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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 18 Meitheamh 2024

Tuesday, 18 June 2024

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to announce for the information of the House that four Members of the Dáil have been elected to the European Parliament, namely, Deputies Barry Cowen, Kathleen Funchion, Michael McNamara and Aodhán Ó Ríordáin. Pursuant to the European Parliament Elections Act, the Deputies will cease to be Members of the Dáil when they take up their seats at the first sitting of the European Parliament, which is likely to be on 16 July. Accordingly, vacancies will then exist in the following constituencies: Laois-Offaly, Carlow-Kilkenny, Clare and Dublin Bay North.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We have an epidemic of domestic violence. This morning, Women's Aid reports that last year it received its highest level of domestic abuse disclosures in its 50-year history. The figures cited in the organisation's impact report are frightening, with more than 40,000 disclosures of abuse against women and children made in 2023. That is a jump of 18% on the previous year. Reports of physical abuse increased by 74% and economic abuse increased by 87%.

Emotional and sexual abuse and the scourge of coercive control are the lived experience of far too many women. The report details the horrific violence that women experience at the hands of partners or ex-partners: attacks with weapons; sexual assaults; threats against their lives and the lives of children; persistent surveillance; and the control of household and family finances. The consequences for women and children can be catastrophic - mental health crisis, exhaustion and burnout, poverty, homelessness and even miscarriage. The awful reality of women being beaten up, sexually assaulted, physically, mentally and emotionally manipulated and coercively controlled happens behind closed doors. It happens in the place where a woman should be safest, in her home. Some 266 women have died violently in Ireland since 1996. The majority were killed in their own home and of the resolved cases, half were killed by someone

they knew. Behind every statistic is a real person and a real life. Domestic violence is not that far from any of us. It can be family, friends, a neighbour or a work colleague. It could be someone close who might be so overwhelmed by fear that they cannot speak up.

The findings of the Women's Aid report demand that the Government respond with a level of urgency, pace and ambition to match the scale of the crisis we face. The third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence must be fully resourced. The Ombudsman for Children must be granted funding to participate in the strategy. The establishment of the dedicated agency on domestic violence is welcome but it must be made fit for purpose and have the autonomy to address the crisis effectively. We need an all-of-society approach to combating domestic violence. We need positive societal change at every level.

As an immediate step, the Government must now solve the deficit in the provision of shelters. The State has failed to meet its refuge provision obligations under the Istanbul Convention. Nine counties still have no shelters, meaning that women and children desperately seeking escape end up staying in or returning to violent and abusive homes.

Domestic abuse service providers have been underfunded for decades. Now is the time for strategy and investment to turn the tide to ensure that women and children fleeing domestic violence have access to refuge and the wraparound supports they need. Leagann tuarascáil Women's Aid amach an méid foréigin teaghlaigh atá ann. Ní mór don Rialtas gníomhartha a thabhairt chun cinn chun aghaidh a thabhairt air seo go práinneach. Does the Taoiseach accept that the findings of the Women's Aid report highlight the need to ramp up the Government's response to domestic violence? Will the Government introduce an emergency action plan to deliver shelters in the nine counties where there is none currently?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy McDonald for raising this extraordinarily important issue. Before I answer her directly, may I acknowledge the fact that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has made the decision to step down as leader of the Green Party? Obviously, he has played a major leadership role in this coalition, and I want to acknowledge that. He is an honest, sincere, dedicated and decent politician. He is a person of substance and a person who has had a positive impact on Irish politics and I fully respect and understand his reasons. I just want to wish him well.

The answer to Deputy McDonald's question is "Yes". We absolutely want to continue doing more in this area. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is leading the very significant whole-of-government – and, I hope and believe, whole-of-society – response that Deputy McDonald rightly called for in this regard. The Women's Aid report makes for stark reading. The findings of the report are, quite frankly, appalling. There is no place in Irish society for violence against women or, indeed, violence against anyone. I want to reassure anyone who is a victim or is at risk of domestic or sexual abuse that help continues to be available. I urge anyone who is in fear or danger due to domestic abuse or any crime to please contact gardaí as soon as can be done safely. I will get into the specific issues. There are challenges and a need to do more, but I never want to accidentally put out a message that people cannot seek help in the here and now. If people are in danger right now, all of us in the House would urge them to seek the support of the Garda and others as soon as they can do so safely.

We have taken a number of steps aimed at protecting women against such abuse. We have shown that combating all forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a priority. This has been reflected in a whole range of actions. For example, we saw the establishment

earlier this year by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, of Cuan, our statutory domestic, sexual and gender-based violence agency. This is now tasked with co-ordinating and driving the full implementation of our zero-tolerance strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

The 2024 plan for the strategy has a number of very specific actions. It commits to exploring models for the delivery of domestic violence refuge accommodation and identifying opportunities to accelerate delivery to meet this target. I want to absolutely assure the Deputy and, more importantly, the women and people of Ireland that we are looking at how we can accelerate further delivery of refuge spaces, particularly in the areas where there is a deficit. The 2024 implementation plan sets out a number of deliverables on refuge spaces by the end of the year. Active planning and engagement are under way on the delivery of 150 additional family refuge units. There is the delivery of eight new family refuge units, ensuring that 25 additional family refuge units are now under construction as well. We are commencing the publication of quarterly reports on progress towards doubling the number of refuge spaces over the lifetime of the strategy, with an accessible tracking mechanism so that we can all collectively monitor the progress that we want to make. The development of the first 36 refuge units in Wexford, Dundalk and Navan is currently under way, with Wexford expected to be operational by September. In addition, 17 more safe homes were delivered last year and 13 more safe homes are expected to be delivered by the end of this year.

Of course, refuge space is a major issue that we are addressing through the strategy and the new agency but, in addition to that, there are also new laws. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has introduced legislation that creates new stand-alone offences of non-fatal strangulation and stalking and has increased the maximum penalty for assault causing harm, one of the most commonly prosecuted domestic violence-related offences, from five years to ten years. We have also seen the highest level of funding provided to service providers working in this area. We will not rest, I know the Deputy will not rest and I know the people of Ireland will not rest until we get to that zero-tolerance destination when it comes to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. That is something we can all be united on in this House. We are eager to work with anybody on any side of the House to make progress in this area.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I think we can all agree that the zero-tolerance culture and reality is one that we strive for across Irish society. However, it is important to acknowledge that we have very significant ground to make up and that for far, far too long, this issue did not have the kind of political priority or social priority that it so rightly deserves. The funding for services is inadequate. The Taoiseach cited an increase. I invite him, on this day when we hear of the highest level of reports to Women's Aid in its 50-year history, to go back to the drawing board and to stress-test what is necessary for these incredible services that save lives, and save women and children, so they are properly and adequately resourced. He should check, see and talk to the sector, and he will find that that is not the case now. As we speak, Roscommon, Carlow, Cavan, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Monaghan, Offaly and Sligo have no refuge provision. That is the current position. I would like a commitment and a timeline from the Taoiseach as to when those nine counties will have refuge provision. Can he give us that date and timeline today?

The Taoiseach: First, I agree with the Deputy that this was not a social or a national priority in all aspects of life, including in politics, until those like the Minister, Deputy McEntee, prioritised the issue. We have now seen this become an absolute priority. We have taken very significant assignments of responsibility and decisions within Government to say the Minister, Deputy McEntee, now co-ordinates across all of Government in relation to domestic, sexual

and gender-based violence because every Department has a role to play. I assure Deputy McDonald, as I know the sector would, that the level of engagement we have with the sector and with the service providers - the people the Deputy rightly identifies as those who are saving lives and doing incredible work - is intense, frequent and regular, as it should be. The level of funding to service providers has risen from about €20 million a year to about €59 million a year and I am committing on the floor of the Dáil that it will rise again.

With regard to refuge spaces, I will send a breakdown note to the Deputy on how we intend to address the issues. There is a plan to double the number of refuge places to 280. We have tasked Cuan specifically with publishing a quarterly tracking report in relation to how we are going to make progress on that for all to see.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I begin by acknowledging the resignation of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, as leader of the Green Party. I wish Eamon and his family well on this momentous personal decision. I also wish Eamon's colleagues in the Green Party well. I acknowledge his immense contribution to public service and environmentalism.

Without a functioning planning system, we have no hope of achieving our climate targets or housing targets. The Planning and Development Bill, which was heralded by the Government as the solution to chaos in the planning system, is, in its current form, incapable of resolving those problems and there is ample evidence that it will make matters worse. I know the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, want to reform the planning system. That is why I am confounded by the almost total opposition to any critique of the planning Bill, whether from the Opposition, environmentalists or the construction industry. Instead, the approach is to ram the Bill through, guillotining debate, offering just days to consider hundreds of amendments and relying on unspecified legal advice where legitimate concerns are raised.

In the *Irish Examiner* yesterday, Attracta Uí Bhroin of the Environmental Law Ireland group recalled the housing Minister's commitment just in April that the planning Bill would be enacted before the summer recess "come hell or high water". Many of us would venture that the Bill, if passed in its current form, would bring about a sort of planning hell and a flood of delays. Even though the Bill is being delayed beyond the summer, despite what the Minister said, we saw debate guillotined last week, with many amendments not reached, including my own, and it seems it will be passing through the Seanad with similar undue haste.

The Taoiseach is likely to say in response that we in opposition are always calling for faster delivery of homes and this Bill is one way to ensure that. It is true that we want to see action, we want to see delivery and we want to see the homes that our communities need being built. However, this legislation, far from facilitating more building, in our view, risks taking our beleaguered planning system and damaging it even more. For example, I have watched the housing Minister - we all have - say time and again that the Bill is compliant with the Aarhus Convention, the international agreement that protects the right to public participation. Most recently, last week, this assertion was made more than 24 hours after the office of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, was warned by the UN's Aarhus Convention compliance committee that this was not the case, and the Bill was not compliant. Nevertheless, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, proceeded and we saw the guillotine imposed on the debate last week. When that guillotine took effect, numerous outstanding Opposition and indeed Government amendments had not been debated, including my own amendments, as I have said. The Government amendments, unscrutinised, were automatically incorporated into the flawed Bill, and that is really disappointing. We have seen so much work go into this massive Bill, only to see it passed in such a hasty fashion and

without the opportunity to scrutinise these legitimate concerns.

Does the Taoiseach accept that the manner in which the Bill was passed through this House was reckless? Will he change tack in its process through the Seanad, and can he clarify whether the Government was on notice of the warning that the Bill was not Aarhus-compliant, when assertions were made to the contrary by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, last week?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Bacik for the question and for acknowledging the role the Minister, Deputy Ryan, has played as a leader of his party. I am very conscious that he intends to continue in office, and that is a matter for the soon-to-be new leader of the Green Party in due course, but also continuing to serve his constituents in the Deputy's own constituency until the next election. He is a politician of substance and impact and I know we all understand and respect his decision.

With regard to this very important issue around planning, I accept everybody has largely engaged in good faith on this. I do not believe the Bill has been rushed though. I genuinely do not. The Deputy has indicated what some of my response is going to be already so I will not say that, in the interests of saving time. This legislation has had massive and lengthy consideration, as it should, at the Oireachtas committee.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Not in this Chamber.

The Taoiseach: The committee, chaired by Deputy Steven Matthews, who is here with us, had about 120 hours worth of hearings on Committee Stage. That is extraordinarily significant and for people watching this debate and Leaders' Questions, that is quite an unusual length of time on Committee Stage, as it should be with respect to getting this right.

The Planning and Development Bill 2023 did complete all Stages in this House, as Deputies know, on 12 June, and it will now begin its passage through Seanad Éireann. I understand it is scheduled to begin in the Seanad on 27 June. Obviously, the timing of this is a matter for the Oireachtas and I know the Seanad will want to give this issue due consideration and tease through various issues as well. We have amended the Bill to deal with spurious planning submissions and appeals. I think that is important. Statutory declarations must be submitted with all submissions or objections on planning applications, appeals and judicial reviews stating that they are not being done for the purpose of delaying a development or for receiving a payment. There is also a ban on requesting a payment for not opposing a development.

I will have to check exactly what the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, found out because I do not know the answer to the Deputy's specific question but my understanding is the Minister is aware of the draft compliance report from the Aarhus Convention compliance committee and its comments on the Bill. The Bill was drafted to ensure compliance with the convention and of course the Minister is consulting with the Attorney General on the matter. My understanding is that the Minister is satisfied that the Bill was drafted to ensure full compliance with the Aarhus Convention. Of course, there will be an opportunity to engage with the Office of the Attorney General and, no doubt, this is something that will be scrutinised further in the Seanad.

It is always a balance when it comes to legislation, and how long you give legislation. There is a lots of legislation on lots of different areas waiting to get through this House. I think this Bill received a lot of time in the Dáil and a lot of time at the committee. I think it is now appropriate that it has passed the Dáil and will be considered by the Seanad.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There was extensive consideration on Committee Stage, that is absolutely right, and I commend Deputy Matthews on steering the debate there with such patience and good will. However, there was not ample time in this Chamber to debate it on Report Stage, and that it is the point. More than 800 amendments were tabled on Report Stage and I think we were at about amendment No. 200-and-something when the Bill was guillotined last Wednesday night. None of my amendments were reached. Among the amendments the Labour Party put forward was one to criminalise abuse of the planning process, an amendment we were glad to see the Minister accept. However, with regard to the Minister's own amendment, which was effectively seeking to do the same thing, we had substantive points to raise. That is a really important provision. That provision alone was a criminal provision in a Bill, which had not been before the House. It had not been before the committee at an earlier Stage. It was something which we in the Labour Party had initiated and which we did not have the chance to debate in this House. That is quite a serious matter.

As for the Aarhus Convention matter, of course we will be ventilating these matters through our Labour Party Senators, as will others, but it is simply not good enough for a Bill of this import to be rushed through at such speed, given those two significant issues, which were incapable of being debated in this House.

The Taoiseach: The honest truth is that on any legislative issue, one gets to a point where the point of disagreement is just reached. I can absolutely assure the Deputy that the Minister-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It was not reached.

The Taoiseach: It was reached. I will explain to Deputy Howlin how the point of disagreement was reached. He has been in this House a very long time. The Minister and the Government have been listening to these issues through a whole variety of fora, through consultation, through Committee Stage-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: What about the Dáil?

The Taoiseach: The committee of the Oireachtas is not a residents' association; it is an Oireachtas committee of the Dáil. The Ceann Comhairle can clarify that is where Members of Dáil Éireann can go to tease through legislation. To be clear, the committee is of the Dáil. The only people who can attend it are Members of the Dáil.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: There was a lot of time spent there. The Minister considered the issues. Amendments are tabled on Committee Stage. Quite often, members of the Opposition, as is their right, table the exact same amendment, or a variation of it, on Report Stage. At some point, the Minister, with such lengthy legislation, which is trying to modernise housing planning so we can get things moving in this country, has to decide to press go. That is what we have decided to do. We need to progress this legislation. There are people depending on it for the delivery of major infrastructural projects, renewable energy and homes for our young people. Of course, there will be a further opportunity in Seanad Éireann to consider some of these issues.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: On 18 June 1994, Ireland played Italy in a World Cup match in Giants Stadium. The Irish team astonished the world by defeating the Italians on that day. Most of

the country was immersed in celebrations of that shock result. Loughinisland is a small village in County Down. On 18 June 1994, like practically every small village in the country, people piled into pubs to watch that match. On that night, at 10.10 p.m., two UVF men in boiler suits wielding Kalashnikovs went into that pub and fired 25 shots. Six people were killed and five others were wounded. Mr. Barney Green, 87 years old; Mr. Daniel McCreanor, 59 years old; Mr. Malcolm Jenkinson, 52 years old; Mr. Eamon Byrne, 39 years old; Mr. Patrick O'Hare, 35 years old; and Mr. Adrian Rogan, 34 years old were all murdered simply because they frequented a pub that was normally frequented by Catholics and they were watching a match in which the Republic of Ireland was playing in an international tournament.

Some people may feel this is in the past but the pain, hurt and suffering for those families still goes on today. No one has been held to account for those murders. Victims and the truth seem to be the collateral damage of the British dirty war in Ireland. Mr. Niall Murphy, a solicitor for the victims, has said the victims have been let down to this very day because no one is being held to account for the massacre. He said Mr. Barney Green was the oldest victim of the conflict in the North, yet the PSNI and the NIO forced the dying Ms Bridget Green to fight to her last days through the courts for justice for her dead husband. In the year of 2016, in a police ombudsman report, Dr. Michael Maguire, stated he had no hesitation in saying collusion was a significant feature of the Loughinisland murders. That report found the RUC knew the names of the suspects of the killings within one day of the massacre but delayed arresting them. The police ombudsman report also stated that one of the suspects was being run by the RUC as an informant.

While some may feel this is in the past, this weekend, 1,500 people, dressed in black trousers, white shirts and white ties, marched in a UVF march in east Belfast. These murders are part of a long list of murders of innocent people in the North of Ireland. These murders were carried out either by the help of the British state or at least were covered up by the British state. The British legacy Act, which was passed, was designed to give amnesty to people who carried out murders to stop families getting to the truth of what happened to their loved ones. Thankfully, the Government has brought the British Government to the European Court of Human Rights on that horrendous Act. What progress has been made in the Irish Government's case against the British Government on this issue?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Tóibín for raising this important issue. I join with him in completely condemning what happened in Loughinisland.

I very much agree with them on the point that just because time has passed, it does not mean that issues can be ignored. It does not mean that an approach can be taken to any issue that is not victim centred and is not centred in terms of justice, truth and accountability. I think all parties in this House, and certainly all parties in Northern Ireland, which is a rare event, have rightly come together to condemn and oppose the legacy Act that has been introduced by the British Government. We do not believe it is compliant with agreements that had been reached between the political parties and the governments of Ireland and the UK because we do not believe it is victim centred. It is opposed by every victims' rights group in Northern Ireland and, as I said, it has been opposed by all of the political parties. It represents a significant deviation from the approach that has been taken through a range of agreements over many years. It was with regret that the Irish Government took the decision that it needed to take an interstate case against the United Kingdom. We did not do so lightly and we did not do it without exhausting all the diplomatic and political avenues available to us. We raised this at British-Irish Councils and all the other places one would expect Government and Government representatives to raise

it. However, the mind of the British Government was set and the papers have been lodged.

I do not have my note on it to hand but my understanding is that the court is now, in the first instance, considering the case and its admissibility. It will decide on that and how best to proceed. I am conscious that there is a British election soon and I do not want to cut across that. However, I am also aware that there are different views among political parties in the United Kingdom on this matter. For our part as the Government and I appreciate on this basis, all parties in the Dáil, we will continue to speak out and speak up for victims and survivors and for the need for justice, truth and reconciliation. Any approach to legacy has to be one that has the support of political parties in Northern Ireland. It has to be compliant with human rights law and have the confidence of victims' representative groups and others. We will take every opportunity to continue to make that case. I intend to meet the British Prime Minister after the results of the UK general election. I hope to be in a position to do that in July. This is one of the many issues I wish discuss.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach is correct in saying that the rule of law is a key part of any country being a liberal democracy and a part of the international community. However, there are still key questions in relation to the rule of law in the North of Ireland. June is also the anniversary of the death of Noah Donohoe. Three years ago, Noah Donohoe, a 14-year-old boy, was found dead in a storm drain in Belfast. The PSNI called off the search for Noah within 24 hours of the boy going missing. CCTV footage taken 14 hours before Noah went missing was inexplicably withheld from the family for two years. We have a situation where we are not sure even when the coroner's office received the CCTV footage. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland issued a public interest immunity certificate, which allows for whole chunks of information about the case to be redacted. The Donohoe family have made three complaints to the PSNI ombudsman in relation to the investigation. As the co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement and a supporter of the rule of law, the Irish Government has a role to play in making sure that the family of Noah Donohoe has justice, that at least that the process of justice is delivered properly and by the rule of law. There are major questions as to whether the British Government is delivering justice, truth and fairness in its investigations into the death of Noah Donohoe. I ask the Taoiseach to make representations to the British Government to make sure that is actually happening.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Tóibín for raising the issue of Noah Donohoe and my thoughts are with his family. I am reluctant to talk too much about any individual case. I am conscious of the processes and the independence of the PSNI from political interference as one would expect, just like An Garda Síochána in this jurisdiction. However, I am always happy and eager to hear from families and people who have concerns about how they have been treated regarding our State institutions or in our role as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. I do not want to cut across any specific process other than to say that we, as a Government, will continue to speak up for human rights, for a victim-centred approach to legacy and absolutely for the support of the rule of law. We take very seriously our role as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement and I look forward to having a conversation with the British Government in July about how we can both work together in that constructive partnership approach that is so important to peace on this island and on these islands.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I dtús báire guím gach rath ar Eamon Ryan cibé cén bealach a shiúlann sé anois. Freisin, tugaim aitheantas don méid oibre a rinne sé.

Fillim anois ar cheist na Palaistíne agus an t-ár brúidiúil, marfach atá ar siúl fad is atá muid

i mbun cainte anseo. Rinneamar an cinneadh ceart an mhí seo caite ar an 25 Bealtaine nuair a thugamar aitheantas don stát neamhspleách Stáit na Palaistíne. Is í an cheist anois ná cad iad na céimeanna eile atá le tógáil. Tá práinn le céimeanna eile. I am going to return to the question of Palestine where genocide continues as we sit here peacefully speaking in this Parliament. I say with the greatest of respect to the government of Israel and to the Jewish population that they are carrying out a genocide. We took the right step on 22 May 2024 when we recognised the State of Palestine but, for that decision to have meaning, we now need to take further steps. Clearly, Israel and its army and government is out of control. They simply know no bounds and are not listening to anyone. I say that in the context of the facts today. More than 37,202 Palestinians have been killed with nearly 85,000 Palestinians injured. I also acknowledge that 1,200 Israelis have been reported killed and nearly 5,500 reported injured. Some 17,000 children are now known by a number of letters: wounded child with no surviving family, WCNSF. Some 70,000 units have been destroyed and 1.7 million people in Gaza displaced. The facts are important. It is important to let them out in view of the propaganda and the narrative that is going out from the Israeli ambassador and Israeli spokespeople. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has said that 1 million Gazans face death and starvation by mid-July, while 100% suffer from trauma and depression. Some 8,000 children aged under five have received treatment for severe malnutrition. I could go on with the number of aid workers and journalists who have been killed. What I want to focus on in my last few seconds is to ask the Taoiseach what steps he is going to take to give a reality to the recognition of Palestine as an independent state. The first one, of course, is to stop the travel of American soldiers and arms through Shannon Airport. That is the most basic step we need to take. We need to end the export of dual-use goods, which have increased tenfold in one year. We need to enact the occupied territories Bill. Regarding the EU-Israel association agreement, why have we not acted on that and on the humanitarian clause as a basic step? It is as basic as inspecting the planes going through Shannon Airport. These are basic steps to be taken if we are to give substance to the recognition we gave a few weeks ago to Palestine.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I spoke yesterday to President Biden and I spoke specifically on behalf of Ireland about the importance of an immediate ceasefire. The president agreed that there was a need for a two-state solution. I think he said that in his read-out of the call. My question to everybody is what more can we do to bring about the circumstances where a ceasefire can be achieved because I genuinely believe the first thing that has to happen is a cessation of violence. As recently as yesterday, 17 June, we saw as many as 17 Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes on a refugee camp in central Gaza. I am aware of the reports of yet further strikes on refugee camps. We need an immediate and permanent ceasefire to create the environment in which we can work towards the two-state solution. That is the first thing Ireland continues to do at every international forum at every opportunity with every world leader. We did it again as recently as yesterday.

I also welcome the publication of the report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel. The report asserts that there have been grave violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law. There must be full accountability for all civilian deaths and for all crimes that have been committed. At a time when other countries have not always done so, we will continue to support the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. We have done that through additional funding as well.

Our position on the association agreement at an EU level remains clear. I articulated it

again to a number of European counterparts as recently as yesterday. I will continue to do it next week at the formal European Council. It is unacceptable that a trade agreement that is in place and that has human rights clauses has not been reviewed. That is the position of Ireland and Spain. We continue to try to get support for that at an EU level. There have been some encouraging signs recently with the Belgian Presidency now also calling an association agreement review meeting.

Regarding dual-use goods, Ireland operates a robust framework for regulating the export of dual-use goods. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is the national competent authority. All export licence applications are considered under criteria set out within the relevant dual-use regulations and in line with Ireland's international obligations. We operate a rigorous export control system and will continue to do so. It has been extraordinary that in the past 24 to 48 hours we have seen the decision by Ireland, along with Norway and Spain, to recognise the State of Palestine being used as some sort of peculiar justification - a pathetic justification really - for the illegal settlements on the West Bank and the determination of the Government of Israel to do more in that space. That should tell us that the recognition of the State of Palestine is not seen as something merely symbolic or inconsequential but is actually seen as something quite significant in terms of speaking up and speaking out for the State of Palestine.

We continue to do all we can in every forum we can. I will come back on the occupied territories.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: When the Taoiseach spoke to President Biden yesterday, did he ask him to stop the export of arms that are responsible for the genocide in Palestine? Did he ask him to take action on that? The previous Taoiseach wrote to von der Leyen back in February about the EU-Israel agreement; nothing has happened since. He wrote directly to von der Leyen and there has been no response. Yet this Government will vote for von der Leyen. I understand that Fianna Fáil has a little more sense and might not support her election. However, Fine Gael will support von der Leyen, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Netanyahu who, along with his government, is now the subject of the International Criminal Court inquiry into a plausible case of genocide. There is an arrest warrant sought for Netanyahu, among other people, and we are still waiting on whether it will be granted.

Von der Leyen stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him. She has expressed no regret about that while arms from Europe, including from her own country of Germany and France, America and other countries are responsible for the genocide that is happening while we sit here and calmly and coolly talk. Talk is over; it is time to take action. The various Bills that are going through the Oireachtas, including one since 2018 from Senator Black, have not been followed. The Taoiseach said the framework for regulating the export of dual-use goods is robust and rigorous. I really tremble if that is merely as robust and rigorous as the inspection of planes going on in Shannon.

The Taoiseach: There is a serious misrepresentation of the views of President von der Leyen by some in this country. Some have done so for political gain during the European elections. I attended the European Council last night with 26 other prime ministers and presidents. I have not heard any country within the European Union actively propose another name for President of the Commission. While President von der Leyen has not got everything right, she has shown leadership on humanitarian aid and UNRWA, and has clearly called for a ceasefire. It is sometimes convenient to blame President von der Leyen for other things. It is a matter for member states of the European Union to stand up and be counted when it comes to the associa-

tion agreement. We have and Spain has. Belgium has made progress. It is not a competency of the President of the Commission; it is of the member states.

In relation to any arrest warrant, this country will always comply with international courts on these issues.

On Shannon and other airports, no airport in Ireland or Irish sovereign airspace is being used to transport weapons to the conflict in the Middle East. In 2023, and to date this year, no application has been received nor has any exemption been granted for the carriage of weapons on civil aircraft to Israel. Any such application, if received, would be refused.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Has an inspection taken place?

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:

- Revised Estimate for Public Services 2024 [Vote 23] and Further Revised Estimates for Public Services 2024 [Votes 16 and 34] (*to be moved together and decided without debate by one question*).

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on international protection, asylum and migration (*debate on Tuesday to consist of two speaking rounds; proceedings will then stand adjourned until Wednesday; first speaking round on Tuesday 202 minutes; second speaking round on Tuesday 100 minutes*).

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

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Digital Services (Levy) Bill 2024 (Second Stage)

- Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Second Stage)

(*if not previously concluded, debate shall be interrupted on these Bills either at 4.30 p.m. or after 2 hours and 16 minutes, whichever is the later*).

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on international protection, asylum and migration (resumed) (*to consist of a single speaking round not exceeding 210 minutes, following which proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion*).

- Employment Permits Bill 2022 (Amendments from the Seanad) (*to commence no earlier than 6 p.m. and if not previously concluded, to adjourn after 60 minutes*).

- Civil Registration (Electronic Registration) Bill 2024 (Report and Final Stages) *(if not previously concluded, to adjourn after 60 minutes*).

- Charities (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Report and Final Stages) (*if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 11.30 p.m. or after 90 minutes, whichever is the later*).

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Hospitality and Tourism Sector, selected by the Rural Independent Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Digital Services (Levy) Bill 2024 (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded)

- Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Second Stage)

(*if not previously concluded, debate shall be interrupted on these Bills either at 6 p.m. or after 4 hours and 16 minutes, whichever is the later*).

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Mortgage Interest Rates Cap Bill 2023.

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 following extent:

(i) the Dáil may sit later than 10.32 p.m.;

(ii) the time allotted to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on international protection, asylum and migration;

(iii) private members' business may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of Government business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; and

(iv) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall not be taken and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of oral Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth;

2. the Motions for Revised Estimate for Public Services 2024 [Vote 23] and Further Revised Estimates for Public Services 2024 [Votes 16 and 34] shall be moved together and decided without debate by one question, which shall be put from the Chair; and

3. on Tuesday, the debate on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on international protection, asylum and migration shall consist of two speaking rounds and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(i) the arrangements for the speeches on the first speaking round shall be in accordance with the arrangements agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 200 minutes, and the Resolution of the Dáil of 20 September, 2023, providing for two minutes for non-aligned members;

(ii) the arrangements for the speeches on the second speaking round shall be in accordance with the arrangements agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30 July, 2020, for 100 minutes;

(iii) on the conclusion of the second speaking round, the debate shall stand adjourned; and

(iv) members may share time.

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) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time, which may be taken later than 8.45 p.m., and shall in any event be taken either on the adjournment of the Charities (Amendment) Bill 2023, or where that Bill concludes within the available time, on the conclusion thereof: Provided that if there are no deferred divisions, the Dáil shall adjourn on the adjournment of the Charities (Amendment) Bill 2023, or on its conclusion if it concludes within the available time; and

(ii) the only Taoiseach's oral questions to be taken pursuant to Standing Order 46(1) shall be those within the remit of a Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach;

2. in relation to Second Stage of the Digital Services (Levy) Bill 2024, and, if reached, Second Stage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2024, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 4.30 p.m. or after 2 hours and 16 minutes, whichever is the later;

(ii) the proceedings shall not be resumed on Wednesday; and

(iii) any divisions claimed on the proceedings shall be deferred until immediately prior to Committee Stage of the relevant Bill;

3. on Wednesday, the resumed proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Regulations and a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on international protection, asylum and migration shall be brought to a conclusion after 210 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(i) the arrangements for the speeches, not including the Minister's response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30 July, 2020, for 200 minutes;

(ii) on the conclusion of the speeches, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iii) members may share time;

4. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Employment Permits Bill 2022 shall be taken no earlier than 6 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be inter-

rupted and stand adjourned after 1 hour, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday;

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Civil Registration (Electronic Registration) Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 1 hour, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday; and

6. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Charities (Amendment) Bill 2023 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 11.30 p.m. or after 90 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 following extent:

(i) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37—

(a) may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of proceedings on Government business, or where Government business concludes within the allocated time, on the conclusion thereof; and

(b) may be taken for 96 minutes, and more than four topical issues may be taken; and

(ii) Thursday evening business, i.e., Second Stage of the Mortgage Interest Rates Cap Bill 2023, may be taken earlier than 8.12 p.m., and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of topical issues, with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. in relation to Second Stage of the Digital Services (Levy) Bill 2024, and, if reached, Second Stage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2024, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) any proceedings, resumed or otherwise, shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 6 p.m. or after 4 hours and 16 minutes, whichever is the later;

(ii) the proceedings shall not be resumed on Thursday, and

(iii) any division claimed on the proceedings shall be deferred until immediately prior to Committee Stage of the relevant Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Not agreed.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yesterday the Taoiseach said the consensus was emerging among many EU leaders to back Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for a second term. I listened carefully to his comments a few moments ago. It will be a concerning development for people in Ireland, notwithstanding what he said about Ursula von der Leyen. She has not rowed back from her initial unqualified support for the Netanyahu regime, as we see the genocidal death toll in Gaza rising. I ask that we have a debate on her reappointment as Commission President in this House so we can highlight and insert some transparency to the process, to see

who from Ireland will be backing her in this attempt to become Commission President for a second term.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: On the EU migration and asylum pact, we had asked for as much time as possible and to take whatever time is needed on this. It is a matter of serious concern among the Opposition that, while the Government has granted more time, it will be scheduled to conclude tomorrow. I again ask the Government to consider allowing this to take as much time as possible and to adjourn until Thursday, or next week. We clearly need more time in the Oireachtas to demonstrate we have had the fullest debate and the fullest opportunity before we vote on the matter.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach will recall that as Minister for Health in 2017 he committed to introduce a statutory right to home care. In 2020, he said the scheme was nearly ready and the new Government would introduce it. Here we are, four years later, and we are no nearer to having a statutory scheme for home care. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, admitted as much last week when she said the nut of funding that scheme had not been cracked. This failure to follow through on that broken promise has huge implications for the care of older people, as more older people are being forced into nursing homes because of the absence of such a scheme. Will the Taoiseach allow time this week to discuss the implications of that for a large number of older people who have been let down by this Government?

Deputy Mick Barry: The Women's Aid annual report is a chapter of horrors, with 40,000 disclosures of abuse against women and children, which is the highest recorded since the charity's inception 50 years ago. It is noteworthy that 86% of abuse was committed by a current or former male intimate partner. It is also interesting that 48% of women who reported abuse to An Garda found gardaí to be unhelpful. That needs to be discussed. I propose that the Business Committee put this issue onto the Dáil schedule as soon as possible.

Deputy Denis Naughten: As the Ceann Comhairle knows, at last week's Business Committee meeting, I forcefully put across my opposition to the imposition of a guillotine this week. I made the point that every Member who wishes to speak on the migration pact should be, and must be, facilitated to do that. I have been in contact with the Taoiseach's office and that of the Chief Whip. I know additional time is being provided and that is welcome. If that happens, I will not oppose the moving of the debate today.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Ceann Comhairle knows well I have raised this for several weeks at the Business Committee, and the fact the Government deceitfully hid this pact until after the local and European elections. Now, we are debating a red herring here because it is already adopted in Europe, we are told. The Government has changed the wording of it. We need ample time to discuss this. Indeed, the Taoiseach promised us we would have ample time to debate it on the floor of the Dáil, as did the Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin, and the Minister for Justice. It is a pact that took ten years of gestation in Europe and we are going to dispense with it with a guillotine here after maybe six and a half hours. It is outrageous. We in the Rural Independent Group are fundamentally opposed to it. We have been trying to get debates on this issue for almost 18 months - we are the only party or group that has been – and we continue to do so. This is being rushed after, as I said, it was hidden away from the people until after the elections. The Government did the same with the referendums, for which it did not divulge the Attorney General's advice. We want to see the Attorney General's advice regarding many issues and many aspects of this pact. We are fundamentally opposed to it.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies. First, in respect of Deputy Bacik's point, I am not sure this always come across in our domestic debates on European positions but four posts are currently being considered in Europe - the European Parliament President, the President of the Council, the President of the Commission and the High Representative for foreign affairs - and the different political groupings at a European level are involved in that, including the Deputy's own group, the Socialists and Democrats. Based on the conversations I had yesterday, my understanding is the S&D group is very actively involved in these discussions, and I have yet to see any sort of red flags or opposition be raised by the S&D to President von der Leyen at a European level. The European Council will meet again next Thursday and Friday, when I hope the Council will be in a position to make a decision on a name to go to the Parliament, and then it will be up to each MEP, including our Irish MEPs, in a secret ballot, I believe, to vote yea or nay on whatever name is sent there. I am not sure, in all truth, whether the House will be able to facilitate a debate in advance of that, but I am open to it and have no difficulty with that.

In regard to the issue of the EU migration pact, I think there were some sensible suggestions from Deputy Naughten and others, and I do not disagree with what Deputy Mac Lochlainn said. There is no deceitfulness going on. We did say we would provide ample time on this. I think eight and a half hours are scheduled between today and tomorrow, from my recollection. What we are clearly saying today in the Dáil is that if time is running out tomorrow on the EU migration pact debate and if there are still people who have indicated they wish to speak, the Whip will come back to the House and make a new business proposal on the floor to extend the time. Every Member of Dáil Éireann, therefore, who wishes to speak on the pact will have time to do so. To clarify, anyone who wants to speak on the pact will have time to speak on the pact, and I think that is the definition of ample time, where everyone will have an opportunity.

On the issue of statutory home care, for that reason, it is unlikely there will be an ability to have a debate on the statutory home care scheme this week, but I am happy that we would facilitate a debate on it. It will not be this week because of the time we are passing over, but I am happy for it to be pursued. There is an update I can give to the House on a lot of the good work that is going on, including the legislative piece recently receiving Cabinet approval, but let us schedule that debate for as soon as possible.

Similarly, on the Women's Aid report, there is no difficulty from our perspective on having a debate on the work of Cuan, the Women's Aid report and our zero-tolerance strategy. Again, it is just that the timing will need to be agreed by the Business Committee.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Not agreed.

The Taoiseach: How many times do you want to speak on it? Are you voting against the arrangement to allow every Deputy to speak on it?

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 74; Níl, 56; Staon, 0.		
Tá	***Níl***	***Staon***
Brophy, Colm.	***Andrews, Chris.***	
Browne, James.	***Bacik, Ivana.***	
Bruton, Richard.	***Barry, Mick.***	

Burke, Colm.	*Boyd Barrett, Richard.*	
Burke, Peter.	*Brady, John.*	
Butler, Mary.	*Browne, Martin.*	
Byrne, Thomas.	*Buckley, Pat.*	
Cahill, Jackie.	*Cairns, Holly.*	
Calleary, Dara.	*Carthy, Matt.*	
Canney, Seán.	*Clarke, Sorca.*	
Cannon, Ciarán.	*Collins, Michael.*	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	*Connolly, Catherine.*	
Costello, Patrick.	*Conway-Walsh, Rose.*	
Coveney, Simon.	*Cronin, Réada.*	
Creed, Michael.	*Cullinane, David.*	
Crowe, Cathal.	*Daly, Pa.*	
Dillon, Alan.	*Doherty, Pearse.*	
Donnelly, Stephen.	*Donnelly, Paul.*	
Donohoe, Paschal.	*Ellis, Dessie.*	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	*Farrell, Mairéad.*	
English, Damien.	*Funchion, Kathleen.*	
Farrell, Alan.	*Gannon, Gary.*	
Fitzpatrick, Peter.	*Gould, Thomas.*	
Flaherty, Joe.	*Guirke, Johnny.*	
Flanagan, Charles.	*Healy-Rae, Danny.*	
Fleming, Sean.	*Healy-Rae, Michael.*	
Foley, Norma.	*Howlin, Brendan.*	
Grealish, Noel.	*Kenny, Martin.*	
Griffin, Brendan.	*Kerrane, Claire.*	
Harris, Simon.	*Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.*	
Haughey, Seán.	*McDonald, Mary Lou.*	
Heydon, Martin.	*McGrath, Mattie.*	
Higgins, Emer.	*Mitchell, Denise.*	
Humphreys, Heather.	*Munster, Imelda.*	
Kehoe, Paul.	*Murphy, Catherine.*	
Lahart, John.	*Murphy, Paul.*	
Leddin, Brian.	*Mythen, Johnny.*	
Lowry, Michael.	*Nash, Ged.*	
Madigan, Josepha.	*Nolan, Carol.*	
Martin, Micheál.	*Ó Broin, Eoin.*	
Matthews, Steven.	*Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.*	
McAuliffe, Paul.	*Ó Murchú, Ruairí.*	
McConalogue, Charlie.	*Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.*	
McEntee, Helen.	*O'Callaghan, Cian.*	
McGrath, Michael.	*O'Reilly, Louise.*	
McGuinness, John.	*O'Rourke, Darren.*	

Moynihan, Aindrias.	***Pringle, Thomas.***	
Murphy, Verona.	***Quinlivan, Maurice.***	
Naughten, Denis.	***Ryan, Patricia.***	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	***Sherlock, Sean.***	
Noonan, Malcolm.	***Shortall, Róisín.***	
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.	***Smith, Duncan.***	
Ó Cuív, Éamon.	***Stanley, Brian.***	
O'Brien, Darragh.	***Tóibín, Peadar.***	
O'Brien, Joe.	***Tully, Pauline.***	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	***Ward, Mark.***	
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Dowd, Fergus.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Phelan, John Paul.		
Rabbitte, Anne.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Ryan, Eamon.		
Shanahan, Matt.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Hildegarde Naughton and Marc Ó Cathasaigh; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Carol Nolan.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have just 21 minutes so I ask Members to keep to the time limits. I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tomorrow, 13-year-old Cara Darmody from Tipperary will again protest outside the Dáil. It is not her first time. She has been campaigning for several years now. Her key demand is that the Government gives a clear date as to when the State will comply with the Disability Act 2005 which, as the Taoiseach knows, sets out that children with disabilities are legally entitled to an assessment of needs within six months. In the past seven years we had two Ministers for Health, namely, the Taoiseach himself, and the current Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and in that time, assessment waiting lists have more than trebled. They have ballooned from 4,000 to 15,000. Such long waiting times have serious consequences for children because early intervention is crucial. Will the Taoiseach answer Cara's

question? When will the Government abide by the law and ensure that every child requiring an assessment of needs gets that assessment within six months, as is his or her legal entitlement?

