion with the relevant landowners under section 206 of the Act in order to achieve the creation of a public right of way by agreement. If an agreement cannot be reached, where it appears to the planning authority that there is need for a public right of way over any land, the planning authority may, by resolution, make an order creating a public right of way over the land in accordance with section 207 of the Act. The planning authority must follow the process prescribed under section 207 of the Act.

The process under section 207 of the Act is a reserved function of the elected members of the relevant planning authority and a process in which the Minister for Justice has no function. The decision to create a compulsory right of way by a planning authority may be appealed to An Bord Pleanála in accordance with section 207(5) of the Act within four weeks of being notified of an order under section 207(4) of the Act. It is then a matter for An Bord Pleanála to consider any appeal.

In addition, the Act places responsibility for the maintenance of public rights of way directly with local authorities, by requiring them to preserve existing public rights of way through mapping and listing them as part of their development plans.

Section 10(2)(o) of the Act requires that all development plans include objectives for:

... the preservation of public rights of way which give access to seashore, mountain, lakeshore, riverbank or other places of natural beauty or recreational utility, which public rights of way shall be identified both by marking them on at least one of the maps forming part of the development plan and by indicating their location on a list appended to the development plan, ...

The “permissive access mechanism” described in Circular Letter PL 5/2015 can complement the statutory development plan objective and can deliver an integrated approach to combining agreed ways and trails with public rights of way statutorily defined in the plan. The overall combined approach, providing an inventory of permissive access routes in addition to rights of way, represents a best practice approach.

I have been further informed that there are no substantive changes to provisions in the draft Planning and Development Bill 2023 pertaining to public rights of way compared to the provisions in the current Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which I referred to. As the Deputy knows, that other Bill is currently on Committee Stage.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the Minister of State for the response. Having spent nine weeks and 126 hours so far in the basement dealing with the new Planning and Developing Bill, I believe that many of those sections referred to by the Minister of State will no longer be relevant because of the new section numbers of the Bill. I take the Minister of State’s point on this. I have been through county development plan meetings where we had what we thought were rights of way but these are contested. It is when the landowner comes back that there is the issue.

I accept what the Minister of State said about the development plan and that the local authority has the responsibility for setting out in the development plan where the public rights of way are but we need to go a step back before that. The issue is where these are contested. This probably comes under the Department of Justice, and this concerns my suggestion as well. The ones that are not contested go into the county development plan. There is that whole process of appeals. One can appeal to the board, etc., and the members pass the resolution. However, it goes back to before that.

I have suggestions I would like to put to the Minister. These are to bring in primary Irish legislation to define and protect public rights of way so councils have a clear definition of what constitutes a public right of way. The legislation needs to provide for disputed routes to be referred probably for arbitration. I am thinking of something like a commission with a judge to chair it, where we look at contested rights of way around the country and where, once and for all, we can finally define a public right of way and prove it is a public right of way.

In the case of Mr. Lenoach and Mr. Barry in Enniskerry, they provided a map, dating back to the 1700s, of an old coach road. Bizarrely, that case never concluded that it was a public right of way. What the judge decided was that the two gentlemen could no longer walk it but the Minister of State or I could. That just highlights the complexity of this. We need to put something in place to deal with these contested rights of way.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy has made a very important point in talking about disputed routes. Two weeks ago, I was in Cashel to launch the St. Declan’s Way walk. It is another part of the strategic plan. It is the most fantastic walk between Cashel and Ardmore.

What struck me on that walk was the number of landowners who were present, who had engaged and who had made the walk the success it was. There was funding from the Department of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, the LEADER programme, the local authorities, loads of volunteers and a committee set up, but it could never have happened without the landowners engaging. This was an old traditional, religious walk that was there many years ago, passing through Mount Melleray, in Waterford, that the monks used to walk. More than 4,000 people walked it last year.

To add to the Deputy's point, when we talk about disputed routes, I think that is the only time we hear any issues around it. People love walking. They love getting out. We have greenways now throughout the country, which is fantastic to see.