The Taoiseach: I met Cara and her father, Mark, briefly this morning when I came back from Brussels. I met them in the courtyard of Government Buildings before the Cabinet meeting. I will formally and properly meet Cara this week with, I hope, other relevant Ministers as well. I have here her letter, which she gave me this morning. She is an incredible young person. We have taken a number of steps already in relation to assessments of needs since I became Taoiseach, including €12 million in funding, which will result in an extra 4,500 assessments of need. I will meet Cara. She has a number of issues that she wants to discuss. I hope to meet her either tomorrow or on Thursday.

Deputy Ged Nash: When will the health service recruitment ban be lifted? It is affecting real people, especially the over-75s. It is June, yet, yesterday morning 33 people were on trolleys in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda. That number, unfortunately, has repeated itself today. There are 43 in Cork today and 34 in Galway, which is unprecedented for June. This is because these hospitals are not allowed to recruit the nurses who have actually been cleared to take up roles in hospitals such as Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. There is a deficit of 71 whole-time equivalent nursing professionals in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. That is 71 fewer nurses than there should be. Management, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and SIPTU are firefighting to support patients and to support stricken staff.

Bernard Gloster, the head of the HSE, is in the media today talking up the possibility of the removal of the recruitment ban and saying that it will be lifted soon. When will the HSE recruitment ban be lifted?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Nash. We are having a meeting of the Cabinet committee on health in early July, I believe, and I look forward to seeing whether we can bring progress to that issue of the pay and numbers strategy there because discussions are ongoing between the HSE and the Department of Health. However, there is broad agreement in relation to the pay and numbers strategy. The Minister has approved the allocation of the 2024 new development posts, along with the roll-out of safe staffing through the conversion of 418 agency staff. I can get specific figures in relation to the Deputy's local hospital.

Deputy Holly Cairns: At the outset, I wish the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the very best as he announced he is stepping down as leader of the Green Party. He has always been sincere and helpful. He can be proud of his contribution to Irish public life.

Domestic violence is a problem which is endemic, systemic and growing. Women's Aid recorded more than 40,000 disclosures of abuse last year. These figures are truly shocking. That is a 20% increase on the previous year. I acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is working on this issue and that tackling it is not easy. What goes on behind closed doors is difficult to police. That is why it is so important that women feel safe in coming forward. It is why we have to ensure that women feel they have options other than remaining in an abusive relationship. Too many women do not feel that way. We know we have a chronic shortage of women's refuge spaces. There has been almost no progress on that. We have just one third of the recommended number of refuge spaces. There are nine counties which do not have any spaces at all. Where is the urgency? What new measures will the Government introduce to tackle this issue? What progress can we expect to see this year?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Cairns for her kind words for the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I congratulate her on her own good news. I know everyone in this House is genuinely delighted for her and for Barry and we wish them all the very best. It is nice to have good news in this place too.

I thank her for raising the very important issue relating to the Women's Aid report and the work relating to the zero-tolerance strategy. She asked specifically about new measures. The honest answer to that, in addition to the list I can provide her on how we will get to the significant increase in places that has been promised under the strategy and the work that is under way in Wexford, Dundalk and Navan and the 17 new safe homes last year and the 13 more this year, the new approach is that there is now a statutory agency, Cuan, and it has been asked to produce a monitoring plan every quarter to show the delivery of those projects. It has also been asked to look at new ways to accelerate the delivery because I accept this is urgent and so too does the Minister, Deputy McEntee. I hope that having our new statutory agency with a co-ordinating role will help.

Deputy Mick Barry: Can the Taoiseach tell us when the Government will make an announcement on the issue of funding for the Cork events centre? It is now nearly eight and a half years since a clatter of politicians, led by Enda Kenny and Simon Coveney, were photographed turning the sod in the run up to a general election and still to this day, not a single brick has been laid.

Can the Taoiseach tell us what the cost to the State will be? The original plan was for €20 million. Over the years it has skyrocketed to €57 million. To be honest, the State could have built it for less than that and held it in public ownership but instead the Government chose to hand it over to a private operator. In any case, I understand the new figure will be higher than €57 million and I would like to know what it is. Can the Taoiseach tell us?

The Taoiseach: I will be able to very shortly and will be happy to tell the Deputy once I have received a final submission on the issue. My Department, for legacy reasons, as it were, has a role in bringing this project forward. I intend to bring a memorandum to the Government on it very shortly. Once I have brought that final memorandum to the Government and it has made a decision, I will be happy to share the details with the House.

Deputy Mick Barry: Will it be before the summer?

The Taoiseach: That is my hope.

Deputy Seán Canney: I wish to get some information on the all-island rail review, which has been published in draft. An implementation plan is also being prepared for its execution. I have a particular interest in the western rail corridor, north from Athenry through Tuam and on to Claremorris. It is phase 2. It was shelved back in 2011 due to austerity measures but is now part of the all-island rail review. I want to acknowledge the work that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan did on this and to wish him well in his decision today. When might the review be published? When might we see it moving to the implementation stage?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Canney for raising the matter and for his kind words for the Minister, Deputy Ryan, which I am sure he will appreciate.

I acknowledge that the Deputy has been pursuing the issue of the western rail corridor and the all-island rail review for some time and we discussed it recently when I became Taoiseach.

My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, is due to bring a memorandum to the Government on the all-island rail review in coming weeks and the detail of any implementation groups and structures and timelines associated with that will be contained in that update to the Cabinet. I hope that we might see that before the summer recess.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too want to be associated, on behalf of the Rural Independents, with Deputy Ryan's departure as party leader.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Oh my God.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He was always courteous in debate, while I fundamentally disagreed with him in policy. I hope he did not find the coldest June too hot to handle. Maybe his climate change clock has gone wrong but I wish him well.

While I thank the Taoiseach for meeting Cara Darmody today with her father, Mark, she should be in school today. She will be off for the summer shortly but she will be up here every week protesting while we are here and continuing to protest and to fight. I heard her say on the radio, and I am sure she told the Taoiseach, that she has met two taoisigh already and they promised her. The time for promises is over. People like Cara's two brothers and her mother, Noelle, at home minding them are profoundly suffering. They need proper, timely assessments, treatments and supports. When will that happen? I appreciate that the Taoiseach will meet them on Thursday with other Ministers. That is very important because we need to have meaningful action here. We cannot have a school child forced to come up here to Government Buildings or the Dáil to look for what all the children should have.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his words of tribute to the Minister, Deputy Ryan. I think many could learn from his courteous and civil approach to politics -----

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Yes.

The Taoiseach: -----in this House and indeed outside this House as well.

Deputy Mary Butler: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: There are many lessons that could be learned from him in that regard.

I thank the Deputy for his words about Cara Darmody. I met her as a Minister, not as the Taoiseach. She highlighted a number of things to me then and some of those, I believe, we have made progress on. I look forward to meeting her again on Thursday.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am going back again on the Women's Aid report. It has already been raised by two Deputies. We could not fail to raise it given the damning figures: an 18% increase in disclosures from last year, making it the highest on record. Women's Aid is now 50 years on the ground. I would have hoped that it would be redundant by this point and we would not need it anymore and instead it has got worse.

What I want to focus in on here is this. In 1996 and 1997, there was a task force and following on from that, we had many strategies and Green Papers. But since that task force published its repot in 1997, 265 women have been murdered by people close to them. That task force identified a number of recommendations. One that jumped out at me was on prevention and help or education for the perpetrator. That has never been dealt with in any of the papers which have followed. Will the Taoiseach respond to that?

The Taoiseach: The first thing I will do is familiarise myself with that task force report. I appreciate that a lot of work has been done since then but I will familiarise myself with that. We do need to come at this from all angles. There is, of course, a criminal justice element to this. A lot of good legislation has been passed through these Houses on that. The establishment of the agency is important but so is the education and cultural aspect. I have significant concerns, for instance, about how young men in particular are seeing things on social media and are being miseducated about what a healthy sexual relationship is and so on.

If the Deputy will let me come back to her on the recommendations on prevention and health specifically, I will ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to take a look at the 1997 recommendations with me.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I wish to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on his departure as leader of the Green Party.

Last night, I was at a well attended, large public meeting in the Killygarry Community Centre, County Cavan. Gathered were people from the Shankill lower and Pottle area in Cavan where two sites are proposed for the development of battery energy storage systems. It is arguably the first of its kind in County Cavan.

A number of speakers educated everyone in the room, along with myself and other public representatives. The main concerns are around safety for local residents and the possible risks to the general public. The question is being asked as to who is responsible for that element of the development of the sites. Locals have done a lot of work on this and they are getting feedback that no one is responsible at the moment for the safety of these sites – not EirGrid, the ESB, the Departments of the environment or housing, the EPA or the SEAI. They all give the same answer that no one is responsible. I have three asks. It is quite alarming for the locals and for public representatives. Cavan County Council has granted planning permission for these sites-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time, Deputy.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: -----and I understand the applications are now sitting with An Bord Pleanála. However, no EPA environmental impact assessment has been requested or is required. That should be non-negotiable. It also does not fall under the COMAH regulations, which are for the control of major accidents and hazards. I ask that the Taoiseach would see to those two measures being introduced very quickly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Smyth for raising with me the issues that were raised in Killygarry, County Cavan last night in respect of these battery energy storage systems. In fairness to her constituents and the important issues, were the Deputy to provide me with a note of those three asks, I would co-ordinate a response across the Government and see if we can establish information for her constituents and if there are lessons to be learned that need be applied in the future.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I give my best wishes to Eamon Ryan. He is a very courteous man and very willing to engage. I have great respect for anyone who recognises that their first priority is their family. That is an important thing that we would all do well to remember.

One of the last Private Members' debates in the Dáil before the elections was on housing

maintenance. Doubtless this is an issue that the Taoiseach will have come across while canvassing too. In my own constituency, several apartment complexes were identified in the Housing Commission report as being in need of renovation, demolition or replacement. They are at Togher Road, Cherry Tree Road, Clashduv Road, Desmond Square and a few other locations. Many of them were built in the 1960s and 1970s and are experiencing serious issues with cold and damp. Is the Taoiseach aware of the Housing Commission's particular recommendation on maisonettes and apartments and will he ensure that the next budget provides adequate funding so that these apartments, many of which are in a very poor condition, are either thoroughly renovated or replaced?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire. I will. I am aware of that recommendation from the commission and the importance of the issue that the Deputy highlighted. I will certainly ask the Minister for housing to respond to the Deputy formally in respect of it, but I will also see what we can do in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I also wish to be associated with the tributes paid to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

I am sure the Taoiseach will agree with me that this country derives significant benefit from the work done by carers. Unfortunately not all carers are treated equally. In many cases, the backup or ancillary services for carers depend on where you live. There are some parts of the country where such services are hardly available at all. It is a classic example of the postcode lottery.

On page 50 of the programme for Government, there is a specific commitment to introduce a carer's guarantee that would effectively end that postcode lottery. In fairness, the Government has started to implement this proposal and I understand that the cost will be approximately €5 million per year. Up to €2 million per year is being spent currently. Is it the Government's intention to fully implement the commitment within its lifetime? It was a specific commitment to a very deserving group of people.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry. I was not talking over the Deputy. Rather, I was talking to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on this important issue to get the most up-to-date information. The short answer is "Yes". It is our intention, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler's intention, to implement that recommendation in the programme for Government. This week, I will meet Family Carers Ireland and Care Alliance Ireland to hear what more they believe we can do in terms of progressing it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Several times, I have raised the Government's failure to adequately provide services for children with special needs in County Monaghan. Many families are in crisis because of the lack of services. In Monaghan, we have no overnight respite care and no special school, we have a shortage in occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, and we have lengthy delays in assessments of needs.

I understand that the Taoiseach will be in County Monaghan tomorrow. I know that a request has been made by families of children with special needs to meet him while he is in the county. Will he give half an hour to meet these families so that he can hear directly of the impact that Government failures are having on their lives?

The Taoiseach: I will meet them. I will not be able to meet them tomorrow, so I do not want to mislead them, but if the Deputy wants to contact my office, I am happy to arrange to

meet them with him and other Oireachtas colleagues from Cavan-Monaghan. I am aware of the issues that the Deputy and other Deputies have raised in the House. Perhaps I will ask the relevant Ministers to attend as well.

We want to make more progress in this regard. We now have a Cabinet committee on disability, which I am chairing. I would be very happy to directly hear from those families that the Deputy wishes me to meet in the coming days.

Deputy David Stanton: Will the Taoiseach outline the Government's policy on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, between the EU and Canada? Does the Government intend to make changes to the Arbitration Act, as was suggested by the Supreme Court, and if so, is there a timescale for that?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Stanton very much for raising this important issue. The Government remains very supportive of free trade and free trade agreements. Obviously, the Government needs to reflect on the court's ruling. I will ask the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Peter Burke, to revert to the Deputy directly in terms of timelines, as I am not across that matter.

Deputy Carol Nolan: In order to prevent a shortage of school bus drivers this August or, as it may be in some cases, September when schools reopen, I call on the Government to intervene immediately with Bus Éireann and the RSA, which advises on policy, to try to deal with the current policy whereby people cannot remain on as drivers after reaching 70 years of age. The policy is discriminatory and counterproductive and will mean that we will have a shortage of drivers if we do not act now. As far back as March, I wrote to the transport committee asking for Bus Éireann to appear before it, but to the best of my knowledge, there has been no progress. Will the Government intervene now? If 70-year-olds are medically fit, they should be given the choice to remain in the workforce. This issue needs urgent attention.

The Taoiseach: I instinctively agree with the Deputy. I know this causes a lot of issues in many constituencies and counties, including my own, where there is someone who is willing and able to drive the bus but is told that, because of an arbitrary age on his or her birth certificate, he or she cannot drive the bus. It is offensive to those individuals and is problematic for our constituents who are trying to get their children to school.

In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Foley, she has done a major overhaul of school transport. It will take a number of years to implement, but it will start this September. One of the issues she was going to examine specifically was engagement with Bus Éireann as to the rationale behind the policy and whether there were reasons that we did not fully comprehend. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy on that matter.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I have often raised the issue of University Hospital Waterford, which is the least funded of our model 4 hospitals and has the lowest ratio of healthcare practitioners to beds in such hospitals. I wish to discuss the stroke unit today, though. University Hospital Waterford receives more than 1,000 stroke patients every year, yet it has only five stroke unit beds and two single rooms. One in five people in our country will suffer a stroke. I ask the Taoiseach to examine this matter. Only 25% of our acute stroke patients get into the stroke unit at University Hospital Waterford and only 6% of transient ischaemic attack sufferers get in. UHW is being denied the ability to deal with acute heart attacks seven days per week and, now, is being denied the ability to deal with strokes effectively. I ask the Taoiseach to re-

source this service properly and consider a new capital programme for stroke as well as cardiac issues at the hospital.

The Taoiseach: My thanks to Deputy Shanahan for raising the issues in respect of University Hospital Waterford. My understanding is that 96 additional beds have been announced in the past three years for the hospital, and rightly so. They are needed in Waterford and the wider south east.

Specifically regarding the stroke issue the Deputy raised, I will raise it with the Minister for Health. I will also ask him to raise it with Professor Rónán Collins, who has done brilliant work as the clinical lead for our national stroke care programme, and see what progress can be made for the south east.

An Ceann Comhairle: Last but by no means least, I call Deputy Ó Cathasaigh.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I suppose I had better say something nice about Eamon Ryan, seeing as how others have. Eamon was the reason I joined the party in 2015. Many of us in the House can describe a problem, but few people put a solution to that problem afterwards. I have got to know Eamon since 2020. He is a great politician, but he is a better man.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I wish to raise the issue of post offices. They are a vital piece of community infrastructure. Postmasters are falling between two stools at the moment. They are suffering from cost-of-living increases. Many of them have missed out on the increased cost of business scheme, ICOB. As many as 50% cannot avail of it. They have funding out to 2025 but will have to negotiate a new seven-year contract afterwards. Currently, they cannot negotiate with the Government or the company to better their position. They are looking for a little certainty as regards Government funding. Can we give them that clarity? We are losing post offices constantly. I view them as vital community infrastructure and would like to see them preserved, particularly across rural Ireland.

The Taoiseach: As is perhaps fitting from a Green Party Deputy, that was the most accurate tribute I have heard to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. He is a good politician and an even better man. That is certainly my experience. I am conscious that today is a difficult and challenging day for the Green Party – it always is when there are moments of transition – and I wish the Deputy and his Green Party colleagues the very best. We look forward to continuing to work together on the implementation of the programme for Government and what we have committed to doing for the Irish people.

Regarding the issue of postmasters and post offices and their falling between stools, I will specifically ask the Minister of State, Jack Chambers, to engage with the Deputy and see if we can provide that certainty.

Estimates for Public Services 2024

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

Vote 23 — An Coimisiún Toghcháin (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €11,719,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2024, for the salaries and expenses of An Coimisiún Toghcháin.

Vote 16 — Tailte Éireann (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €85,637,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2024, for the salaries and expenses of Tailte Éireann and certain minor services.

Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €6,846,571,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2024, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage including grants to Local Authorities, grants and other expenses in connection with housing, water services, miscellaneous schemes, subsidies, grants and payment of certain grants under cash limited schemes and that a sum not exceeding €141,000,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Votes put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [23995/24]

2. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [23998/24]

3. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [24000/24]

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [25588/24]

5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [25960/24]

6. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [26038/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments and considers policy matters relating to the European Union and international issues. The committee generally meets in advance of meetings of the

European Council to discuss the agenda for these meetings. In addition, it considers current EU and international matters, including the ongoing situation in the Middle East and the conflict in Ukraine. The committee most recently met on 10 June when it looked ahead to the informal European Council meeting, which I attended yesterday, and the meeting of the European Council scheduled for 27 and 28 June. Both meetings take place in Brussels.

At the informal meeting, leaders reflected on the outcome of the European Parliament elections and focused on the new EU institutional cycle. At the meeting of the European Council proper on 27 and 28 June, leaders will hope to sign off on a new strategic agenda for the period ahead. They will discuss issues including Ukraine, the horrific humanitarian catastrophe in the Middle East, security and defence and the EU's competitiveness agenda.

Ahead of yesterday's informal meeting of the European Council, I attended the conference on peace in Ukraine hosted by Switzerland. This conference comes at a time Ukraine continues to be under relentless attack from Russia, including the targeting of civilian infrastructure. Some 20,000 children have been abducted in Ukraine - snatched by Russia, taken from their parents and from their towns and villages. If Ukraine managed to get one child a day back, it would take 55 years to return all of the children. We must be relentless and challenge ourselves to do much more in this regard. Certainly, from the Government's perspective, we are very eager to see what more practical assistance we can provide to help with that humanitarian issue. The aim of the conference was to rally world leaders around a peace initiative that is based on the principles of the UN Charter and in support of Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence. During my intervention, I expressed Ireland's strong support for President Zelenskyy's peace plan.

It is expected that the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet again in the coming months as necessary and ahead of the meeting of the European Council in October.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I note that at the summit there was a lot of talk about adherence to international law, which is right. There is no doubt the atrocities that Putin has carried out are horrendous and that it was a bloody and indefensible invasion, occupation and war. However, it is difficult to credit the claims of adherence to international law or the desire for peace when, at the same time that all of this is going on, many of the countries in attendance at the conference continue to support and arm the state of Israel while it is guilty of committing genocide in front of our eyes. While we were counting the votes in the European and local elections, Israel slaughtered just under 300 people in Al-Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza in what an Al Jazeera journalist described as "descending into hell". After the opprobrium at that, last night, Israel was attacking the same refugee camp again. It was also killing people in Rafah as they waited for aid trucks. However, nothing is done. Some of those in attendance at that conference, like the United States and others, continue to arm the state that is doing this. In fact, they may well have been complicit in the attack on the refugee camp as it looks like their troops on the so-called humanitarian pier were involved in supporting the Israeli massacre in that refugee camp. When are the shocking double standards and failure to act against Israel's genocidal attack by the western governments that arm and support it, including in the European Union, going to stop? When are we going to see sanctions?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to raise the issue of Palestinian third level students who are going to be here as a consequence of the genocide that their families are experiencing in Gaza. Perhaps they are able to flee, have already fled or are going to be fleeing here over the

next period. I was in touch with the Taoiseach and his office previously when he was Minister for higher education regarding a particular case that is still ongoing and is illustrative of the issue. Amir is a 19-year-old Gaza man who is studying at TU Dublin. He arrived as a regular international student and regular international student fees were paid. Then, in October, his family home and family business in Gaza were destroyed and he had to apply for international protection. However, TU Dublin is continuing to pursue him for the fees it says he owes based on assessing him as an international student, so he is facing thousands of euro in fees. It previously said his exam results would be withheld, although it has since progressed that and has released the exam results and said he can put a payment plan in place for paying these fees. He has no mechanism to pay the fees. TU Dublin has said that the Government has not provided any scheme or funding for students from Palestine but that if a scheme is put in place, as was put in place for Ukrainian students, it would be able to implement it. It is one way or the other. TU Dublin is saying it needs the money to be able to do this. Either TU Dublin or the Department needs to step in here.

Deputy Mick Barry: An Associated Press investigation has identified at least 60 Palestinian families where 25 family members or more were killed by Israeli bombing between October and December. In some cases, four generations of one family were wiped out. Israeli bombing has destroyed homes, buildings and infrastructure to the point that there is now 37 million tonnes of rubble in Gaza. It is estimated that it would take ten years to clear it. Last year, while the assault was well under way, a European politician compared Israel's role to Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression. She said: "All these conflicts have one thing in common: they are about the struggle between those who seek peace, balance, freedom and co-operation - and those who do not want any of this." That politician was Ursula von der Leyen. Why is the Taoiseach supporting this woman for the Presidency of the new European Commission?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: A meeting of EU leaders in Brussels yesterday evening failed to endorse Ursula von der Leyen for a second term as the European Commission President. This should be welcomed by all right-thinking people. Through her offer of unconditional support for Israel, she provided political cover for the genocide that continues to unfold in Gaza. By continuing to block a review of Israel's human rights obligations under the EU-Israel association agreement, she is providing economic cover for Israel's genocide and failing to hold it to account, unless there is further information in that regard. She has acted outside of her competency, impugned her office and damaged the credibility of the European Union to act as an agent of peace and a champion of human rights across the world. We spoke earlier about the possibility of a debate in the House. Can the Taoiseach assure the House that the Government will oppose the reappointment of the Commission President?

Deputy Seán Haughey: As expected, there was a shift to the right across Europe in the recent European Parliament elections, with migration and the response to climate change emerging as key issues during the campaign. However, it seems the centrist coalition has held, by and large. The coalition is made up of the European People's Party, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats and Renew Europe, and it remains to be seen if the Greens or the European conservatives and reformists will also join any new coalition in the Parliament. All of this will determine the future policy direction of the EU and, of course, how the top positions will be filled. It seems to me, despite what we just heard from other Deputies, and despite her initial response to the Israeli-Hamas war, that Ursula von der Leyen is set to become Commission President again. The Taoiseach discussed these matters at a special European Council meeting yesterday. Various names are being mentioned in the media for the posts of Council

President and foreign policy chief, as well as the President of the European Parliament. What is the Taoiseach's approach to these issues? When will Ireland's next EU Commissioner be announced? It is generally accepted that the earlier the name is known, the better for securing a significant Commission post. If the Taoiseach would like to name the Irish Commissioner now, I am sure the House would welcome any information he can give in that regard.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Who is being elevated?

The Taoiseach: I am not sure the Tánaiste would. Under our coalition agreement, the Tánaiste will bring a name to Cabinet for consideration. What Deputy Haughey said about the importance of timeliness is a statement of fact in this regard, and I and the Tánaiste share that view. I should say that the process is as the Deputy said. The European Council last night took stock of the European elections at an informal meeting. With respect to Deputy Ó Murchú, it was never a meeting that had a legal basis to make a decision. That will be the European Council meeting next Thursday and Friday. Obviously, once a President of the Commission is in place, it is then member states formally submit the names of their Commissioners or Commissioners-designate. I share the view that clarity around the name in the coming weeks, which is the plan of the Government, would be good in our national interest because that then allows us to engage with the Commission President on portfolios and trying to ensure the portfolio is a good fit for the person Ireland sends and a good fit for Ireland in terms of policy interests and national interests we may have.

The approach I took last night was, I think, the approach that was taken by all members of the European Council, which is that there needs to be a balanced approach. There are four positions, as the Deputy rightly said: President of the Parliament, which is dealt with by the Parliament, and President of the Council, President of the Commission and the High Representative for foreign affairs. It is important that there is a balanced approach to that package of roles that reflects the democratic outcome of the European election results and also tries to take into consideration other things in terms of the size of member states and geography, where possible. Last night was an initial take stock discussion. I do share the Deputy's view that the centre has held. One hears lots of different views in this Parliament, as is entirely appropriate but people cannot forget the fact that the European People's Party gained seats in the European election, and that it looks like it will be possible to put a centrist coalition together in the coming weeks as well.

I do not accept that President von der Leyen is blocking any review of the association agreement because this is a matter for member states. There are 27 member states. Ireland and Spain have signed a letter saying we want it reviewed. The Belgian Presidency has made some progress on this, which I welcome. However, I call on all European leaders to join us on this because I fundamentally believe that the association agreement needs to be reviewed because there are human rights clauses in it.

In response to Deputy Barry, there has to be a correlation between the outcome of the European elections and the President of the Commission, and that has been established. Indeed, the Deputy respectfully campaigned on that basis in the European elections when he asked people to vote for candidates who would definitely not vote for President von der Leyen. I heard the Deputy say that. That is his position and I respect that but the reality is the European People's Party chose at a congress President von der Leyen to be the lead candidate. Other political groupings chose other people to be the lead candidates and we had an election across the European Union. That has to count for something in ensuring there is not a democratic deficit or

disconnect between the citizens of the Union and those who are appointed to roles.

With regard to President von der Leyen, people have made comments in our Government in the past about the early days of the Middle East situation. However, looking at President von der Leyen's actions in respect of the support for UNRWA when others were not supporting UNRWA - that is the humanitarian aid, for people watching in - and her calling for an immediate ceasefire and her belief in a two-state solution, sometimes she is wrongly positioned on this issue in terms of-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: She is blocking sanctions.

The Taoiseach: -----how she is being wrongly presented by people on this. President von der Leyen is committed to peace and wants to see an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East. She is also someone who has been a good friend to Ireland on Brexit, and someone who is responsible for saving many lives through the roll-out of the Covid vaccine programme.

In response to Deputy Murphy, I am happy to immediately engage with him on the specific case he raised. I should not get too much involved in a back-and-forth with the universities as I respect their autonomy, independence and all that sort of stuff but international fees are set by them and therefore, that answer they gave the Deputy makes me bristle a little bit. There is absolutely nothing to stop any university today deciding not to levy those fees on a student. They do not need a Government initiative to do so. We have universities of sanctuary, for example, as well. I do understand that in general, our universities have been taking a case-by-case approach to this but I am disappointed to hear of the situation that Amir finds himself in. We are doing work - I will not waste time going through it all now - on scholarship programmes and fellowship programmes for funding schools in the Middle East so maybe I could send the Deputy a note regarding our position on all of this.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, this country, small as it is, is doing everything humanly possible to continue to articulate for peace. I share the view that there is an inconsistency in approach being taken by the world to the conflict in Ukraine, which needs to immediately end as it is an illegal, brutal invasion - and I welcome the Deputy saying those things - and to what is happening in the Middle East. It is a humanitarian catastrophe and there are war crimes being committed. It is important that we call out both. Ireland does, and others should.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: And those complicit.

Child Poverty

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach to report on the published third meeting of the cross-government network on child poverty and well-being. [23997/24]

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on the published third meeting of the cross-government network on child poverty and well-being. [24002/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 8 together.

This Government established the child poverty and well-being programme in the Department of the Taoiseach to make sure we prioritise children, and particularly vulnerable children, and to make sure they get a real chance to realise their potential. From Poverty to Potential: A

Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025 was published last year. It is the initial programme plan for the child poverty and well-being programme office in my Department. The programme plan does not address everything but rather takes a focused approached on six key areas that have the potential to bring about significant change for children and their families. These include income supports and joblessness; early learning and childcare; reducing the cost of education; family homelessness; consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services; and enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty.

The role of the Department of the Taoiseach is to co-ordinate and focus Government action. To help facilitate this, the office has established a cross-government network on child poverty and well-being. Three network meetings have taken place to date. The purpose of the cross-government network is to bring together the very wide range of actors across Departments, their agencies and local authorities who are responsible for implementing actions and policies which impact on the objective to end child poverty and enhance child well-being. The network creates a platform to support this diverse work and identify shared purpose and mission and meets three to four times per year. Information about the network and its meetings is published on *gov.ie*.

On 27 February, the third meeting of the network addressed the theme: achieving a continuum of care: exploring effective strategies for enhancing service integration. The objective of the discussion was to support policymakers and service providers to share learning and think creatively about the challenges and benefits of integrated services. Integrated services is one of the key focus areas of the programme office. The overall ambition for integrated services is to identify and create pathways for children and families to smoothly access the services they need.

A keynote address exploring effective strategies for enhancing service integration was delivered by Dr. Carmel Devaney, associate director of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at the University of Galway, and a practice panel looked at the evidence, legitimacy and feasibility of service integration in practice. Panel members were from a wide range of organisations, including representatives from Meitheal, a family resource centre, and a children and young persons' services committee.

Reflections from this cross-government network meeting and the inaugural child poverty and well-being summit, which I attended, inform the ongoing work of the programme office. I believe we can absolutely transform the lives of children and their families, and we must give every child the best possible start in life. Achieving this is not just the right thing to do for children but it is also essential for protecting social cohesion, empowering vibrant communities and securing our long-term economic future.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is all very well setting up a committee to deal with child poverty and welfare but it has to do something. The Taoiseach said he wants to give children the best start in life - absolutely. One of things that guarantees they do not have a good start in life is if they are homeless or they are facing the prospect of being homeless. A total of 4,170 children are in emergency accommodation, and the situation is getting worse every month. The Taoiseach needs to address that and to recognise that his Government has so far failed to do so. It has worsened every month.

I want to just point him to a few things that could help. First, we do not have enough three- or four-bedroom houses being bought or built by local authorities. In the new Part V private

development that is coming up in Shanganagh as opposed to the Land Development Agency development, all of the units that are being bought are only one- or two-bedroom apartments, even though there are loads of three- and four-bedroom apartments. When we are talking about kids, they generally have three- our four-bed needs.

Housing needs assessment does not take into account families that are on RAS and HAP transfer lists but many of them are families with children. When people are facing the possibility of eviction, they cannot get the higher rate of homeless HAP until eight weeks before they are facing eviction. Even though many people know months in advance they are facing the prospect of being homeless, local housing authorities will not do anything for them until they are eight weeks out. Even then, they will basically say to them to wait until they are homeless and then knock on their door, by which time the kids are thrown into homelessness. That has to stop. There has to be a proactive and preventative approach to kids or anybody, but especially kids and families, going into homelessness. At the moment, that is not what is happening. It is a bureaucratic approach and it is not prioritising children and families.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The minimum essential standard of living report was published today and it is pretty damning. It shows that social welfare is lagging behind basic needs. In more than three quarters of the cases at which the report looked, people had an inadequate income. In 43% of cases, people had a deeply inadequate income. It found that the costs of a minimum essential standard of living, that is, the very basics one needs to have the basics of a decent life, have gone up by nearly 17% since 2020. Food has gone up by more than 20% and energy costs are up by more than 60%. The costs of babies has gone up the most; the price of baby formula is up 37% and the price of nappies has nearly doubled over that period of time.

The report states that the small increases the Government has introduced in social welfare, including the one-off payments, have not compensated for that. They have not meant people have kept step with achieving a minimum essential standard of living. It found a two-parent family with two kids, one of whom is in primary school and the other in secondary school, is being left €96 per week short of a minimum essential standard of living. This is a political choice. We have a €65 billion surplus. Will the Taoiseach make a different political choice in the coming budget to say that no one will be left below the minimum needed for a basic, decent quality of life?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I wish to ask once again about enhanced family supports, which are absolutely necessary for those children and families who are the most marginalised and, at times, the most chaotic. We have all seen programmes that have worked in recent years but sometimes the resources get spread too thin and they do not have the impact. We have seen they can do huge things in saving kids and families from what can be incredibly difficult lives. They can save many people from the criminal justice system and they can save a lot of State resources, such as those nuclear options that are needed later. Recently, I have been dealing with an even greater number of families and communities who are being impacted by chaotic families in their own areas. We do not have the necessary supports, whether we are talking about the Garda, Tusla and support services, or the powers that council need to deal with this. We need a review of these circumstances. If we could put in enhanced family supports early, we could probably save ourselves from a lot of these issues. They are needed at both ends.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for raising these issues. On child homelessness, we have a real need to do more. The point Deputy Boyd Barrett made about three-bedroom and four-bedroom houses is interesting because - and this is the challenge with a housing crisis in

general - I often meet people in my constituency who are always looking for a one-bedroom house. If we are being honest and truthful, this is what happens when there is a deficit of social housing when we are playing catch-up, although last year we seen the largest number of social homes provided since the 1970s. I take the point about three and four-bedroom houses and I will scratch the surface on that a bit more.

As for the Deputy's point about when people can access the higher rate of HAP and why they have to wait until they are nearly at the cliff edge before being able to access it, I have passed that onto the Department of housing on a few occasions. The Deputy's point sounds logical in that regard and I will purse it again with the Department of housing. I raised it with the Department after the Deputy raised it with me here previously. I will take away the suggestions that I accept he is making in good faith.

As to Deputy Murphy's point on the minimum essential standard of living report, which was published today, truthfully, I have not yet read it, but I will. We want to make child poverty a priority. There is no one in Ireland who wishes to see a child in poverty. There is no one in this House, regardless of political ideology, who wants that. I accept there are political choices to be made. One of the political choices to be made is universal versus targeted measures. I discussed this at the child poverty and well-being summit at Dublin Castle recently. There is absolutely a benefit to doing universal things as there are certain things we all want to be universally provided for all children in Ireland. The free schoolbooks scheme and the expansion of the hot schools meals programme are examples of that. I have to be honest that there is also a need to do more on the targeted side. I listened to people such as the Children's Rights Alliance on this issue recently and they talk a lot of sense. As we approach the next budget, child poverty will be a priority but we are going to have to make very targeted decisions because we need to bring all children to that equal starting place in their lives. I am proud of a number of things the Government has done in this area. I could list them but I will not in the interest of time. There is a need to look at more targeted measures for children in particular need.

Deputy Ó Murchú's point is a similar one in the context of those wrap-around, enhanced supports we need in communities. I hope, as the community safety partnerships develop and roll out, that they do not just become discussions about criminal justice issues. They are not mean to be in terms of their membership. We are trying to have a conversation about what can be done to create a better and safer - in every sense of the word - communities. That is why it is important the likes of family resource centres and others are plugged into that discussion.

Programme for Government

9. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on the programme for Government. [24004/24]

10. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on the programme for Government. [25302/24]

11. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [25608/24]

12. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [25610/24]

13. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [26071/24]

14. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [26074/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9 to 14, inclusive, together.

Individual commitments in the programme for Government are advanced through the co-ordinating mechanisms of the Cabinet committee structure. There are ten Cabinet committees established by the Government to reflect the full range of policy areas set out in the programme for Government. Cabinet committees meet regularly to accomplish their work.

The strategy statements of all Departments reflect the national priorities outlined in the programme for Government. The Department of the Taoiseach is continuing to help advance the programme for Government commitments in the following significant policy areas: implementation of the Housing for All strategy, including additional initiatives as necessary, to advance housing-related commitments; continued engagement at EU and international level on the situation in the Middle East, including by calling for full observance of international law by all parties; increased funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees and working to build consensus at an EU level to take a more proactive approach in assisting a negotiated two-state solution and lasting peace process as, on 28 May, Ireland formally recognised the State of Palestine, a decision which the Government took, in co-ordination with Spain and Norway, to support the two-state solution and which fulfils our commitment under the programme for Government; engagement with EU leaders to advance high-level objectives in the programme for Government, economic and competitiveness issues in particular, energy security, external relations including with the UK, as well as continuing our strong, collective EU response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; pursuing our international commitments, including strengthening our relationship with the United States and implementing the UN sustainable development goals; advancing the Government's commitments on the shared island initiative; ensuring implementation of the New Decade, New Approach commitment, working with the relevant Departments, North and South, in advancing these goals; strengthening the British-Irish bilateral relationship including with London, and the devolved governments in Wales and Scotland; implementation of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Government's climate action plan; advancements in Sláintecare, improving access, outcomes and affordability for patients by increasing the capacity and effectiveness of the workforce, infrastructure and provision of patient care; supporting the development of the next national disability strategy that will be a blueprint for the further realisation of the UNCRPD; oversight of implementation of the third domestic, sexual and gender-based violence strategy, which is something we have discussed, rightly, a lot today in this House; oversight of the implementation of A Policing Service for our Future, which is the Government's plan to implement the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland; development of the well-being framework for Ireland and driving its whole-of-government integration in policymaking and budgetary systems; publication of Harnessing Digital, the digital Ireland framework in February 2022; and the establishment of a child poverty and well-being programme office in the Department of the Taoiseach. These are a number of the vehicles we have in place to ensure implementation of the programme for Government and to monitor that implementation across the Government.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On 21 May, the Cabinet approved plans that will result in the

loss of direct DART services that serve Howth, Sutton and Bayside. Under the plans approved by Cabinet, these direct services will be lost and they will be replaced by a shuttle service between Howth and Howth Junction DART station. This is happening at a time we should be encouraging more people to use public transport rather than taking decisions that will have the opposite effect. Will the Taoiseach tell Irish Rail it needs to maintain these direct services that service Howth, Sutton and Bayside?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I got a phone call earlier that I would have much preferred not to have got relating to the technological giant, PayPal. There will be up to 85 redundancies happening in the next while. I received the usual commitments of enhanced packages.

4 o'clock

In or around 900 people work at the Dublin site and 700 staff now remote work but would have formerly been on the Dundalk site. They are saying that these losses would be almost half and half. We would like to see some kind of engagement from the Government to ensure that it would be at the lower end of the figures and that workers would be looked after. The State should engage with people and facilitate further employment for them. There were some 200 redundancies in February. The company says it is still committed to Ireland. There needs to be engagement from the Government so that we can assure those other workers who are very worried - my heart goes out those who may lose their jobs - that there is a commitment by this tech giant company to Ireland.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: One of the commitments in the programme for Government is to invest in sporting infrastructure. I was delighted to see the successful European Championship athletes visit the Taoiseach recently. It was important that he spent time with them. Ireland had an incredible European Championships. Ciara Mageean won a gold medal, as did the mixed 4 x 400 m relay athletes, and Rhasidat Adeleke won a superb silver medal. I congratulate Rhasidat on an incredible achievement. If she is listening, I want to assure her that 99.9% of the people of Ireland are proud of her. We are absolutely delighted with her performance and I say to her to ignore the bigotry and racism. The women's 4 x 400 m athletes also won a silver medal. This placed us on the medals table ahead of the likes of Germany and Ukraine, which are athletic superpowers. We did all this despite the fact that we are not investing in our athletics infrastructure. My point is that we need to invest in athletics infrastructure. For example, in Cork, 8,600 athletes do not have an athletics track to train on. This is despite the fact that the likes of Phil Healy, the "Ballineen Bullet", who was part of that 4 x 400 m women's silver medal winning team, is a member of Bandon Athletics Club, as is Nicola Tuthill who finished ninth in the hammer throwing event. Bandon Athletics Club is in the process of building an athletics track. This could be a game changer for athletics in Cork. I ask the Taoiseach to support this facility and investment in it. The club has submitted a sports capital grant application. It needs to be successful in this regard, but it also needs other sources of funding to complete this vitally important project.

Deputy Mick Barry: I ask the Taoiseach about the issue of childcare in Ballincollig in Cork or, more precisely, the lack thereof. Cork City Council recently turned down planning permission for a crèche. Does the Taoiseach know how many disappointed parents had their names on the list for a place? The answer is 400. One of those 400 parents was on unpaid leave at the time. She will now have to quit her job to look after her child. Another disappointed couple will have to carry on driving 27 km each way every day for childcare outside Ballincollig. It is the only facility they can get. In the next decade, Cork will be the fastest growing city in the

State and Ballincollig will be one of the city's fastest growing areas. What does the Government intend to do now to resolve the childcare crisis in Ballincollig and other population centres like it?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The programme for Government was written when we were coming out of the Covid pandemic. Much of it dealt with economic recovery and the impact of Covid on particular groups of workers. One group that I campaigned and advocated for very strongly was taxi drivers. They last two years of work at the time. Following pleas from the taxi drivers, the Government conceded that those with cars reaching the ten-year replacement deadline during the pandemic would get an extension. Some of those who were reaching that deadline got an extension. I have raised this issue before. An anomaly has emerged for other people who were on the road with slightly newer cars but still lost two years of work. That means two years during which they could not finance the loans they had. They lost the same amount of income and were equally impacted. They are now facing having to take their cars off the road in January, even though they last two years of income. This is very urgent for them. I put a question to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, about this and he basically said he was not planning to do anything about it. That is wrong. Anybody who was on the road at the time lost two years of income. Their cars did not operate for two years, so it is legitimate that they would get an additional two years. In fact, there will be an anomaly where cars that are much older will still be on the road in 2027 because of the extension their owners got, whereas cars that are newer will be forced off the road. This is a very big financial issue for the taxi drivers involved. We are appealing that everybody who was on the road at the time get the two-year extension.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I had a look again through the programme for Government. I was struck by the number of commitments to improve animal welfare standards. There is even a reference to prioritising equine welfare based on a robust traceability system, which would certainly raise eyebrows after last weeks RTÉ's "Prime Time Investigates" programme. I will focus on Dublin Zoo, an issue I raised previously. There is evidence to suggest that the zoo continues to fall below appropriate animal welfare standards. There have been protected disclosures and allegations made in the Dáil and Seanad and there has been an investigation by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS. I understand that last week a zebra in the zoo was shot dead with a gun. It was euthanised with a gun, as opposed to with an injection which is the appropriate and normal approach in zoos around the world. This was not done by a vet and vets are the only people licensed to do it. It is not the case that the zebra was running around endangering people. There is a serious question about this event and there are other serious questions about the zoo. A question that has never been looked relates to the involvement of Management Support Services, MSS, at Dublin Zoo. This company is also involved in the notorious Ashton Dog Pound where all sorts of abuse of dogs and so on took place. A new, independent investigation is needed into what is happening in Dublin Zoo.

The Taoiseach: I am not aware of that situation but is a very serious matter to raise. Let me ask for a report from the relevant Department. Dublin Zoo is independently run but receives funding from the State. I take animal welfare extraordinarily seriously. I was utterly horrified by the revelations in the "Prime Time Investigates" programme last week. I want to receive a full and comprehensive report on the actions that will now be taken on this matter at an Irish and an EU level.

Deputy Boyd Barrett and I do not often agree on issues but the issue he raised about taxi drivers seems logical to me. It was raised with me by taxi drivers in certain parts of Dublin

when I was out on the canvass recently. The Deputy raised it with me previously and I asked that it be looked into. I ask whoever monitors these matters for me in officialdom to please follow up on this. I will certainly follow up on it on my return to my office. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, about it directly to see if anything can be done and come back to the Deputy on it.

I thank Deputy Barry for raising the issue of childcare in Ballincollig in Cork. The number of names on the list indicates the real challenge that clearly exists regarding capacity and childcare services. The Government is already providing capital grants for the refurbishment and expansion of childcare facilities. I can send the Deputy a note on this. Capital funding is now available through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. I hope it will be utilised in west Cork and by the county childcare committee and others who might be in a position to help. I will send a detailed note on what is available and I am happy to engage further with the Deputy on it.

The happiest day I have had an office is the day I met some of the Irish team who had returned from European Athletics Championships. Their energy and positivity are such a tonic. They have done the whole country proud and I know they are not finished yet. Many of them are planning for the Olympics. I join the Deputy in wishing Rhasidat and the other athletes the very best. Phil Healy was part of the group that came to see me. The Government wants to do a lot more to invest in sporting infrastructure. We are beginning to make real progress in a number of sports on the global stage. Beyond that, sport from a community physical and mental health point of view is vital. We will have the largest sports capital programme ever under the Minister for State, Deputy Thomas Byrne. Details of that will probably be announced around September. I think there will be some €250 million in that. All three parties in government are eager to do more on investing in sports infrastructure. I will raise with the Minister the specific issue the Deputy raised related to an athletics track.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú, I am not briefed on the PayPal potential redundancy issue and therefore do not want to say anything that cuts across a process or causes any anxiety. Of course, we think of anyone who is made redundant and, as the Deputy says, our hearts go out to them. Any time there are redundancies, the full infrastructure of the State must kick in, including the Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Social Protection. I will speak to both Departments. I will also ask the Minister for enterprise, Deputy Burke, to come back to the Deputy specifically regarding PayPal and any interactions or engagement the State is having with it on its Irish operation.

In response to Deputy O'Callaghan, one of the benefits of being out on the campaign over the past while was that this issue was raised with me on a number of occasions when I was in Howth. I clearly understand the depth of feeling there is in the Deputy's constituency related to this issue. The Government signed off on what I believe is a good project, the expansion of the DART network. I am very conscious, though, that the consequence of that in terms of disruption to people in Howth, Sutton and Bayside is something people very strongly about. I intend to engage with Irish Rail on this and I will be happy to come back to the Deputy on it.

Estimates for Public Services 2024: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for Public Ser-

vices for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2024: Votes 16, 23 and 34.

International Protection, Asylum and Migration: Motion

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind Members that this debate will adjourn at the end of the second speaking round and resume tomorrow.

The Taoiseach: I move:

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

(a) Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast),

(b) Regulation (EU) 2024/1347 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 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, amending Council Directive 2003/109/EC and repealing Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council,

(c) Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU,

(d) Regulation (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework, and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147,

(e) Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013,

(f) Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on the establishment of "Eurodac" for the comparison of biometric data in order to effectively apply Regulations (EU) 2024/1351 and (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Directive 2001/55/EC and to identify illegally staying third-country nationals and stateless persons and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council, and

(g) Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 addressing situations of crisis and force majeure in the field of migration and asylum and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147,

a copy of each measure having been laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd May, 2024.

I am sharing time with the Tánaiste and the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue before the House today. I thank the Minister for Justice for leading the Government on this issue.

Earlier today, the Cabinet met to discuss this pact, which will shape European migration policy for the next decade. As we begin the debate on the pact in the Dail, it is important to first assure the public that there is a strong cross-government response to migration and the increased number of people seeking international protection in Ireland. We understand that the Irish people want to see people fleeing war and persecution treated with compassion. That is what we want to do here in Ireland - treat people with compassion - but we also need to see that balanced with common sense, which means rules being enforced without fear of favour and systems working efficiently. It means government working coherently, not operating in silos, constantly monitoring the situation and consistent, clear decision-making. Today, the Government did just that. We approved a proposal from the Minister for legislation to increase airline fines for people who arrive in Ireland without documents. We agreed a proposal from the Minister to increase the number of people working on processing asylum applications, meaning faster decisions for all, which is in everybody's interest. We agreed to free more gardaí from desk duty, allowing them work on enforcement measures.

In recent weeks, the Government has taken several measures aimed at managing our migration system better. We have designated more countries as safe, meaning quicker processing times. We have started to means-test welfare payments for asylum seekers and have begun reducing the payments to those claiming welfare while working. We have increased workplace inspections to prevent people working in the shadow economy. Through our embassy network, we have made it clear to those seeking asylum that access to accommodation is a huge challenge. The Government will shortly consider further measures on welfare and related matters. These decisions are necessary to ensure Ireland is not out of kilter with our European neighbours.

Ireland is a country shaped by migration. Our history has been woven by generations of Irish people leaving in search of a better life. That has left scars for families across the country, with every community having its tale of loved ones travelling to different corners of the globe. Today, people come to Ireland in search of a better life for themselves and their families. As a nation of migrants, Irish people know the benefits that inward migration can bring. We know migrants are often the people building our homes and infrastructure. They are the nursing home workers, the doctors and the nurses protecting us when we are at our most vulnerable. We know migrants are often the people serving us food in our hotels, restaurants and cafés and driving our taxis, buses and public transport. We know because we were them. This is also our story.

We welcome people to our shores because we know diversity is good, not just for our economy but also for our society. Ireland benefits from immigration. However, Ireland and all countries must have rules that govern the asylum system and must be upheld. Those who enter Ireland and are determined not to have a right to be here will be processed more quickly and asked to leave more quickly. This year alone, 100 people have been prosecuted for failing to have the necessary documents. Deportation orders signed in 2024 are 83% up on the same period last year. Enforced deportations are up 126% and voluntary returns are up 129%.

There is no disguising the fact that inward migration and the scale of increase are posing

challenges for communities and societies across the country. We need to be honest about that and to rise to meet those challenges and engage with communities. Towns have seen their populations grow significantly over a short period. Many communities have seen hotels and other facilities taken from public use. These were the unfortunate realities of an emergency response to a number of crises across the world. Today, we are beginning to see some progress because around 15% of hotels that had been used to provide asylum accommodation have now been returned to communities. Over the summer months, more will follow and will be returned back to their original use.

Communities have often been pitted against migrants when, in truth, we need a more managed response and sufficient services for everyone. This is the key point. We must not try to divide communities versus migrants but put a more sustained system in place. By shying away from difficult discussions, those discussions do not disappear. All that happens is that this ground gets ceded to extremists who are then allowed to shape and misshape the conversation and debate. By staying silent, we would allow falsehoods and lies to become common in conversations. As politicians of the centre, we must not shirk our responsibilities. We have a duty to engage with people on the realities we are facing. Ireland is not immune to the rise of the far right and in recent elections, we saw the breakthrough of some candidates. That cannot be overstated but nor should it be underestimated. Those who campaign on the politics of division should not be sneered at or ridiculed. However, their narratives should always be challenged. There is an onus on those of us in public office to do so. This includes our politicians but also people outside of public office and there is the role of media and social media companies.

Over the course of this debate, people may well hear many claims that have little regard to fact. Therefore, let me be clear. There are no unvetted male migrants in this country. There is no "implantation of men" in Ireland and Ireland most certainly is not full. Crime does not increase in locations where asylum seekers are living. These are myths but they are worse than that. They are more than myths. They are designed to sow division and spread fear and it is these narratives that can cause riots in our capital city such as those we saw just last year. It is these untruths that have helped to bring people to politicians' homes to subject some of our families to intimidation. It is this hate that is poisoning people across the country to believe a migrant is the enemy. It needs to be called out because it is this radicalisation that has the potential to spin and spill into violence. It needs to end.

As Taoiseach, it is my absolute priority and duty to ensure Ireland has a coherent and effective migration policy and a whole-of-government approach. It is also my duty and obligation to challenge the extremists who claim to speak for this country, generally with no mandate. Waving a tricolour does not make you a patriot. It does not give you the right to intimidate. Equally, though, we must in these debates be willing to differentiate between the extremes - those on the far right, the so-called patriots with their flag-waving - and legitimate concerns and questions that people in communities across Ireland have and which deserve to be answered.

Ireland cannot allow traffickers and smugglers to decide who enters what country, while making significant money and depriving the most vulnerable of their dignity and belongings. Therefore, our goal must be to join forces with friends and colleagues in Europe to fight illegal migration. That is why this migration pact is essential. Let us be honest. There is no European state, big or small, that can single-handedly resolve this problem. Those that have tried have seen their migration numbers increase. The pact before us is a united effort from Europe, after excruciating work and negotiation over a long period, to ensure we have full control of and responsibility for our European borders and that we have a system in place that works across

the European Union for once and for all. This means effective registration and monitoring. It means an effective policy against organised crime gangs and faster, legally binding decisions. Europe is too divided and too fragmented when it comes to migration policy. By each country just looking at protecting its own border and its own rules, we risk ineffective policies that cause fragmentation and secondary movements. Reducing secondary movement to the European Union is of particular benefit to this country. Due to our geographical location, the majority of applicants have already travelled through another EU country. This pact will prevent that. It will allow return operations for all those ineligible for asylum.

In opening this debate, an important debate and one which the Government will absolutely give ample time to, let me conclude where I began. Ireland is a compassionate country full of decent people. Communities have welcomed refugees to their communities and in the overwhelming number of cases without fuss or fanfare. Communities have shown flexibility and have shown care to those who need it most. They want their Government and their public policymakers to ensure the migration system is bedded in common sense. That is what we are working to do across government. However, we cannot do it on our own.

This European pact provides us with the tools, the laws and the structures we need to combat illegal migration while protecting the most vulnerable from the clutches of criminal gangs. Over the next two days we will hear many colleagues across the House proclaim there are easy solutions to the most challenging circumstances. There are no easy responses on this, but there are practical measures we can take in the here and now, and this pact is one of them. Let us not fall for the trap that the small far right has created. Let us unite in the face of hatred, division and racism. Let us listen to our communities and their genuine issues of concern. Let us show the citizens of Ireland and of the European Union that we, the policymakers, are capable of building a migration system that works. This pact is the first step of cohesion.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The measure before this House represents a balanced, ambitious and important initiative to improve the ability of Ireland and our fellow European countries to address very real pressures which have grown due to the scale and nature of migration from outside of Europe. It seeks to ensure that we share burdens, co-operate actively and protect the integrity of the system for protecting those seeking asylum. The asylum and migration pact represents a large-scale restructuring of Ireland's asylum system, a restructuring which will be both firm and fair. It will ensure a faster and more effective system for dealing with applications and directly address issues which have arisen because of the new patterns of migration that have emerged in the past decade.

Let us all be very clear on one thing: those who want to seal off Ireland from the world, those who aspire to some mythical purity on this island know nothing of our past and have nothing to offer a country whose progress and prosperity is fundamentally based on its diversity and engagement with the world. Their attempt to import the "little Englander" mentality continues to be overwhelmingly rejected by the Irish people. As we see every day in culture, sport and enterprise, the Irish people are deeply proud of the diverse faces and histories which represent us to the world. Irishness is not, never has been and must never be something that is fixed and unchanging. The people who fought for and founded our State saw it as a place with multiple identities, open to the world and embodying the most important republican principle of all - to reflect the diversity of its people.

The attempt to exploit sincere concerns about the impact of new levels of migration to Europe must be roundly rejected. We here as democrats must both protect the principles of

humanitarian protection and ensure it quickly and efficiently enforces these principles.

A new era of migration is a global phenomenon and one which is impacting on Europe in particular. In one of the most barbaric examples of the threat to shared values in the modern world, we have even seen countries like Syria and Russia seek to use migration as a weapon against democracies.

No country can deal with challenges of migration alone. To address the pressures of migration in each of our states, we must have greater co-operation and co-ordination among countries of origin, transit and neighbouring countries. It is essential that EU member states stand together and respond as one to establish a more coherent approach to migration, asylum, integration and border management. Effective partnership among ourselves and with third countries is indispensable if we are to achieve sustainable results and better management of migratory pressures.

Our work in this area must be always fully consistent with our international legal obligations. We have to address all of the aspects of this extraordinarily complex issue, including responding to the root causes of migration. We need to look for alignment with our European partners in the area of asylum and migration. We need this to strengthen our ability to meet challenges head on. That is why joining the asylum and migration pact is so important. Through this we can deliver an asylum system that is both firm and fair, a system which is more efficient and capable of providing certainty and clarity at a faster rate for those seeking asylum, a system which protects rights but recognises that when a person is not seeking asylum because of legitimate concern about persecution, their cases should be dealt with quickly and they should return to their home countries.

Opting into the pact will allow for better co-ordination between member states particularly by enhancing data sharing. The pact will also facilitate the faster processing of applications as well as quicker returns of inadmissible and failed asylum applicants. Ireland experiences high levels of secondary movement of people who move from other safe countries before applying for asylum here and because of this, the reforms of the pact are essential for us. On top of this, without opting into the pact we would not be able to abandon any solidarity or burden-sharing mechanisms which could, if deemed necessary, alleviate pressures on our asylum system.

The Government has not been waiting on the pact to deliver reform. We are significantly ramping up resources at every stage of the international protection system. This is and will continue to be vital. The Government also introduced accelerated processing for applicants coming from countries that are considered to be safe in November 2022. This has led to a 50% reduction in the applicants coming from those countries. Since then, further countries have been added to the list with more under review. Ireland consistently promotes respect for the obligation on states to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons regardless of their migration status and has taken this approach into all of our international and multilateral engagements.

Through a programme for international development Ireland seeks to address the poverty, instability and lack of opportunity which can leave many people feeling they have no option other than to seek a better life elsewhere. We are committed to working towards a world in which migration is safe, orderly and regular, as called for in the global compact for migration.

We also work with international organisations for migration on issues around disinforma-

tion on migration and on harnessing the potential of diasporas to contribute to development in countries of origin and destination.

At the second global refugee forum in December 2023, Ireland made a number of pledges, including on resettlement, complementary safety and legal pathways for admission of refugees, and increased support for international agencies. It is important for us all to note the huge amount of work that will need to be undertaken to operationalise the pact at the same time as other member states in 2026. Work on transposing legislation will begin as soon as possible. Therefore, it is vital that the Commission is notified of Ireland's intention to opt in in the coming weeks. The European Commission has published a common implementation plan to support the development of member states' national implementation plans, which must be produced by December. The European Commission will also support member states with a substantial European Union budget to support implementation of the pact as well as technical and operational support to overhaul their national systems over the coming years. This funding will be distributed through the European Union Asylum Migration and Integration Fund and will help member states in areas such as IT and systems development.

I strongly believe that Ireland's opting into the asylum and migration pact represents the most realistic chance of creating a system that can process asylum applicants as fast as possible and as fairly as possible, and protect the integrity of the asylum system. Our opting into the pact at this stage demonstrates our engagement at an EU level on a global challenge. Through greater co-ordinated action with other EU member states, we can address gaps and key inefficiencies in our current system and ensure those with a valid asylum claim are offered the protection they need.

The pact will ensure a fair sharing of responsibility through stronger governance of asylum and migration policies across the European Union. Central to the pact is reducing movement within European countries, greater data sharing and situational awareness, faster processing and an increased focus on swift returns. Each of these is vital for Ireland in dealing with a challenge of a scale beyond anything we have experienced in the past. We know that migration requires a humane, comprehensive and co-ordinated European response. The decision on who comes to Europe cannot be left to smugglers putting vulnerable people's lives at risk. The pact will ensure fair, efficient and effective action to manage new pressures from migration. Participation in the pact is essential for Ireland, and moving forward with preparations must start as quickly as possible.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): It is a really important debate we are having today, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to outline the benefits of the migration and asylum pact and to outline once again and to stress that inward migration has been hugely positive for Ireland. It has provided significant benefits to our economy and to our society. We can all see this in our hospitals, in our nursing homes, in our hospitality sector and in our agriculture and food processing sectors. We only have to look at the figures. Last year alone, 31,000 employment permits were issued, more than 10,000 of which were issued to people in the health and social work sector. We all have our own stories. My little boy, when he was six months old, had to go into hospital for a number of days. Many of the staff, the doctors and nurses who looked after and minded him, were not born in Ireland or the European Union. We all see the benefits and know that so many of our sectors would be lost without these people. They also contribute significantly to our tax revenue by €3 billion every year. In discussing migration, I am also conscious that Irish people emigrated to every corner of the planet in search of a better life. For a country with a population of more than 5 million people, there are 70 million people

who are part of the diaspora and claim Irish descent. Migration is clearly a part of the Irish story.

In the context of the pact we are discussing today we see more people on the move than at any time since the Second World War. War, conflict, famine, persecution, climate change and poverty are driving these people to seek a better life. The invasion of Ukraine, the war in Syria, and ongoing wars and conflicts in Africa are all driving migration. As we have heard, we are also seeing migration weaponised by countries, including Russia, that seek to undermine our democracies and radicalise political discourse. This was made clear to me in the past few days by ministers in the Scandinavian and Baltic member states, in particular, when attending the Justice and Home Affairs Council. They outlined their concerns and the challenges they are facing. What is clear from these conversations and those referenced by the Taoiseach is that we cannot deal with what is a global and European challenge on our own. The EU migration and asylum pact, which has been negotiated over many years, has now become EU law and represents the collective effort of the European Union to manage this issue and to develop an approach which is firm, but fair, while working with countries to address the root causes of migration. We are here opting into the EU migration and asylum pact. There are those who claim we can go it alone. There are those who claim that Ireland is full, but they have no plan. They have no plan to deal with this challenge and no plan to provide support for those who need it. They have no plan whatsoever.

All the while, like many countries, we have seen and continue to see a significant increase in the number of people applying for international protection. However, it is clear that our system was designed to deal with a volume of applications far lower than we are currently dealing with. Our international protection system is under considerable pressure, but we are responding. We are not waiting. We have ramped up investment in staff, introduced and accelerated our processing system and are strengthening our returns system. The pact presents a significant opportunity to further reform and improve the operation of the international protection system. The legislation we have, which is the 2015 Act, is no longer fit for purpose. Subject to motions being passed in the Dáil and Seanad, I will begin preparations for implementation of the pact, and this will include a new Bill to repeal and replace the International Protection Act 2015. This will be done in parallel with a complete re-engineering of our entire system from start to finish. We need a system that works faster, that enables people granted protection to quickly obtain status, integrate and start a new life, but also ensures the efficient removal of those who are not entitled to be here.

I will give a brief overview of the pact. First, the screening regulation will apply where a person first enters the EU irregularly or is identified in a member state without permission. Such people will be required to undergo a screening procedure within seven days at most. This will consist of identification or verification of identity. There will be health and vulnerability checks, security checks, fingerprints and registration in what is known as the Eurodac database. While we cannot opt into this measure because we are not members of Schengen, we will align our laws with this system to ensure we can benefit from the data which is gathered throughout Eurodac, while also providing this data to other member states. At the end of the screening, all people will be directed to relevant procedures. There will be four procedures, all common across the EU. There will be a border procedure, an accelerated procedure, an inadmissibility procedure and an ordinary or standard procedure.

The most significant change is the introduction of a new mandatory border procedure. This will apply to people who have misled authorities, by destroying identity documents for ex-

ample, who are a danger to national security or public order, or who come from countries with a 20% or lower approval rate for asylum applications across the EU. Those who are processed under the border procedure will not be authorised to enter Ireland and will be accommodated at designated locations. Their applications must be processed within three months, and if unsuccessful, they will be removed within a further three months at most. Ireland already operates an accelerated procedure, for people from safe countries of origin, for example. Since this was introduced in November 2022, the number of people applying from these countries has dropped by 50%. The new regulation will make accelerated processing mandatory for certain applicants and include a three-month deadline for first decisions on such cases. Ireland also already operates an inadmissibility procedure, for people who have already been granted asylum elsewhere. Again, the new regulation requires decisions to be made in the first instance within two months. The ordinary procedure, which is the standard process for international protection applicants introduces a six-month deadline. We will also legislate for appeals timelines, and will, of course, be ambitious in our targets. On identity checking and secondary movements, the Eurodac regulation will give Ireland access to improved IT systems that allow us to carry out these additional checks.

The new regulation expands the scope for wider immigration purposes to include asylum applicants, irregular migrants apprehended at the border, irregular migrants found to be illegally staying, new categories for people who have disembarked following search and rescue operations and beneficiaries of temporary protection. It will also now include children aged six and above, in particular to enhance protections for children and to combat child trafficking. Accessing information on which member state is responsible will help with returning secondary movers to the correct member state. We will, importantly, have access to this security information, where applicable, from screening checks in other member states.

As a country we experience a high level of secondary movement. This is where someone applies for asylum in another member state and then applies in Ireland. The pact provides us with the legal tools necessary to ensure we can return an applicant to the first member state where an international protection application is already lodged. We have heard time and again that the Dublin III regulation is not fit for purpose. It does not work. It will be replaced by the pact. If we do not opt in, therefore, we will have absolutely no legal basis to return people to other member states. The pact will make the transfer process clear. It introduces timelines for the issuing of transfer notifications. It replaces the current take-back request with a simpler take back notification, which will reduce administrative burdens on the current system. It will allow us to identify and return secondary movers to the correct member state responsible, freeing up our own system to assist those seeking international protection swiftly and efficiently.

There are also those who say this will be a cost to Ireland. Of course, there will be a cost in making sure we can ramp up our processing. However, there will be more significant costs if we do not opt in. It is likely we would face higher levels of secondary movement, slower processing and a less efficient returns system. This would result in applicants staying much longer in accommodation and making sure we have to pay for that, as well as other supports. We would not have access to the €1 billion of funding, which will be available to member states to implement the pact across the EU. Further funding will be made available. We need to invest in the system now to make sure it does not cost us in the long run. There are Deputies in the House who say we should abandon European solidarity in favour of going it alone. There are no plans being provided for this option.

Other measures in the pact include a harmonisation of reception conditions across member

states, including accommodation and subsistence provisions. Again, this is to reduce incentives for individuals to move from one member state to another. The pact also establishes a new solidarity mechanism to ensure the fair sharing of responsibility across the EU. We will decide annually how we opt into that. It is not true to say that we will have to accept 30,000 people every year, which is being said by Deputies and Senators. Nor will we be fined hundreds of millions of euro. We will be asked to accept 648 people every year or pay a financial contribution. That decision is completely up to us. Any decision to change those figures or that overall system would have to be agreed by all justice ministers across the EU. What this has done is to show solidarity with member states. We think of those countries on the front line, where there is an unprecedented number of people seeking protection along their shores, such as Greece and Italy. We have to show solidarity and support.

Of course, we are not waiting on the pact to introduce changes. Already, I have doubled the number of staff in the International Protection Office, which has tripled the number of decisions, with further increases planned for this year and next. I introduced fast-track processing in November 2022, as I mentioned earlier, leading to a 50% reduction in applications from those countries. I have suspended visa-free travel for certain refugees and added more countries to the visa-required list. We have ensured over 3,000 doorstep operations were carried out on flights that posed a risk of irregular migration, to the end of May of this year. I am legislating to increase fines on carriers from the current maximum of €3,000 to €5,000. All these changes have meant that in the past two years, the number of people coming through our ports and airports without the correct documentation has reduced by 40%. I am freeing up 100 gardaí from back-office roles to support immigration enforcement activities, including deportations, and we have seen over recent months prosecutions for people arriving without appropriate documentation, a significant number of whom have been imprisoned.

I am continuing to look at additional measures that can be taken in the coming weeks. This includes continuing to ramp up investment in staffing and capacity. Today, I brought a memo to Cabinet setting out how we will hire 400 more staff to bring us in line and to ramp up the system from start to finish. I will complete the review of additional safe countries in the coming weeks, extend restrictions on visa-free travel for certain countries and complete a tender for charter aeroplanes to return unsuccessful applicants. All this work is under way to make sure we are ready to join the pact in two years' time.

As I have said, the pact presents us with an opportunity to completely reform and re-engineer our systems, and I ask those Deputies who are opposing it what their solutions and plans here are. I have outlined some of the benefits to Ireland from joining the pact. However, it would be remiss of me not to point out, and this goes to the Taoiseach's point, that we are a compassionate country and that we want to support those who need our protection and our help. The pact holds benefits for those applicants themselves. It will establish a faster, fairer processing of asylum applications across the EU, providing for appeals and safeguards for vulnerable people, in particular protecting children who are seeking our protection. The pact is a way for us to deal with and respond to what is a global and significant challenge, ensuring we have a system that is firm but fair - fair to those who genuinely need our protection and help but firm to those who do not. I commend this motion to the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government is wrong to adopt the EU migration pact. That it did not even consider, it seems, exercising Ireland's opt-out from any element of the pact is shocking. Migration is a challenging issue. We must, of course, respect international law and co-operate with other states but, ultimately, migration policy must be set by an Irish

Government elected by the Irish people. We must retain the flexibility we currently have. Only by retaining the powers to make our own decisions on migration will we have a rules-based system that is properly managed and fair, that applies common sense and common decency and that recognises the unique challenges Ireland faces. The reality of the common travel area with Britain has not been calculated or considered at all by the Government, it seems. Retaining the power to make decisions in Ireland - standing up for Irish sovereignty - is a key principle in a healthy relationship with the European Union. It informs our position regarding retention of powers in Ireland on taxation, on foreign affairs and defence and on migration. In each of these cases, power should remain with the Irish Government.

The world is, as has been said, experiencing an ever-increasing rate of instability and volatility and this is a major factor in how the issue of migration manifests itself in the here and now. Putin's criminal invasion of Ukraine has seen the largest displacement of people in Europe since the Second World War, dramatically increasing the number of people seeking refuge across the EU. The impact of climate change, persecution, war, famine and natural disaster sees people flee the global south for their lives and run the gauntlet of conflict, boiling hot deserts, human traffickers, sexual violence and extortion. Thousands have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea attempting to make it to Europe in search of safety and sanctuary. This human catastrophe is born of global inequality and injustice that has persisted for generations, an inequality rooted in western colonialism and its devastating legacy of exploitation of resources, structural disadvantage, construction of divisions that fuel conflict and civil war, and the failure of the West to address these injustices. Becoming a refugee is a desperate act of survival. Those seeking refuge in Ireland must be treated with respect and dignity, their human rights fully vindicated. A fully resourced, efficient immigration system is central to vindicating those rights. A transparent system of rules, rules which are enforced, is at the heart of protecting the vulnerable and ensuring a system that works and enjoys public confidence and public support.

The truth is the Government has failed to plan and resource a functioning immigration system and that failure belongs to this Government alone, just as the Government failure to provide homes, medical care, childcare and so many other basic essentials to our citizens also rests with the Government. Those who would seize on Government failure in order to whip up fear, tension and division are wrong. They want to punch down instead of up, to blame the immigrant for everything and the Government for nothing, it seems. The reality is the Government's approach has been utterly shambolic, a chaotic mess, evidenced best by the tent cities that sprung up in Mount Street and along the banks of the Grand Canal here in Dublin. It is, therefore, no surprise that people wonder whether anybody competent is in charge. The Government has caused a scenario of division and tension within communities. It has caused ordinary people who have no truck with bigotry or racism, but who are concerned, to feel isolated and unheard for fear of being branded a racist should they open their mouths. That is wrong. The lack of proper community consultation from the Government has been a disaster, and those on the Government benches should take responsibility for it. They have served to fan the flames of distrust and tension. Just as they correctly call out the far right, the hard right or those who seek to weaponise resource shortages against vulnerable people, their responsibility for this mess has to be named and identified also.

The Taoiseach: And yours.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The increasing number of people seeking asylum places an onus on every government, including theirs, to plan and resource an immigration system that is fit for purpose and that safeguards social cohesion as well, and that has not happened. Now,

by opting in to the EU pact, the Government compounds its failure and shirks its leadership and responsibility. It proposes to hand responsibility and power for Ireland's immigration policies over to Brussels lock, stock and barrel. Signing up to this pact in its entirety ties the hands of future Irish Governments to set common-sense policies that are best for Ireland. These decisions are best taken here in Ireland. Agreeing to this pact represents a dangerous erosion of Irish sovereignty.

The Taoiseach: It does not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am an Irish republican. I lead an Irish republican party. I believe passionately in the principles of equality and inclusion. I despise every form of bigotry, sectarianism, racism, exclusion and discrimination. For our part, our commitment to equality includes tackling wealth inequality, standing up for working-class communities, for ordinary people and families and for carers, and investing in communities that have been failed and ignored by successive Governments. This is the lens through which I, as an Irish republican, view everything, including migration. It must be for an Irish Government to decide key aspects of our immigration policy. That is how we best achieve an immigration system that is fair, efficient and enforced, an immigration system that protects the human rights of applicants and safely returns those who are not granted status here, a system that upholds the functioning of the nation for all who call Ireland home, a system that ensures fairness, decency, common sense, the protection of human rights and that also commands public support and public confidence.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "to accept the following measures" up to and including the words "migration and asylum and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147" and substitute the following:

"(a) Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013, and

(b) Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on the establishment of 'Eurodac' for the comparison of biometric data in order to effectively apply Regulations (EU) 2024/1351 and (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Directive 2001/55/EC and to identify illegally staying third-country nationals and stateless persons and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council".

We oppose this motion. Where Sinn Féin stands on the issue of migration is similar to where the vast bulk of Irish people stand. We believe in common sense and common decency. Most people recognise that where people are genuinely fleeing war and oppression, they deserve protection and support. Most Irish people recognise that many migrants make a huge contribution to Irish society. Most people also agree that this must be on the basis of rules and where there are rules, they must be applied. They want to see resources prioritised to those who need them most. It is clear resources are currently scarce and under severe pressure. People do not want to see a migration system that is unmanaged. They do not want to see a system that is

slow, inefficient and fails to follow through. They want to see a system that is fair, efficient and enforced. The rules must be followed up on and where someone is deemed not to be in genuine need of international protection, he or she needs to be returned.

Irish people want to see a system that applies common sense and common decency. There is no sense in the Government's approach to the migration pact. The Minister confirmed to me at the justice committee that absolutely no consideration was given to not opting in to all of this pact.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I would not have done-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is what you said. I asked a you a very straight question and you said the answer to that first question is "No." That is what you said. We can look back at the record afterwards but you said very clearly that no consideration was given, and I checked it again this morning. It was a reckless and not thought-through approach.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am not disputing that there is nothing that does not benefit us.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: You can clarify that in the closing remarks but what is on the record is crystal clear, Minister. This is a reckless and not thought-through approach and the public would be absolutely astonished at this. We are in a unique position. We share a common travel area with Britain as we have for the guts of a century. We have considerations that no other country has because of that travel area. It is my view that it is a mistake not to ensure we have flexibility. If we are tied in to the EU system entirely we reduce our ability to respond and legislate in a bilateral way with Britain. We are not blind to the necessity of international co-operation where that is necessary and where it makes sense. We would and do support measures that are in the interest of Ireland where we believe international co-operation makes sense. We have to be able to return those who seek to make an asylum application here to the first country where an international protection applicant has made a claim. That is why we support opting into the asylum and migration management regulation. We have to be able to access the fingerprint database at Eurodac and all the data associated with that to ensure we have information on who enters the State and to assist with vetting, conducting checks, tackling child trafficking and returning asylum seekers where appropriate. That is why we support the Eurodac regulation which makes provision for those legislative powers. However, we will oppose opting into the measures that are not helpful and which give powers to the EU and will tie the hands of future Irish Governments. We oppose opting into the procedures regulation, the crisis and *force majeure* regulation, the qualifications directive, the reception conditions directive and the EU resettlement framework. We do so because we are opposed to the Government's plan to opt Ireland in fully to the migration pact. This is an issue of Irish sovereignty and flexibility into the future. Signing up to the migration pact will tie the hands of future Irish Governments. There are decisions that are better to be made in Ireland and the Minister herself has outlined the various things she believes she can do without the migration pact. It is our view that much more can still be done.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Sinn Féin is opting in to the bulk of it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: No, if the Tánaiste listens back that is not the case. Only by retaining the powers to make our own decisions on migration will we maintain a system that is properly managed and fair and that applies common sense and common decency. It does not make sense to give up that flexibility.

Sinn Féin also opposes the migration pact because there are significant human rights concerns. Several human rights organisations outlined a number of concerns to the justice committee regarding the potential in some of the provisions of the pact and the welfare of vulnerable asylum seekers. We know the stories about detention centres in countries such as Greece. In recent days the BBC carried horrific reports of migrants deliberately thrown into the sea and put out to sea. These are stories that would make one's blood run cold. The EU is complicit in this. The EU migration pact does not address these serious shortcomings in EU migration policy. Migration does not arise from nowhere. It is caused by war, conflict, poverty, inequality and climate change and Ireland should have a role in peace and conflict resolution.

I will comment briefly on the plague that is racist commentary and that unfortunately has become too commonplace in society and particularly online. It is truly a disgrace that people chose to attack someone who brought such pride to Ireland as Rhasidat Adeleke with some even seeking to question her Irishness. It is a disgrace that we have seen people attacked and killed for not speaking English as was Josip Štrok in west Dublin. We must take every opportunity to stand against such hatred. There are people who seek to stoke division. This is quite different from those who have genuine concerns about migration. There are undoubtedly ways of raising those issues. I recognise that people have concerns and it is important that Irish politics does not repeat the mistakes made elsewhere of discarding entirely people who have such reservations. People are entitled to have their views and express them. Many people have expressed such concerns to me in respectful ways that I can comprehend but that can never justify violence and racism.

I acknowledge some recent developments. I note the Government has now moved on what Sinn Féin said with regard to chartering flights. I also welcome what the Minister said about 400 additional staff which is another thing Sinn Féin would have been calling for in addition to the point about increased fines on airlines. This is another point Sinn Féin advocated for and I am glad the Minister is listening to some of those points and I hope she will listen to further points. With regard to chartering flights, where this has utility and we do not disagree with it, it would be far more effective to ensure the rules are in fact applied and enforced because the attitude of this Government seems to be that it is not worth the trouble of following up and ensuring people have left. Just as I said that people recognise the need to provide protection for people who need it, people also recognise the rules must mean something. In 2022, there were 5,711 applications for asylum refused, withdrawn or inadmissible with 948 - or 10% - of applicants issued with orders and only 52 of those orders enforced by the GNIB. Of that 948, 317 applicants were then confirmed to have left by the Department of Justice. That is a small portion of them. In 2024, of 586 orders there were 220 confirmed returned by the Department of Justice. Again this is a minority of those concerned.

This Government's policy is not to follow up on applications and expect unsuccessful asylum seekers to debark themselves without oversight and verification. If someone is willing to leave themselves, voluntarily, that is better for everyone, but if that is not the case the rules have to be enforced and it has become clear the authorities do not know where many international protection applicants are. Our system must be fair, efficient and enforced and in my evaluation it fails on all three counts.

Deputy Pa Daly: This is a welcome but delayed debate. The justice committee completed its report on the migration pact on 2 May but the Government postponed the debate until after the election. A response to a parliamentary question submitted in April confirmed the Government was in preparation for the implementation of the pact and it said that:

> While Ireland has not yet opted-into most of the Pact measures ... other Member States will be bound by them two years after they are adopted [and] Member States are beginning to prepare their transposing legislation ... for the Pact to go live in 2026.

Meanwhile, others have been using migration to undermine the case for a new Government, for a fresh approach, and change that is needed in housing, health, employment and education. In the local election debate, I saw some people trying to drag the debate and other politicians into the gutter, telling untruths about asylum seekers, about politicians, about the Garda, and questioning the right of Irish citizens to even run in the election. Sinn Féin supports a regulated system of immigration and asylum that allows for asylum seekers to be processed expeditiously and for those with qualifications in areas where there are shortages, such as in our nursing homes, to be welcomed here. The asylum system has been broken for some time. The Government has failed to accommodate people, failed to give them proper decisions expeditiously, and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in charge of this entire mess for decades now. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael seem to oppose their own policy on asylum and migration or certainly have not budgeted for it when they trumpet the announcement. Green Party Ministers are being left isolated and left to deal with the mess within accommodation and we are left with a not-for-profit approach followed steadfastly by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael since the former introduced it nearly 20 years ago as a supposed stopgap but it has cost the State more and more and has created divisions within communities.

5 o'clock

The removal of asylum seeker tents and the lack of consultation with communities arose from this approach and while the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the increase of international protection applicants are challenges, the Government has shown no real inclination to fix the issues up to now.

One of the simple reasons this is the case is reliance on private operators and ignoring State-led solutions. When left to the market, accommodation will inevitably only be provided where it is profitable to do so. This means interim accommodation in villages, towns and areas outside towns where property prices are low and businesses are struggling. People living there are inevitably struggling themselves meaning resentment can be stoked by the far right, which is increasingly organised and dangerous. I saw some videos that were treated as amusing in the local elections at the beginning but, in their attacks, were certainly not funny. Previous analyses have showcased that some areas have had to carry a larger share of the burden. It is within this context that we must consider the pact and the measures therein.

We need to retain our common sense remembering our history of emigration and reaching out in support of people in countries that have struggles, and we need flexibility. There are major human rights concerns in this criticism of the pact and the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice highlighted this. We listened to the concerns of organisations regarding the border procedure, the possibility of detentions and the welfare of vulnerable asylum seekers and we share concerns around detention, assessments, inspections and implementation. We heard reference to the nine migrants overboard and are also aware that in 2023, more than 2,500 human beings were reported dead or disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea. People escaping conflict and persecution or seeking economic security have faced illegal pushbacks and arbitrary detention and rescue at sea is not addressed here.

It is possible to adopt some of these regulations and not others. We should control our im-

migration rules at national level. Most of the measures in the pact are not in Ireland's interest. We must retain our discretion. We are unique within the EU in having only one land border - one we, of course, want to remove. We are also the only jurisdiction that speaks English, our island cannot be easily reached by small boats and we have a unique culture of emigration and solidarity.

There are also unknowable elements in the future. Signing up to the pact wholesale will limit Ireland's ability to respond to these challenges. Preparing our own safe country list is also vital. Regarding the assessment of conditions in other countries, while we should look at what happens in the UK and the rest of Europe, we should take into account what Human Rights Watch and the UN are saying.

We need to understand and appreciate the reasons for this crisis and opt into regulations where European co-operation is crucial, including an approach that opts us into Eurodac for vetting and allowing safe return but not considering our own policies and other regulations is irresponsible. For those reasons, we cannot support the pact in full and will vote accordingly.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is no logical basis for a wholesale opt in to the EU asylum and migration pact. Ireland has opt-outs for a reason. We are an island nation divided into two political jurisdictions, one of which has been forced out of the EU; our nearest neighbour has left the EU; and we are a part of a common travel area. Future Governments will need flexibility to deal with future challenges. What the Government is proposing to this House is that it will tie the hands of this State to meet those challenges.