I reiterate the fact the local authorities have sufficient powers under planning legislation for the creation of rights of way. Sometimes, however, when these particular rights of way are forced, it can end up with neighbours falling out with neighbours, and that is the last thing you want. I will certainly take on board the points the Deputy made about the possibility of some form of arbitration. He is speaking specifically about disputed routes. I am sorry those two gentlemen he met had that negative experience.

Road Projects

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This has been a saga for the people of Lehenaghmore and Lehenagh Beg. To give the Minister of State some context, since she might not be familiar with the locality, this is an area just south of the link road in Cork city. Hundreds upon hundreds of houses have been built there in recent years but, effectively, it is an island. It is within walking distance of Ballyphehane and Togher but, because there are no footpaths, you would be taking your life into your hands going out onto the road. There is inadequate public lighting there as well, but the lack of infrastructure there reflects the worst excesses of Celtic tiger planning. All the houses went up and none of the infrastructure went in. So many people would love to be able to walk down to the shops. There are children who would like to be able to walk down to their friends. There are people who might like to cycle there. It is an absolute disaster. It is challenging for motorists as well. Fundamentally, at the minute, it is unsafe.

It is a large enough community at this stage but, unfortunately, they have seen an awful lot of frustration in recent years. This is fundamentally about footpaths, and while there is a substantial scheme, because of the way in which the road is congested, it is difficult to put in footpaths, much as I might like that to be possible. The scheme was first promised in 2008 or 2009 to the residents living there and it has gone on and on, and each deadline seems to be missed. That is causing huge frustration among residents. I recall that even after this had gone to planning - the initial application has cleared planning for three years now - I was given a timeline of quarter 1 of 2022 for publication of the CPO, quarter 2 of 2022 for the tender for construction contract and quarter 3 of 2022 for commencement of construction. We are a long way beyond that.

The CPO was appealed to An Bord Pleanála. I understand that while it has not been heard by An Bord Pleanála, the council has progressed with dealing with the individual property owners and hope to wrap that up to be in a position to proceed without the CPO. Where central government comes in, because a lot of this happens at the local authority level, is that, this year, €450,000, as I understand it, was allocated under the NTA's travel funding. Two years ago, €1.9

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million was allocated for the same scheme. Obviously, that could not be spent because of the difficulties with CPO, An Bord Pleanála and all the rest of it, but there was an awful lot more committed at that stage. My concern is that if it is possible that the council is in a position to proceed without an An Bord Pleanála hearing, and I hope it will be, the funding that is allocated this year will not be sufficient to deliver a large amount of progress this year.

This is a shovel-ready project once the go-ahead is given. The design and all the rest of it are ready to go. The need is profound and urgent. It is in the interests of everyone, as I said, including motorists, cyclists and pedestrians. It is about allowing this community to link in with its neighbours, and that is not a lot to ask. It is very much about safety.

I hope the Minister of State can give me an update. I also hope she will take back to the Minister my request that if an additional application for funding comes forth, it will be considered.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Department of Transport has responsibility for the provision of funding and setting of policy on transport issues, including active travel. The National Transport Authority has responsibility for the allocation of funding to projects at local authority level and works with the local authorities to ensure delivery of same.

The Deputy will be aware that a significant increase in funding has been allocated to walking and cycling infrastructure projects in recent years, following a commitment of approximately €360 million per annum in the programme for Government across this Government's lifetime. The NTA's active travel programme receives most of this funding each year, with around €290 million allocated through that agency across all local authorities in 2024. The years 2022 and 2023 saw full allocation spend by local authorities, with €310 million and €340 million, respectively, invested in active travel. This was only made possible through the increase in the capacity of local authorities through the provision of funding for dedicated active travel staffing by the Department of Transport.

A consequence of the recent success of the programme is that there is a huge pipeline of projects to be funded, including a significant number reaching the aforementioned high-cost construction stage. As such, the programme is moving into a so-called project prioritisation stage, whereby funding will be allocated to projects which should see the greatest impact in terms of modal shift away from private car use. The process of identifying such projects is undertaken by the NTA in collaboration with the relevant local authorities.

Walking and cycling projects are funded across the Cork City Council area through allocations from the NTA's active travel infrastructure programme. As with all local authorities, funding allocation is based on demand, user need and project phase. Typically, projects at an early stage in development, such as concept development, will have a lower allocation need than projects that are at or approaching construction phase.

To get down to the nub of the Deputy's question, Cork City Council has received funding allocation of just over €29 million this year, of which €950,000 has been allocated to the Lehenaghmore improvement scheme. Cork City Council plans to carry out a road widening and enhancement project to serve the needs of residents and businesses in the Lehenaghmore and Togher area of Cork city. The project aims to upgrade the L2455 and L2454 roads. The scheme will provide road enhancements consistent with the urban nature of the area and the evolving transport demands of its residents and employment centres. The Lehenaghmore Road

active travel improvement scheme overall is approximately 2.6 km in length. The proposed works will include road realignment, road widening, signalisation of the Forge Hill junction, a new mini roundabout at Barrett's junction, with associated pedestrian crossing, public transport shelters and bays, new footpath construction, new cycle facility construction, road reconstruction and resurfacing, services diversions, a new surface water drainage system, new road lighting, new boundary treatments, retaining walls, embankments, accommodation works, new hard and soft landscaping, new road signage and street furniture. It is quite a big project.

A 4 m-wide pedestrian and cycle bridge is proposed on the outbound-eastern side of the old Bandon railway bridge. The new bridge will run parallel to the existing stone bridge, but it will not impact on the existing bridge. In addition, the proposed development has been screened to determine whether an environmental impact assessment is required, and it has been concluded that there will be no real likelihood of significant effects on the environment arising from the proposed development and an environmental impact assessment is not required. Cork City Council accepts these findings.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank the Minister of State. It is a substantial scheme; there is no question about that. The Minister of State can imagine the situation for a resident who, fundamentally, just wanted footpaths and to be able to walk to the shops and to Togher or Ballyphehane. They would have liked progress to be made an awful lot more quickly. As good as the scheme may eventually be, this still impacts their day-to-day quality of life and will continue to do so until it is developed.

I note the response states €950,000 has been allocated. That is a bit different from a parliamentary question I saw on the Dáil website but perhaps it is under two schemes or something like that. It is a bit more than I had realised. I welcome that. It is still only about half of what was allocated in 2022. I am still a bit concerned. I hope that the Minister of State might take back that this is very shovel-ready. If there are other projects under these travel funds throughout the State that are ready to go further, faster, that funding should be reallocated. This project has been waiting long enough.

I note it is potentially holding up access to public transport as well. The bus travels up most of the Lehenaghbeg side of the hill. It is a kind of horseshoe-shaped road. It cannot go past the junction and down Lehenaghmore. The NTA told me in correspondence, referring to the road scheme, that when the scheme is complete, it will be possible to extend bus services to operate along at least part of the L2454, which is the Lehenaghmore side of the road. One option, which the Minister of State discussed, was to include the planned route 4 onto Togher Road, which is broadly the route of the 203 currently. It is something the NTA is actively looking at, which is important to people who currently do not have access to a bus route. A bus cannot currently get past the junction. That is also being held up by this issue. I appreciate the update. I hope it can be progressed soon enough. Will the Minister of State please take on board the point on additional funding?

Deputy Mary Butler: I think the rest of this response will answer some of the Deputy's questions. I thank him for his views on this matter, which is obviously a very important issue to the residents of Lehenaghmore Road and the wider community. The safety of road users, especially vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians, is paramount to the Department of the Minister, Deputy Ryan.

The Lehenaghmore improvement scheme is currently at detailed design and land acquisi-

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tion stage. Cork City Council deemed it necessary to seek a compulsory purchase order to secure the required lands for the scheme as acquisition of these lands through agreement was not possible. An Bord Pleanála has set 22 May as the date for the compulsory purchase order oral hearing. The detailed design stage cannot be concluded without first securing the required lands. If the CPO is approved, the detailed design stage will be finalised and the proposed works will proceed to the construction tender and award stage. Construction is anticipated to commence thereafter. The 2024 funding provision for the Lehenaghmore Road improvement scheme aims to cater for all costs arising in 2024, with subsequent funding to be provided in subsequent years. That may answer the Deputy's question on funding. An Bord Pleanála has set 22 May as the oral hearing for the compulsory purchase order. I hope that will now get movement on that scheme and people will be able to walk in safety, especially older and young people, when trying to access the various roads in that particular area.