How many times in this Chamber does a Minister respond to a sensible and practical proposal with the assertion that it cannot be implemented because of EU constraints? Today the Minister wants to add to those constraints. We can opt into some parts of this pact and opt out of others and that is what we should do. We should opt into those parts that are necessary to have a fair, efficient and enforced asylum system, namely, those parts that provide for the return to international protection applicants and those that allow for the sharing of information, and opt out of those that are not necessary, namely, measures that could as easily be enacted domestically or that could prevent governments taking emergency or speedy decisions. That the Minister has confirmed that she has not even given any consideration to opting out of most or even some of this pact is not only a failure on her part, it verges on maladministration. If the Government moves full throttle to sign up to every part of the migration and asylum pact, the only meaningful outcome will be the undermining of sovereignty and our ability to make decisions at home. It will not change the fundamental failures of this Government. It will not address the accommodation shortage that has disgracefully resulted in vulnerable people being forced to sleep on the streets or in tents. It will not address the concerns of communities that have been ignored and dismissed by Government, which has allowed private operators to make millions of euro while ignoring the capacity of those local communities and the public services on which they rely. It will not deliver a fair, efficient and enforced system. To be clear about what that means, a fair system is one that treats those seeking asylum with dignity and respect and ensures adequate engagement with communities before, not after, decisions that affect them are made. An efficient system is one that processes applications quickly and ensures that those who are eligible to remain are welcomed into society and supported in entering into their communities to make a positive contributions to them. An enforced system is one that quickly returns those who are not eligible to remain to their state of origin. None of that is beyond our ability, although it does appear it is beyond the competence of the Government. Things can be done better by a better government but this Government is trying to make things more difficult

for its successors by signing us up to a pact from which we will not be able to withdraw. It is not acceptable and this House must make a stand by rejecting the Government motion before us.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Labour Party in this debate. Recent debates on immigration have been dominated by disinformation. This is regrettable because it is essential we stick to the facts. It is important to state unequivocally that seeking asylum is a human right and that under international law, everyone has the right to apply for asylum if they are fleeing conflict or persecution nor can any state opt out of that fundamental international legal obligation. One might not think this was the case listening to some electioneering and scaremongering in recent weeks but that is the fact.

A further fact is that when we talk about immigration and the right to seek asylum, we are speaking about people - human beings like us who are seeking refuge here. Ours is a welcoming country. Sometimes the bad news stories dominate. Across the country, communities have welcomed and offered huge supports to those who have come here fleeing the war in Ukraine and war and persecution elsewhere. In my constituency, I have been proud to work with residents' groups and committed volunteers through Dublin 6 and Dublin 4 for all groups. It has been really emotional to meet with some of those who sought asylum here. These are people who when I first met them six or eight months ago knew nobody but are now embedded in their community such as the young man in Rathmines I met this morning who came here fleeing persecution and who now has a job and is embedded in sports clubs. Knowing and befriending many of those who have come to seek refuge has deepened my own dismay at the toxicity of this debate. I acknowledge the very positive messages and speeches from the Government side on the benefits of inward migration for Ireland. My own family is a testament to that. My grandfather sought refuge here with his young family after the horrors of the Second World War and built up Waterford Glass. Those are the sort of positive benefits we have seen. All of us must stand firm against racism and anti-migrant sentiments. We have seen far too much of that in the recent elections, particularly directed against candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds, which was appalling to witness.

We in Labour agree with the need for a cross-EU approach to migration and migration policy. We cannot pretend that this is something that any EU state can go it alone on because people will always be forced to leave their homes to go somewhere safer. As global conflicts worsen, the climate crisis deepens and as we see appalling horrors in Gaza and so many other countries such as Afghanistan, we know people are fleeing their homes for safer places. That trend will not reverse so the notion that we can go it alone when this is a global issue does not hold water. I do not agree with those in opposition who suggest that this is the case. Even this pact has many positive aspects such as measures to speed up the processes because long delays in our own asylum system have been chronic and the effects of those delays on the welfare of individuals and families have been well-documented by many journalists such as Shamim Malekmian of the *Dublin Inquirer*. We also need measures like the Eurodac regulation because we know the *status quo* in Ireland is not working and is failing those trapped for too long in the international protection system and those being moved along in tents in my constituency and elsewhere without any adequate provision of accommodation. We agree in principle with a cross-European approach. I am a committed European as are my Labour colleagues. I believe that the EU, founded as a peace project, can be a social Europe that protects and bolsters human rights across the continent but this involves solidarity with the global south and persecuted peoples around the world. Unfortunately, what we are seeing is a hardening of attitudes against those from the global south. This has been well documented by Irish writers. In her amazing

book *My Fourth Time, We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route*, Sally Hayden charted the unthinkable human cost of detention camps in other countries that are operated in complicity with the EU. She spoke so eloquently about EU complicity with human rights abuses in the Mediterranean Sea where so many people have tragically met their deaths while attempting to enter Europe. I am thinking of the Irish writer Paul Lynch, whose Booker winning *Prophet Song* sets out in articulate detail how families can get to a point where they are forced to put to an unsafe sea to seek a better life for themselves and their children. Warsan Shire, a British Somali poet, wrote "[N]no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark ... you have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land". That is the crux of this issue when we debate migration.

Seeking asylum, fleeing one's home and risking one's personal and family safety is not something anyone does lightly. Asylum seekers and those who seek refuge should be treated with dignity because all people should be treated with dignity. We are fortunate that we are in a safe and peaceful country, but many others are not. The EU should, therefore, be able to devise a more humane approach in solidarity with those who flee persecution. What we should be seeing from the EU is a greater commitment to establishing cross-European legal pathways for those who wish to bring their families here, and bring their skills and expertise and forge a better life. Why not an EU-wide or Donnelly visa approach which operated successfully for so many Irish people in the US? That is the sort of solidarity mechanism the EU should develop.

Instead, in other aspects of the migration pact, beyond those I have mentioned, we are seeing, unfortunately, a worsening of human rights standards. That is why we in Labour have strong objections to elements of the pact, while acknowledging that the principle of co-operation is necessary. As I said, we have seen the hardening position on migrant rights across Europe and elements of the pact bear out that. We have strong misgivings about the impact of some elements of the pact on the right to claim asylum and the potential for worsening conditions in detention and reception centres.

As I said, our current lack of capacity to accommodate those who seek refuge here is already untenable. It is indefensible that the Government has not implemented the Catherine Day report and put in place the necessary capacities. It is unsustainable and inhumane to keep putting up barriers to prevent people from sleeping in public places, and yet not providing them with anywhere else to go. We are seeing that daily on the canals and in public parks a stone's throw from here.

Our current system is not sustainable, but there are worse systems already in place in other countries. Detention measures have been implemented in other countries such as Italy, where Giorgia Meloni's far right government is in situ. We are concerned that mechanisms such as the asylum procedure regulation, APR, will render Ireland in a position whereby we are taking steps that are incompatible with human rights protections. The APR contains a border procedure which could block the entry of asylum seekers to member states, thereby creating a legal fiction of non-entry where a person is physically in a country but not legally regarded as being present in that country with, therefore, an erosion of human rights. This could impact in particular on survivors of human trafficking with limited access to legal representation.

We will also see a worsening of the conditions in which people may be detained. In Ireland, we have correctly criticised that sort of mechanism where it has happened elsewhere, such as on the border in the US or in Russia. Yet, there is no clarity as to how this measure will be implemented here. We need clarity. I am mindful that organisations like the Irish Refugee Council

have warned that the migration pact, if implemented here, will lead to fewer safeguards and increased levels of detention and destitution among people seeking protection in Ireland.

We must also recall that there has been a lot of discussion about illegal entry to the country, without document or passports. We have to recall that there are countries like Afghanistan from where so many people have been forced to flee. Most who manage to get out of Afghanistan have no alternative but to travel without a passport or any legal document. Those without documentation are being unnecessarily disparaged in public discourse.

Under the APR, it is not those without documentation who would potentially be subject to a lessening of human rights protection; those arriving from countries with a recognition rate of 20% or less would also be affected. The APR procedure, coupled with limited vulnerability assessments, make up a dangerous combination when it comes to ensuring the continued human rights protections of those who are among the most vulnerable on earth.

As a former legal practitioner, I want to close by mentioning my concerns in respect of people's recourse to the courts under aspects of the pact. When we opt into a discretionary EU measure, we vote to suspend the application of the Constitution to that. While the EU charter on human rights will continue to apply, our courts will lose the ability to apply Irish constitutional principles. That is not to be taken lightly. It makes it all the more regrettable that we have not been provided with the opportunity to debate each aspect of the pact in the Oireachtas, as we sought. Instead, we are being given the opportunity to vote on a take-it-or-leave-it approach. That is a mistake and it is regrettable that we will be forced to vote against the Government motion tomorrow.

As I said, we are concerned about aspects of the pact and that some measures of the package will result in a deterioration in standards and the introduction of an asylum procedure which does not respect basic rights or contain safeguards for vulnerable applicants. We are concerned that, just as occurs currently with our emissions targets and other legal limits, the solidarity measures in the pact may see Ireland simply paying out from a budget surplus rather than offering support to our fair share of those who need help. While the Government has provided assurances that our way of implementing this pact will be more humane than other countries, nonetheless there are aspects of the pact that raise serious concerns about human rights protections.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): Opting into the pact is Ireland's opportunity to undertake co-ordinated wide-reaching reforms in an area that has seen mounting public interest in recent times. It will provide better co-ordination between member states, the faster processing of applications and return of inadmissible and failed asylum applicants, reduced secondary movement and enhanced data sharing and screening through an improved Eurodac system.

We in Ireland have seen record numbers of asylum applications in recent years, with 13,651 international protection applications lodged in 2022, representing a 415% increase from 2021 figures. This trend is broadly comparable to what we are seeing in Europe, where there was a large influx of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016 and again in 2022 and 2023. The reforms as presented in the pact can be seen against a backdrop of the long-standing challenges faced by member states in dealing with the increase in the number of asylum applications. There is also an indication that this record will abate in an increasingly unstable world.

One challenge the pact seeks to address is the enhancement of security and data collection in the area of migration. In this vein, the pact outlines strategies for increasing security along external borders. This includes frameworks for pre-entry screening, establishing an asylum and migration database, efficient boarder procedures for asylum seekers and crisis protocols. Under the pre-screening entry regulation, a uniform pre-entry screening procedure will be introduced for third country nationals who arrive irregularly at an external border or are found staying illegally in a member state. Screening consists of a preliminary health and vulnerability check, an identity check, the registration of biometric data in the appropriate databases and a security check through a query of relevant national and Union databases.

This particular regulation is a Schengen measure and thus Ireland will not be able to opt into it. However, this is a prime example of why it is important that we viewed the pact as a package and not a legislative pick-and-mix, choosing only the regulations we deem that best suit us. Each of the regulations work in harmony with each other. The pact's strengths lie in the fact that it provides a universal and not selective approach. We cannot opt into this particular regulation, we will reap the benefits of it through opting into the Eurodac regulation. Through this, we will be able to access an enhanced Eurodac system which will contain information captured by Schengen countries through the screening process. Opting into the Eurodac provision is of particular importance to us in Ireland as not only will we be able to access further information around any potential security threats, we will also have access to further information around secondary movements.

We are all too aware that Ireland, due to its geographic location, experiences high levels of secondary movements. It is estimated that at any given time upwards of 50% of international protection applicants arriving in Ireland have been in another member state prior to their arrival. By opting into this regulation, we will have further information on these applicants, including their fingerprints, photographs and any potential security flags. It will also allow us to access this information quickly and will aid us in returning secondary movers to the correct member state.

Enhancing security on our own borders is also provided for in the pact with the introduction of mandatory border procedures. Those applicants who have entered the State irregularly and pose a security threat as well as those who present with false documents or are citizens of countries with low recognition rates, will be subject to this procedure and will not be authorised to enter the State. They will be accommodated at designated locations and their applications, appeals and removal decisions must be processed within three months. The aim here is to issue decisions in the quickest time possible to those less likely to have an entitlement to international protection.

As I previously mentioned, the pact emerged from the migrant crisis of 2015 and 2016. We can see the imprint of this on the crisis and *force majeure* regulation proposed in the pact. This regulation allows for countries in times of crisis *and force majeure* situations limited derogations from asylum procedures. These would be temporarily available to member states and would include options such as the option to extend processing times or immediately provide a protection status equivalent to a subsidiary protection. Managing migration must not be presented as a zero-sum game. However, continuing down a path where there is no common system for migration across all member states, leads to a situation where we all lose.

The pact is a balance between proper border management and an asylum and migration system that is fair to those in need of protection but firm with those who are not eligible. People

have always migrated and will continue to do so, driven by poverty, war and climate change. We have a responsibility to help those people. However, our system is being congested by those who do not have legitimate reasons for applying for asylum. This diverts much-needed resources from those who genuinely need them. That is why we need swift and fair procedures, similar to those proposed by the pact.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Alan Dillon): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the pact, a matter of profound significance and immediate concern to the people of Ireland. It is a subject that touches the very fabric of our society and calls for a unified European response. Migration is one of the most important issues of our time. Ireland, for the first time in our history, is experiencing significant inward migration. This influx, driven by those fleeing war, the impact of climate change and economic factors, has become a cornerstone of our nation. Migrants now constitute 20% of our workforce. They have become integral in such sectors as healthcare and construction, where their contributions are invaluable.

The EU pact on migration and asylum represents a landmark shift in our approach to asylum and immigration. By opting in, Ireland will fully align with the EU, enhancing our border security and ensuring faster processing of applications within legally binding timeframes. We will see rapid processing at designated centres, especially for those without documents or from countries not afflicted by war or persecution. Moreover, there will be greater focus on returning unsuccessful applicants to their home countries and other countries through which they have passed.

I commend the efforts of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, who has taken significant strides in this area, doubling the staff in the International Protection Office and tripling decision-making, with plans for further increases; introducing fast-tracking of applicants from ten safe countries, those already protected in Europe and the most representative nationalities of the previous quarter; implementing more than 3,000 door step operations on flights that pose risks of irregular migration; An Garda Síochána's successful prosecution of individuals arriving without proper documentation, and a substantial increase in deportation orders and enforcement of deportations, reflecting our commitment to a firm but fair immigration policy.

Let us be clear. Ireland cannot face this challenge alone. Without the migration pact, we risk becoming an outlier, left with less effective measures and no means to return individuals to other EU states. This could lead to an unsustainable increase in applications. We need co-operation and we need other countries to be willing to accept people who should not be processed here. This approach offers us all in Europe a real opportunity to work together to design a system that is firm but fair, based on a fair sharing of responsibility that works for everyone. Therefore I urge that we formally request to opt in to the pact as soon as possible. This will not only ensure that we stand readily alongside other European counterparts but also allow us to access vital implementation supports from the EU Commission.

Ireland's response to migration must be a co-operative effort. We need a system that is firm but fair, one that is based on fair sharing of responsibility, and works for everyone. The EU pact on migration and asylum offers us a chance to work together to build a future that represents the dignity of every individual while safeguarding the integrity of our borders.

Deputy David Cullinane: Fundamentally, this is a debate about sovereignty. It is about how sovereign states manage migration. It is, and should be, for every nation to determine its

own migration and border policies.

Ireland should have its own rules-based system that needs to be fair, efficient and enforced. A one-size-fits-all approach to migration throughout the European Union is not the best solution for this country. Ireland is unique as only one of two EU member states with opt-outs from the common EU migration policy. The Government should exercise that right so that we can decide our own migration policy for ourselves. Instead the Government is importing a policy from Europe because its own policies have failed. That is the wrong decision because it will tie the hands of future governments on migration policy and further erode our sovereignty, at a time when there is a growing tide of far-right and extreme sentiment in many countries in Europe.

For that reason Sinn Féin will oppose the Government's plan to give over responsibility to Europe and remove the hard-won flexibility to decide our own migration policies. Europe should have no role in determining our migration policies. There are areas where we should and must co-operate with the European Union and other member states. I have no difficulty with that but to hand over the responsibility and power of managing our migration policy and setting our migration policy to the EU is a fundamental mistake. Sinn Féin wants Ireland to have control over its own borders. We support a migration system that is matched with our ability to integrate, develop public services and grow our economy.

The vast majority of Irish people are good, honest, decent people. They want a fair migration system that supports access to work and that supports people fleeing war, violence and persecution. They are asking for a migration system with integrity that they can trust and have faith in. They want to know that the same rules apply to everyone, that the system is efficient, that applications are processed quickly and that decisions are enforced. Unless a rules-based system is enforced, we cease to have a rules-based system. That is part of the frustration that many communities feel. What people see, unfortunately, is the opposite. They see a system that takes too long to process applications, has failed to provide appropriate accommodation for those who are genuinely fleeing war or persecution, has privatised services and has funnelled profit into the hands of a few who have benefited from the Government's mismanagement. They see a system where rules are not enforced. When you do not enforce rules, you did not have rules. A rules-based system is essential to fairness. Everyone deserves a fair shot on the same rules, underpinned by fairness and human rights.

Government policy has been failing on this for years so, when a surge came, the system was wholly inadequate and unprepared. Nobody is to blame for the chaos across our towns and cities except the Government and the parties opposite. The new Irish communities that have grown over the past two decades are welcome here. They are Irish and their contribution to our society is overwhelmingly positive from healthcare to hospitality and the tech sector. While we oppose this pact, we do not discount that there is a huge role for the EU in respect of the causes of migration, promoting global climate action, peace, development aid and fair trade agreements. There are many reasons for migration including war, violence and persecution. There is also massive social and economic inequality, which is supported by the West, developed countries and, at times, the European Union. The hypocrisy of the European Union in this regard is clear. For example, the Mercosur trade agreement would facilitate the destruction of the Amazon without consequence when we know that global climate change will be a large driver of migration in the years ahead. Europe and the West must face up to their role in the contributing factors that drive migration and prevent people from living prosperous lives in their home countries. Without tackling global inequalities and economic disadvantage, we will

not address the root causes of the problems to which this pact is a response.

The extreme voices in this conversation are not interested in solving this problem. They do not have the answers and cannot solve the problem. They have their heads in the sand on the causes of migration. Talking tough is not going to solve the problem. The Government's incompetence has given these voices space to peddle fear and division. This must be tackled proactively and head-on by the Government and Opposition. We need a migration system that is fit for purpose, restores and invests in housing and public services.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The way this pact has been handled is an insult to the Dáil and the people who elected us. At every step of the way, the Opposition has pleaded with the Government to treat this issue carefully and allow for sufficient oversight and debate. At every step, however, the Government has ignored those pleas. The only actual scrutiny of the pact before today was two three-hour sessions in the justice committee in late April. One of those sessions was only added at short notice when the Government's cavalier approach to oversight was the subject of significant public anger. At the time, we were told the committee debate had to be curtailed because the Government wanted to hold a Dáil vote on the pact in early May. Here we are, six weeks later, only now debating this pact in this House because the Government buried it until after the elections. People can see through this cynical manipulation. The Dáil debates on the pact this week are designed to give a veneer of democratic oversight but in reality it is being rammed through these Houses with almost no debate or scrutiny. At the end, we will have an all-or-nothing vote, instead of a vote on individual measures.

Meanwhile, media reports today have revealed the plans to fast-track legislation giving effect to the migration pact. Clearly, the Government views today's debate as nothing more than a rubber-stamping exercise. There is no intention to take any of our legitimate human rights concerns into account. Rushing this debate is not just cynical. Rather, it is dangerous because the absence of considered and informed debate in this House has ramifications for our society. It allows misinformation and disinformation, particularly online, to spread like wildfire and with very little push-back from anyone in the Government. To make matters worse, we are still waiting for the Government's long-promised communications strategy on migration. I do not know if it will materialise before the general election or if the Government is waiting until afterwards but the lack of urgency is incredible.

The Government's entire approach to migration has been panicked, reactive and shambolic. It is leading to chaos, division and rising hate across this country. This persistent Government mismanagement is causing real and lasting harm, particularly for minority communities which are experiencing racist abuse and violence as a direct result of incompetence. The level of virulent racism in this country is disgusting and shameful. The targeting of candidates from minority communities during the recent elections was just one example of this. It was a direct attack on our democracy.

When is the Government going to get it together on this? Talking tough on migration and echoing the language of the far right is not a strategy. We need a fair, humane and efficient asylum system. Crucially, we need to vastly increase resources, training and staff at the International Protection office in order that claims can be dealt with speedily and fairly.

There has been a lot of right-wing commentary about the migration pact, borders and sovereignty. Bizarrely, much of this commentary, straight from the Tory handbook, has come from the Sinn Féin benches. As a result, much of the opposition to the migration pact has been

framed in this divisive and insular way. I want to specifically distance myself from those kinds of objections. Instead, I want to talk about the very serious human rights concerns the Social Democrats have with this pact, including the border procedure, the potential for detention camps, the stripping away of the right to legal advice and the fiction of non-entry to Europe. We are far from the only ones who are expressing these concerns. Over 160 NGOs, including Oxfam, Amnesty and Médecins Sans Frontières, are opposed to the pact. All of these human rights experts agree that the pact is dangerous because the fundamental right to claim asylum and international protection, which refugees have enjoyed for more than seven decades, is being eroded. Eve Geddie, from Amnesty International stated:

> This agreement will set back European asylum law for decades to come. Its likely outcome is a surge in suffering on every step of a person's journey to seek asylum in the EU.

Even former Green Party MEPs shared these concerns, which is why they voted against most of the pact in the European Parliament. We cannot say we were not warned about this pact and what it will mean if all of it is enacted. It will lead to more people in detention centres at EU borders, including families with children and unaccompanied minors. It will also lead to reduced safeguards for people seeking asylum, substandard border asylum procedures and more people being refused a fair and full assessment of their asylum claims. None of the pressing problems facing our own asylum system, and others across Europe will be solved by adopting the pact in full. It will not solve the chronic underinvestment or complete absence of the six State reception centres which were promised years ago. It will not prevent EU countries from continuing to use illegal and often violent push-back policies. In fact, it facilitates them. The pact makes clear that outsourcing immigration processes will continue to be a core EU approach. It is one that the Taoiseach himself has endorsed. A few weeks ago, he said:

> ... processing asylum applications in a third country is worth considering. The EU Migration Pact allows some states the option to shift asylum applications to safe, third countries.

What is the reality of that outsourcing? It is our own cruel Rwanda policy, a policy that the Tories never managed to get off the ground, and a policy of preferring that thousands of people drown, rather than resourcing search-and-rescue missions. Since 2016, search-and-rescue missions led by member states in the Mediterranean have been replaced with deals supporting coast guard agencies in north Africa. Of course, that is not news to Fine Gael, whose MEPs voted against a move to enhance search-and-rescue operations for migrants in 2019.

People attempting the dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean are intercepted by these agencies and often end up in detention centres in appalling conditions, for example, in Libya. Facilitating torture and human rights abuses in third countries is not a policy we, or anyone in this House, should stand over. A good EU asylum law should instead include safe and legal routes to Europe and properly resourced search-and-rescue missions. The priority should be stopping the deaths at sea, investing in better asylum systems and treating people humanely. Instead, we are looking at a system where many asylum seekers will be put through fast-track border systems and treated as de facto criminals, with their right to claim asylum seriously undermined.

People processed in this way all across Europe, including children and families, will be sent to detention centres for 12 weeks. There will be no right to legal aid and, in fact, no right to

even claim they have reached the EU. The Minister has stated that Ireland will not introduce detention centres, but the legal basis will be there to facilitate them. We have had no clarity on a whole range of issues such as where these centres will be located and whether children will be entitled to attend school. These are not questions we should still have and the ambiguity is concerning.

I wish to address the dehumanising language that has become normal when discussing migration. Asylum seekers are referred to as "burdens" or problems to be solved. They are not. They are human beings who deserve to be treated with compassion and decency. This should be the case regardless of whether their claims are successful.

Not everything in this pact is bad. There are some measures that we should opt into. For example, the reception conditions directive would provide minimum agreed standards of accommodation so that asylum seekers would not sleep rough. The solidarity mechanism would ensure co-operation across member states so that individual member states on the borders of Europe would not be left to deal with large numbers of arrivals in isolation. The Eurodac regulation is largely welcome in terms of information sharing, but there needs to be clarification around serious data protection concerns. For example, if the fingerprints of a six-year-old refugee are taken for the child's safety and to ensure the child is not being trafficked, we need to know how long the fingerprints will remain on the database. There are some sensible and necessary aspects to this pact, but they are grouped with regulations that are designed to cause absolute misery to incredibly vulnerable people who arrive on our shores.

We in this country are in a unique position. We do not have to opt into every measure, so it is bizarre that the Government is doing so. Adopting this pact in full sends the wrong message globally. It sends a message that we are willing to downgrade the right to claim asylum and to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses when it suits us. That is not a message that the Social Democrats can stand over and, for that reason, we will be voting against the migration pact.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this debate. Immigration is one of the most pressing issues facing the international community. We can see this across European member states, the UK and within our own country. Therefore, I welcome the Government's decision to opt into the EU migration and asylum pact. It is not only a necessary agreement, but one that will lead to a stronger, more robust and more responsive immigration system at home and abroad.

To that end, I pay tribute to the Department of Justice, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and her officials for their efforts to date. We are already seeing the fruits of the labour that has gone into addressing the large number of asylum seekers who have entered Ireland in recent years, with the number of international protection staff doubled and the number of decisions issued tripled. This is on top of the additional 100 gardaí being provided to support immigration services and the 3,000 "doorstop" operations carried out on flights. I also note that the fines on carriers have been increased by 66%, which will help to ensure that passengers have the correct documentation when beginning their journeys to Ireland.

While these are positive developments, we must also recognise that the International Protection Act 2015 is no longer fit for purpose. We must therefore ensure that we take the necessary steps, in tandem with our European partners, to improve our laws and operational systems, as we cannot go it alone. It is vital that we build a system that is sustainably resourced with funding and staff in order to ensure that we have a system that is flexible and adaptable to whatever

circumstances arise. I ask Deputies to take themselves back just three years and compare the number of asylum applications then to the number this year and last year. To this end, I am pleased that the Department has plans to increase the requisite staffing and resources.

The world is changing around us. We are seeing an erosion of democracy around the globe, a rise in conflict and a rise in misinformation and disinformation, including in Europe and, sometimes, in this Chamber. We are faced with a weakened international order, with international institutions we have relied on for decades being undermined. We are also living through a period of climate crisis. All indicators suggest that the world is not yet taking the decisions needed to limit the worst effects of climate change. This will undoubtedly lead to greater pressure on immigration services, particularly in the European Union.

In our interconnected world, we cannot fool ourselves into thinking that events in one corner of the world will not have consequences for our own. We cannot go it alone. War and its impacts represent an enormous challenge to the international community, with the potential to see tens of millions of people on the move across multiple continents, including our own, in the decades to come. We must therefore ensure that our systems are not only able to adapt to the pressures of today, but are also future-proofed to deal with major international events that may lie ahead. The EU migration and asylum pact represents a positive shift towards this goal. By integrating information and processing systems, we can have a much more effective method of providing help to those who need it while processing those who do not have the right to stay within the State.

The reality is that, as an independent country, we cannot solve this challenge on our own. We must work with other EU member states. It is a facile, pointless and irrelevant argument to suggest that, with the common travel area and common movement across the EU, we could somehow decide that parts of this pact do not suit us and we should instead go it alone. By opting into the EU migration and asylum pact, we will be in a position to return individuals to other EU countries where appropriate. We simply cannot do that if we choose to opt out. We cannot deal with an increased level of migration that is nearly overwhelming our system if we go it alone or cherry-pick elements of the pact that suit our political narrative. We have spent years negotiating all elements of this pact, so why would we not opt into measures that we know will benefit us? Those opposite keep talking about a commonsensical approach, yet they have not made any suggestions as to what they would do. Nor have they said what they would do that they would otherwise be constrained from doing within the pact. Perhaps other Deputies opposite will set those details out later, or perhaps not.

If we do not opt in, we will not be able to participate in the Eurodac database, which will hold information such as fingerprints, allowing us to accurately identify individuals and where else they have been in Europe, again reinforcing our ability to determine whether they should be allowed to reside within the State. Information will also be collected on children older than six years. This will be a key step in preventing child trafficking and child exploitation, something to which we must redouble our efforts and something that a number of Members have raised over the years, particularly on the justice committee, which I have had the pleasure of being a member of. This aspect speaks to a wider need to ensure that human trafficking is routed out and those responsible for running criminal gangs dealing in the trade of other human beings are crushed, their profits seized and the full force of the law brought to bear upon them. An Garda Síochána has a strong track record of working with international partners to tackle criminal gangs operating across international borders. We must engage with partners on the goal of preventing human trafficking in Europe.

I am appreciative of the efforts under way and the continued progress that Irish immigration services are making as regards faster processing times for international protection applications. I note that the rapid processing system for those without documents is being developed apace. The EU migration and asylum pact will see the harmonisation of these processing times across the EU bloc. Given our current progress in processing times, this will facilitate a seamless integration into the wider European framework. Ultimately, this will lead to stronger borders, supported by a system that is responsive and efficient and has the tools to identify where an individual should be accommodated.

Regarding accommodation, the large-scale facilities set out by the Department of integration are needed now more than ever. While some locations have been identified across the State, it is essential that both sides of the House continue our efforts to engage with communities in a meaningful, truthful and fair way to inform them as to what has to occur in any given community. Where mistakes have been made in the provision of, for example, hotel accommodation in certain areas in the country, we must do our best to ensure that communities are not overburdened. I know every single county has an asylum facility of some kind where we are accommodating those in international protection, not just our friends from Ukraine but also individuals from all over the globe. It is a reflection of the global trends that those numbers will not decrease but increase. Therefore, we must be able to facilitate in the most humane and appropriate environment the individuals who seek protection.

The inclusion of the solidarity mechanism in the pact will represent a pathway for countries to co-operate without mandatory measures being imposed. This is a welcome inclusion that will allow the Government to determine the best course of action for our people. I also recognise that a great deal of misinformation is being disseminated about what the pact will mean for member states, including Ireland. An extraordinary level of misinformation and disinformation is present, as I have referenced. I ask anybody watching this session of the Dáil to familiarise themselves with a recent Sky News survey of the source of much online discussion on this matter. It showed that with regard to the riots, 80% of the information being disseminated was emanating from the UK and with regard to migration and those other incidents that have occurred in recent times, something like 90% of the information was being spread from outside the State. I find this extraordinary but those apparently are the facts that were available on the X platform. It is imperative that the facts are heard and people are not gaslit into believing that we are some sort of lawless society where anybody can enter unchecked. The reality is that we have a robust system based on rules of law. The nature of the EU migration and asylum pact will enhance our system, make it stronger and allow us more flexibility to address the challenges, whatever that may be.

To opt out of this pact would make us weaker. It would limit the scope of our options when processing individuals and despite what is being claimed in some corners of the Internet, opting out of this pact would mean we would become a more popular destination for those with invalid circumstances because of the lack of options. We would be unable to cope and, dare I say it, the 100 or so tents on the canal could potentially become thousands.

I also highlight some of the facts about our immigration system. Compared with this time last year, undocumented arrivals in Ireland are down by 14% and this figure is down by 42% when compared with 2022. This is all the more noteworthy during a time when we have seen an increase of 44% in all types of passengers. It shows that the operations carried out by the Garda, border security and immigration services are working. Furthermore, we have seen an increase this year of 83% in deportation orders compared with this time last year. Enforced

deportations are up by 126% while voluntary deportations are up by 129% when compared with this time last year, both having more than doubled.

I again thank the Minister for her work on this matter. As a member of the justice committee, I know we have had the opportunity to discuss this with the Minister and her officials and I am pleased it has been of significant import in the general debate in recent months. I look forward to working with colleagues on this issue and delivering results that reflect our moral responsibilities in the interests of the Irish people.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I welcome that such a generous amount of time has been provided for the Dáil to debate the EU asylum and migration pact. The Sinn Féin position is clear. It is that the vast majority of measures included in this EU pact are not in the best interests of Ireland. We must ensure we have sovereignty over how we manage our immigration system and that we have a system that is fair, efficient and enforced. For these reasons, we will not be supporting this pact.

I strongly believe the legacy of this Government will be one of sowing the seeds of division in our society and treating those who arrived here disgracefully. Irish people are inherently decent but the way the Government is treating new applicants is far from decent. Voluntary groups do more than the Government to support integration of new arrivals.

The Government has created division in Irish society with its management of immigration. This division is nowhere deeper than in the inner city. Years of neglect have made people angry. I do not believe the vast majority of residents in the inner city are racist; they are angry at decades of neglect and that is not the same as being racist. The Government knows the neglect that communities in the inner city have been subjected to and knows the anger and apathy, yet it does nothing to address that other than to put up more barriers around the inner city, issue press statements and then move applicants when they reach the number of 100. It is like the Government has an acceptable level of chaos when the reality is that it clearly cannot manage the situation. Residents feel that the Government has torn up the social contract. Its policies are dividing communities. The Government's lack of policy and process on immigration and lack of engagement on the ground are causing the erosion of social cohesion in many communities. The Government is failing to engage with local communities and is guilty of leaving a void open for disinformation to run rampant.

The latest figures show that it is taking almost 19 months for a decision on an IP applicant. This could not be any further from an efficient system. How is that fair to anyone? It is clear that the international protection system is in urgent need of an overhaul. We need to see sufficient investment of resources in the system and reform to address these delays. The International Protection Office on Mount Street only operates from Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 2.30 p.m. This office needs to be managed and staffed 24-7 so all applicants who arrive can be triaged and offered accommodation rather than wandering the streets looking for a tent. When issues arise, residents have no contact with the management and staff in the office on Mount Street. This must change. There must be a form of liaison so local residents can contact the office to iron out difficulties and support the office in resolving the various issues that arise.

There is speculation that the barriers around Mount Street and along the canal will be removed from the end of June but, again, the residents are not being consulted. The Minister might clarify what is happening with regard to the barriers. There does not appear to be any Government strategy on this issue. Who is in charge? No amount of press releases will cover

the mess the Government has made. We need an efficient, compassionate and enforced immigration system, just like Canada or Australia. We need effective control of our borders. People are frustrated when they hear stories of people arriving on flights with no passports – it drives people insane. It has to be an issue that can be resolved. It cannot be beyond the wit of man or the Government to resolve that issue. It is something that needs to be done.

People do not have any faith in the Government process for dealing with these cases. We need to address these issues, treat people humanely and compassionately and, at the same time, make sure the system is efficient and enforced.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People Before Profit will be opposing the Government motion on the migration and asylum impact and the pact itself, not for the reasons that some in this House may put forward but because we believe the European Union and, sadly, our own Government are beginning to make concessions to anti-immigrant hysteria and to the scapegoating of immigrants by the far right in a dangerous way that is not prompted by a desire for a more humane system but, in fact, is going to result in a less humane and less fair system of international protection and asylum.

6 o'clock

The criticisms of the migration pact by those who are genuinely concerned with human rights and giving people a fair hearing have been well articulated and I am sure the Minister is more than familiar with them. What we are actually going to see is, for example, fast-track approaches dealing with people who come from so-called safe countries. If you take even the most cursory look at countries that have been designated - and I have just spent my time looking at them as I was listening to the debate - in almost all the countries that have been designated as so-called safe countries, when you look at what human rights organisations are saying about those countries, you see very serious problems indeed. This would lead one to understand immediately that there would be very legitimate reasons for people fleeing those countries. I looked, for example, at the Amnesty report on Algeria, which has been designated a safe country. What do you see in recent times? You see journalists arrested and detained, human rights organisations shut down, opposition political parties shut down and banned, people being arrested and so on. Of course, there would be good reasons people might flee countries like that. The Minister can go through the list of all of them.

What the new pact will also mean is people who are lodging appeals against decisions can actually be deported while they are awaiting appeals, as well as legal grounds for greater levels of detention of people making asylum applications. There are major problems but all of this is underpinned by our own Government and the European establishment leaning into the scare tactics and hysteria being whipped up by the right and the far right. They are essentially adopting Tory tactics. It surely should be something of a lesson to an Irish Government, when one looks at the Tory Government that has relied on the scapegoating and attacking of immigrants, that it is about to be swept out of power because everybody in Britain finally understood that all these attacks on immigrants and asylum seekers were the Tories' desperate attempts to deflect attention away from the real issues that people have a right to be angry about, that is, on the cost of living, the housing crisis, the lack of public services and so on. Instead of addressing those issues, however, we scapegoat vulnerable people who are fleeing war, persecution and oppression or who are just looking for a better life.

What really worries me about Government interventions, and indeed some of the Opposi-

tion interventions, is that language of "a burden", suggesting that human beings - and that is what we are talking about, human beings - are somehow a burden. The reality is that human beings generate all of the wealth and richness of our society. The vast majority of human beings, wherever they are from or whatever colour or creed they are, enrich our society. They make it better. They add to our society economically and culturally. Anybody who thinks there is some sort of ideal Irish purity should just think about it for a little while. When you go back to the 1950s, 1940s and 1930s in this country, when masses of people were leaving the country, did reducing the population of this country make it better? No - it made it poorer and worse and, of course, it was a period characterised by the Magdalen laundries, the industrial schools, the shocking treatment of women and of children who were not born in supposedly legitimate family relations, and all of this horrible stuff.

There is the idea that Ireland is full. I mean, it is ridiculous. There were 8 million people in this country at the beginning of the 19th century. Unless people are going to suggest that the Famine enforced on the Irish population by the British Government, which halved the population, was somehow a necessary thing to reduce the population - which I do not think any sane person would say - the reality is the reduction of our population led us to being a much poorer country. Decades and generations of emigration made this country a poorer place at every single level. If you even look at the basic thing of population density, the Netherlands is two thirds the size of this country and it has a population - I was just looking at this before the debate - of 17 million. Similarly, Switzerland, which is less than two thirds the size of this country, has a population of 8.7 million. These are wealthy countries. The idea that low population density is somehow good economically is simply not true.

If you look at the tax contribution of immigrants in this country and if you look at our health services, there are 51,000 non-EU citizens working in our health services at the moment. There are 36,000 working in information and communication; 24,000 in industry; 24,000 in hospitality; 20,000 in the professional and scientific sectors; 17,000 in wholesale and retail; 13,000 in administrative services; 11,000 in financial services; and 34,000 in other areas like agriculture and so on. Our economy would literally collapse without the contribution of immigrants. Surely we should know that as a country that helped build other countries. We faced the same racist scapegoating that the far right and now, sadly, our own Government are echoing when we went to those countries. The divide-and-rule tactics that were used by successive Tory and British Governments against Irish immigrants were actually a weapon to divide the British working class and distract from their own failings to provide things for ordinary working people in Britain. The Irish and black people were used as scapegoats, and now European leaders and the Government are leaning into it.

The Minister, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, is shaking his head. I ask him to look at the amount of measures that have been taken in the last few weeks, facing into an election, which were all directed at sending signals that the Government is getting tough on immigration, that is a burden that has to be addressed and so on. The problem in this country is not immigrants; the problem is the failure of successive Governments to address the housing and accommodation crisis, to properly resource and staff our health service, to address the problem of the lack of GPs and so on, and critically, to distribute the enormous wealth that exists in this country, where 10% of the population owns 57% of the wealth. Ireland has never been richer but nor has it ever been more unequal in terms of the concentration of wealth. We have more than enough resources and wealth to solve our problems.

When you talk to people, the vast majority of people in this country are absolutely not rac-

ist. They are welcoming, decent people but they are frustrated about the lack of GP services, the fact that their daughter or son has been on a housing waiting list for ten or 15 years, or that they go into the emergency department and find they are on trolleys for hours or even days. They are angry about that but of course, some people want to suggest it is immigrants when in fact, it is immigrants we need. We have labour and skills shortages in almost every area. We are lacking taxi drivers - I was listening to it on the radio today. We are lacking bus drivers, and people in retail, the health service and construction. There is an idea that Ireland is full but immigrants will not do anything other than help us solve the problems that need to be solved as a matter of urgency. That is the truth we should be telling people and Government should be acknowledging its failure to address those things but not leaning into the scapegoating of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants or whatever they might be.

Human beings enrich our society. They make it better and they are not a drain. We need people. Just as the world benefited from Irish people going to countries all over the world, we benefit from immigrants. We should not scapegoat them and we should reject the attempt by the European Union and our Government to do it. Let us address the real problems and admit our responsibility for failing to solve those problems until now.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Claire Kerrane): I thank the Deputy. We move now to the Government slot, and I believe the Minister, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, is sharing time with Deputy John McGuinness. The Minister and Deputy McGuinness have five minutes and eight minutes, respectively.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Acting Chair. I welcome the proposal by the Minister for Justice, and I and my Department look forward to working with her and across Government on its implementation.

Ireland, like many other European countries, is experiencing a significant increase in the number of people seeking international protection. The arrival numbers remain significantly elevated. Up to mid-June of this year, over 10,000 people had arrived in Ireland seeking international protection from the State. The average in 2022 and 2023 was in the region of 250 per week. That placed Ireland at the EU average *per capita* for numbers of people seeking international protection. We have gone from a situation in which the numbers seeking international protection in Ireland were, comparatively, extremely low to a situation in which we are receiving the EU average. That has created challenges, undoubtedly. They are challenges to which the Government continues to respond. It has required us to completely rebuild our international protection system to meet these EU-average numbers coming to this country. That means improving the processing of applications and increasing the amount of accommodation we have for people while their applications are being accessed.

In order to provide that additional accommodation, since January 2022, the Government has brought more than 200 properties into use to ensure a supply of accommodation for those seeking shelter in Ireland. Currently, there are 31,000 people accommodated in the IPAS system, of whom just more than 7,700 are children. This is compared to 8,700 at the end of February 2022. As we face into the challenges of processing and accommodating all of those seeking international protection, the EU asylum and migration pact will be crucial in ensuring cross-border co-operation in what is a fundamentally global phenomenon in the years ahead. I welcome that this pact will introduce legally-binding timeframes for making decisions on international protection applicants and appeals and will ensure fairness for those who are applying

for international protection. They will have the knowledge their application will be dealt with in a timely manner. We all know of instances in this country whereby people have been seeking their international protection application for three, four, five, six, seven or eight years. They are in stasis and in limbo. They are unable to actually get on with a life in Ireland or unable to get clarity that their future does not lie here. By speeding up international protection applications and by making clear statutory timelines to which State institutions have to adhere, we are giving people the opportunity for clarity as to what their position is here in Ireland.

The pact will also address a previous lack of targeted mechanisms to deal with situations of extreme crisis. In recent months, a significant increase in applications has been seen, not just in Ireland but in the UK and right across Europe. These new mechanisms will allow member states to approach any future crisis situation on a European-wide basis.

The measures my Department is working on are pragmatic. There are strategic solutions contained within the comprehensive accommodation strategy that was approved by the Government in March 2024. The work of the comprehensive accommodation strategy aligns with some of the measures foreseen by the pact identified as practical solutions for our State within a reality of long-term migration. My Department will provide infrastructure, human resources and funding for integration efforts. Material reception conditions should be available to applicants when they express their wish to apply for international protection. We will put in place mechanisms for accessing and addressing the needs of the reception systems, including mechanisms for verifying applicants' actual presence in the accommodation. Obviously, such mechanisms should not restrict an applicant's freedom of movement.

My Department is focused on the delivery of State-owned accommodation. As we know, we have been overly reliant on the use of private accommodation. We are moving our system towards one that has a core of 14,000 State-owned accommodation beds. The comprehensive accommodation strategy also seeks to address the current accommodation shortfall while making that move to a longer-term system.

As for the updated strategy, accommodation is being delivered through a blended approach between the purchase of large-scale turnkey properties and the delivery on State-owned sites. In the months since the launch of that strategy, we have already brought two State-owned sites into use and work is under way on a third site to bring it into use.

I wish to take this opportunity to commend the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on her work in increasing the speed by which the applications of international protection applicants are processed. Significant resources have been put into the IPO and we are seeing the benefit of that.

Clearly, global migration is not something to which Ireland responds alone. We have seen what has happened when our closest neighbours decided to go it alone and to withdraw from EU mechanisms. They have even less control of their borders than they did prior to Brexit. States must work together to address major crises and this is why I am happy to support the EU asylum and migration pact.

Deputy John McGuinness: Like most conversations that now take place throughout the country, they begin with the phrase "I am not a racist" because people are trying to protect their own position and integrity against accusations of racism or online abuse. I do not condone racism; I am not a racist. I wish to ensure that local communities are helped and that we play our role within Europe. I have to put on record that the Government in its efforts, since the begin-

ning which goes back two years, has failed miserably in convincing the public it has a handle on all of this. It caused consternation in local communities and in the planning services. It pitched neighbour against neighbour and it pitched a lot of people against the State. There was little explanation coming forward and that is still the case. I do not know how someone like me, who deals with people on a regular basis within their communities trying to support them and to support the Ukrainian families and others who are here, is expected to believe the Government is going to do all of what it says. This has continued for two years. The complaints and the issues were raised at parliamentary party meetings, and indeed within my own party, but nothing was done.

In the context of this debate, I wish to highlight that some communities are now engaged with An Bord Pleanála to find a solution to the problem. What assurances will be given to those communities that what they have been through will be acknowledged and that the offers or actions which are there now on record will be withdrawn? I refer to the Wallslough community in Kilkenny. It has housed and supported Ukrainian families; it has done its bit. It was then told it would have further international protection applicants housed in the community, bringing the total population to outnumber the local population. The community is still in the dark about all of that. What assurances will be given to those in Maudlin Street, Dublin Road, Kilkenny, who have been told of international protection applicants being housed? There were no plans; the council does not even know about it. In fact, the building being proposed was not accepted as a housing proposition by Kilkenny County Council. All of this needs to be clarified and it needs to be clarified now.

Furthermore, if one looks at all of the debate around this, it started in 1999. There is nothing new about this. This House was not kept informed. The public was not kept informed. That is why there is such anger out there that the Government would attempt, almost in secret, to allow the bureaucrats of Europe to bring forward proposals without the appropriate consultation. That is what raises the questions around sovereignty and issues to do with racism. The Irish people, know full well, as Deputy Boyd Barrett said, that they went away, worked and built New York, London and many other capital cities sending money home to benefit the family members who were left behind with very little. My family was one of those. We respected the fact that employment was got in all of those countries. It gave people at home a reasonable living. Compare that to a man who came here with his family 24 years ago. His family has now got naturalisation but he has not, because a police report, somewhere in the world, said he had questions to answer. He wrote to the Minister and the Commissioner to say he would give himself up to go to the country that raised the question and he would allow himself to be interrogated by the Garda in Ireland, but that did not happen. That was not accommodated.

The man now lives with a cloud over him and his family. Nothing is being done by the Department of Justice to resolve the issue. I could say the same about people who are living in Ireland who want to make a contribution to the State but cannot change their status. The application processes, under the EU treaty are a nightmare. I am saying this in the context of what the Minister for Justice is telling us about this pact and what it will do. The Minister needs to give more clarification about what is going on. She needs to inform the public and address issues like those of the man I spoke about

I have listened carefully because the latest part of this debate is how the EU will be funding €1 billion. For the past two years we have not heard that. In fact, we have not had a decent debate about this in the past two years, simply because it was not accommodated in this House. Yet, at committee level we were told in the discussion about the pact that 80% of individuals are

coming across the Border, fleeing from the UK because of the Rwanda policy there. Yet, we did nothing about it. There was, and still is, an incompetence in the State in dealing with these matters. I agree with Deputy Boyd Barrett that there are queues everywhere, for everything. The failure within the State came across during the canvass for the European and local government elections. This is a failure to spend the money wisely and to deliver the services to the public. In all of the debate here, I have heard little praise for the communities that have reached out and helped Ukrainian families. I have heard little commentary about the expectation created by encouragement from the Department for business people to do up properties that are now left to carry a burden of debt. Many issues have emerged here and I am delighted we can have a debate without any rancour. However, I would expect, on behalf of the people I represent, that the Minister would clarify what is to happen in all of the outstanding applications to the Department for both Ukrainians and international protection applicants. That is the least people deserve. Common courtesy and decency go a long way. Please give full information and full transparency to the Irish people as we debate this matter.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Sinn Féin opposes the migration and asylum pact for very good reasons and we will vote against it. In our view, the majority of the measures contained in the pact are not in Ireland's interests. Instead, we must retain our sovereignty on these matters if we are to have an immigration system that is fair, efficient and enforced. We must also recognise our particular circumstance in that we share a common travel area with Britain. Sinn Féin's position is the same as that of the majority of the Irish people, in my opinion. Most people recognise that when people seek asylum they need protection and support and that must be provided. Most people recognise the huge contribution that migrants make to Irish society and most people also want to see a migration system that makes sense, with the rules being fair and applied to everyone and that they are applied. They want to see a system that is fair, efficient and enforced, that applies common sense and common decency. They want a system in which they can have confidence, that reassures them and recognises their concerns, hears their questions and answers them. When we do not have this it creates a space for people to spread hate, fear and division. The truth is that Ireland can have a fair, efficient and enforced system without the EU pact. Such a system would involve quicker decisions and greater enforcement. Decisions on asylum applications take far too long here. Almost 19 months for an IPO decision under standard processing cannot be described as efficient. This must be addressed. Sinn Féin would overhaul the international protection system by accelerating decisions through increased resources and legal reforms and by prioritising the safe return of people to their home countries if their applications fail and they are found to be not eligible for international protection.

An improved system would also involve greater engagement with communities. The shambolic approach by the Government is continuing to this day. The Government has no plan, no consistent approach and is not working with local communities. There is a drip feed of information, all of which is partial and some of which is disseminated only to be directly contradicted later. Thornton Hall is a case in point. At a briefing on 28 May, local Oireachtas members were told that part of the site was fully serviced and would come into operation as an accommodation centre by the end of June. Media reports last weekend directly contradicted this. Questions remain unanswered in relation to timelines at Thornton hall. What are they now? What is the situation with planning compliance including among other things in relation to proximity to the airport and aircraft noise? What is the situation regarding infrastructure availability and capacity for example as was reported at the weekend in terms of sewage? What are the details of the proposed dedicated bus service? Is it still proposed, what will its schedule be and where will it

go? Importantly in relation to ancillary supports and services, health, mental health, education, community, social protection etc. where are these to be sourced? It is patently clear that the capacity does not exist locally so what is the plan or is there a plan at all? If there is, then public representatives, community representatives and residents do not know about it. I have written to the community engagement team in the Department and to the Ministers, Deputies O'Gorman and McEntee. However, I have had no update other than to say there will be an update in due course. This is not good enough and it must be addressed. We need straight answers provided in a timely fashion and we are not getting them. This is something I and other representatives will continue to pursue. We need a migration system that works, one that reflects the inherent and long-displayed decency of the Irish people and one that supports people in need. We need a system that is fair, efficient and enforced. We can have that without opting into the EU pact. In fact, we can have that without opting into the EU pact. That is where the focus should be.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to address Ireland's relationship with the EU and how this plays into that relationship. Currently I believe the biggest threat to the EU is more EU. The creep of democratic powers from nation states towards Brussels is creating great resistance in societies across the European Union. If we look back, not all of Ireland's relationship with the EU is positive and that has to be outlined. The economist Paul McCulley stated that the former Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, had a loaded gun pointed to his ear when it came to the ECB letter sent to the Irish Government in 2010. Later, the new Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan, confirmed that he received a call from the then president of the European Central Bank, Jean-Claude Trichet, blocking the imposition of burden sharing at the time. Noonan said that Trichet warned him that an economic bomb would go off in Dublin if Ireland pursued the option of imposing losses on senior bond holders. With a population of 1% of the EU total, Ireland paid 42% of the total cost of the European banking crisis. This was a cost of about €9,000 per person,according to Eurostat. We know that at times the large European states make decisions on the basis of their own national interests and at the cost of so-called other members of the European Union. At the moment legislation is coming thick and fast from the European Union. Most of it is unquestioningly rubber stamped here without any concessions to this House and much of it is flawed. The nature restoration law is an example of this. This law has been handed down to farmers with rigid targets and little detail on how it will be implemented and totally absent of the funds necessary to ensure farmers can make a living.

Another example of the drift of power from nation states is Ursula von der Leyen's plan to create a European defence union. This would be a union that would make decisions on the basis of the needs of France and Germany but would ignore the views of the Irish people. It would be a union that would, in the medium- to long-term, expect young Irish men and women to put their lives on the line for it, but only for German and French strategic interests. If the Government thinks it would be able to influence Ursula von der Leyen, let it just look at the amount of influence it imposed on her when she strode the world stage offering Israel a blank cheque for the murderous campaign killing 37,000 people in Palestine. It is an Irish Government with no influence over Ursula von der Leyen in that regard.

Now the Government is already preparing the way for the European defence union. The Tánaiste has indicated he wants to get rid of the veto we have over military issues in the treaties and the Taoiseach has indicated he wants to get rid of the triple lock. Even the Government's attitude towards sovereignty is incredible. The Tánaiste stated that he wants nothing to do with a backward idea of sovereignty but Aontú certainly does not agree with him. We believe the sovereignty of the Irish people is really important. Decisions made here, by the people and

close to the people, are better decisions so that we can hold the decision-makers to account and influence those decisions. We, like most people, are supportive of the original premise of the EU, which is as a trading partnership that works together in the interests of the nation states, and we seek a partnership of nation states working together. However, what is actually happening on a range of different issues is that the Government is ceding significant power and sovereignty to the EU.

From the very start, the Government's policy on immigration has been an absolute disaster. It is true that the Minister for Justice has been asleep at the wheel for at least four years and the only reason she has awoken is the work we, in Aontú, have done over that period. It was Aontú that found out that 85% of people who were served with deportation orders in this country never had their deportations actioned by the Government. When I asked the Minister where these people were, she replied to me in black and white that she did not know. She could not confirm whether these people had been deported. It was Aontú that found out that 5,000 people came through Dublin Airport with no travel documents last year, which again is an incredible figure. Two years ago, I asked the Minister for Justice where people were registering for asylum when they came to this State. I found it very strange that the answer given to me at the time was that 75% of people were registering for asylum at the International Protection Office on Mount Street. I felt it was odd. I imagined when people registered for asylum they would have registered at the airport or at the ferry ports. I asked the Minister how these people were coming into the country and astoundingly she said she did not know. Worse than that, she said the staff were not asking the question of the people as to how they came into the country when they attended the IPO. Logically, it seemed to me that most of the people who were registering at the IPO must be coming across the Border. Two years ago, I asked that question of the Minister and she said she did not know and that this question was not asked. I asked again last year. The answer changed. The Minister said the information could not be extracted from the data and again, at the start of this year, the answer was the same. Amazingly, a couple of months ago the Minister then admitted under pressure that 80% of the people were coming across the Border to register at the IPO. There is a very simple statement in management that says if you cannot measure, you cannot manage. This Government was not even measuring the really important statistics to help us manage this issue for the past three or four years. That has led significantly to the crisis we are in at the moment. Now, incredibly, the Government has created this new situation where it is putting checks on the Border for people coming across.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No we are not.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are spot checks happening in relation to-----

Deputy Neale Richmond: Do not mislead the Chamber.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Lies.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----people coming across the Border at the moment and it is pointless. It is window dressing. There are 290 roads North to South. There are 10,000 fields North to South. Bringing people back to Newry does not mean they are not going to find another route into the State. The fact that Sinn Féin has supported that particular element of the Government's policy is also incredible as the *raison d'être* of the party was supposed to be to erase the Border, yet four times in the recent European election campaign, Sinn Féin candidates stated they agreed with the Government's policy of spot checks on the Border for people coming into the country, which is again quite incredible.

Another potential reason there is a high number of people registering at the IPO is people trafficking and people smuggling. As the Government is not measuring that, it means we were not able to tackle that. Another issue is people staying in this State on expired visas. I asked the Minister just two months ago how many people were currently residing in this State on expired visas and she said she did not know. She said we had no mechanism to check the exit of people from the State. Again, it is quite incredible that this answer was given just two months ago.

The EU migration pact is another massive transfer of sovereignty. Nobody knows what the future will hold. We do not know the numbers or the cost. However, at least if we can determine our response to it, we can control the issues of numbers and cost. However, the pact creates a mandatory pool. States must contribute to this on the basis of the fair share principle. It means we have to contribute either financially or be in receipt of people coming in to this country. That undoubtedly creates a situation where we could have to pay significant money to meet our responsibilities under the pact. Second, the pact can be changed in the future and we would not have the ability to stop that change because it will happen under majority vote. We are signing ourselves up not just to the current regime indicated in the EU migration, but to a potential change in the future that we would not be able to resile from as well.

I asked the Taoiseach how much the European migration pact will cost the State and he stated he does not know. This is an astounding admission. It was probably the first blank cheque he actually signed up to in this Government. The Government is committing to the European migration pact and telling us it does not know. Spending other people's money is something the Government does very well. We can see that right through a range of different projects. However, already the Government is breaking so many commitments it has to the European Union that it is being fined tens of millions of euro on an annual basis to pay for those broken commitments. The environmental commitments we have made for 2030 are going to be an example where we will have to spend potentially hundreds of millions of euros in fines due to not meeting those commitments. Here we have the Government hardwiring into new commitments for which there will be a cost. Poland and Hungary already stated they do not support this and they are unlikely to fully fulfil this. The EU has stated that there will be fines and penalties for countries that do not implement the pact. Many of the provisions in this pact that could be good for this country could already be done by the Government. We, in Aontú, have long highlighted the fact that the Government spends such a length of time processing people, which is neither fair on them or to the State, and actually creates a cost to the State in that regard. Speeding up that process is in the Government's gift currently. All it needs is the resources to provide for it. The fact that, up until about last year, thousands of people were waiting two or three years for their first application to be processed is incredible, and given that it can take up to ten years when appeals are made, this shows just how dysfunctional the system over which the Government presides is. Many of those things that are positive in the pact could be delivered by the Government.

The Taoiseach said we are only a small country in the middle of the ocean and that we cannot go it alone, but I am sure people said the same to James Connolly and Pádraig Pearse regarding Irish sovereignty as well. We are better off being able to work co-operatively with other countries but not in a situation where there are mandatory requirements that we do not control.

The inability of the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, to provide accommodation has led to significant problems in this country. He purchased 30 buildings two years ago for the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers. One of them is in use. Again, this is another example of a Government unable to deliver serious infrastructure in Ireland. I have spoken to many im-

migrants in recent times and they have told me their lives have changed for the worse in this country. They have told me they are receiving a high level of abuse and attacks, both verbally and physically, in Ireland.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: So the Deputy is for immigrants now.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They feel that the chaotic arrangement of the Government has actually led to the breakdown in cohesion in recent years. Aontú believes that the colour of a person's skin is of no more significance than the colour of their eyes. We believe that all citizens must be treated equally and fairly in this country. During the recent election campaign, I talked to many people who are from different countries and who are not white. They told me of their children who were born in Ireland, who are playing hurling and who are speaking Irish in school being attacked physically and verbally in Ireland. Young people who know no other home are being told to go home by certain people in Ireland. That is absolutely wrong and must stop. One of the ways we can rebuild cohesion is to make sure that we have an immigration system that is actually implemented fairly and equally.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Neale Richmond): I welcome this opportunity to contribute to this debate and speak in favour of this motion. This gives us a great opportunity not only to speak to the detail of this pact but speak more widely about the issue of migration. Many people have been calling for that and it is important.

I spent four and a half years having to listen to Nigel Farage's contributions to Brexit debates but little did I know that I would see it repeated here for a good three and a half minutes by Deputy Tóibín. That was spectacular Eurosceptic nonsense that was absolutely mind-bending.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Euro-critical. I am not looking to come out of the European Union.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It took him 90 seconds to raise the canard of the EU army. I was just waiting for him to talk about straight bananas; that is how ridiculous he got at one stage. The absolute twisting of truth is lessening this debate. It took Deputy Tóibín seven minutes to actually mention the pact at hand. He was citing issues, talking about a hard border, checks at a border, no checks at a border. He was talking about welcoming immigrants and then talking about a firmer system. He then talked about this entire notion, which I will come to in a minute, that somehow we can do this all on our own and we would be better on our own. Taking the names of Connolly and Pearse into the context of this debate lessens the debate. It just shows the sort of populist nonsense he has been doing. He is very welcome back to the Chamber; I appreciate he spent the past number of weeks campaigning.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister of State is calling names; he is not addressing anything at all.

Deputy Neale Richmond: All right, I will address the issues. Some of the issues the Deputy raised are ridiculous.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Again, he is calling names.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Talking about a European defence union and an EU army has no place in this debate.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Of course, they have.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State without interruption.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is that sort of level of debate that unfortunately leads us having to spend the whole time myth busting.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What about sovereignty?

Deputy Neale Richmond: The issue I would like to address is the pact at hand.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: But sovereignty does-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State without interruption.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will speak more pertinently to the issue of sovereignty. Deputy Mattie McGrath is due to speak in two slots and I will listen to his contribution then. I look forward to it as ever.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will talk about the same issues.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Very few people have talked about the detail of the pact and the fact that this took eight years to come about. It took eight years of contribution by Irish people in Brussels at every level to ensure that we talk about this. When I was on the EU's committee of the regions, I sat on the CIVEX committee. All my colleagues from the Mediterranean wanted to talk about Mediterranean crossings, migration and the asylum crisis and the fact that this was seen in a total vacuum as some sort of humanitarian issue alone in Ireland. The issue has been moving on further and further. It is quite clear that the Dublin III regulations are completely out of date and no longer fit for purpose. What this pact seeks to do, can do and is absolutely right to do, is make sure that the system across the European Union is better harmonised, quicker and more cost-effective. It needs to be fair to those who are seeking refuge and to those who are migrating, but also crucially it provides a pathway for EU member states to address the challenges that are being very clearly presented in every community and every village across this country as it has been doing for other member states for quite some time.

One of the root causes of the issue that so many people face is the scourge of human trafficking and smuggling. I recall the report launched by the former Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, when he was a Member of the European Parliament back in 2004 citing the issue of human trafficking and how this was absolutely plaguing not just those who are being trafficked but communities across the European Union. This is where the root of the need for reform and the absolute need for this pact lies.

When talking about the pact, I use this opportunity to respond to some of the claims that will be made in this Chamber or that have been consistently made or indeed that all of us are receiving consistently into our office by email or are seeing on social media. Often it is being presented as absolute fact. I will talk about sovereignty in a moment and our entire role within the European Union. A common tactic is to say that this will lead to 30,000 individuals, asylum seekers, migrants or whatever we call them being forced upon Ireland. This is a very deliberate tactic used by those who are looking to spread disinformation. That is absolute nonsense. Anyone who has read the pact further than the first page will know that if the solidarity clause is invoked in Ireland, Ireland will only have to accept a fraction of this - exactly 648 people - or pay us far smaller financial contribution to the solidarity fund if we choose; we are not forced

to.

Not only will this allow us to have a quicker turnaround time but will also provide a far better way of returning those who have failed in the asylum process to member states. I take great issue with the line that I think Deputy O'Rourke used in that somehow we are far better to do this independently - ourselves alone, that old trope. This is a global phenomenon. When we are talking about migration, we have to talk about far more than just accommodation. We also have to talk about the motivating trends which can be war, climate change, the pursuit of a better life, escape from persecution and so much else. The very notion that we can do it on our own is an absolute fallacy.

We only have to look across the United Kingdom, which left the EU for many reasons but one of which was used most egregiously by the hard Brexiteers was that somehow this would address immigration. We see the election platform launched by the Reform Party yesterday, which absolutely ruled out any further immigration. We are not talking about illegal immigration or asylum seekers, but absolute non-essential immigration into the United Kingdom going forward. One of the issues it cited is that somehow Brexit will help the UK process asylum seekers much more quickly, which we have obviously seen to be false because what we have seen post Brexit is that the level of migration into the UK has gone up, including legal migration, illegal migration, asylum seekers and cross-channel crossings. The ability to utilise the provisions under EU law in terms of returning people who failed asylum applications or in terms of reunification is completely lost on the British Government. This notion that is being put across repeatedly that somehow we should do this on our own, that we are an island and that we can solve this is absolute nonsense. It is a recipe to cause trouble and make sure that our systems absolutely fall apart.

A number of comments have suggested that somehow this is a surrender of sovereignty. It is an issue as old as time. This comes back to Deputy Tóibín's comments when he suggested going back to what the European project was originally about - some sort of free trading area. Anyone with a scant knowledge of European or Irish history knows that that is not what it started as. It started with the European Coal and Steel Community. It started with the pursuit of peace, bringing people together and providing better lives to the largest displacement of people on this Continent in history. That is where the European project started. The European Economic Community came much later. It came after Euratom, after the development of the Common Agricultural Policy and much more. The notion of a European project has always been about far more than a collection of member states. It has been far more than a loose trading agreement. It is not some sort of North American Free Trade Agreement for the Continent. It is far more than that and is far more important than that. It is absolutely about pooling sovereignty and sharing ideas. It is not about taking edicts by some foreign power.

The two previous Secretaries General of the European Commission were both from Dublin. Throughout the over 40-year history of the European project, we have seen Irish men and women serving at every single level of the European Union with distinction. When Irish Ministers go into European Council meetings, they represent Irish people but they look to get a common solution and a common good developed across the Continent.

We need to nip in the bud this notion that somehow making the decision to opt into a pact is somehow giving up sovereignty. We are making a decision that will allow us to do things better, quicker and fairer. It will ensure that it is absolutely Irish people who have a say. We will not see decision being imposed. Ireland will still retain the veto power. It was already said

a minute ago that the rules are going to change, that we will be forced into an EU army and that we will lose QMV. These notions and discussions have been allowed to seep into debate without people calling them out to say that they are absolutely false. That is really important.

Some people have suggested that the nature restoration law was somehow forced upon us before the European Parliament came back into sitting. Anyone who says that does not realise that the nature restoration law has been passed by the European Parliament and it is a matter for the European Council. It is the ordinary legislative procedure, yet people want to ignore the rules, ignore legislation and ignore constitution to score cheap political points and clearly spread fear about very important issues. I understand that some people have concerns with the EU migration pact. Some people will say it is too hard and others will say it is not hard enough. However, it is a compromise by 27 sovereign states, members of a collective union who have made a decision to work together for the better good of their citizens, for those seeking asylum, and of promoting the EU as the best place in the world, the largest economy and a place that people understandably want to come to. This has unfortunately just given rise to an easy bit of EU bashing with absolute ignorance and scant regard for what is an important pact. It is the product of eight years of detailed negotiation between ministers, officials, Members of the European Parliament and many more. It is crucially important that Ireland opts into it at this time, but we opt in by giving clear information to people. This is an opportune time for a lot of people to discuss migration more widely. We have heard contributions from Deputies, some of which were raised many times previously. They want to talk about issues such as accommodation in their local communities. They are entitled to do that, and they are entitled to seek answers. They are also responsible to make sure we say we are first and foremost discussing this pact.

If this leads to a wider debate on migration, we have to put things clear on the record. I have no hesitation in saying that immigration is a good thing for our country. It is a good thing for our economy and a good thing for our society. When I had the privilege to serve as Minister of State in the Department of enterprise, I was proud to issue 31,000 work permits to people from outside the European Union who are coming here to work in our hospitals, on our building sites, in our multinational companies and in our communities, and to contribute so much. That is why it is vitally important we have an immigration and migration system that works. That is why it is so important we opt into this migration pact, to make sure that those who come here to seek work go through the appropriate channel looking for work permits. Deputy English, when he was Minister of State, managed to get that waiting time reduced from three months to 12 days. It was an exceptional piece of work with dedicated officials. We see ongoing work from Deputy McEntee's officials and others to make sure the visa system is sped up. A lot of people have said the Government can allocate more resources now. The resources are being allocated. Today the Minister for Justice announced more officials to work in the visa processing system and the asylum processing system to make sure it works. We need to reform our system and we need to speed it up.

I will briefly comment on an event in my constituency yesterday. For a number of weeks my constituency has been the focus of a lot of commentary about IPAS centres and community engagement. That is a complete understatement. There were unfortunately a couple of unsavoury incidents that required arrests and the presence of An Garda Síochána, and a number of people from outside the constituency were arrested. What I witnessed yesterday in the pastoral centre of the Holy Cross Church in Dundrum was something we do not see enough on the news. They expected a crowd of between ten and 12, but we saw more than 120 people. We saw asylum seekers, people born and reared in Dundrum and people who came to Ireland in the past

couple of years come together to network, meet and arrange. We saw representatives from two different football clubs and cricket clubs who wanted to work, integrate and welcome people. I believe that is inherently at the soul of Irish people. We are a welcoming people. This is the land of 100,000 welcomes. We need a system to make sure those welcomes are reflective of what is needed in society. I fundamentally believe that the more we do it in co-operation with our European partners, the more we will get a system that works better. The people in that pastoral centre yesterday came from all countries and local areas. There were people who have been in Ireland their entire lives and who were born and bred here. There were people who only arrived a number of years ago but are as Irish as we are. We hold our passport proudly and we see athletes proudly representing our country who perhaps were not born here, or whose parents were not born here. It does not make them any less Irish than us. We have to remember that. They have to know the system works. They want to know we will debate fairly about how we improve that system and make sure that system is truly representative of what we want to achieve. In order to get a system that works, I fundamentally believe that we need to pass this motion as speedily as possible.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This is an important pact for us to make a decision on, and it is my view the Dáil should vote against the Government's decision to fully opt us into this pact. As a result of that I will be voting "Níl". It is often that we hear from Ministers that they cannot do X or Y because of some EU regulation, and it is out of the hands of the Ministers and Government and their hands are tied. Here they are choosing for their hands to be tied and to lose any room for manoeuvre. Here we have a pact we can opt out of. We are in a unique position in our ability to do this, yet instead the Government is taking an all or nothing approach on this. This makes no sense at all to me.

We have all been knocking doors over the past months. The first thing people will say when they talk about immigration is that their hearts go out to the people fleeing war. We need to recognise the causes of immigration and the role the west plays in this. We need to talk about the role the west plays in wars and in climate change, which force people to leave their homelands. We need to recognise the role we play in these wars through the continued use of Shannon Airport. Wars leave destruction around the world, and we must be strong advocates for peace. We must use our military neutrality to work towards peace. We must also be strong in Europe on this issue. We are seeing an increasing militarisation of the EU. Ursula von der Leyen is on record as saying that it is her intention to transform the European Union into a geopolitical bloc, and as part of the next Commission, she wishes to establish an EU defence Commissioner and an EU rapid reaction force, which is an army by another name. She wants to massively increase investment into the European arms industrial complex. Increasing militarisation and increasing wars lead to more migration and the displacement of more people. We must be a voice for peace and the EU must go back to its fundamentals, which were born out of the horrors of two world wars. Even in research at third level, the distinction between civil and military research is being eroded. There is now the new term of dual-use research. That is bad for Ireland in many ways but could also impact our access to funding in the future.

This is also a question of sovereignty. We should be able to make decisions here through a government elected by the people and held accountable by them. We are in a unique position in this State in that we do share a common travel area with Britain, and we should keep flexibility to make changes here when we need to. I also have serious concerns about the EU's policies and attitudes to migration. Many human rights organisations have raised serious concerns about this pact. We have to look at the number of people who have drowned in the Mediterranean.

Between 2014 and 2019, more than 19,000 people drowned there. In 2012, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that refugees could not be returned to Libya by European boats because it would endanger the lives of the people. We know now that the EU managed to circumvent this by training the Libyan Coast Guard, which does interceptions, and brings people back to what can only be described as the largest human market in the world. We should not be holding the EU up as a beacon of human rights and humanity on this issue. As the Minister, Deputy McEntee, said, it took the EU many years to agree on this pact. If there are issues with this pact, my concern is it will take many years to fix them too. Sometimes we do not need a one-size-fits-all approach and model. We have a right to decide our own approach, and I believe it is our responsibility to exercise that right if we feel it is in our own best interests.

Agus cúpla soicind fágtha agam, tá mé ag iarraidh é seo a rá arís i nGaeilge.

Tá sé fíorthábhachtach nuair atáimid ag plé na cúrsaí seo go mbreathnaímid freisin ar na cúinsí ina dtarlaíonn sé go gcaithfidh daoine a dtíortha féin a fhágáil. Caithfimid a bheith ionraic faoi seo gur minic nach bhfuil daoine ag iarraidh a gcuid teaghlaigh féin a fhágáil ach mar gheall ar chúrsaí cogaidh, nach bhfuil cinneadh ar bith eile acu agus go mbíonn orthu fágáil. Caithfimid breathnú air seo agus a chinntiú mar thír go n-úsáidimid an guth láidir atá againn san Aontas Eorpach chun chuile shórt a dhéanamh chun stop a chur le cogaidh. Tá mé buartha go bhfuil an tAontas Eorpach ag dul i dtreo atá ag breathnú ar chúrsaí míleata i bhfad níos mó agus gur chóir dúinn stop a chur leis sin.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Rural Independent Group and I are fundamentally opposed to the migration pact and have made our opposition known for several months. The Dáil justice committee wrapped up its discussions on the pact more than a month ago. Since then, the Government tactically postponed the debate and vote in the Dáil until after the local and European elections, and the dogs in the street know that. We saw in the referendums that the Government withheld vital information that should have been put into the public domain, and it has tried to do the same with this, just hide it from the people. A pact that took nearly a decade to negotiate in Brussels is to be expedited through the Dáil and Seanad within several hours this week.

The EU migration pact consists of five separate regulations. Within these regulations, there are ten regulatory measures, seven of which the Government proposes to adopt. However, it is denying the Dáil a vote on each of the seven opt-in measures, despite the European Parliament having held separate votes on each of the measures, as has been well documented. We should be discussing the pact section by section, because there is some good in the pact but there is also an awful lot of bad in it for our country. On 10 April 2024, the European Parliament voted in approval of the pact. I could not but be reminded of 10 April 101 years ago when Liam Lynch, the republican leader, was fatally wounded in the Knockmealdown Mountains, close to my home.

All EU member states, with the exception of Ireland and Denmark, became bound by the pact after it had been voted for by the Parliament and the Council. Ireland has a hard-won opt-in provision because, like the UK, it enacted an opt-in provision in the areas of freedom, security and justice, which includes migration and migration laws. Opting in to the measures proposed by the Government under the pact will have grave consequences, including increasing numbers of asylum seekers or financial penalties under the solidarity mechanism of the pact. Ireland is required to accept an unspecified number of asylum seekers each year or face a financial penalty of at least €20,000 per person, imposed by the European Union. The quota of asylum seekers each country will be assigned under the pact will be based on population size,

which does not work in our favour because of our small population, and on our GDP, which is seriously skewed by the multinational investors that are here at this time but which could disappear at any time like snow off a ditch.

To make matters worse, if any future Government does not support the pact, it will not be able to opt out. While, in theory, a future Government could ignore the pact like Hungary, it would leave the country and taxpayers exposed to enormous fines. Why do we want to tie ourselves into some kind of a bond we cannot ever change? It is futile, short-sighted and divisive. The consequences of approving this pact or opting in to it will either impose an increasing number of asylum seekers on communities across Ireland each year or compel taxpayers to pay an annual fee of €20,000 for each person denied entry. The decision to opt in to such an agreement is utterly irrational and transfers the authority of immigration decision-making from Dublin to Brussels. We are ceding our sovereignty, as can be nakedly seen for all its truths.

The process of returning asylum seekers to their first country of asylum or to safe countries will become more challenging due to stricter rules, including guarantees of the applicants' rights to access higher education and of their ability to stay in the country unless they pose a security risk. That is very scary.

The ability of Ireland to designate safe countries is compromised due to the EU's authority to overrule any such decision. This is particularly relevant in the case of the UK due to its ongoing withdrawal process. We have designated very few countries as safe. We recently increased the number by two but some other European countries have twice as many as we do. Why are we so lethargic in that regard? Why have we not been doing this all along?

If a member state claims to be under migratory pressure, it can request the EU to prevent other member states from returning any asylum seekers to them for up to 12 months, and that is startling.

Under the crisis and *force majeure* regulation, a member state facing significant migratory problems can request support from the European Commission, including by asking other member states to take in some of their asylum seekers. This raises questions as to whether Ireland can be legally compelled to accept a quota of asylum seekers annually instead of paying a financial penalty. According to a reply my office obtained to a recent parliamentary question, the cost of accommodating asylum-seeking individuals in 2023 was €561 per week. That is a figure from the Minister's office.

From the same data we know 64% of all asylum applicants assessed for eligibility in 2023 did not qualify, indicating they were either illegal immigrants or should never have been in the asylum system in the first place. We have been unable, therefore, to deal with it. The Minister has stated it is taking 19 months for an assessment. The system has been shambolic from day one. Ministers thought they could blame it on the Department of the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and that they would get away with it but no, it has divided communities. Take my county mar fhocal scoir. Borrisokane, one of the towns that took in Ukrainians, was held up as a model throughout the country. Now, the Department is trying to force the town to take in asylum seekers instead of Ukrainians, who were welcomed into the community, worked there and lived there. We know what happened in Roscrea, with terrible treatment of the ordinary people there. We saw what happened in Rathcabbin, where it was the same story, with a nursing home that was being used for Ukrainians is now to be used as an IPAS centre. The same is true of Clonmel at the moment, where Hearns Hotel is to be used as a centre for IPAS, and

what is going on in the Heywood Road is outrageous. British security forces are there, with no badges displayed.

I condemn any violence or threats of violence, but is this what we want, to divide people? Is this what we fought for in 1916, 1922 and 1923? Is this the Ireland we need today? It is divide and conquer. The Department has been disgraceful at responding or engaging and the fire office, likewise, will not check out buildings. It is all cloak and dagger and it is not right to the people of Ireland.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: This pact is about trust. Having canvassed extensively over recent months, like the Ministers, what I am hearing at the doors is that the people do not trust the Government when it comes to migration, and it is hard to see how you could disagree with them when we see the chaotic scenes.

I will give a couple of examples. One day, all the agencies of the State come and remove tents in Mount Street and along the canal. They grab them, take them away and dump them. They move the people along and put up barriers, and the following day, they give out new tents and the same thing happens again. It is a lack of what the people would see to be direction and leadership. That is what people are crying out for.

They are asking how it can be right that people can just get onto a plane. We heard Michael O'Leary, a man who is often vilified in this House but for whom I have nothing but the highest of respect because he did an awful lot for the airline industry in this country. I listened very carefully when he came to the Houses the other day and spoke about passports and documentation being flushed down toilets on aeroplanes. It is a fact people were getting on planes with their documentation and when they arrived here, they did not have documentation. I got those statistics from the Minister's Department and I was very glad to get them. It showed shockingly what was happened. That would not be tolerated anywhere. Any one of us cannot get onto a plane, land somewhere, such as in the US, and say I had my documentation but I do not have it anymore, or that I am just here now and please accept me. That would not be tolerated, and we were tolerating it here for a long time.

I see that the Government is finally waking up to the reality that we were being taken for fools in many instances, and that is not to make little of people who came here because they had to come here. I have seen pictures of people's homes having been bombed and of people with nothing but a couple of bags in their hands, but this is a completely different thing we are talking about. On the one hand, we are talking about people fleeing from a genuine war and, on the other, there are people coming here because it is better to come here than to go somewhere else. The Government really has to wake up to this. That is one of the reasons I cannot support this pact when it is put to a vote tomorrow at midnight. I ask the Government to listen to the people because it did not listen to them previously. It did not listen to them in the recent referendums and it was proved wrong in that regard. The vast majority of people are not for this either because, quite simply, they do not trust the Government given what it allowed to continue happening for so long.

Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important debate in the Dáil, outline my views on the pact and why I am supporting it and respond to some of the claims I have heard about the pact during this debate.

It is very easy, when discussing something that can be technical at times and involves the movement of many people, to lose sight of the human face of this issue and the human stories that should illuminate our ability to discuss very complex policy issues like this. I have experienced a number of human stories in my constituency over the last 18 months that lead me to the view that this pact is appropriate and the right thing for our country. They also reinforce the importance of this debate overall and the need to take care about the claims we make and the language we use.

The first story in my mind, as I listen to this debate, is about attending a ceremony in my constituency to mark a change in patronage in a primary school. The change was part of a process that had been worked on collaboratively with the local church, reflecting that the Catholic ethos and patronage of the school were no longer appropriate for the school community and the school community to come. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and I were present for the ceremony to mark this change. As I looked into the audience and saw all the young girls and boys who were present, all of whom were infants, including many born here and many born in other parts of the world, I saw that they were thinking about the school and their future. It reinforced for me the common views and needs we have, as humans and people living on this island. What those kids are looking for, regardless of where they were born, is an environment in which they are safe, are schooled and can play their role in the society in which they live. As I consider that experience, I find it very difficult to relate it to the claims I hear made about the dangers of migration and of what can happen if migration flows become unregulated. The very purpose of this pact is to put a regulatory framework on migration.

The second story relates to when I visit the centres in my constituency that house people seeking asylum in our country. I and, I am sure, other TDs have visited these centres and met people who have come to Ireland from circumstances I cannot imagine and who, frequently, have experienced danger and difficulty that are outside my ability to comprehend. I had one particular conversation with a man around my age that made me reflect on the fact that there but for the grace of God go I, or any of us. There but for the grace of God go we, and we have avoided that fate because we had the good fortune to be born in this part of the world in a stable, safe environment that allows us to avoid having to deal with those kinds of terrible challenges.

The third story is the many citizenship ceremonies that take place in this State. People who have come to our island go through very rigorous and arduous processes to become citizens of Ireland and to be treated with utter parity with all of those speaking in this debate. I contend that these are deeply valuable and positive experiences that are related to this debate and to the fact that 20% of the labour force come from outside the country or have moved here. It relates to the fact that every workplace in this country has changed and become so much more diverse. If we accept the economic reality that this country will need more workers in its public services and for its employers, and if we look at the human experiences that I am sure all of us have had and relate those to migration, the question becomes this: how can one accept, on one hand, that migration brings positive benefits and has much to offer our society and economy, while, on the other hand and at the same time, buy into the kind of approach that says we can have closed borders and that anybody who comes to our country seeking refuge is doing so in a way that is deceitful and less than honest? How can one accept the benefits migration can bring overall and then not treat the migration challenge in our country with a balance of competence and compassion? The great risk I fear we have to be aware of and navigate through is that we begin to equate migration, its benefits and the need for people to come into our country with the challenges we have with asylum-seeking, and that we get to a point that we begin to view it all

as the same thing.

Openness has brought great benefits to Ireland. Without openness we would not have the public services or economy we have today. What this pact and the Government aim to do is to balance that openness with the need to respond to a migration of human beings that has taken place across the world, which has been caused by three wars, the breakdown of states and the climate change we see take place all around us.

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Government have made the case for this pact throughout this debate. I, in turn, want to deal with some of the charges made against the pact this evening. First, I have heard the approach set out that any sharing of sovereignty is a bad thing, any pooling of sovereignty with our neighbours is intrinsically wrong and we should view with suspicion any efforts that seek to do this, either through the pact or any other form of co-operation. That is not the route to progress or for responding to the challenges of this century and what is to come. That is a step backwards. The reason we need to co-operate across borders and pool sovereignty on this issue is that the challenges we face here are too great for any country to deal with on its own. That is the very essence of the European Union and it is coming to life in this pact in recognising that we need a higher form of co-operation and co-ordination and that seeking to do this in a solitary way will ultimately be unsuccessful.