Museum Projects

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for taking the question. There seems to be a bit of a Cork contingent here tonight, for a change. I wish to read into the record a statement from the Sinn Féin spokesperson on Gaeilge, the Gaeltacht, arts, culture and heritage, Deputy Ó Snodaigh. It is to do with the scrapping of the *LÉ Eithne*. It states:

Opting to scrap the vessel without even doing a cost-benefit analysis into the alternative of using it as a museum is bad policy-making. Even worse is the fact that this wasn't even discussed with the Minister responsible for our cultural heritage and museums.

It will cost a significant sum of money to scrap the vessel, a cost that would be better put towards developing it as a tourist attraction that could recoup money by drawing tourists from far and wide, generating investment and creating jobs locally. This could form a must-see draw in Cork's tourist offering, similar to Naval museums in other countries, while also complementing the other maritime museums/exhibits across Ireland such as in Dún Laoghaire, Belfast, etc.

Other cities spend millions building replicas of ships to showcase their maritime history. We don't have to start from scratch, we have a stellar example of Irish shipbuilding and naval excellence in our hands, ready to be used to tell our island nation's naval story, if we would only take the chance.

It would be a disappointing waste to dispose of the *LÉ Eithne* for good.

My uncle served as chief petty officer on the *LÉ Deirdre*. I also have cousins in the navy, as well as cousins who are retired from it. I wanted to raise this issue because of the potential for tourism. We have always said that 0.1 of an investment gets fourfold back. The vessel is there. We have the harbour. We are trying to promote tourism. Spike Island is down there and liners come in at Cobh. This would be an amazing testament to the shipbuilders because this ship was built in Verolme dockyard. The amount of history there is a testament to our shipbuilders and the crews who sailed on the ship. As mentioned in the statement, on top of that is the possibility of jobs. We are also promoting our proud history. It would be an amazing testament to mark that for the people who were involved throughout the history of the ship.

I know it costs a lot of money to scrap these ships. When the Naval Service has to buy a

ship, it is extortionate money. The latest information is that nearly €16,000 has been spent on just moving the ship from Haulbowline. That is money that could be invested better. The *LÉ Aisling* was sold at public auction in 2017 for €110,000. It was not a good investment to let a ship like that go. That is why I wanted to raise the matter, even just to go back and do a cost-benefit analysis, balancing whether it is worth scrapping this ship and towing it away or making it a museum and having it showcased in Cork, where we are very proud to have that naval base and its history and that of shipbuilding in Cobh. It is a no-brainer to promote that. We already have plenty of liners coming in and we will take many more. We also have the history of the *Titanic* and the Titanic Experience Cobh. This would be one of the best, no-brainer complements to the history of Cork. I am interested to hear what the Minister of State's response will be, even to see the cost-benefit of this in tourism and jobs.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am taking this Topical Issue matter on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence. I thank the Deputy for his statement and interest. In July 2022, the then Minister for Defence accepted the recommendation of the joint civil military working group on decommissioning that the decommissioning and disposal of three Naval Service ships, namely, the *LÉ Eithne*, *LÉ Orla* and *LÉ Ciara*, should be progressed as soon as practicable. In effect, these three ships had reached the end of their working lives and were not in a condition for continued operations.

As the Deputy is aware, *LÉ Eithne* was originally constructed in Verolme Dockyard in Cork and was completed in 1984 as a helicopter patrol vessel. She was the last ship of the Irish Naval Service to have been built in Ireland and, as such, occupies a significant place in Irish maritime history. As flagship of the Naval Service, *LÉ Eithne* was the first Irish Naval Service vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean to North America when, in 1986, she sailed to the United States, visiting Hamilton, New York and Boston. She has since gone on to cross the Atlantic several times. In 2006, she travelled to Argentina, marking the first deployment of an Irish Naval Service vessel to the southern hemisphere. The ship participated in events in Buenos Aires to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of Admiral William Brown, considered the father of the Argentine navy. In addition to her diplomatic missions, in May 2015, *LÉ Eithne* was the first Irish ship to deploy on Operation Pontus, a humanitarian rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea. *LÉ Eithne* was involved in 22 rescue operations, rescuing in the region of 3,376 migrants during this operation. *LÉ Eithne* was also used to assist in our national response to the Covid-19 pandemic when she was deployed to Cork city in 2020 in support of Operation Fortitude acting as a forward logistics base and training platform in support of the HSE. The primary day-to-day task of the *LÉ Eithne* was to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the European Union. She undertook thousands of fisheries patrol days over the course of her service. Like all Naval Service vessels, *LÉ Eithne* was multi-tasked and also had the ability to undertake general surveillance, search and rescue, diving operations, drugs interdiction and other duties while conducting her primary day-to-day task of providing a fishery protection service.