As for those who make the case for that approach, having listened to Deputy Mairéad Farrell's speech, I was honestly no wiser at the end of it as to what Sinn Féin's policy is. Perhaps Deputy Ó Laoghaire can respond on this. I heard Deputy Mairéad Farrell speak about dual-use goods, the future of the European Union project, geopolitical claims and President von der Leyen. I heard her speak about many other issues and I am no wiser as to what Sinn Féin's approach is to the migration pact and the great challenge we have in making the case for migration and dealing with the challenge of a greater number of asylum seekers coming to our country. I am afraid I have reached the view that Sinn Féin's policy is either shockingly naive or shockingly cynical. I hope Deputy Ó Laoghaire can prove my claims and fears wrong and outline what Sinn Féin's policy really is. If it is saying it wants to withdraw from many elements of this pact or, more precisely, not participate in them, what would Sinn Féin do instead? What is its alternative? It can step back to the past and evoke images of other points in our history and talk about what it believes the EU should be but if it is not willing to co-operate with those that are on side with this framework and does not believe we would be in it, why should they co-operate with Ireland? If we decide to go on our own path, why should they decide that they will go on it with us? That is the really practical question I hope Deputy Ó Laoghaire can answer because no Sinn Féin speaker has done it so far and no Sinn Féin speaker has outlined what Sinn Féin would do. I have heard much about what Sinn Féin is against and why it does not want to be in the pact but I have not heard it say what it would do differently or how it would be able to respond to this. I look forward to hearing the Deputy say it.

I have also heard the views about requirements. I have heard it said that we should not have requirements placed upon us to do things in a particular way but if we are saying we are not willing to accept requirements on us to act in a certain way, why should other countries accept requirements on them? If we are saying that there are particular targets we should not meet or particular ways of handling this great challenge we should not conform to, why in turn should we expect other countries to co-operate with us? If we are not willing to meet particular standards and do things in a particular way required by this pact, why are we expecting other countries to do differently? That is at the heart of all of this. What is at the heart of all of this is dealing with a challenge that at a very human level moves across borders. As part of our

membership of the EU, we have a political union that helps us create policies that are greater than what we can achieve on our own. To be inside this framework is the best practical prospect open to Ireland regarding how we can respond to what has become a defining challenge in many other democracies. I fear that opting out of this framework would create great risk and great challenges. Those who are making the case for doing so should explain to the Dáil what they would do in its place.

I go back to where I began in this debate about the many different and complex but very human issues. In the midst of this debate, let us not lose sight of having an open economy and an open society, treating others as we wish to be treated and using the fact that our economy has resources at its disposal to help those who are truly vulnerable and destitute. Let us not lose sight of all of those really important attributes of our country and society and let us locate that in this debate on pact and remind us of the need to treat those who are in those vulnerable situations with competence, fairness and compassion. It is for that reason that I support this pact.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I listened to the Minister carefully. This Government has led a divisive campaign about refugees and asylum seekers. This has led to a situation where we have two tiers. The Ukrainians came in with full rights compared to those ensconced in direct provision. This Government has stood over direct provision, a system that was not fit for purpose, for over 24 years. There were numerous reports, starting with the modest report of Mr. Justice Brian McMahon at the time and going on to the Catherine Day report. A decision was made by the Government, which I welcomed, to stop direct provision, the serious for-profit system that was undermining human rights and feeding into a horrible narrative.

I have also gone through the elections supporting people and experienced that narrative, which I deplore, but the Government has had a hand in that. Today, the headlines are that the Government will bring in legislation to revoke people's citizenship. Can the Government imagine the narrative it is feeding into? I come from Galway city and county and have watched what has happened to my dismay and horror. I have deplored the comments made in Oughterard, which I described as the worst meeting of my life. Then I saw what happened in Rosscahill and lately in Carraroe. All that time, the Government has learned nothing. I deplore the comments made in Carraroe. I would lose votes rather than support any of those comments or that narrative but the Government has persisted with the policy of taking over hotels and not providing extra services to the areas. There is also the added insult of English classes in a Gaeltacht area. These are small examples of the Government's failure to learn and to deal with direct provision in a more human way and deal with the people coming to our country seeking asylum. They are not immigrants but people seeking asylum and under international law, we have obligations to look after them and make quick decisions. If they are not entitled to asylum, there should certainly be a quick return but none of this has happened. The Government has allowed this horrible narrative, which I deplore, to build up such as the argument that Ireland is full or questioning whether we can take any more. It is horrible language.

This pact has seven parts but nobody has explained why there is only one vote. Perhaps I am wrong. Is it one vote on seven individual parts? There has been no explanation as to why this will happen. There is no ability for us to tease this out because it went to the Oireachtas Committee on Justice for one day. There was pressure to get it debated in the Dáil. There was one day when people came in to make presentations. I understand the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is on record as saying that it did not have enough time to make a presentation. Can one imagine? An organisation of that status did not have enough time to make a submission on this. We were led to believe that it had to be pushed through before the local and

European elections but suddenly it did not have to, just like the copyright referendum that was supposed to be held. That was put off as well. That went by the board as well even though we were told that had to be held. Suddenly, this was not to be done before the elections and here we are.

I am on side with the tenor of what the Minister said about the unacceptable nature and our obligations. My difficulty concerns what has happened to the European project, the lens we are looking down and the tunnel vision we have. An article by Sally Hayden in today's edition of *The Irish Times* tells us about the situation in Sudan. The article quoted people saying "We are looking for help, we are looking for humanity". It is an impossible situation with 10 million people displaced in Sudan. What are we doing? Absolutely nothing. On Leaders' Questions today, my question was about Palestine where people are being slaughtered. What are we doing? We are waiting for our big sisters and brothers in Europe to tell us what to do. Oh yes we are. The Government is going to vote for Ursula von der Leyen.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: That comment is below the Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I did not interrupt the Minister. What are we looking at here? The UN estimates that at the end of 2023, there were more than 117 million displaced people in the world. I understand the number has gone up to almost 120 million. What are we doing about that? What lens are we looking through to see what is happening in the world? What voice are we using? Are we using our voice as a neutral and independent sovereign state to ask what is happening and what we will contribute to that debate as a small country? Our voice is much stronger given our history and I would like to hear it. If 120 million people are displaced, no amount of border protection, detention centres, prisons or walls will sort that out. For as long as I am here, whether it is for a few weeks or a few more years, I will use my voice to say that is wrong. Do not build Europe up as a fortress. Mr. Borrell is telling us that everything outside the walls of Europe is a jungle. Remember that? Ursula von der Leyen tells us that what Benjamin Netanyahu is doing is okay. That is the type of Europe we have. I will not be part of that Europe and I am a committed European. I have had the privilege of living in Germany and learning the language. I have family there. I am a European in a different sense to what von der Leyen and Borrell are telling us.

We are not allowed to vote on the seven individual parts of the pact. NGOs have spoken about the pact. I can pick from a number of papers. The Irish Refugee Council stated 161 NGOs called on members of the European Parliament to vote against the pact and that it will have devastating implications for the right to international protection and will greenlight abuses across Europe, including racial profiling, default de facto detention and pushbacks. The Irish Refugee Council prepared a briefing paper, which stated that it believes the reforms reflect an effort to limit access to protection for refugees in Europe and will result in fewer safeguards, increased attention and destitution among people seeking protection. I could go on.

I realise other submissions stated there were some good and bad things in the pact. I realise that. I have read every one of them. Overall, the pact is channelling a discussion in a particular fashion and way and for a particular narrative that allows people who have been regarded as being on the right to use it in a way that suits their arguments, as opposed to asking how we stand together through solidarity with the 600 people who went down on a ship this month last year. I did not hear von der Leyen say one word about those 600 people.

I hope to watch a BBC 2 documentary which aired last night on what is happening with the

Greeks, who are under pressure, and how they are throwing people back into the water. Figures were given. How do we stand in solidarity with countries in the world which are the poorest and are taking the most asylum seekers and refugees? I would have loved if a Minister, or the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste, had quoted figures for the countries which are the poorest and are taking in the most.

Europe's percentage of refugees and asylum seekers has decreased significantly over the past number of years. The richest entity, which is on its way to becoming a military power and empire, speaks about a rules based order within its walls while everything outside of that does not deserve respect. People are treated with utter contempt, as if they go into a ship for the love and fun of it and to get fresh air in the Mediterranean. They are running for their lives and from appalling conditions.

Ireland and Europe are not looking at what part Europe is playing in those conditions, given the type of business and model we are pursuing. We can take a tiny look at this and say we are standing in solidarity. We are making a mockery of language because we are certainly not standing in solidarity with those who need our help. Von der Leyen does not need our help.

Our voices need to be heard loud and clear. We need to say that we have challenges in terms of the number of asylum seekers and refugees running from their countries. We need to ask why that is happening. We need to ask what we, as part of Europe, are going to do about that. We need to make words mean something when we stand in solidarity and show some human outrage at the 600 people that we know about who went down on one ship. That still continues to this day. I will not be supporting the pact.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I welcome the opportunity to voice my views on the EU migration pact and will do my very best in my limited time as I have a lot to say on the matter. It is completely disingenuous of the Government to steamroll ahead with a single vote on this pact. There is no need for that, it has the public's back up and I take real issue with that.

One point has been completely lost by the Government. It is abundantly clear, much the same as the recent referendum, that the heels have been dug in and there is no sign that the Government wants to work collectively in this House on the issue of migration. At the same time, it is speaking to the need to work on this issue collectively in the EU. That seems hypocritical and sends a loud message that has been resounding for the past two years.

I called for increased engagement with communities. Instead it seemed that such a small but significant step, which is vitally important for integration, was too much to cope with and too big of an ask. Instead, it was considered fair to put vulnerable people in rural and peripheral rural parts of Clare into towns and villages with high levels of deprivation, a lack of employment opportunities and with reduced or non-existent public services - I am referring to very basic public services. It was a case of out of sight, out of mind. The Government pitted vulnerable people against each other, who then felt they had more competition to fight against. That is exactly what has unfolded. That was dangerous and anything but fair.

The truth is that the Government has lost credibility and has not demonstrated its capability to deliver accommodation in this never-ending housing crisis. Can it respect that this affects trust, confidence, social cohesion and attitudes towards migration? I will not support the EU migration pact. I want to briefly mention communities in Clare which have done amazing work in assisting and supporting people with very little support from this Government.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I will preface my remarks by stating what a remarkable institution the European Union is. It is unique. It was formed by statesmen determined that in future, difficult global problems would be resolved co-operatively and peacefully among the countries involved. For Ireland, membership of the European Union has been the gateway to take our place among the countries of the world, as Parnell spoke about.

For a small country to exercise sovereignty in a meaningful way on global issues is to share in decisions and in making and reaching decisions on issues that, had we not participated, would affect us anyhow without our voice being heard. I see this debate very much in the context of the European Union and Ireland as an integral part of it trying to resolve what is undoubtedly a highly divisive issue. We see that right across Europe, where these issues are becoming divisive in European politics.

Migration has been hugely accelerated by war, as we all know. Ireland has maintained its fair share. It is not carrying more or less but it is carrying its fair share in dealing with international protection and the nearly 6 million people displaced by the Ukrainian war. This debate and these issues will test our values and ability as a member of the European Union to work with others to try to resolve the common difficulties we face. This series of tests comes at a time when there are serious forces out there seeking to fan the flames of divisiveness with their xenophobia, Euroscepticism, battles over identity and conspiracy theories.

We are working in a dangerous environment and it is important that we see the pact in that light. This is an important effort by the European Union to address the massive problem of displacement that is now occurring. As many others have said, it cannot be resolved by one country acting alone. This has to be a collective approach. As the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, pointed out, people are legally here seeking our protection because of the circumstances in their countries. Many talk about them as being illegal immigrants. They are here legally and are exercising a right we have recognised time and again in international treaties.

Every EU country is struggling in the same way to manage these flows. I get annoyed when I hear and see the protests stating that Ireland is full and that we should have a fortress Ireland. Do the people who advocate for that just ignore the tremendous changes that have happened in Ireland over the past decades, because we have opened up and because we have moved away from this fortress idea? The bedrock values of the European Union, from which we have derived so much benefit, are the free movement of labour, of goods and of capital. That is why we have been so successful. So many of our enterprises and services, such as the health service, depend entirely on the existence of migration and the support of people who decided to make their futures in this country. That has to be at the heart of the way we look at this challenge.

However, mutual co-operation is absolutely essential if we are to manage this and maintain the sort of open societies from which we have derived benefit. If we start to balkanise our approach with each country taking its own individual approaches, as advocated by those who oppose this, we will sacrifice the openness we have all enjoyed so much. The EU has had a common system in this area for 25 years. The notion that we co-operate together is not a new EU approach. It has been established practice for 25 years.

Moreover, this pact was difficult to agree and no doubt there was give and take. Different countries have different interests and they all had to be accommodated. Like all agreements, it comes at the end as a package. People make compromises to agree something on which they can all agree. That integrity requires that participants cannot pick and choose what bits they

like and do not like. I can understand how politicians want to come in here and oppose this treaty at all costs. They will find something in the treaty they do not like. I can understand that instinct because this is a very divisive issue. However, let us be honest. At the end of any negotiation that has gone on as long as this has, there comes a time where we have to decide whether we are opting in or out. Ireland has absolutely rightly decided that we are opting in.

Is it perfect? Certainly not. Is it the last word on migration? Certainly not. However, it is a very good effort to improve what is happening in the European Union at the moment. It offers real concessions or improvements that help us to manage our migration more effectively in both a fair and firm manner, as the Minister for Justice has repeatedly stated is her objective. It reduces gaming of systems between countries and secondary movements. It introduces standard approaches in all countries and copper-fastens those in new ways. It shares information from the vetting process that is exercised in each country. It makes it easier to trace those with criminal intentions in order that such people do not come here and slip through the net. It speeds up the process of application, particularly for inadmissible applications. It creates a workable system for returns, which had not been there under the Dublin Convention. It creates new institutions at the EU that will provide financial support to member states to try to manage this more effectively.

This House has been looking for every one of those elements. There has been criticism of the Government for not processing cases faster and worry that people with criminal intention may be slipping through, although the evidence shows that is almost negligible in its level. It is making sure we share information, which makes it easier. It has a return system, which people in this House have been demanding. It now offers financial assistance to help member states to work together. These are elements we have all looked for and this is a collective agreement that allows them to happen in each member state so that we do not have the balkanisation of the systems that allows people to game one state against the other. It becomes a fairer approach.

To see the merit of this agreement we only have to look at the UK. The UK left the EU largely in the belief that by taking back control, to quote Dominic Cummings's great insight, it would take back control over migration. That has certainly not happened. Migration into the UK is at record levels. It is looking to pay £500 million to France to try to shore up a system in an individual bilateral agreement. It spent £600 million on a Rwandan scheme under which I understand one person has actually been deported. The imaginary objective of taking back control has proved entirely illusory. As well as that, it has sacrificed many of the benefits the UK could have derived from many of the other common policies of the EU.

Much is also being made of the solidarity agreement. On the night the Minister announced the pact had been agreed, on social media I got these claims that Ireland was going to have a burden of €600 million and we would have to take in 30,000 migrants every year. I am sure others received this too. It was just terrible disinformation designed to undermine people's confidence in the pact. It is far from what has been actually agreed. The modest proposal here of solidarity when a country gets overwhelmed is an important element, because any country could be overwhelmed in this way. At the heart of the approach to migration of the European Union is that there would be solidarity and fair sharing of the burden.

In the few minutes left, the last comment I want to make is that we need think much more deeply about the issue of migration and displacement than perhaps we have in recent times. The concentration has been on people moving so quickly and trying to accommodate them. There is no doubt but this will continue. Climate will continue to disrupt. We are seeing grow-

ing forces in the world who see benefit in exploiting the sort of differences that have created war and famine across our planet. The EU must continue to be the strong advocate for policies that will build capacity to stop the source of these problems. That is such an important element of any approach to this. We concentrate ourselves in the short term on the problems of those turning up on our shores. However, we need to have serious policies to build capacity. We are in a privileged position to help to do that. As we approach this and try to balance the humanitarian crises with our own capacity to absorb and manage flows, we must also think about how to reduce the preponderance of humanitarian crises, many of which are being created by our failure to act sufficiently quickly on issues like climate change. We need to develop the multilateral capacity of countries to impact on these really difficult humanitarian crises that are creating such damage in people's lives, who are turning up on our shores.

Deputy John Brady: My colleagues in Sinn Féin and I will be voting against the EU pact on migration and asylum. We do not believe that opting into this pact is in the best interests of Ireland. From the outset, the Government's approach to the area of immigration has been absolutely shambolic. It has consistently been found wanting, invariably scrambling to catch up on events as they are developing. The bottom line is, there has been no plan and there is no plan. Now, with the EU migration pact, the Government is attempting to crowbar Ireland's immigration problems into what it wrongly believes to be a catch-all solution, without any regard to the fact that Ireland's interests would be better served by exercising our sovereign right to develop our own individual responses to the immigration crisis when so doing would offer a better solution than the migration pact. I find it difficult to believe, although I should not, that the Minister confirmed that she did not even consider that Ireland might adopt a more nuanced approach of opting into some areas and out of others. Like the rest of the Government, the Minister has failed to acknowledge that the majority of the EU migration pact simply is not in the interest of the Irish State.

Ireland has the right to choose to develop its own policies on migration. That does not put us at odds with the EU. It merely acknowledges Ireland's sovereign right to take decisions in Ireland about matters that affect Ireland on the island of Ireland. Ireland's position is unique and it is necessary to deal with the complexities that could arise from our common travel area with Britain. It allows the State to opt into elements of the migration pact that serve Ireland's interests and opt out of those that do not serve our interests. This is the approach that Sinn Féin has advocated. If the Government is successful and the EU migration pact is adopted, then that is it: we are in it and there is nothing we can do about it. By remaining outside most of the pact we retain the flexibility and the agility to respond in real time in a way that is in Ireland's best interests.

Ireland requires an immigration system which is fair, efficient and enforced. One that serves Ireland's interests but that also maintains a human rights standard. A number of human rights organisations have brought forward serious concerns about the provisions of the migration pact. These include concerns around the potential for the detention of refugees for totally inadequate assessments and the welfare of vulnerable asylum seekers. I share those concerns. Ireland must play a stronger role in the international community in working to address the underlying issues driving migration across the globe. Ireland must regain its international voice. It must use the international moral standing of the Irish nation to demand that the international community gets real in addressing ongoing conflict and inequality and the impacts of climate change that are blighting large parts of the globe. Our history of neutrality and of struggle against colonial occupation gives Ireland a unique credibility among nations when it comes to speaking on these

issues. The Government would do well to remember that when Ireland was elected to the UN Security Council, it was the votes of the non-aligned, island nations and former colonies that put us there. Sinn Féin is opposed to Ireland opting into the procedures regulation, the crisis and *force majeure* regulation, the qualifications directive, the reception conditions directive and the EU resettlement framework. The rationale for our opposition has already been outlined by my colleagues who have spoken earlier. However, Sinn Féin does support the measures that do make sense. We support the asylum migration management regulation, which would allow Ireland to return individuals who make asylum applications here to the first country where they have made a claim for international protection. We believe it is in our interests to be able to access the fingerprint database, which would allow the State to ensure that it has more information on those who do enter Ireland. This will aid in vetting processes, help in child trafficking cases and conducting checks and, where appropriate, to returning asylum seekers safely. The Eurodac regulation involves a database of the fingerprints of all asylum seekers who have registered in EU member states or associated states.

We have a broken immigration system. Our system is completely overwhelmed. This Government's failure to introduce a fair, efficient and enforced immigration system has impacted on the social fabric of many communities across the State. The Government's failure to enforce its own rules has allowed the numbers to continue rising at a completely unmanageable rate. In 2019 there were 4,781 international protection applications. By 2023, this had risen to 13,276. This year it seems as though the figures might surpass 20,000. Yet asylum applicants endure an average waiting time of just under 19 months for a decision. This most decidedly is not an efficient system. The whole thing appears to be something of a "whatever you're having yourself" approach. There is evidence of haphazard enforcement of decisions when they are eventually reached. There is little or no follow-up and there is a reliance on failed applicants leaving the State voluntarily. The absence of oversight or verification is absolutely ridiculous. Over 11 years when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were either in government together or providing active support to each other, some 10,622 deportation orders were issued and only 1,948 of those orders were enforced. That is a mere 18%. In 2022, when 928 deportation orders were issued only 52 of those were acted upon. In 2023, there were 80 deportations enforced of a total of 734 that were signed. It appears that the Government does not know where these unsuccessful applicants are: whether they are in the State and, if they are, where in the State they are. It does not compile that information.

The Government has failed to enforce its own policies or system of rules. It is a *laissez-faire* approach where it appears that it is left to individuals to leave by themselves. This has created bottlenecks and has meant that a completely overwhelmed system does not serve the best interests of those who it was set up to serve. The single most damaging and shambolic aspect of the Government's failed immigration strategy, however, has been its failure to communicate and consult with local communities. Most damaging of all is the way the Government has allowed the communications gap to be filled with lies, hate and prejudice. Sky News recently revealed that 56% of online content relating to one particular protest originated in the US with 10% in Britain and only 20% originated in this State. Responsibility for this lies firmly at the door of the Government. Communities require the Government to be honest with them about what is occurring in their midst. Instead, the Government has straight-out lied to communities, which has led to anger and resentment on the ground.

Ireland needs a fair, efficient and enforced system of immigration. We have the means to exercise our sovereignty and to act in the best interests of our own State and our own island,

developing our own solutions to the unique character of the problems here. I have outlined the individual measures which are not in Ireland's interests. We must oppose them. By ceding sovereignty to the EU on the issue of migration, the Government is moving to undermine the State's capacity to effectively address the issue. That is why I, and my colleagues, will vote against the EU migration pact.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am very glad to have the opportunity to speak on this truly important issue. I will make a few general points before I deal with the specifics in the proposal before the House. This is a fundamentally important set of proposals that seeks - I think in an honest way - to address an issue which is of deep concern to the majority of the Irish people. It merits, therefore, the kind of scrutiny and debate that these measures were given in the European Parliament itself with a focus here in our discussions on how each of these provisions will be enacted and the implications for Irish policy.

8 o'clock

That has not happened, though. The truncated opportunity given to the justice committee when important national institutions felt that they had not been given enough time to make their presentations was not an adequate way of dealing with such an important issue.

As the Minister is present, I have to say that the approach taken to this set of issues by the Government changed during the European and local elections. It is now a policy platform, it appears to me, that is driven by electoral politics rather than by fundamental principle. That is underscored by the announcement this morning of laws to strip citizenship from naturalised citizens in certain circumstances. The Minister's proposals may well be well founded, but such important matters are now delivered by media release in advance of telling anyone in this House, presenting anything to committees or presenting anything to the plenaries of this House. The matters now compete on social media with appalling views coming from other quarters.

It is the Labour Party's strong view that the asylum and migration issue can only be properly dealt with on a pan-European basis. This is not an issue that can be dealt with by ourselves alone. Our party leader said that there was much in this set of measures that was welcome and that we would support. The problem for us is that we have real and substantial concerns about some of the provisions. It is also a fact that, unlike a constitutional proposal, the Government has not spelled out how we will legislate for each of these proposals. The Oireachtas is being asked to accept all in a single vote and await the detailed specific legislative provisions later.

Like every other Member, I have seen in my constituency of Wexford the welcome afforded to asylum seekers as well as Ukrainians fleeing Putin's tyranny. In every part of my county, communities, clubs, schools and individuals have done extraordinary things to make people welcome, to ease their burdens and to support integration, but that significant effort often goes unreported.

As the Minister told the House, opting into the pact will mean the full repeal of the International Protection Act 2015, which we introduced while in government. It will be replaced by as yet unseen legislation, with the Government to publish an implementation plan by the end of the year and the law to come into effect in July 2026. We have a number of concerns about, for example, the asylum procedure regulation, especially the Border procedure, which creates the fiction of non-entry, a situation where an asylum seeker will be physically present in the State but have no legal entitlement to actually enter the State or to be recognised as being here.

What are the Government's plans in respect of detention? The nature and character of detention should be known to us in specific detail before this House votes. God knows, we have all vented our views on how those detention centres apply in other parts of Europe and, most especially, on the Mexico-US border. I do not believe for one minute that anything like that is envisaged for here, but what is intended should be spelled out so that we all can have confidence.

We also need to be specific about what the UNHCR has said. Unfortunately, I do not have time to go into the details, but the UNHCR is asking for specific guarantees on matters of fundamental rights and importance.

These are complex and challenging issues. I agree with Ministers that there is no simple or simplistic solution and I know that an agreed EU framework is not an easy thing to achieve, but I had hoped that the same care would be taken by the Government in explaining in detail and hearing the views of this House rather than showing us a *fait accompli* and telling us we could have a few hours to vent our views, but nothing would change and we would have to vote yea or nay on a comprehensive set of difficult and challenging proposals.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Molaim go bhfuil an díospóireacht ar siúl anocht agus measaim go bhfuil tuairimí éagsúla sa Dáil faoin gceist. Is é mo thuairim láidir, ámh, go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach go mbeimis ag cabhrú leis na tíortha eile san Aontas Eorpach agus go mbeadh an dearcadh céanna ag gach tír agus go mbeidh an polasaí, más féidir é, a bheith chomh séimh agus a bheith ag obair i ngach áit. Is trua liom nach bhfuil an polasaí i gContae Lú, go háirithe, ag obair in aon chor mar tá daoine ar buile faoi na rudaí a thit amach. Goilleann na rudaí atá le rá agam anois i mBéarla, go háirithe, go mór orm.

It is important that, as common countries in the European Union, we work together to deal effectively, humanely and appropriately with all of the issues that arise in this context. I support the Minister in her proposals. This is the only way forward. We cannot pick and choose. We have to act together and have the same frontier and policies. An issue I would like to see addressed, though, is that of the list of safe countries. As I understand the matter, different countries in Europe have different lists. We all need to have the same list, if possible. Some countries that are nearer to the Mediterranean Sea have more countries on their lists than states like we do, but we need a common policy that works.

We have just come through local elections. In County Louth in my constituency, particularly in my town, the issues of international protection, race, colour and the D Hotel were to the fore. Notwithstanding all the arguments and criticisms, we elected Drogheda's first black councillor ever. She is an immigrant from Nigeria who settled in our town. She has lived here for 33 years and done a magnificent job in the health services. As the Minister pointed out, immigration adds to capacity in the health services, IT services and so on, so we must be focused and practical in what we do. If we have a shortage of skills in our economy and cannot, for example, build the houses we want to build today or tomorrow as a result, and if some of our international protection applicants or people from Ukraine have those skills, I do not see why we should not be able to match their skills with our needs. When people are coming to the country who have the skills we need, we should use them productively. Doing so would be important.

The criticism is that we do not favour humane and appropriate policy. We do - I certainly do, and I stand firmly on that platform - but the Government, in particular the Minister, Deputy

O'Gorman, and his Department, has got it entirely wrong in Drogheda. Let us consider the figures in the nearby counties. Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan are a natural combination of four counties that works in many ways. The number of international protection applicants in Cavan is 155. In Monaghan, it is 693. In Meath, which is a larger county than Louth, it is 1,001. Louth, however, has 1,165. The Government has doubled the number of applicants in County Louth over the past year. There is no issue with that provided appropriate accommodation is provided for them, but the Government has lost us our only major hotel. The D Hotel will be gone for two years, causing untold harm and friction in our community, which is entirely unacceptable and has not been addressed by the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, specifically or by the Government. I have with me a report that was commissioned on the economic impact of losing the D Hotel in Drogheda. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is aware of it, as are the Taoiseach and other Ministers. This independent report from PMCA Economic Consulting calculates that losing our only hotel is a loss to our tourism industry and our wider economy in the order of more than €20 million over the two years. That is unacceptable.

We need an initiative. I welcome that the Minister for Justice is a frequent visitor to our town and that she is familiar with and has met many people there. The Taoiseach will visit shortly. Our town needs a lift after what has happened. We need to ensure there is significant local benefit to our community as a result of losing our D Hotel. Along with that, we need transparency around the decision as to why we lost it and how we lost it. It concerns me that the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, is refusing to act in an appropriate way and to be accountable to this Oireachtas and the parliamentary questions I am putting in. He is obfuscating and not telling the truth about what is actually going on and what is the true cost.

The true cost appears to be that accommodation for IPAS applicants in private accommodation has gone from €34.99 per day in 2018 to €80 per day in 2024. To me, part of that is the reason. He signs up 500 beds in Drogheda - which could not possibly be put into the D Hotel and used - when in fact he is limited to 250. There is huge waste of money in what he is doing and as I said, there is no local economic benefit that is substantial or an equivalent increase in facilities. We have scores of people walking our town, day in, day out, with nowhere to go. They are in a hotel that has no recreational amenities. They walk the streets of our town and they are at a loss, as we are, as to why this was done when there is actually, I believe, no need to do it.

The failure of the Minister to provide State-owned accommodation is stark and absolutely unacceptable. The Government needs to ensure that State-owned accommodation is the order of the day, and it exits from all the private accommodation it has, and places people appropriately in State-owned accommodation. It will avoid the hassle and the conflict that is there at the moment and it would be fair to everybody if that was the case. It is also fair that around the country, each county stands up and plays its part. Louth is more than playing its part because the smallest county in Ireland is looking after - there is not an issue with this, if they were in the appropriate accommodation - more IPAS applicants living there than 22 counties that are all smaller than us in terms of physical size. We need to be fair. We are happy to play our part but other counties need to play a greater part, and that is where the reality of this issue lies.

I know I have only one and a half minutes left. We need a moratorium in Drogheda on any further contracts awarded in the town centre for private contracts. If further investment in private contractors in our town is allowed, that will create serious friction and problems that are exacerbated by the loss of our hotel, and the fact there is no equivalent local benefit to our community. If the Minister wants to have future prosperity for everybody, all of the communities need to be looked after and the pressure reduced on services that are being pressurised in

Drogheda. In particular, I go back to the loss of our hotel which is and remains entirely unacceptable.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am opposed to a full opt-in to this pact because there are so many aspects of it that are not in Ireland's interests. The all-or-nothing approach taken by the Government is reckless, unnecessary and mystifying. Why did the Government not look at this pact and decide to opt out of what is not good for us? Why is it not the Government's automatic reaction to put Ireland's interests over the EU's institutional neoliberal interest? This is the same EU institution that gives its full support to the massacre of the Palestinian people. That alone is a red flag and that alone should make the Government determined not to cede our sovereign power on immigration to a neoliberal EU, an EU increasingly removed from the decency and goodness of its people, evidenced by protests against the war crimes and crimes against humanity it is supporting in Gaza.

In this uncertain political world where good is bad and bad is evil, it is vital that Ireland retains its sovereignty over asylum and immigration because nobody knows what is coming down the line. We have a duty to our people to make sure immigration is in our hands and not in those of Ursula von der Leyen or her EPP cronies coming after her. All in Fine Gael and the EPP gave succour and cover to the far right, refusing to tackle it because it was not affecting their vote. Party first, citizens a very poor second. The centre right legitimises the far right and today, we have the front page of the *Financial Times* saying that big business is courting Marine Le Pen to keep out a left government in France. What does that tell you about the interest of business in democracy? It says give us Le Pen, not decent wages or equality for our ordinary workers.

Thanks to a long, cynical silence, vigilantes are accosting migrants across our country. They are cruising in our towns and cities abusing gardaí. Immigration locations are being set fire to, and roadblocks and identity checks are being set up. A Croatian man, Josip Strok, has been killed. We have an elected councillor in Kildare telling us he wants Irish women to breed more. Ireland is full one week, and the next week he wants, in his words, "indigenous... women" breeding more. Beef to the heels, the lot of us.

These people start with women's rights and status, and then they come for members of your family who are gay. Next they will come for members of your family who are disabled. That is the playbook of the far right's useful idiots, and that is what they are playing. That is what this Government has turned a blind eye to. We need a vastly different and better system of immigration that is tightly managed and regulated, one that is compassionate and that protects people seeking refuge from war, famine, persecution and human rights abuses. They should not be vying for services with people who have been generationally neglected by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, people who are really hurting. They are people I see every day in my clinics, and I read their pain in my emails. They are suffering because of this Government's brazen recklessness.

I want better for all our people. I do not want Ireland cowed by thugs who would give their eye teeth to behave like the fascist squads of old. The Minister must do her duty and stop this lunacy of blanket opt-in. The Government must look after our people, our refugees and immigrants who have come to contribute to life in Ireland, and make all of us its priority, not the demands of the EPP and Commissioner von der Leyen.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I want to begin with a very simple premise: that is, that migrants have contributed hugely to our country, as we did when we went overseas and contributed to others. I think it is important to start there.

Ireland would grind to a halt without the work of migrants who live here and have contributed both through their labour and their enhancement of our culture. They have powered our industries, which would completely collapse without their service. Some 40% of our doctors are migrants. Our healthcare system, public transport and retail sectors would cease to function without them. Hospital waiting rooms, which are already overcrowded, would overflow to an unimaginable degree. The trolley crisis would reach heights beyond our comprehension and lives would be lost if we did not have migrants who came here to contribute to our republic.

Some 95% of migrants in our country are working but they are valuable for much more than their contribution to the economy. They enrich our society, families and culture. They are friends, neighbours and loved ones. They are people no different from any of us here and they should not be evaluated or judged any differently from how we look at ourselves.

Migrants and people who have come here in search of sanctuary deserve better than this process, which has been rushed and seems to be devoid of any degree of humanity. This chaotic approach is causing real harm. Refugees fleeing war and famine have been left on the streets in tents. They have been moved from place to place every single stay, with no circumstance of destitution sufficient enough to abide the callousness of those who seek to create division from their presence here. This approach, or lack thereof, has created a void and it has been allowed to be filled by division and hate.

In this Chamber, we do not seem to be able to even agree on numbers or data, never mind a strategy. Minority communities are experiencing racist abuse and violence as a direct result of incompetence. We need a fair, humane and efficient asylum system, something we have seen no sign of yet, and there has been no indication of progress, certainly not in this debate so far.

We need to increase the resources and staff at the IPO and IPAS so that claims can be dealt with fairly, humanely and with some degree of flexibility and speed. The backlogs found in these organisations have crippled staff and hindered the efficiency of our entire migration system. The only scrutiny of the migration pact in the Oireachtas extends to two three-hour sessions in the justice committee, which is far from enough considering the gravity of its effects. There has been almost no debate and no scrutiny of the measures. Any Dáil debate there has been on the issue in recent weeks has been during Private Members' time in the Dáil, and it has given time to those who wish to espouse their hate and division. The Government is ramming it through with just one vote, even though there are seven separate regulations and packages of measures, and even though when this was passing through the European Parliament, they were able to vote on each individual issue. There has been a deplorable communication strategy that is now being masked by performative cruelty on the part of the Government. The Tánaiste has said on numerous occasions that Government communications and engagement on migration must improve on all fronts and that we need a Covid-style response. Would that not be lovely? We have heard the same thing from the Government repeatedly for more than two years. Can we ever expect this to change or is that not within the capability of the Government? To be fair to the Minister in charge and the Tánaiste, it is very difficult to communicate a strategy that simply does not exist. As it stands, the strategy only seems to extend to the occasional desperate appeal to the private sector for some dilapidated buildings. Short-termism and desperation have underpinned this approach, allowing the far right to challenge the narrative with their hateful agenda.

We will be voting against this pact but we will be doing so for very different reasons from those that have been communicated by others in the Chamber. There has been very little dis-

cussion on the various human rights concerns that many people have expressed. The Social Democrats have concerns about aspects of this pact, with the border procedure, the potential for detention camps, the stripping away of the right to legal advice and the fiction of non-entry to Europe to the fore. We also have questions about the uniqueness of Ireland's situation with regard to the North and this has in no way been alleviated. More than 160 NGOs, including Oxfam, Amnesty and Médecins Sans Frontières, are opposed to this pact and experts in the field feel it violates human rights law. There have been attempts by some in this Chamber and elsewhere to undermine the work of these organisations but they do valuable work every single day and their voice should be respected. They agree that a fundamental right to asylum and international protection will be severely diminished by this pact.

To have more people in detention centres on EU borders, including families with children and people in vulnerable situations, does not paint a picture of a fairer Europe. We should not be treating those more vulnerable than us in a way that endangers them further. A system with reduced safeguards for people seeking asylum, substandard border asylum procedures and more people being refused a fair and full assessment of their asylum claims is not a system that we should be adopting. Given the horrific history of institutional incarceration in this country, we should be very careful before we impose any other institutions of incarceration on people.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I welcome this debate. It is very important that the Oireachtas takes the time to discuss the migration issue generally but also the international protection system. It is also important that we give significant and appropriate time to discussion of the migration pact. I recognise the Minister, Deputy McEntee, for her work in this regard but also for making sure it has received significant debate at the Oireachtas committee level, which is important, in today's debate and, if necessary, in further debate in the Dáil and Seanad. The legislation that will follow will present a significant opportunity for the Houses of the Oireachtas to assess and tease out the proposals and make sure they are fully considered.

I will take up Deputy Gannon's point at the start of his contribution. It is important to recognise the significant contribution that migrants make on an ongoing basis to this country. We are very fortunate to have people who are contributing in all areas of society. With 2.7 million people at work in Ireland, it is vital that we have a strong employment permit system in place to allow non-EEA nationals to fill significant skills and labour gaps that cannot be filled in Ireland or, indeed, in Europe. Migrants today make up 20% of our workforce and are crucial in many sectors, not least healthcare and construction. Their participation in high-skilled roles in engineering, science and ICT across the economy contributes to the strong economy and society that we have. In 2023 alone, more than 30,000 work permits were issued to non-EEA workers.

Alongside the significant contribution that migrants make to our economy and society through work permits and participation in the Common Market, it is also important that we have systems in place to support people in need of international protection. Of course, our country stepped up significantly in regard to the terrible atrocity of the illegal invasion of Ukraine. We welcomed people to different parts of our country at a time of dire need and provided shelter and refuge for many people. We saw that in communities across the country and it continues today.

In recent times, we have seen particular challenges within the international protection system, in particular a significant step change from pre-Covid to last year and this year in terms of a significant increase in the number of people seeking international protection. It is important

that we respond appropriately by making sure we have the processes in place to deal with those seeking refuge in this country, that they get a fair assessment of their application and that those who require protection receive it. We also need to make sure that for those who do not meet the criteria, there is an effective system in place to process their applications, they get a prompt answer and there are systems in place to have them returned.

We have seen a significant increase from approximately 3,000 applicants pre-Covid to approximately 13,000 last year and it is likely to be in excess of 20,000 this year. The Minister for Justice, working on the accommodation side with the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, has responded to that increase in number. It is important that significant resources have been provided to ensure that processing can be administered as quickly as possible. We have seen a doubling of the number of staff working on that aspect and, of course, there are plans in place to significantly increase that, which is important.

It is crucial that we co-operate with other countries to have an effective system in place. That is why, alongside putting in place systems in our own country that can meet the increased number of applications, we are also working at European level and with our neighbours in Britain and the wider UK to ensure there is co-operation on the processing of applications and information sharing. That is where the EU migration pact has emerged from, with EU countries coming together for what is a shared challenge and a shared responsibility in making sure we provide refuge to people who are coming from many parts of the world where they may be experiencing dire circumstances and danger. We are working across borders to make sure there are systems in place. If we do not do that, it will be impossible for any one country in isolation to be able to deal with the challenge that will be with us for many years to come.

As we know, the world currently has significant dangers and conflicts. I saw that most recently as part of the St. Patrick's Day visit I made to the Horn of Africa, where I visited Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia. I visited one refugee camp at Kakuma in northern Kenya that had 700,000 refugees in place. Of course, significant ongoing conflicts and recent conflicts have led to many people being displaced. In South Sudan, for example, more than million people have been displaced as a result of the civil war there and 1 million people have been displaced in northern Ethiopia as a result of the war in Tigray, with 600,000 people killed during that civil war. Of course, we know the challenges, the trauma and the terrible devastation in Palestine, alongside what is happening in Ukraine.

These conflicts are going to be present in a number of forms for years to come and the world is a much smaller place than it ever was before. We have to work to be able to have a system in place that provides refuge to those who need international protection and works effectively. The EU migration pact is going to be crucial in that regard.

Those who oppose this system are not putting forward alternatives. It is not possible to do this alone. The only way forward is to work together to share this challenge, which every country in the EU is facing, and to ensure we are humane, provide support to people who need it and the systems in place are robust, fair and well implemented. I recommend the adoption of the pact as a way forward. It is important that the Oireachtas puts the legislation in place over the next two years and makes a decision at this point that we are signing up the EU migration pact so that those processes can start and we can all move together in a way that shares this important challenge facing all member states. I thank the Minister for Justice for bringing forward the motion. I also thank all those who contributed to this debate and those who will contribute to the processes that will move forward in the time ahead.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá muid ag dul chuig Sinn Féin anois leis an Teachta Patricia Ryan.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: For hundreds of years, Ireland's people have been immigrants, leaving our shores for other countries, both near and far, whether driven by famine, unemployment, as in previous years, or, more recently, because they cannot find or afford housing. These immigrants faced rules and regulations at their destinations because the countries in question put in place controls and requirements. Common-sense laws and regulations all applied at the point of entry and were accepted by those seeking entry as part of the process.

For the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and this Government to expect blind acceptance of their reckless all-in consent to this EU migration pact is truly breathtaking. The Minister has admitted she did not even consider partial adoption of the pact. This is the political equivalent of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In this case, the baby is Ireland's sovereignty and its ability to create a fit-for-purpose, fair and efficient immigration system that is managed and makes sense. This pact is not that.

We Irish deeply understand what it means to be an immigrant and to be driven from one's homeland to seek refuge in another foreign land, whether by hunger, war or persecution. We understand more than most how many people fleeing horrible circumstances need protection and support. We all understand the value and the huge contributions that can be and are being made by many migrants and the skills they bring with them. All we need do is look at our hospitality sector and hospitals and at the impact our own emigrants had. Mother Jones came from humble beginnings in Cork to become an anti-child labour activist. Let us not forget Presidents Kennedy, Reagan and Obama who celebrated their Irish immigrant routes.

Retaining our power to legislate on immigration matters is absolutely essential in ensuring we have an immigration system that works to protect Ireland's interests and allows us to control our immigration rules at national level. We cannot hand over all power on this to the EU. Legislative powers on this issue must remain in our hands. Mr. Raymond Crotty proved that in 1982. Is the Government deliberately flying in the face of the Constitution?

The Minister's decision to effectively surrender Ireland's sovereignty is both thoughtless and reckless. It is a mistake which would leave us with no control on key immigration issues, ranging from the criteria which define genuine asylum applications from others to deciding what countries Ireland should accept refugees from. We must retain sovereignty over our immigration system. That system must be fair, efficient and, most important, enforced. This Government's all-in approach to the EU pact is wrong and will not deliver that. Sinn Féin is opposing this motion and we urge all in the House to do the same.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is 35 years this November since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Where are we 35 years on? There are 1,800 km of walls and fences built or being built on Europe's borders, the equivalent of 12 Berlin Walls. In Hungary, the European Union helped to build a steel fence, ringed with barbed wire between the border of Hungary, Croatia and Serbia, giving €22 million in funding. In Poland, there are 180 km of barbed wire separating the country from Belarus. The police force established to maintain this frontier, Frontex, had a €6 million budget in the year 2005, which will swell by the year 2027 to €900 million. The number of staff will increase from 1,400 to more than 10,000. This is fortress Europe.

The UNITED List of Refugee Deaths calculates that between the years 1993 and 2024, there

have been 60,620 deaths as a result of fortress Europe, with more than 3,000 people dying in the Mediterranean Sea alone last year. I am opposed to the EU migration and asylum pact because it strengthens fortress Europe. Those who are deemed on the initial check to be unlikely to be granted protection will not be allowed to enter a state and will be accommodated at a designated location until their application is ruled on. Dr. Ciara Smyth from National University of Ireland, Galway, says that it kind of creates an excised grey zone where the applicability of fundamental rights is unclear. That is precisely the reason for it. Refugees will be forced to stay in, or be sent to, dangerous so-called safe third countries. Already, these externalisation policies have led to migrants being abused in Tunisia and tortured in Libya.

Shorter decision times will make it extremely difficult for those seeking protection to access legal aid. Immigration lawyer, Mr. Cathal Malone, says the stakes are incredibly high and by artificially shortening those timeframes to such a degree, we are in real danger of putting people into situations in which they may be tortured or killed. I am reminded of the comments of Mahatma Gandhi when he arrived at Southampton in England in the early 1930s. He was asked by a reporter what he thought of British civilisation. He replied that he thought it would be a very good idea. His words came to mind when I read that this agreement will mean those without proper documentation will be registered on the Eurodac database which will include mandatory fingerprinting and facial scanning on all irregular migrants over the age of six.

Who has been campaigning for these policies? It is the European far right. Who is implementing these policies now? It is those who self-describe as the European centre right and, shamefully, those who self-describe as the European centre left. If the centre is implementing this programme, it is what Tarek Ali correctly described as the extreme centre. It is to the particular shame that the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, the sister group of the Labour Party, is signing up to this pact.

Of course, some will wonder whether, if the restrictions were not so tight, many people would come to Europe and there would be an even greater crisis in services, social services, housing and so forth. That need not be the case if the wealth that exists in Europe were used for the benefit of all in society instead of being controlled by a small minority and a number of big corporations. The Fortune 500 reckons that the top 500 companies have a total revenue of $13.9 trillion, which is three and a half times greater than the GDP of Germany. European big business excess profits were worth €310 billion in 2022 according to the Left group in the European Parliament. Of the population of Europe, 10% controls 67% of the wealth. The poorest 50% controls a mere 1.2% of the wealth according to Credit Suisse. If there were real wealth taxes on that wealth and nationalisation of companies and if that wealth was then put to the benefit of society, we could certainly accommodate more asylum seekers and refugees and have a better life for all in this continent of ours.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next slot is a Government slot. Does Deputy Coveney wish to speak?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this debate on the EU migration and asylum pact. As we know, inward migration has become central to the political discourse and debate in Ireland particularly in last year. The truth is that strongly-held views on immigration are no longer only coming from people of one political persuasion. The discussion has become very much mainstream. Any Government that is doing its job needs to respond to that in a responsible way by addressing myths, bias and fears and by facing down discrimination and at times, downright racism. It needs to invest in capacity building and new

accommodation solutions. It needs to ensure a fair but also efficient decision-making process that can make decisions between people who are generally vulnerable and at risk of persecution and people who are not. It has to prioritise scarce resources for those who most need them and work with international partners to address what is an international problem shared across this continent and many others.

The Government is doing all of these things through the leadership of the Ministers, Deputies McEntee and O'Gorman. Most importantly though, given the capacity pressures Ireland has been experiencing and the tension that is being created as a result, we must try to set the tone for how this debate on migration is conducted. The coarseness of language sometimes used in the debate needs to be counterbalanced. Many have noted tonight that inward migration has been very good for Ireland from the point of view of economics, education, and healthcare and also from the perspective of social well-being. Does anybody seriously think that the big multinationals that Deputy Barry is so quick to criticise almost every time he speaks here, such as Google, Dell, Apple, Microsoft, Eli Lilly and Meta, would have invested as heavily in Ireland as they have done if they were not able to put international teams in here? Google headquarters in Dublin has 73 different nationalities working there. In Deputy Barry's constituency, Apple has around 90 different nationalities working there. Ireland has become a place where the international community comes together to do global business. That has been very good for Ireland on many levels.

Outward migration is also embedded in the Irish story. We are a migrant people globally and we should not forget this when we have these debates. That said, many of the pressures we face today from a capacity perspective will not be solved by kind words or focusing solely on the supply side in the context of accommodation, in particular. We need to be realistic and we need to understand what is actually happening in the world today. This is not primarily about Ireland; it is about what is happening in other parts of the world that is now impacting our own country. Vast numbers of people are on the move internationally, many of whom are seeking international protection from war, conflict and persecution. There are many who are simply seeking economic opportunity and understandably so. There are 125 million people today who are displaced from their homes. Many of them live in refugee camps and many others are on the move within or across borders. Every country in the democratic world today is discussing how to deal with the scale of migration that is currently happening and also predicted for the future in the context of the pressures that conflict, climate and lack of economic opportunity will drive.

We have a choice here. Do we try to deal with the scale of this challenge on our own in isolation or do we try to do it with friends and partners within the European Union? As with all the big international challenges, a collective approach protects the small countries. Ireland has been protected on many occasions by that EU that many of the Members opposite have chosen to try to demonise this evening. People quickly forget how we were protected by France and Germany and many others, through the Covid years. People forget very quickly how the European Commission ensured that small countries like Ireland got Covid vaccines rather than them only flowing into the bigger and more powerful countries. People quickly forget how this country has been transformed on the back of EU membership, working in a Common Market across the European Union through my lifetime and the lifetime of many in this House.

Ireland displayed a very real role in the negotiation and design of this EU migration and asylum pact, just like it has done on other big policies that we have shared and agreed within the European Union. It is not perfect, but there is no perfect solution when it comes to trying to deal with the challenge and scale of migration we are seeing today. This represents a significant

improvement in terms of the certainty and predictability that it will bring for the future. It will make changes like, for example, a new asylum procedures regulation. For the first time, this delivers a common procedure for international protection applicants across the EU. In other words, every country is going to do the same thing. That will bring a consistency of approach that will be hugely valuable for a country like ours. The procedure contains four elements. There is a mandatory borders procedure. This means that people who come here and may have destroyed documentation or are seen as high risk for a number of reasons, will be taken to a separate designated location for their applications to be processed. There will be an accelerated procedure for people who have come from safe countries of origin, so that we can make decisions with a turnaround time of no more than three months. There will be an inadmissibility procedure in the case of people who have already been granted asylum somewhere else in the European Union but have chosen to move on and come to Ireland. A decision will be made within two months for that category of person. Let us not forget that the majority of people who come to Ireland come through other countries first, whether that is the UK or other EU countries. There will be a so-called ordinary procedure, which is what we do for most applications today, whereby a decision will be required within six months. Of course, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Government are putting the resources in place to try to get there, regardless of this migration pact.

There will also be an asylum and migration management regulation. This will replace the Dublin III regulation. It will reduce timeframes for determining which member state is responsible for processing an application. If people come to Ireland via other EU countries, we will now have a system that actually works to be able to return them to the EU country to which they first arrived. This will be hugely valuable to Ireland but we cannot avail of it if we do not opt into this pact.

There will be a new solidarity mechanism, which many people have exaggerated the effect of. I encourage people to inform themselves in terms of what Ireland is actually being asked to do, which is pretty modest, in the bigger scheme of things. The choice is clear. On the one hand, isolation, going it alone, taking all the risk that comes from that when we know that our closest neighbour, with all of its resources, population and influence has been unable to manage the migration question and it now dominates politics there. On the other hand, we can choose to try to do this as a collective within the European Union - after two or three years of negotiation which we have been involved in - to try to make sure that we have a common standard with realism across the European Union.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It is clearly not in our interests to opt into all of the parts of the migrant pact that will unfortunately tie future Governments into this pact. Ireland can create a fair, efficient and enforced immigration system. I note that Ministers and Government Deputies all day said those same words. Fine Gael has been in power for 13 years and Fianna Fáil for the past five years. They have had the time to do it and they have failed miserably. They are now trying to play catch-up using these words and it is many years too late. Decisions should be made closer to home and future Irish Governments must be able to decide on key aspects of our immigration system.

I live in one of the most diverse communities in the State. There are some natives in Dublin 15 but the vast majority of us are blow-ins, many from other parts of Dublin and the surrounding counties but many others from outside the country. These are immigrants who came here to work in our hospitals, care homes and social care providers. Others work in construction, IT, pharmaceuticals, hospitality services and many other types of jobs. Migrants, with those who

were born and bred in Ireland, have played a massive part in building Dublin 15. We are a much better place with them coming here to make a better life and contribute to our economic life, music, sports, education and health systems and the many other areas to which they positively contribute.

In recent months, I canvassed thousands of doors in my constituency of Dublin West. I thank everyone who engaged respectfully on the issue of migration, even those who disagreed with me. However, there are a very small but growing number who were emboldened to spew hateful, racist and homophobic abuse. These racist and hateful people should be faced down and their abuse should never be tolerated. I note that social media companies, particularly TikTok, are absolutely toxic. TikTok is a wild west that allows racist and violent content on its platform. It allows the most horrendous abuse without removing it. Today, I watched a video of a foreign man brutally beaten by these so-called patriots who made unsubstantiated claims about this person. He was punched and kicked in the head while on the ground and one thug had a so-called knuckle-duster with which he rained down punches. This video is freely available to be viewed by millions on TikTok today. The days of hands-off self-regulation must come to an end. They have shown that the negative content, lies, misinformation, hate and racism this platform spews out every day are about making money. That is all it is about. TikTok does not care about people and the effects of its content on society.

The majority of the people I spoke to are decent, hard-working and kind. They want to see a system that makes sense and is rules-based and they want those rules enforced. They understand that Irish people have travelled the world and laid down roots in many countries across the globe. This is seen in the hundreds of St. Patrick's Day parades held in March every year. They want to see a Government that is listening to them and that takes their hopes and concerns into account. What we have seen is a completely disjointed and badly communicated process when it comes to accommodation for asylum seekers.

We have made it clear that this migrant pact is not in Ireland's interests. It hands over our sovereignty to the EU and will make it impossible for Ireland to determine its own immigration system in the future. I will be voting "No" because it makes no sense to give up the flexibility we have within the EU on decision-making regarding migration.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The management of migration and application for refugee or temporary status in this country has been dysfunctional in many ways for years. Historically, with relatively low levels of migration, the number of applications for international protection status hovered between 1,500 and 2,500 per annum. Even then, our system of direct provision left people in limbo for years in shoddy accommodation with little opportunity to improve their lives or general circumstance. Despite our membership of the EU, we were, by dint of geographic location, largely excluded from the increasing migration into Europe. Our past economic performance also meant we were not viewed as a target location, but in recent years this has changed. We are now seen as a successful economy and therefore a place in which those seeking a better economic future will want to settle. In truth, our economy needs a certain amount of net inward migration to combat our falling birth rate, continue to provide the economic output and ensure all citizens can receive adequate social and economic protection as they age.

The problems of inward migration have become significantly acute in the past number of years. The increase in world population, which has largely gone unacknowledged, the Ukraine war and climate change have all played a major role. The State has also contributed to our more

recent migration problems due to our failure to adequately and proactively plan to deal with our known responsibilities.

I acknowledge that the State has seen an influx of refugees from Ukraine and that no one could have envisaged the numbers of refugees who have needed and have been provided with protection in this State. The Irish people are to be commended on the many efforts made to provide accommodation in various forms to over 100,000 Ukrainians. However, the rise in the number of applications for temporary protection has been well flagged, considering the level of migration across the southern borders of Europe in recent years. European solidarity has dictated that Ireland too must play a role. Unfortunately, the Government and its associated offices did not take the appropriate action and steps to meet this challenge head on.

I am one of the TDs who put early questions to the Minister regarding border controls exercised by Ireland in respect of inward economic migration. I pointed out the lack of credible enforcement of border controls at Dublin Airport and our ports and that we were allowing people to present for temporary protection who had clearly hidden or destroyed their travel paperwork before meeting immigration officers. In an interview in recent days, Michael O'Leary of Ryanair clearly described the orchestrated destruction of travel paperwork by people looking to access the IPAS and IPAT systems from safe countries. He also described how the airlines have been offering technology to identify passengers by seat allocation and origin of departure but that there has been little to no engagement from Department officials. In addition, Ireland has operated a different safe country list from the rest of Europe. Until recently, the subsistence payments we were making were many times more than other EU states. All of this speaks to an obvious recipe that has been driving illegal migration to our shores, which in turn is damaging the legitimate cause of those who would and should qualify for legal and refugee protection under EU law.

We have had the arbitrary selection of hotels and guesthouses down the country to hide our lack of capacity in refugee planning systems. We have had the giving of tents along the canal bank walk. We have had the suggestion of revitalising an old prison plan to create a national refugee centre, along with more blue-sky thinking to magic up another five national centres around the country. Now, we have the European migration pact, a plan which Hungary and Poland attempted to block. This should sound some alarm bells. It is being presented as a catch-all solution to the migration crisis, a crisis which has been allowed to happen mainly because Europe's asylum-seeker laws have not been updated for over two decades. Now, we are being told by the European Commissioner who presented this plan, Ylva Johansson, that if we do not sign up to it, we could face legal action. What we are being asked to sign up to is a reactionary measure which is being cast like a net across the EU member states, regardless of each country's efficiency to implement it. In Ireland, we will be signing up to taking close to 30,000 migrants at a time when many of the migrants we have are sleeping in tents at the side of the road or in accommodation that HIQA is horrified by.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is just not true.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is not correct.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy is better than that.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Others are being bused into towns and villages throughout Ireland, often without the knowledge of local residents, and left in hotels miles away from re-

sources. Refugees are walking for miles to get to the nearest shop all because Ireland is saying "Yes" to a situation for which we have not properly prepared.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is a complete lie.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: We want to help people who are fleeing hunger, murder and tyranny, but wanting to do something and being properly prepared to do it are two different matters. This migration debate has caused huge division in the country and we have to stop thinking about it as one with a right or a wrong answer. One should never be criticised for saying we should stop, slow down or that we are not ready for this. The reason we are not ready is that, too often, we have had a slow and chaotic response.

This debate has reluctantly been agreed to by the Government because it knows it is vulnerable on these issues. It should also know that we are acting outside the best interests of the Irish people, as well as the interests of migrants whom we are blindly welcoming at this time without adequate resources. The direct provision system was failing long before the war in Ukraine. It shows Ireland needs to sort out its own house before it can bring more people into it.

One of the caveats in the European migration pact is that countries can impact their impact their intake of refugees where they can demonstrate activities in the origin countries to instigate social and economic change benefiting those communities that may otherwise migrate. This is something Ireland should be doing far more of. We need to do far more activity on the ground. As I said to the Minister previously, we should harmonise our safe country list and have exactly the same system and parallels throughout the European Union if we are active people. Most of all, we have to look at the proper resourcing and execution of facilities for dependent migrants.

Deputy Carol Nolan: There are many people who see the adoption of this pact as the grave into which we are going to place our national sovereignty on the issue of asylum and migration. I agree with that view. In the fullness of time, we will be worse off socially, financially and politically because of it. Many also share the view, articulated some months ago by Senator McDowell, that what we are dealing with here, while it may not rise to the level of constitutional change in the strict sense, seeks to bring about constitutional-level changes and, as such, requires far greater levels of public consultation and consent.

9 o'clock

Have we seen much consultation taking place? Have we seen many discussions taking place with the Irish people who will be directly affected by this opt-in to the pact? No, we have not. Why is that? In a series of parliamentary questions that I submitted to all Departments, I have established that Government spent almost €14 million on digital advertising and €23 million on Irish print media advertising in the last number of years. The issues ranged from the banal to the serious. Has there been a widespread campaign alerting people of what we are dealing with here today? Has the Government encouraged the voices of ordinary people to be heard on these issues? We all know the answer to that. We all know how debate was stifled in this very House when I brought it up 22 months ago. I certainly was not given a fair platform, and in that discussion and that exchange I was labelled in a way which was totally unfair and out of order. In a democracy all views should be welcomed and respected.

There are probably two reasons that the Government does not want to hear the voices of ordinary people. The first is that is the Government is terrified of their replies and the honesty that they would receive. The second is that Government is simply indifferent to people's con-

cerns on this particular issue. We live in an utterly changed European environment. We know, for example, that in France, President Macron's coalition championed the pact suggesting it could improve the EU's governance framework on migration policy and take better control of the Continent's external borders. What was the response of the French people? Their response was the obliteration of his party and his coalition at the first available opportunity.

The simple fact is that the deep structural problems created by uncontrolled levels of mass migration cannot be solved by the very people who allowed these problems to become a reality. The people of Ireland and indeed the people of many EU member states are light years ahead of their governments on this issue. They want a solution to this problem that undermines the nation's sovereign decision-making capacity. The pact is morally and politically bankrupt. It is the product of an EU establishment that is rotten to the core and which treats the views of ordinary citizens as political poison. I urge all Members to reject it. I urge all Members to avoid becoming complicit in the high-level political theatrics that this pact represents. The pact is weak where it should be strong and strong where it should be weak. It is weak on protecting national sovereignty but it is strong on maintaining in place the very many protections that are in place even for those engaged in illegal immigration. It is all wrong and I will not be supporting the EU migration pact.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: It is heartbreaking to see people in this country use those who are in an extremely vulnerable position as a political talking point, as if stances regarding migration are merely a matter of opinion and not a matter of human rights and a matter of right and wrong. We cannot stand here and debate whether people have a right to live, a right to safety, a right to a life other than the one many have been so unfairly dealt. We can never know what it is like for people to wake in a war-torn country, anxious and afraid, living day-to-day because they have no idea what their future looks like, where their next meal will come from or whether they and their family will live to see the day through.

I know there has been much interest in this debate and potentially many people watching and so I want to appeal to people's humanity. I know there is much to be discussed and figured out when it comes to migration and I agree that the Government has handled this terribly in recent years. However, we must not look past the human beings at the centre of this or blame them in any way for the difficult and devastating lives that many have been forced to live. I understand that people feel angry and possibly protective, but we cannot let this feeling override logic or worse, our humanity.

Many migrating to this country share the same fears as those who are wary of their arrival. They too are feeling fearful and protective of their families. This is what has driven them to leave in the first place. We all share the same emotions and the same fears. We too can share the same hopes and the same goals but only if we allow it and only if we do not let fear and hate divide us.

I cannot even begin to imagine the situation that so many migrants have had to face before coming here, weighing up the dangers of staying and the dangers of leaving, having to make a choice for themselves and their children, deciding to travel into the unknown, hoping and praying that they will survive and that the kindness of strangers will allow them and their family the opportunity of a better life. We have the ability to give so many people a better life here. This world is unjust in so many ways but we are in the position to make it fairer, to right some of its wrongs.

Unfortunately however, this EU migration pact will not make things fairer in any way, which is why I am opposing it. The pact will have devastating implications for people's right to international protection. It will allow for human rights abuses across Europe, including racial profiling and de facto detention. I am particularly concerned about the pact's expansion of biometric data gathering from migrants. It is for this reason that I will be voting against this motion. The pact goes too far in limiting the rights of those seeking protection. The choices of asylum seekers are already limited and this pact threatens their basic human rights even further by introducing fewer safeguards, increased detention and destitution among people seeking protection.

I believe the committee was deliberately stifled in being able to have public hearings on the pact. We were curtailed because the Government intended to introduce this two weeks before the European elections, which it failed to do. We ended up only having one hearing, which was wrong.

More than 160 organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have expressed concern regarding this pact, which seeks to fingerprint children as young as seven. The profiling of minors, of seven-year-olds, should not be condoned in any way, never mind legislated for. This pact will have detrimental consequences for the rights and well-being of children seeking protection. I find the arguments of those speaking against this motion for other reasons to be unreasonable, inhumane and extremely hypocritical. Many would be horrified at the thought of being profiled in this way. Despite strong opinions about rights to privacy and freedom, many do not seem to extend these rights to others.

The EU should not be making it harder to seek protection when we are already offering so little. The EU's share of the world's refugee population has decreased from 70% in 1993 to under 20% since 2018. We are contributing less and less and getting increasingly stricter. On top of this, we are also completely failing to address the root causes of migration. Europe has become so fixated on restricting migrants, that it fails to recognise or even attempt to address why migration is occurring in the first place.

I listened to Government speakers earlier argue in favour of this pact and I do not think any of those arguments stand up. This pact is about stopping people from coming and stopping people getting here. It is about conflicts that we, in Europe, have contributed to. Europe destroyed Libya. Most of the migrants now come from Libya and Europe is actually paying warlords in Libya to house migrants it returns there. It is an absolute disgrace and we should be ashamed at how Europe is treating the migrants. The EU has failed to address conflicts, persecutions and large-scale human rights violations. It has failed time and time again to respond to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters and other environmental issues, many of which Europe caused or contributed heavily to. Now we are going to adopt this, which is wrong.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with the arrangement agreed on the Order of Business, proceedings now stand adjourned until tomorrow.

Debate adjourned.

Carers: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pauline Tully: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that Family Carers Ireland's report entitled "The State of Caring 2024" found:

— almost three quarters of carers have never received respite;

— half of carers have to pay privately for services that should be publicly provided to support their caring role; and

— the vast majority of carers are finding it difficult to make ends meet;

calls on the Government to heed the voice of carers, thousands of whom told Deputies their stories and outlined the extreme pressure they are under on the doorsteps over the past month; and

demands the Government take real action in response, including committing to a minimum respite guarantee and a significant relaxation of the carers allowance means-test so that more carers are supported and payments for all are increased.

I will be referencing a Family Carers Ireland report published last week, called The State of Caring 2024, which shows deeply entrenched issues faced by family carers. This is a biannual report. It was done in 2022 and the same issues are identified again, except they are exacerbated for a number of reasons. Family carers have long been held up as the backbone of care provision in Ireland. We have various departmental strategies referring to the important role they play in our society. However, this report declares, "The policy landscape ... remains a patchwork of intentions and initiatives that have yet to coalesce into a coherent strategy capable of addressing the needs of carers and those they support." Economic fluctuations and cost-of-living increases are all exacerbating and placing extra burdens on carers. Many already face financial strain due to the issue of caregiving. There are also immeasurable costs experienced by family carers, such as the impact on their physical and mental health, and loss of income caused by the inability to work outside the home because of their caring duties. There is the potential for a life of debt and the constant stress of having to fight for all of the support services and so forth. Carers are in many cases receiving a carer's allowance, but it falls well below the established minimum essential standard of living. Currently many carers are not eligible for the payment due to means-testing and the allowed limits of 18.5 hours per week in paid work, voluntary work or training and education. There is a need to reform the carer's allowance. We need to look at the rates and ensure they are adequate, both for the carer's allowance and the carer's benefit. In our alternative budget 2024, we proposed that it should be increased by at least €15 per week as part of a vision to incrementally bring social welfare rates in line with the MESL over time. We also want to increase the income threshold in the means test for carer's allowance, which will result in higher payments for current recipients on reduced payments. It will also mean that more people will be eligible for the allowance. I received costings from the Parliamentary Budget Office on the removal of the means test. I worked with Family Carers Ireland on this. It came in at just below an additional €400 million per year. On a similar motion in April, the Minister stated €600 million in costings were coming in from the Department. I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, if she would share those costings with us and she said she would. We unfortunately have not received them to date, and neither has Family Carers Ireland. I would be interested to get those costings from the Department on removing the means test to compare and see where the discrepancy is between just below €400 million and €600 million.

The housing crisis is also compounding the issue for carers. The report speaks of the double-edged sword of caregiving duties and the struggle for secure and suitable housing. We have skyrocketing rents and on top of everything else, many people are worried about where they are going to get suitable and affordable housing for themselves and the person they are caring for. We know many people will have, or will develop through accident or illness, mobility issues and may need to adapt their home. The housing adaptation grant has not increased in more than a decade. We know the cost of construction has increased of late, yet the grant has not. It is totally inadequate and ineffective. In Sinn Féin's budget 2024, we proposed doubling the funding for the housing adaptation grant. That came in at a cost of €25 million. It is something I urge the Government to look at for this year's budget. Support services are severely lacking, and respite in particular. Of the respondents in the report, 74% of the carers reported that the individuals they support did not receive any form of support and 72% have never received respite. That is shocking and is something that has to be addressed. Some will try to pay for these services privately but not everybody is able to do that and it puts a financial strain on them. We are looking for a commitment to a minimum respite guarantee in order that carers will receive up to 20 nights per year in respite. We need a respite register to identify who requires respite and what form of respite they require - because it can vary - so it can be addressed. Carers deserve better and their voices must be heard. This report exactly outlines the issues affecting carers at the moment.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Family carers are the backbone of care provision in Ireland. That has long been recognised in sentiment and it is now time it was recognised in substance. They play one of the most important roles in our society. They care for their loved ones, their families and friends, out of a sense of love, duty and responsibility. They are not looking for any applause. However, being a carer in this State is extremely challenging. Being a carer and having to fight and struggle for every bit of support takes a huge toll on a carer. It takes a toll on a carer's physical and mental health. There can be challenges for carers with the loss of income caused by the inability to work outside the home for more than 18.5 hours because of caring duties. Some of those ironically would work as carers outside the home had they more scope to do so. There is the potential for a life of financial hardship, social isolation, strain on relationships and the constant stress and worry of always having to fight due to the insufficient provision of services and supports to which a person being cared for is entitled. In spite of this, carers frequently tell me that they find caring for a loved one to be extremely rewarding. This is a testament to their character, their sense of responsibility to their loved ones and their sheer selflessness. Nobody is a carer because it is easy. Nobody is a carer because it is comfortable. Nobody is a carer for the sake of a quiet life. However, we would be foolish to take them for granted. Many of these people would do it for nothing, but according to research by Family Carers Ireland their contribution is estimated to save the State approximately €20 billion per annum. That research also found that family carers are lonelier, more isolated and in poorer health than the average person in Ireland. They have to be supported but we instead see the opposite from Government. We see carers voices, in many instances, being ignored.

Three in four family carers surveyed said the people they support do not receive sufficient formal support and 72% have never received respite. That is three in every four carers who never get a break. I have met people on the canvass recently who have been waiting years for respite, and it is brutal. Half of carers are prepared to pay privately for products and services that should have been publicly provided to support the caring role. Some 69% find it difficult to make ends meet, with 29% of those struggling financially and cutting back on essentials such as food and heat. Some 34% said their accommodation was not suitable to meet the needs of

the person they care for, 23% missed a mortgage or rent payment over the past year and 17% of mortgage holders. This is shocking. This is how our Government treats our carers. Carers deserve better. Their voices must be heard. We would do well to look at other societies. We are fortunate in Ireland that we have so many family carers. In other countries where this process is more advanced, and where family carers were perhaps taken for granted in the past, the social care crisis is severe. People are crying out for support but the Government is not listening. We urge it to support Sinn Féin's plan to deliver a respite guarantee and increase payments for carers to ensure they are adequately supported. Carers must be respected and listened to. It is clear from the findings of the report by Family Carers Ireland that they do not feel supported.

In this motion we are calling for a commitment from Government for a minimum respite guarantee and a significant relaxation of the carer's allowance means test. I echo the point made by Deputy Tully relating to the sharing of that information. That is a matter the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, said she is reviewing. It is an issue of public debate. If there is information on the costing that the Department has then it should be shared, because it is important we have full light on that. The current rules around carer's allowance are too rigid. Many carers are not eligible for the payment due to means-testing. The maximum limit of 18.5 hours is also a problem. That is an enormous worry for carers. They are restricted in increasing their household incomes in any way. That is why 69% of carers find it difficult to make ends meet and one third of those are struggling financially and cutting back on essentials. It is not good enough that many carers are receiving payments that fall well below an established minimum essential standard of living. The income inadequacy imposed by existing social welfare payments must be addressed. We called for the rate of carer's allowance and benefit to be increased by €15 in budget 2024, and to incrementally bring social welfare rates in line with the MESL. I urge the Government to support Sinn Féin's motion and ensure that carers are respected. At the moment carers have no capacity to increase their income and are faced with a growing cost-of-living crisis and an isolation and loneliness crisis. I urge the Government to support the motion and that carers are fully supported in caring for their loved ones.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: If we are to judge a government by how it treats its most vulnerable, and in turn those who care for the most vulnerable, then how can we judge this Government? For far too long, the voices of family carers have been completely overlooked and ignored. Day in, day out, including on the doors before the recent local and EU elections, they tell us how they feel pushed aside and abandoned by the Government. They tell us they are burdened by enormous strain and pressure, with little or no hope for respite or relief.

These experiences are borne out in the report entitled The State of Caring, which paints a bleak reality. It is a damning indictment of this Government's record and, indeed, the records of successive Governments. The report echoes the persistent struggle highlighted by so many. Families and carers are pushed to the brink. One issue the report consistently highlights is the lack of respite. Despite it being absolutely essential, 72% of family carers surveyed had never received respite. In Meath, we have a chronic shortage of respite services. At least 200 families are on a waiting list. The system is at breaking point and it is grossly unfair. This is an issue I have raised consistently with the Minister. While it was confirmed last June that increased funding had been made available to secure additional respite capacity in the county, no capital funding was made available. The State continues to outsource its responsibility. Third-party providers find it difficult to find buildings and even harder to find staff. The money, €1.6 million, is very welcome, but money itself is not enough. It must be translated into services but this is just not happening. Funding is allocated and is welcome but 12 months later, there are

no additional respite services in County Meath. That is what actually matters.

We must listen to the lived experiences of family carers. We must incorporate their knowledge into the solutions we put forward. I urge the House to support tonight's motion and Sinn Féin's plan to deliver urgent reform, including a respite guarantee and increased payments for all carers in order that they will be adequately supported.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: More than 299,000 people identified as unpaid carers in the 2022 census. People aged between 50 and 59 were the group most likely to be providing regular unpaid care. Access to care and the quality of care provided presents challenges for all societies. In Ireland, there was an expectation on women to shoulder unpaid care responsibilities. Today, there continues to be a heavy reliance on informal family care for older people and people with disabilities.

I have met many carers in my time as a family support worker, a councillor and a TD, and I am always in awe of the work they do and the commitment, love and care they give to the people they care for, whether they are family members or not. There are two components to the care system, namely, the provision of unpaid care work by family and sometimes friends and, second, paid jobs in the care sector. A factor that must be looked into here is the issue of pay and parity of conditions between community care workers, those employed privately and those employed by the HSE.

There are constant blockages and delays in getting any type of payments and supports. It is as though the system wants to wear down people and grind them down until they give up. Earlier this month, I was contacted by a very worried mother in respect of her domiciliary care allowance for her son, which was rejected in September 2023. She appealed this decision in October 2023 and has still not received a decision on her appeal. She has been told the authorities cannot give any indication as to when the decision will be made. She was previously given an estimated timeline of 17 weeks for a response to her appeal, but her appeal was lodged more than 32 weeks ago. Since then, she was told the case had only been assigned to an appeals officer on 19 April, six months after the appeal, and there has still been no movement. She needs access to services urgently but she cannot afford these because she is unable to work due to her son's care needs. Again, for assessments of need, there are horrendous waiting lists.

Another carer, whom I met on the doors when we were canvassing, had worked all her life. She left her job to care for her mother, saving the State a fortune. She was assessed for the carer's allowance and she got €18. Means-testing needs to be addressed. That sum is an absolute disgrace when someone has paid in for her entire working life. She said she had started work when she was 18 years of age, and she was getting €18 per week. She was having to travel from Blanchardstown all the way to Donaghmede, and it did not even cover the cost of her petrol for a couple of days. This needs to be addressed.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I thank Deputy Tully for the motion. I am glad to speak on it because I feel as though I am speaking for the army of invisible people who work 24-7, relying on the extremely modest carer's allowance, with many unable to make ends meet. They are kept under constant scrutiny by the State for that payment, a State that seems more intent on catching them out in some way than helping them, valuing them or relieving them of their caring duties with sufficient respite. It is hard to credit that three quarters of carers have never received respite at all. They must just carry on. Half of them pay privately for services that should be readily and publicly available.

In my constituency, Kildare North, I have had a long involvement with two outstanding carers, Aisling McNiffe, who fights day in, day out for her son Jack, and Lourdes Sanchez, who fights day in, day out for her son Conor. These women are exhausted, not only by the lack of services but by the frequently peevish way the State behaves towards all carers, quizzing them, testing them and begrudging them the slightest allowance or assistance, demanding endless form-filling while, at the same time, overseeing billions in overruns in public projects such as the national disgrace of the national children's hospital. Neither of those women's sons will ever see the inside of that completed hospital because they are adults. Aisling and Lourdes are not looking for the Earth. They are looking only to establish their sons' right as citizens from childhood to adulthood. The scrutiny and peevishness must cease. The actual care of our carers must start. Immediately, the means test must be relaxed to give them breathing space and living space.

I have also been dealing with a mother who has gone back to college to make a better life for herself and her child. Her caring has not stopped. Her daughter's needs have not stopped. She studies while her daughter is in school, with no change to her caring but she has been cut off. This narrow, mean thinking must change, because if we do not care for carers, who will, and who will care for the people they care for then?

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Tonight, we ask the Government to listen to the voices of carers, who are stretched beyond their means and have been left to their own devices by Minister after Minister. Carers throughout this State have to fight tooth and nail for services they should be entitled to. The State takes their work for granted and that is reflected in the lack of State assistance. In its most recent report, Family Carers Ireland found that 49% of carers were paying through the nose for private services they should have access to through the public system. As my colleagues said, 72% of those who took part in the report stated they had received no respite. A total of 34% said they did not have suitable accommodation for the needs of those they care for, while 69% of carers find it difficult to make ends meet. Time and again, carers' cries for assistance go unheard. This is a complete failure of the Government.

We are asking for carers to be treated with fairness. We are asking that they get the support they are entitled to. The Government needs to back this motion and begin to take real action that supports carers. The Minister of State can do just that by reviewing the carer's allowance means test and committing to at least minimal respite. These measures would go some way to easing the burden on carers, who are suffering tonight throughout this State.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I am very happy to be here to address some of the issues raised in the Private Members' motion on carers. Support for carers is a topic that is always on the agenda and it is, of course, an enormously important one that comprises so many different cross-departmental issues. It covers not just health and social care supports but also income supports and housing, as the Deputies clearly identified. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke will later set out some of the policies, supports and initiatives provided to carers through other Departments and, therefore, I will take the opportunity in this contribution to focus some attention on my Department.

We are engaged in continuous efforts to expand and improve the provision of specialist disability services to people with disabilities and thereby also the supports given to their carers. Various surveys show that between 5.8% and 11% of the population identify as family carers. Three in five carers are female, and women make up the vast majority of those providing the

most intensive levels of care.

Officials from my Department and from the Department of Health recently attended the annual carer's forum, as they do every year. The event always provides a very useful and often emotional insight into the issues faced by carers who, as we should remember, are a diverse group. Some are caring for children with disabilities and others are caring for younger or older adults with a range of conditions.

We know that caring can be a rewarding, but also a very challenging, role particularly for higher-intensity caring. What all carers have in common is that they need assistance from time to time and in various ways to help them in the very important role that they fulfil. The access to respite is an issue that comes up every year at the carer's forum and I am very aware that there is still a lot of unmet need in this area, which I am working hard to enable the HSE and its providers to meet.

Respite for those with, and caring for, people with specialist disability service needs has been a priority area for me since I took up this role as Minister of State for disability. Successive budgets have seen additional funding for respite and over the past couple of years in particular, a substantial number of new services have come onstream to provide not only much-needed additional respite beds but also a range of daytime activities. In 2014, funding for respite service provision totalled €53.5 million, while in 2024 it is in excess of €110 million. In terms of overnight respite, this has translated to provision increasing from 87,177 overnights accessed by people with a disability to 151,123 overnights last year, as well as 45,424 day only sessions. The total number of people in receipt of respite services in 2023 was 6,137. I fully intend to continue this expansion and I was able to attain additional new development funding of €15 million for specialist disability respite services through budget 2024, increasing to €25 million in a full year. This will ensure that provision continues to expand significantly across the country. With this increased funding my Department, in tandem with the HSE, is working with me to support different forms of respite - overnights, day provision, after-school clubs and weekend activities. Particular attention is being focused on areas that are below the national average regarding the availability of respite. There will be further detail provided in the respite investment plan, which I hope to publish in the coming weeks.

I acknowledge that demographic challenges associated with the increase in the number of people living with a disability, the increase in age and life expectancy, and the changing needs of people with a disability have all led to the need for increased respite services and we are working hard to step up provision on a continuous basis. The co-ordinated focus will be on expanding existing overnight capacity as well as providing significant additional investment in alternative forms of respite to meet the different needs. Every effort is being made to incrementally move to support the provision of respite on a more equitable basis and to expand provision in all forms of respite. Respite will continue to be a priority for me and this Government.

Respite is one important area of support for people with disabilities and their carers but there are many more, including personal assistance and home support services as well as timely access to therapies and assessment. An unprecedented €2.9 billion is being provided in 2024 for specialist disability services. The recently published disability action plan sets out our ambition for reform and expansion of disability services, and together with the roadmap for children's services it provides the blueprint for service improvement over the next few years.

I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion on carers and providing an important forum for

debate on these issues. I look forward to further contributions.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank my colleagues, Deputies Tully and Patricia Ryan, for their dedicated advocacy on behalf of carers and the elderly and for tabling this motion. It is universally accepted that people with disabilities and their carers are more financially vulnerable than any other section of society. In fact, the Joint Committee on Gender Equality recommended bringing social protection rates for carers in line with the minimum essential standard of living, MESL. It is critical that the Government understands, and what is more reflects this, in the upcoming budget. Two out of every three carers experience financial distress:16% are in arrears with their utility bills and 23% are in trouble with their rent or mortgage repayments, yet the Government fails to recognise their many challenges and the personal sacrifices these carers selflessly make every day, often without proper public services such as transport and respite.

This is also taking into account the rapid rise of the cost of living, including medicines and medical supplies. What is not considered is that if these carers were to stop doing what they are doing this minute, it would cost the State more than €20 billion per year to replace them, yet the income disregard for the carer's allowance has increased just once, by 14%, in 15 years. We are calling directly for the carer's allowance to be increased, the means test to be immediately reviewed and an increase in the income threshold.

The system is more than 33 years old and requires a significant sea change is required to the current, archaic system. The Joint Committee on Gender Equality recommended that a participation income be established for carers. Perhaps the Minister of State will commit to doing this during her closing remarks.

The Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2018. However, six years later it has failed to do anything, as was promised and committed to in the programme for Government. The question remains: when will this be done?

Deputy Johnny Guirke: This is not the first time I have raised the issue of home care hours being approved but not provided. In a lot of cases not enough hours are provided to clients. One lady in my constituency currently going through cancer was approved home care support months ago but she has yet to receive that care. Care availability remains an issue. It has been highlighted for years but not dealt with. There is a lack of staff who want to take up the role of a caregiver due to the poor pay and the poor travel expenses in between calls is a factor that turns care givers away from taking up the role with private companies. In some cases where caregivers work weekends, they do up to 15 calls in one day while running and racing between calls. If they ring in sick, cover becomes impossible to get.

What is the point of approving home care support if there is nobody there to do it? It is totally unacceptable that home care hours that have been approved are not being fulfilled and an intervention form the Government is needed to ensure that home care providers can offer fair pay and travel expenses that will act as an incentive people who want to take up the role as a caregiver. The Government also needs to ensure that if companies are receiving increases, the increases staff receive should be monitored to ensure they are being paid fairly for the work they do and are retained by these services.