A number of disposal options were considered for *LÉ Eithne*, including the possible donation of the former flagship as a museum piece or tourist attraction; the disposal by recycling at an EU approved ship recycling facility; or disposal by way of sale at public auction. A number of organisations, including Dublin Port and the local authorities in Cork and Limerick indicated their interest in taking *LÉ Eithne* as a museum piece or tourist attraction following her decommissioning in 2022. Officials from the Department of Defence and the Naval Service engaged extensively with these interested parties but following, in some cases lengthy, discussions and

inspections, all these parties withdrew their interest in taking the ship. Dublin Port commissioned two reports in addition to a ship survey looking at the feasibility of taking *LÉ Eithne* as a historic museum ship in Dublin Port. However, Dublin Port subsequently withdrew its interest in taking the vessel.

When, despite the best efforts of all involved, it was not possible to identify an alternative use for *LÉ Eithne* post-decommissioning, the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence decided that the vessel should be disposed of by recycling it in an environmentally sound manner, along with two other decommissioned Naval Service vessels, *LÉ Ciara* and *LÉ Orla*. Recycling the ships gives certainty on the ultimate destination of the vessels and deals with them finally in an environmental manner in line with Government and EU policy.

Deputy Pat Buckley: It is interesting. Listening to the first half of the Minister of State's response, I thought it was brilliant that she outlined the whole history of the *LÉ Eithne* for me. We will lose all of that. I am disappointed by the fact that the contracts have been signed, but contracts can be pulled. I will go to both Ministers who are responsible because, as I said, the amount of history attached to this boat and the harbours can be seen in the first half of the Minister of State's response. I cannot believe that the councils were not interested. There must have been money involved, but surely a State agency, such as the Defence Forces or Naval Service could do something. It is an absolute travesty that we will lose such an historic part of our culture and our proud peacekeeping missions. The Minister of State named so many places, that it was the first ship to sail across X, Y and Z and spoke about all the humanitarian stuff. I am stumped for words and I am not stumped very often.

The second half of the Minister of State's reply states that the likes of Dublin Port and others were not interested. I still make the assumption that the Irish Government should invest money in this. It belongs to the Irish people. The history belongs to the Irish people. It is a massive mistake when you have so much potential in the story, the history and the location it is in, that this resource would just be signed off under a contract, towed away to Belgium and scrapped and that should be the end of it. Perhaps in another 100 years when the centenary of the scrapping of the ships comes, we will read about it. I thank the Minister of State for the answer. We do not always get the proper answer. I will still follow up with the Tánaiste and Minister to see whether there is any way of reversing this because it would be a wonderful asset.

Deputy Mary Butler: To reiterate, a number of organisations, including Dublin Port and the local authorities in Cork and Limerick indicated their interest in taking the *LÉ Eithne* as a museum piece or a tourist attraction, following her decommissioning in 2022. However, despite extensive engagements and lengthy discussions and inspections all these parties withdrew. Dublin Port commissioned two reports in addition to a ship survey. A decision has been made that the ship will be decommissioned.

Earlier in 2024, following a competitive process, officials from the Department of Defence signed a contract with a Belgian company, Galloo, to recycle the three ships. This company is contracted to remove the ships from Cork harbour and tow them to the ship breakdown yard in Ghent, Belgium for recycling in line with the EU ship recycling regulation. The company is on the EU list of approved ship recycling facilities so we can be confident that it will deal with the ships appropriately in an environmentally friendly manner. Preparatory work has been done on the ships in Doyle Shipping Group's dockyard in Cork in advance of recycling. Final preparations are under way and it is planned that the ships will be towed to Belgium in the coming weeks, weather permitting.

I understand the Deputy's disappointment. My understanding is that every effort was made was to try to find a lasting home for the *LÉ Eithne*. As the Deputy stated correctly, the *LÉ Eithne* has a proud history. I am here to respond to the Topical Issue on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence and that is the answer that is set out in front of me.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Butler: However, I will relay the Deputy's disappointment.

Customs and Excise

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the office of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue and the Minister of State for being here this evening.

The Port of Cork plays a key strategic role in the economic life and development of the south and south-west regions. It is recognised as a port of national significance, tier 1. It is the Government's position that these ports are considered to be of national significance and must be capable of the type of port capacity required to ensure continued access to both regional and global markets for the trading economy. Indecon estimated the overall value of trade handled by the Port of Cork, based on modelling for 2012, 2023 and 2033 at €13.9 billion in 2012, growing to almost €28.7 billion in 2033. This supports 170,000 full time equivalent jobs, which will be doubled by 2033.

A border control post, BCP, is a designated entry point to the European Union market through which consignments of food, food contact materials, animals, feed and plants that are subject to increased import controls must enter the European Union. These import controls are carried out to protect animal and public health and animal welfare. These requirements include additional documentation and prior notification before arrival of the food to Ireland. They must enter Ireland through a specific entry point which is the border control post. All such products must be accompanied by a health certificate issued at origin and supported by a common veterinary entry document. There is a range currently of LoLo services operating between the European Union, the UK trans-shipment ports and the Port of Cork. Containers currently transiting through Dublin, therefore, could use feeder routings to Cork. A BCP in Cork could be an alternative, contingency and overflow facility should congestion arise at Dublin Port or Rosslare.

The construction of a new direct container service between Cork and the United States by Independent Container Line, ICL, would increase the number of boxes that would benefit from a control post in Cork. More than 2,000 containers have the potential to be examined at the Port of Cork and discussions with ICL support this estimate. New businesses that require BCP support face increased costs in trying to establish in Cork.

I am sure the Minister of State will be interested in the following point. More than 166 tonnes of pollutant emissions could be avoided if a BCP in Cork handled 2,000 diverted containers annually. Under current conditions, cargos of melons for instance coming to Cork from the Americas cannot be unloaded in the Port of Cork as they need to be checked at a designated BCP. As a result, the same cargo must go to Southampton, before being transferred onto another ship bound for Dublin. These are perishable goods so time is of the essence to get them off ships and onto the shelves. The reduction in the cost and time in delivering containers to companies now results in an additional cost of approximately €4,000 per container. Higher shipping

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costs have a negative impact on the consumer with higher end-user or purchasing prices. I ask the Minister of State in the short term to agree to the Port of Cork's request for a temporary derogation to be granted to customers upon application to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The derogation should last for a specific period of three to six months to allow the import of goods without disruption as many goods requiring BCP inspection are essential.

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A temporary derogation would offer the Port of Cork increased flexibility that would encourage importers to use Cork. Therefore, the goods would land in Cork, be transported to Dublin in the interim and be inspected there.

In the long-term, the Port of Cork sees the construction of a permanent fixed border control post situated at the Ringaskiddy base as the ultimate solution. I am interested in the Minister of State's response to this. It is good for business, the country and the consumer. It is good for emissions and pollution. It saves time and ensures that the product that is perishable lands in a timely fashion.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Senator Pippa Hackett): I thank Deputy Stanton for the opportunity to discuss the border control post designation at the Port of Cork. I am taking this on behalf of my ministerial colleague, the Minister, Deputy McConalogue.

Currently, Cork Port is a designated border control post for container shipments of wood and wood products only. Inspections of these products take place at the Tivoli container terminal near Cork city. I am advised that it is not possible at present to use this port as an entry point of regulated food products. I understand, however, that my Department has been assessing the feasibility of a limited derogation for certain seasonal low-risk commodities where there is legislative scope to enter outside of a border control post. A temporary derogation to use Cork Port for the import of melons for the 2024 season has been approved by my Department, with communication to stakeholders of the requirements and procedures issued recently. This will hopefully act as a much-needed trade facilitation measure for industry, helping to reduce freight costs and improve the shelf life of produce. However, it should be noted that outside of this temporary derogation, the physical infrastructure required for handling bulk wood products and that required for handling food products is very different.

Between 2015 and 2018, a number of meetings took place between my Department and the Port of Cork. I understand that in December 2018, the port authority advised that it did not intend to pursue the building of a border control post at that time, although it would consider doing so as a second phase of the development. The port authority has since submitted a business case for the building of a border control post that is capable of handling food product. Under the Union customs code, a border control post must be located in a customs-controlled area, necessitating consideration of any business case in this regard to be conducted in consultation with the Revenue Commissioners.

In recent years, following the Brexit referendum and the consequent increased volume of sanitary and phytosanitary official controls, my Department has managed a substantial expansion of our border control infrastructure to meet this demand. This involved a very considerable expansion of border control post infrastructure at Dublin Port, as well as the building of an interim facility at Rosslare Port. Construction of a permanent facility at Rosslare Europort

is under way. Border control posts must also be developed, approved and operated in adherence with European regulations. Any change in the designation of Cork Port would ultimately require the endorsement of the Commission.

In determining if a location is viable for the establishment of a border control post, broad consideration and analysis must take place, including an assessment of both the need and the projected economic benefits of same. Consideration must be given to the costs of the establishment of the border control post as well as the longer-term running costs. Further regard must be given to the potential impact on our existing border control posts. A full border control post would also require close collaboration and co-ordination between my Department, Revenue and the HSE. The issue of whether an additional border control post might be required in the Port of Cork remains under consideration. Officials from my Department continue to analyse the requirements for this facility.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State for a very positive response. I welcome the fact that the derogation has been granted temporarily in recent days for the import of melons, which I also mentioned in my presentation earlier. I also welcome the fact that it remains under consideration. I urge the Minister of State to deepen that consideration and make it viable.

I understand that the cost of building a customs inspection facility is approximately €1 million and the cost of kitting it out is approximately €500,000. The total budget comes to roughly €3.5 million, which is not huge in the overall context when we bear in mind the actual benefits to the country as a whole. Cork has a catchment area that represents a large and strategically important part of the State's population and economic base. Almost two thirds of the port's customers are located in Cork while more than 70% are in the south-west region and 92% are in Munster. This has important implications in terms of the requirements of the port capacity to serve this catchment area.

Gross output in the manufacturing industry located in Cork city and county represents more than one third of output across the State as a whole. Cork Port is, therefore, already a very important economic facility for our country. If it had this border control post, it could add to the services provided. As I said, the emissions would be reduced. Cork itself would become more attractive. Even though we have extensions and expansions in Dublin and Rosslare - I understand there is also work going on in Belfast - very often we may see congestion there. Having a border control post in Cork would actually help as well in that regard. There are, therefore, considerable strong arguments for examining this presentation further.

I welcome the fact that the Minister said both now and last January when I first raised this matter that it remains under consideration. However, I ask the Minister of State this evening to ensure that it goes beyond consideration and that people roll up their sleeves and continue the good work they are doing to ensure a border control post is put in position in Cork.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Senator Pippa Hackett): I thank the Deputy for those comments. I accept what he is saying. It is not a terribly large cost if it is €3.5 million. Again, however, that business case has been submitted. I am not sure of the status of that. I can certainly bring that back to the Minister, Deputy McConalogue.

As the Deputy said, Cork Port is an incredibly busy and strategically important port for

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Ireland and for trade. I do not know, but there may be further opportunities for other temporary derogations in the meantime. Certainly, however, there is continued interaction between my Department and the Port of Cork. Taking into account of those considerations in terms of the impacts on other border control posts and the cost implications, etc., those engagements need to continue. It would be good to come to some sort of answer sooner rather than later. I have been informed that officials from my Department will gladly receive any new information that the Port of Cork may well have gathered that might feed into that business case consideration. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.07 p.m. go dtí 9.10 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 17 Aibreán 2024.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.07 p.m. until 9.10 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 April 2024.