It appears the Government is driving people into nursing homes and see older people and people with disabilities as a burden on the State. This should not be the case. Hospitals are

overcrowded and as caregivers cannot be found by providers, many people with approved home care hours cannot be discharged from these hospitals. The Government needs to listen to the caregivers, take note of what they are saying and support them. Home carers, who are providing care for family or friends, have been easing the pressure on home care providers and on the State, yet half of these home carers have to pay privately for services that should be publicly provided to support their caring role. We need a relaxation of the carer's allowance means test. These people are saving the State a fortune by caring for their loved ones and keeping them at home.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There has been a very obvious increase in the number of cases coming in to my constituency office that concern issues around carers. In particular, more people are coming looking for help in getting the carer's allowance or the domiciliary care allowance. Most applications fail because of the strict adherence to section 179(4) of the carers Act. While it is important to have a set of criteria as a guiding principle for those applying for carer's allowance, it is clear from cases my office deals with that there are many who do not rigidly meet the criteria but there are cases in which common sense and discretion should prevail. Unfortunately, when deciding officers deny an application, they usually say they are restricted by legislation and quote section 179(4). Basically, even if they see a worthy case, their hands are tied by this legislation and it leaves them with no room for manoeuvre. We also find many carers are not eligible for the payment because of a restriction in the number of hours they can work per week and because this payment is means-tested. We have found that many who fall marginally outside the limits allowed by the means test fail to qualify for the allowance.

The reality is that carers could not be paid enough for the work they do and the money they save the State by providing care in the home for their loved ones. Family members take on an incredible undertaking in caring for someone with a severe disability or serious illness. These people are not professionals but untrained family members who take on difficult tasks to give their loved ones a better quality of life and to ensure they receive a level of care and attention they would not necessarily receive in a State facility. We should not be making it difficult for these people. Many are surviving on low incomes that are well below the average standard of living. We need more flexibility in how the legislation is interpreted and we need to give deciding officers greater discretion when deciding on cases. There also needs to be an increase in the income threshold in the means test for carer's allowance.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Last Saturday, I buried my aunt Jenny O'Leary. Jenny McCarthy was her maiden name. She had been sick for 12 years and her daughter Linda cared for her. Jenny had a lot of issues but she always wanted to stay at home. Even up to two years ago before she stopped communicating, her daughter kept her at home. Linda had to fight for everything from home help hours to increased home help hours to weekends. Here was a daughter doing everything for her mother that her mother wished for but this State did not support her along the way. I witnessed the love that Linda, the grandchildren and the rest of the family showed her. This is just an example of the love other carers show. This is done for love not for money. They do it because they love their family members and they want to look after them.

The wife of a very good friend of mine named Jamesy had a number of massive strokes last year. Jamesy was self-employed and had his own small business. He had to give it up to look after this wife, the woman he loved. He had to fight. My office had to fight to get him a payment. He used up a lot of his savings because he could not get a payment. This is a man who had worked all his life. I played hurling with and against him. He is a great man who had to go home and look after his wife and when he needed help, the State was not there to help him.

Funding for respite services in Cork was cut by 50% in 2023. A lady I am dealing with at the moment has to fight for everything. She drives her two children, both of whom have special needs, to school because they attend different schools. She cannot get school transport or therapies. She cannot get anything. The woman is at her wits' end. I was on the phone to her last week. She said to me "Tommy, who's going to look after us? Who's going to look after my children?" That is what she is asking and that is what we are asking here tonight.

The Minister of State said that 6,137 families accessed respite care in 2023. That figure must be a tiny proportion of those who need it because I know a woman who brought her child to a hospital and left the child there because she could not get respite and she thought she was going to have a nervous breakdown because nobody was there to support her. Can the Minister of State imagine bringing her child to a hospital and leaving her child there because she could not get respite from the State? I know a family that had to go to the US last year. I raised this case with the Minister of State last year. All they wanted was two weeks off to go to the US so they could attend their brother's wedding but they could not get it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. It is always welcome to speak on the issues facing carers but particularly so given the report released by Family Carers Ireland last week. The findings of the report are shameful. It is another report about the disgraceful lack of support for carers and those for whom they care and another reminder that life is harder, more stressful and more expensive for carers. Carers are struggling financially, the stress is impacting on their mental and physical well-being and the State is not providing critical support services. All of these issues are entrenched. They have been present for years and they intensified during the pandemic.

We will not improve the lives of carers without real systemic change. They will not be solved by tinkering around the edges and moving the means test threshold up a few euros. The means test needs to go in its entirety but that is only one facet of the struggles facing carers. A total of 69% of carers report that they find it difficult to make ends meet with nearly a third cutting back on essentials like food and heat and nearly a quarter missing at least one mortgage or rent payment over the past year. That figure rises to 35% when it comes specifically to carers who are renting privately or from the council. The housing crisis affects every person in the State and we can see how it exacerbates other problems we face across society. Carers are facing pressure from all sides with the lack of financial or practical support from the State for their caring duties and cost-of-living pressures, all of which are on top of a lack of affordable, appropriate and secure housing.

Support for carers is not just a matter of money. It needs to be an holistic approach that provides respite, housing support and mental health supports. Nearly 50% of carers are experiencing severe loneliness. This is blatantly down to the demands of caregiving, which severely limit social opportunities. That level of isolation compounds the stress and anxiety experienced by so many carers. We need targeted supports and interventions to address the crisis of loneliness among carers, ensuring they have the time and the finances to be able to engage with their communities and to help build social networks they can depend on.

Respite services constitute an essential aspect of that. A total of 72% of carers have never received a single moment of respite care rising from 65% in 2020. This is an issue I have been highlighting for years and despite countless promises from Government, availability of respite services is scarcer than ever. Research has consistently shown that respite improves the well-being of individuals and their carers. Respite is about giving everyone a break and giving the

individual and family some space. This allows everybody a chance to rest and to recharge. We all know the incredible stresses faced by the families with either children or adults with disabilities. Nobody can live under that pressure without it affecting his or her mental and physical health. Families and carers need respite.

Respite is an opportunity for disabled people to increase their independence, socialise with other people and experience new and different activities. Reports to the National Disability Authority based on participation by people with disabilities showed high levels of satisfaction with many aspects of respite services, especially the chance to get some time for themselves and to engage in interesting and meaningful activities. The participants noted that respite gave their carers a break, particularly their mothers.

Respite is an essential service. This has to be recognised by the Government. There is a pressing need for a drastic increase in respite capacity. Respite is an essential part of disability services, yet it is very clear that there are very few respite beds and community services. Talking to families, one of the issues they often bring up is the lack of respite services for children and adults with disabilities. Unfortunately, this is symbolic of the larger state of disability services in Ireland. There is a severe lack of respite capacity and staff shortages, inconsistencies in services and poor communication with disabled people and their families. Once again, the State is failing in its responsibilities and leaving overstretched and exhausted families without basic services. There has also been a gradual increase in the number of agency staff in this area. This is only a stopgap measure and fails to address the much larger systemic issue of staff in disability services.

Respite needs to be treated as a vital service for disabled people and their families. Until the Government appreciates its importance and many benefits, thousands of families will continue to be denied it. Figures released to me in response to a parliamentary question show that there are currently only 46 public respite beds in Cork, down from 73 in 2018. Access to respite has still not recovered from the pandemic and the closure of community nursing units. Respite services are incredibly important, but are also symptomatic of larger issues around disability services. They do not seem to be a priority.

These people are being failed every day and there does not seem to be any sign that is going to change. We have heard promises over and over again and we hear the Government talking about how much it values carers, but where is the evidence? The claim that the Government values and supports carers does not stack up, given the reality experienced every day by people who are caregiving. If we compare the Government rhetoric to the reality in the Family Carers Ireland report, there is a stark difference.

There are daily financial struggles, anger at the lack of services, constant anxiety about the absence of supports and dread about what will happen to their loved ones when a carer is no longer around. The problem is not even that there is no support out there, although that is increasingly the case for many families; rather, it is that the State often seems to erect barriers to deny people what little support does exist. Qualifying criteria for supports are almost impossible to meet. There are time consuming and complicated applications and people do not have the time or energy to fill them out. There is an attitude of complete apathy from State institutions that chips away at people's morale and sense of self-belief.

There are more than 299,000 unpaid carers in Ireland. That figure has grown by 53% in just six years. Every one of those carers provides an invaluable service to the State, but the State

does incredibly little to support them. Too often, it does the complete opposite and makes life actively more difficult and expensive for them. Carers need to be supported. The State needs to provide targeted mental health supports for carers, provide increased support for housing adaptations, deliver more accessible social and affordable homes, get rid of the carer's means test, extend access to the fuel allowance, provide more respite beds and guarantee 20 days respite a year for carers. It is past time that the State introduced these measures to improve not just the lives of carers, but also the lives of those for whom they are caring.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. We can never speak enough about care work and carers in this country. We can all agree that, in a very crude form, carers save the State hundreds of millions of euro per year. We cannot put a price on the care work they do for loved ones and friends.

The discrepancies in care pointed out by Family Carers Ireland are quite shocking. The report is called the State of Caring, but the state of caring is arbitrary and can be very hit-and-miss in terms of respite care, which I will discuss. The survey points out the many things that carers have to endure, in particular financially. They have a reduced income. Many people have referred to the means test for family carers. It is mean that the payment is means-tested. People providing full-time care should not have their income means-tested. Not having such a test would create less of a worry for somebody in that situation.

The survey also refers to care that has to be paid for privately, which is a substantial cost. There are obviously issues with private care, including personal items and items for a house. All of this is a cost, which is not supported by the State. There are also issues around accommodation. Other people have referred to adaptation grants. The application process for adaptation grants in most local authorities takes forever. There must be a more streamlined process in terms of accommodation and making the homes where people are cared for livable.

On the substantive point, namely respite care, it is quite shocking that 75% of people who provide care will have no access whatsoever to respite care. That is unforgivable. People who are providing full-time care do not get any respite at all, which leads to physical and mental stress for them and those they care for. That is difficult. Having no break can have a detrimental effect on caregiving. Respite care is very arbitrary. It is a postcode lottery, where people cannot get particular care.

During the local election campaign, I spoke to a family whose experience is reflected in the report to which I referred. The family has an adult son who is cared for on a full-time basis. They did not get one day of respite in the past 24 years. That is unbelievable. I could not believe it when the mother said the only way she could get respite care was if she told HSE she could no longer look after her son. If she did that, she would get respite care and her son would have to go into full-time care. We can see how unfair the system is for people in that situation.

Redress is needed. We need to go back to the basics of care, in particular around respite care. We need to consider how care in society is distributed because it is arbitrary. Care is an essential part of any caring society. This country is a great country that cares for its families and friends. However, there are discrepancies where people cannot get that public service when they need it. If they cannot get it when they need it, people will feel quite embittered and let down by society and the State. The State has to look after people when they need a rest and intervention. That is really important. The statutory home support scheme must be implemented as soon as possible.

Deputy Seán Canney: I too welcome the motion and thank Deputies Tully and Ryan for bringing it forward. They are colleagues of mine on the disability matters committee. The motion follows on from one the Regional Group put forward a number of weeks ago, in which we sought for the abolition of means-testing for the carer's allowance.

I want to recap some of what was said during the debate on that motion. More than 500,000 family carers, or one in eight people in the population, are regular unpaid carers. Family carers are the backbone of care provision in this country. However, they often lack support and recognition. Caring intensively over long periods without support or recognition negatively affects a carer's physical and mental health, financial status and social integration.

For many who care for a child with additional needs, their caring role is likely to last for many decades, which has serious implications for their long-term health, well-being and financial security.

10 o'clock

Carers are predominantly women, with people in their 50s most likely to provide care. The number of carers increased by more than 50% between 2016 and 2022. It is expected that this trend will continue due to our ageing population. Carers save the State billions of euro each year. We should value this essential care, which is currently valued at €20 billion per annum.

The application of the carer's allowance means test in respect of household income can make carers financially vulnerable by making them dependent on their partners' income. In many cases, a mother gives up work or a career to care for a child. She cannot get the carer's allowance because her husband is working and the financial means cannot be addressed. As a result, that mother is dependent on her partner or husband's income in order to live. She sacrifices so much and gets nothing in return other than to be at the behest of her partner. It is important that we address this issue. When our group brought a motion on this matter before the Dáil, it was not opposed by the Government. I presume it was accepted. The means test threshold was increased in the past week or two. However, we need to see a strong plan put in place in order that the means test is abolished within the next two to three years. In the meantime, I hope to see an incremental rise in the threshold for income to ensure that people who are carers can have the independence they need.

Our group sought the full abolition of the means test. This was a reflection of research carried out by Maynooth University and commissioned by Family Carers Ireland. It is time that we take up the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands in its pre-budget submission of July 2023 that a high-level officials group to scope out and develop a roadmap for the implementation of a non-means tested family carer support be established. The cornerstone of this debate tonight is to give recognition to carers.

There are other issues at play which people have experienced. Any Deputy who receives representations from carers or people who look after their loved ones will know that overnight respite is virtually non-existent. A family came to my office looking for one night a month respite for their child. They have been told in the past two weeks that they have been accepted and are being put on a waiting list. However, there is no guarantee they will get anything this year.

I had a case relating to a couple who are caring for their son. The mother's sister in the UK

died. They were trying to organise respite but could not get it. Eventually, they had to change their plans. The mother had to travel on her own to the funeral of a close family member in the UK while the husband had to stay at home to mind the child. That was just a one-off request for respite from the family in question, and that is what happened. This morning, I was talking to a woman whose mother is in her 80s and has 21 home care hours. However, nobody showed up to provide care at the weekend. When I spoke to the daughter this morning, she said they were just about recovered after the weekend because they were trying to manage a hoist to get the mother in and out of bed. The mother wants to live at home. Sláintecare states that people should be kept at home for as long as possible. The other issue is that the mother's wishes have to be met. I can see that case evolving in such a way that somebody will be in hospital very soon, mentally stressed that they cannot cope. The home help hours have been allocated but people do not show up. This is a major problem in my constituency.

Another issue is transport for people with disabilities. The report by the Ombudsman two years ago advised that it was high time we brought back transport supports for people with disabilities. A primary medical certificate is deemed to be not fit for purpose. There is no way to appeal a decision because it is so restrictive. We have been told that something is going to happen with that. This has been going on since 2011. It is not the fault of the Ministers here tonight, but nothing is happening. The problem is that it is up to the Department of Finance to make a decision. I am of the view that it is up to the Government to make a decision. The transport and mobility supports that were available were taken from people with disabilities who did not apply at the time or who were not there at the time. They are without those supports while other people have them. The system is totally unequal and the quality of supports on offer is really bad.

Another issue that arises relates to people on community employment, CE, schemes who want to take on the role of being carers. When they look for the carer's allowance, they do not qualify because they work 19.5 hours a week on the schemes. The eligibility criterion for the carer's allowance is 18 hours of work a week. It would be only a very small step to increase the threshold to 19.5 hours in order that people could actually be on CE schemes or rural social schemes. The rural social scheme is not an employment scheme. It is a break for the carer to be out in the community. If they can go out during the hours that suit the caring, it is a no-brainer. However, this has not happened. There is a resistance to bringing the threshold above 18 hours.

I am like a recording when it comes to the housing adaptation grant. A review was carried out and is with the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. To call a spade a spade, the housing adaptation grant is a key component in keeping people in their homes. I commend the staff in Galway County Council on the work they do in turning around applications as quickly as they do and getting money out to the people who need it. However, the money is inadequate because it does not meet the inflationary costs that exist. This needs to be sorted. The Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform needs to stop stalling on this or holding it back for an election announcement. That is using people's misery for the purpose of politics. It is time we got this out of the way, particularly as the review has been with the Department for months. We had three Ministers dealing with it. I do not know who is dealing with it at the moment. It could be Minister of State, Deputy Dillon. It was Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, before that and somebody else was dealing with it before that again. The review is with the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform and it needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae and Deputy Collins are sharing time.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have stood in this Chamber many times and spoken of the work being done by the carers of this country. I have spoken of the amount of money they are saving the State, the personal care they give, which is second to none, yet the thanks these people get is that they are means tested. I can quote case after case, person after person, but it seems to fall on deaf ears. We hear a good deal in the Dáil about human beings. I am here to say the carers of Ireland are human beings too. It is about time the Government treated them like human beings. Carers should not be means tested. Very simply, if they are doing a job, give them the carer's allowance. It would cost the country a great deal more if carers did not do their jobs and if they relied on the Government to care for their loved ones. Being a carer, especially in a rural area, is a lonely life, with no supports in general and no financial support for some. Research indicates that, on average, women spend twice as much time caring as men do. The costs of providing informal care, including losses in paid employment, are disproportionately borne by women. Let us face it, women bear the brunt of this. We are always speaking in the Dáil about equal rights and treating women fairly. Let us start by supporting our carers financially and emotionally, and before anyone starts saying that this is a populist thing to say, it is what my office hears on a daily basis. This is what I hear at my clinics every weekend. This is what I heard at the doors when campaigning recently. It is time this Government got in touch with the people of this country and listened to what we are telling it and abolish the means test for the carers of Ireland.

Supporting carers and allowing elderly people and disabled individuals to live at home is of paramount importance. Not only does it enhance the quality of life for these individuals but it also contributes to a more inclusive and compassionate society. The Government, communities and individuals must work together to create a supportive environment for carers and those they care for. There are so many ways people who are elderly and those caring for them are being treated so unfairly. I would like to raise some issues around home help. Home helps have been providing an excellent service but it is so difficult for so many elderly people to get a home help. It seems as though a system has been built whereby someone has to fall on the ground before they can get the home help instead of caring for the person in their eighties or nineties in their home before it gets to that. If they are cared for properly, they will not end up needing medical or hospital attention. Unfortunately that has not been the case at all here. People are continually having to beg and plead for home help hours. Some are caring for people during the night and are having to care for them during the day. I know quite a lot of people who are begging for half an hour or an hour extra in the week. I meet lots of home helps who say they are willing to do it but they will not be given the job. There is something wrong somewhere along the line. I look at the shocking way elderly people are being treated.

We will all know a person who has cancer. One such person came to me recently. They cannot get a medical card because their income is slightly too high. Surely to God in this day and age we can sympathise with a person when they have cancer and they automatically get a medical card until the cancer is cured, please God, and they can get back to normal life. There is a crazy situation here where, as far as I know, people come into this country and are automatically handed a PPS number and a medical card. These are healthy people. If they were not healthy, I would accept that but if they are healthy, they should not be getting a medical card. However, people here who are not healthy, who have contributed to the economy of this country, who have paid their taxes and who worked hard just need a medical card when they are going through chemotherapy or cancer treatment but, no, they do not get one because they

are €5, €10 or €20 over. We live in a cruel society. The Minister of State can shake her head because that is a fact.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Can I correct something there, if the Ceann Comhairle does not mind?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: That is not correct. If your clinician deems that you are medically in need, there is a one-page medical application form that is sent from the consultant directly to the HSE where it is approved within 24 hours.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister of State for clarifying that but you have to be terminally ill to get that.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: No.

Deputy Michael Collins: In most cases that is the case because I certainly know from my office.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: No.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State is incorrect because people have come to my office and they are applying for the medical card and cannot get it even though they have cancer. The Minister of State should not come along telling me that is not the case. Unfortunately, you have to be terminally ill to fill the form the Minister of State is talking about. If not, please give me the form. She must have a magical form that we do not seem to have in west Cork.

The Government follows people and it punishes people. I have people coming in to me who want to avail of the fair deal scheme. Their families were prudent and they are honest people. They are followed to the grave to rob them of the few bob they saved all their lives so they could pay for their burial and maybe give a little comfort to their family but because they were prudent, they are being chased. Phil Hogan said once that he would chase people to the graves and that is what the Government is doing today.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Sound bite. Well done.

Deputy Michael Collins: Thank you too with your dream talk.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this very important topic this evening. I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Tully for giving us the opportunity. I thank carers and home helps all around the country but especially in Kerry for the great work they do and continue to do. I must compliment one man who lives up the street and who came home from Limerick. Kilgarvan is a small place and he is only three doors up from me. His mother died a couple of weeks ago at 99 years of age. In 2014 he left his job in Limerick and left his wife and children there to stay with his mother. He took the responsibility of caring for his mother until the other day. I am thinking of my own uncle, Dan Rae, who looked after his mother - my grandmother - who lived to be 97 years of age. He took it on himself when he was quite a young man to look after her and do little else. There was no talk about money for carers at that time or anything like that. People do it out of love and they feel they have to look after the people who brought them into world and who looked after them when they were small and

got them going. Unconditional love is what it is. Those people need to be looked after.

I thank Deputy Canney for bringing forward a motion a few weeks ago to get rid of the means testing for carers because it is often the case that if someone's spouse or partner is working, they are denied the carer's allowance because of the means test even though they continue to look after their loved ones. So many things are happening with home helps. People are promised home helps but no one comes because we do not have the staff. That is not good enough.

Parents with children who were born with physical or mental disabilities look after their children. It is a massive burden and some, after a long wait, get the domiciliary care allowance but when the child reaches 16 years it is gone. We all know those people still need funding to keep going. It is a lonely life. Many of these people are living the disabled person's life or the elderly person's life. They have no life of their own.

That brings me to respite care. Take the massive territory from Poulgorm Bridge on the N69 all the way down through Kilgarvan, Kenmare, Sneem and Cahirdaniel and then the other side of the Kenmare River back to Lauragh, Ardgroom and the county bounds and up to Bonane. All that catchment area is depending on one respite bed in Kenmare hospital. People get one week but at the same time eight beds are idle in that new hospital. Those eight beds have been there since the hospital was built in 2011 or 2012. Those are the things the Minister should be addressing.

Home helps are going into houses for 20 minutes or half an hour and then they are supposed to go somewhere else. That is too short a time and it is too hard to get it. Many are not covered for weekends or bank holidays but people are still disabled or need help on those days.

Another issue that arises is that you need two home helps to operate a hoist and people have to be trained. It is often the case that only one can come in and that is not good enough. We should have surplus home helps available and at the ready to take up the slack. To leave a person for a day in bed, or even for 48 hours without getting out of bed at all, because there is no one to operate the hoist is not good enough.

In Denmark all their nursing homes and community care hospitals are practically empty because they have a proper home help system in their country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We should aspire to that and look after our own people. We are spending billions on others and the Government wants to do more of it with this Bill that it is trying to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, let us not go down that road. We are-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Thank you very much, Ceann Comhairle. It is a very serious matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It has to deal with it and be seen to deal with it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next are Deputies Connolly and Harkin, who are sharing time.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Regarding that last comment, quite a number of our carers are non-Irish. It is important to acknowledge that.

I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. It builds on what Sinn Féin, Deputy Canney, others and I have done. We are doing this not to embarrass the Government. Well, perhaps we are doing it to embarrass the Government into acting. Rather than use my own words, I will cite the motion, which is looking for very basic measures, namely, a minimum respite guarantee and a relaxation of the carer's allowance means test. We all agree it should be abolished, but if it were relaxed with a view to abolishing it, we would welcome that.

The State of Caring 2024 survey, which we have all referenced, is worth examining. It is the third such survey. In 2020, it showed that carers were grappling with financial hardships, on the brink of indebtedness and lacking critical support services. The 2022 survey stated that not only did the 2020 challenges still exist, but they had intensified significantly for many during the Covid pandemic. One might think that matters would improve after Covid, but the 2024 survey showed that carers were still facing the same challenges. The core issue identified at the start of the decade – we are nearly halfway through this decade – remains deeply entrenched, underscoring the ongoing need for a transformative approach to the support of family carers. Just like with climate change and no longer doing business as usual, we need transformative change in this regard.

For the life of me, I could never understand how the experts in the Department of Finance and the various Ministers for Finance never considered how much money carers saved the country. In my naivete, I could never understand how that was not a fundamental part of the budget every year. Perhaps this year the Minister of State might make a difference to the narrative in the budget in terms of what carers are saving our economy.

Between 2016 and 2022, the number of people providing regular unpaid care increased by 53% according to the census. In 2022, 61% of carers were female and 39% were male. There are many more statistics, but I will not go into them.

An Indecon report on the cost of disability was commissioned in 2018 and published on 7 December 2021, which was a long lapse in time. It identified no single cost of disability due to the wide range in the severity of disabilities, household types, etc., but it concluded that people with disabilities, believe it or believe it not, had annual extra costs ranging from €8,700 to €12,300 per year, although this could reach as high as €23,610 for people with multiple disabilities. We have had many budgets since the report was commissioned in 2018, but we have had two since its publication and have still not established a cost of disability payment. Along with the abolition of the means test, this would be a basic measure in a republic.

I tabled a motion approximately two years ago. The Government did not oppose it, which I welcomed. That motion was on opening up respite beds that were still closed after Covid. I welcome that the Minister of State took a hands-on approach to the matter, as did the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, but that was two years ago. I was seeking an audit of the respite beds that were available throughout the country. I still do not know how many respite beds there are. I do not know how many of them are in HSE-owned properties or in rented properties. We all table questions on how many respite beds there are available in Galway. The number is up and down and the beds still remain closed. The reasons for the change include a lack of staff-----

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Is the Deputy referring to respite beds for older persons?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: A mixture. It is difficult to understand from the answers whether the beds are for older people or people with disabilities. There is a mix. I will put my hands up and say I am adding to the confusion.

These are basic requirements. Carers are saving us billions of euro. I heard a figure of €20 billion mentioned. I do not know what the exact figure is, but the one I was using was €12 billion. We could pick a figure out of the sky, but perhaps the mandarins in the Department of Finance might assist us.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion, which builds on many motions, including my own Private Members' motion on the need to eliminate the means test for the carer's allowance.

This motion is timely because we are coming up to budget 2025. As I have often said, the means test is commonly known as the "mean test". From speaking and listening to carers over the past 20 years and from reading all the reports from Family Carers Ireland and others, I can see why that is so. For a long time, Family Carers Ireland has believed that the carer's allowance is inadequate, gender biased, overly restrictive and not fit for purpose. It is inadequate because every single report on the cost of caring tells us that families face extra costs and extra bills of between €10,000 and €14,000 per annum. The Government's own report tells us that as well. The carer's allowance barely covers that amount. Research shows that 29% of carers are cutting back on essentials like food and heating, 39% live in households with a total income of €30,000 or less and 83% of those on carer's allowance do not receive the fuel allowance. One can see why the allowance is inadequate.

It is gender biased because many of those caring are women. The income disregard is not based on the woman's income, but on the household income. In many cases, if her husband or partner is above the threshold, the woman receives no carer's allowance. This is restrictive. In order to qualify, one has to care full time for a person who needs full-time care. Less than a quarter of those who provide such care actually get the carer's allowance.

One of the issues I have encountered is that a carer in receipt of the allowance can only study for 18.5 hours. Recently, I came across two carers who were trying to do online courses of between 20 to 25 hours. They are at home all the time and available 24-7, yet they are not able to access the carer's allowance. One can see why changes need to be made. For example, we need to move towards a participation income that is not means tested and the family carer's income support should be for all family carers who fulfil the assessment criteria. Family Carers Ireland is asking for these changes to be implemented by 2027. If one were to describe what a participation income might be, it could be paid at the rate of the current carer's allowance without being means tested. It would be awarded because the person was caring.

As Deputy Connolly stated, there are many figures for what carers save the State. The figure of €20 billion is one that we often hear. If it is anywhere close the truth, then it is the equivalent of another HSE. Based on such figures, carers in my constituency of Sligo probably save the State approximately €250 million per year. In Leitrim, the savings are approximately half of that. In Donegal, it is twice that at €500 million. In comparison, the cost of abolishing the means test would be €397 million per year for the entire country. This proposal needs to be considered.

According to a report published less than a week ago by Family Carers Ireland, 72% of car-

ers have never received respite. That is not good enough. In fact, it is not even close to being good enough. We have to do better. Family Carers Ireland is calling for family carers to have a right to a minimum of 20 days of respite per year. It is not a big ask but it will make all the difference for those who are caring 24-7. I would appreciate it if the Minister would take what is in this motion to heart and make sure the next budget starts the implementation of getting rid of the means test for the carer's allowance.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak of the legendary work that carers do for the most vulnerable people, day in, day out. Carers save the State an estimated €20 billion per year and that is the equivalent of a second HSE. Carers are predominantly female and, for the most part, are alone and isolated. They are not respected for the work they do or the moneys they save the State every single year and they do not get recognition for the important roles they play, which, by the way, has a knock-on effect in respect of their role as advocates.

In order for those wrongs to be righted, we need the abolition of the means test for carer's allowance, and that is for a start. We need equity for carers. This is especially the case as we know that the number of those providing unpaid care is increasing year-on-year. Census 2022 pointed to 15% of all unpaid carers being over 65. I have been raising the need to abolish the means test for carer's allowance. I know the Minister aims to report back in quarter 3 of this year but carers need action now. From the Family Carers Ireland report, for which I thank it, we know 69% are experiencing financial distress and 29% of those struggling financially are cutting back on essentials, such as food and heat. It is a bleak picture. We also know that 48% are experiencing loneliness.

I know of female constituents who want to avail of the incremental tenant purchase scheme, for example, but because they are in receipt of the carer's allowance, that income is not deemed eligible for the application. Those ladies are trying to provide a bit of security for their families but, again, they feel their work is under-recognised and not appreciated. A number of cases that come through my office relate to carer's allowance and DCA applications, which parents say take far too long and are too arduous on their mental health.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Colm Burke): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. In coming back in response, it is important for me to state that I too have been involved in trying to work out support for people who reside at home. The challenge is that people are living longer and life expectancy in Ireland has increased by six years over the past 20 years and, therefore, we have a lot more people living longer. For example, the figure for those aged over 75 has increased from 220,381 in 2011 to more than 335,000 in 2023, which is more than a 50% increase in a very short timeframe, and that will continue.

In her opening speech earlier, the Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, Deputy Rabbitte, outlined some of the policies, supports and initiatives in her Department that do and will benefit those who care for a loved one. I will outline some of the other supports provided both through the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection. We are delivering on the commitment in the programme for Government to introduce a carer's guarantee that will provide a core basket of services to support family carers across the country regardless of where they live.

Since 2021, we have invested €2 million per annum in these services. The bulk of the funding of €1.9 million is being provided to Family Carers Ireland to deliver a mix of community

and individual supports to a minimum of 5,000 new carers annually. There is an investment of approximately €62 million in funding provided for respite in older people's services per annum. Respite may be provided in the community within the person's own home, in HSE residential care settings, by agreement with voluntary organisations or by contracted private facilities. In June 2021, the HSE, in partnership with Family Carers Ireland, launched the home support emergency respite scheme, with funding of €600,000 to provide a total of 27,000 hours of respite care to family carers who require additional emergency respite. The HSE continues to provide emergency respite supports in 2024.

Since September 2018, individuals in receipt of either a full or half-rate carer's allowance or carer's benefit are automatically eligible for a GP visit card. This measure was introduced at that time to enable approximately 14,000 people who were in receipt of carer's allowance or carer's benefit and who had not qualified for a medical card or GP visit card on means or age grounds to be eligible for GP services without fees. On foot of this measure, as of 1 April 2024, 7,279 persons in receipt of either full or half-rate carer's allowance or carer's benefit have GP visit card eligibility. It should be noted that many carers may have already held a medical card or GP visit card prior to this welcome change. A range of other measures has been introduced in recent years to expand access to GP care, including the automatic awarding of a GP visit card to all persons over 70 in 2015 and a 10% increase to the income thresholds for a GP visit card in 2019.

The Government has invested an additional €235 million in home support services for older people since budget 2020. In 2024, we expect to deliver 22.1 million home support hours, an increase of 4.2 million hours over 2020. This is more than has ever been delivered before. There are now more than 57,000 people receiving home support services. In 2023, the Government allocated €2.1 million to allow dementia day care centres to reopen to full capacity and, in 2024, there are 58 dementia day care centres in operation. In budget 2024, a further €500,000 was allocated to increase the provision of in-home dementia day care. An additional €2.2 million was provided for day care services in 2024, providing invaluable support for older people living at home and those who care for them.

Income supports are also a vital factor in providing assistance to carers and ensuring they do not suffer financial hardship as a result of their caring role. The Government very much values the work of our family carers and since her appointment as Minister for Social Protection, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has sought to make sure that the interests of carers and the people they care for remain a focus of her Department's priorities. In budget 2021, in her first budget in the Department of Social Protection, the Minister increased the carer's support grant to €1,850, its highest-ever level. On Thursday, 6 June of this year, 132,523 carers received the grant in respect of 149,361 persons at an estimated cost of €275 million. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has also delivered on the programme for Government commitment to provide a pension solution for long-term carers. From January 2024, a new long-term carers contribution scheme was introduced.

Carer's allowance is the main scheme by which the Department of Social Protection provides income support to carers in the community. Some 96,742 people are currently supported by this payment. This year, the expenditure on the carer's allowance scheme is estimated to be over €1.1 billion. As the Deputies are aware, carer's allowance is a means-tested social assistance payment awarded to those who are caring for people who need full-time care and attention. While the caring requirements of those being cared for may be different, this does not affect the rate of carer's allowance as it is intended to provide an income support for the carer

and does not depend on the individual requirements of the person receiving care.

The means test ensures that support is provided to those most in need and plays a critical role in determining whether an income need arises as a consequence of caring. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has made the carer's allowance a priority in recent budgets, with significant enhancements to the means test. As part of budget 2022, she increased the income limit for a couple from €665 to €750 and for a single person from €332.50 to €350. In addition, the amount of savings disregarded in the carer's allowance means test was increased from €20,000 to €50,000.

As part of budget 2024, the Government has gone further again and the weekly income disregard has increased from €350 to €450 for a single person and from €750 to €900 for carers with a spouse or partner. This change was implemented from Thursday, 6 June of this year. The changes meant that carers on a reduced rate moved to a higher payment. In addition, many carers who previously did not qualify for a payment due to their means were brought into the carer's allowance system for the first time. These are the highest income disregards in the social welfare system.

This motion calls for further relaxation of the carer's allowance means test. The reality is that any further relaxation of the means test would result in people who may have higher sources of income benefiting, while reducing the scope for the Department to provide income supports to lower income households. Those carers who rely solely on the income from the carer's allowance payment would not benefit from further increases in this regard.

Deputies will be aware that the Minister for Social Protection announced the establishment of an interdepartmental working group to examine and review the means test for carers' payments. The group is chaired by officials in the Department of Social Protection and includes representation from the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the lead Departments with responsibility for the delivery of supports and services for older people and people with disabilities. This group is to review the whole process and will report back in the not-too-distant future.

Taking all of this into account, yes, we would all like for more to be delivered in this area but there are constraints in any budget, and the amount that is now being provided, as I have set out already, is more than €1.1 billion in any one year. It is a huge increase compared with the past five years, and I think that is important to take into account, together with the other benefits we have provided to carers.

We have a challenge now with the growing elderly population in this country. The figures are quite clear. By the end of 2030, we will have in excess of 1 million people over 65 years of age. Therefore, there are going to be increasing challenges and we need to plan for that. If we remove the means test completely, it means other services may lose out. It is about getting the balance. I think the Department of Social Protection has certainly provided that balance together with the Department of Health, and it is important we take these issues into account when dealing with this scheme.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Bogaimid ar aghaidh. I understand that to wrap up, Deputy Tully is sharing with Deputy Patricia Ryan.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, and I thank Deputy Tully

for bringing this motion to the floor today. I would like to say I am shocked by the figures in the Family Carers Ireland report, but in all good conscience I cannot say that. As Sinn Féin spokesperson for older people, I know only too well how much these selfless people do and how poorly valued they feel, especially when considering the millions they save the State every single year by caring for their elderly, disabled and vulnerable loved ones. Most of the care in these situations is being provided by women. Each of these carers is an individual person with a life they could lead, a job they could take, and a career they could have awaiting them if they were not a carer. They are also individuals who, when being assessed for a pension entitlement, often find themselves short of the required contributions because they were a carer.

Carers are individuals until it comes to applying for the carer's allowance. Suddenly, they are now part of a household and the household income is the benchmark that decides their entitlement. The average carer's allowance is €249 per week, with 35 hours of care having to be provided for that. It is the princely sum of €7.11 per hour, with the sad reality that most carers give care for many more hours than that. That is not even close to the minimum standard of living or even survival levels. How devaluing is that? The carer is a person doing a job caring for the vulnerable person, but the value of their work and dedication is determined by household income and not for their individual effort of work. To add insult to injury, a massive 72% of these people have never received respite. A total of 69% of them are struggling to make ends meet, with some even having to choose whether they eat or heat. It is a disgraceful indictment of Government policy.

Carers are sick and tired of platitudes and empty words from Government. They do not need another promise. They need proper support, recognition and remuneration for the sacrifices they have made to be carers for their loved ones. What we need is urgent reform of the carers scheme, relaxation of the means test for carer's allowance, an increase to the income thresholds, and a widening of the eligibility criteria to include the self-employed.

We discussed the housing adaptation earlier. I want to finish on this . The Minister of State spoke a minute ago about support for the carers. That in itself tells us there is a problem, if the Government has to support them with extras.

Deputy Martin Browne: I also thank Deputy Tully for bringing the motion to the House. This is in an important motion in light of the report by Family Carers Ireland, which revealed that 74% of those surveyed do not receive significant formal support, while 72% have never received respite.

By its very nature, the rights of carers and the supports they are given extend to the very people they are caring for. If carers are not given the support they need to care for themselves as well as the person they are caring for, both parties are being underserved. Respite is something carers have to constantly fight for. In a recent case I dealt with, it has become obvious that people who are approved for respite would generally rely on getting it due to another cancellation rather than getting it at the frequency they have been deemed eligible for because respite is running at capacity. This effectively denies carers the break they are due and which they need to enable them to carry on with their valuable work, which saves the State billions of euro every year.

Each year ahead of the budget, we hear from the Government benches about how valued carers are. We want to increase income thresholds in the means test for the carer's allowance. This will result in higher payments for current recipients on reduced payments, and it would

mean more carers would qualify for the allowance.

Carers save the State €20 billion every year, yet that is not reflected in Government policy which, in my experience, seems more focused on excluding people from qualifying for payments. Take two cases I am currently dealing with in which a change of carer is needed. Despite the fact that, in both cases, the applicant would be looking after a person whose needs were such that a carer had previously been approved for them, the application failed. This effectively says that despite the person being given care having a level of need that justified a carer being assigned to them, they no longer are. Again, this makes no sense apart from suggesting that when it comes to the allocation of carer's allowance, finances take precedence over need. This is clearly in conflict with the spirit of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters, which advocated for transitioning to needs-led and rights-based disability services. Surely this approach must be standard.

There is a similar issue with medical cards. I am aware of a case in which a young girl with Treacher Collins syndrome and cerebral palsy had to re-apply for a medical card despite her serious lifelong condition. Her family had to submit 80 pages of documentation and devote a huge amount of time while also looking after her medical needs.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is fairly straightforward what we are asking for here and I welcome the fact the Government is not opposing this. If we are talking about carer's allowance, it is quite straightforward. We need to have an element of flexibility, and whether we are talking about the time someone spends on education or working, 18.5 hours with no element of flexibility is not working for many. We know there has to be some element of loosening-up of the means test threshold and even beyond that, because we know this is the only direction this can work.

As has been said by many, a huge amount of work is done by carers which we could not afford as a State if we did not have those people who do that huge work. I commend Family Carers Ireland and also the likes of Inclusion Louth, which has done a huge amount of work and advocacy over the years. I know the Minister of State has himself engaged on respite care in a huge way, and we all know the huge work that has been done, whether we are talking about Maria Goretti or Anam Cara. It is making sure we can deliver what is necessary, and that guarantee we are talking about with regard to respite is something that needs to be followed up.

I am going to cut straight to the fact that 34% of carers said the accommodation is not suitable to meet the needs of the person they care for. We know we have dealt with these issues. We know the housing adaptation grants are being reviewed and we know what actually needs to happen. The Government needs to follow up in this regard. We could talk about disabilities here for the next four hours but I do not have any time left so I will let it go.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I wish to thank everyone who contributed to this debate. It is obvious, from right across the floor, that carers are really valued for the work they do, but they are a cohort who need support. We need to trust carers more. The 18.5-hour limit was raised consistently. It is too restrictive regarding study or work outside of the home. As Deputy Canney said, they cannot even undertake a community scheme because that amounts to 19 hours. This is something that could be looked at and adjusted. We have to trust carers will provide the care their loved ones need and if they have the opportunity to do some work or some study in that time, they should be allowed to do so.

The respite guarantee is really important because having a break is really important. A break is as good as rest. Having such a high cohort of people who do not even have one night of respite is really important and needs to be addressed.

Supports and services for disabled people in particular are really important. Similar to section 39 organisations and that whole pay parity issue, a lot of the services have not been restored to full capacity after Covid-19. I wish to mention in particular the Irish Wheelchair Association's services in Cavan which, since Easter, are on a Covid-19-type service due to staffing issues. The HSE does not seem to have engaged as it promised it would. I have tabled a parliamentary question on this issue because I want to know what is going on in this regard. There are people and carers who need that service. It needs to be restored as soon as possible. I cannot commend the staff in there enough but they need support.

A lot of people raised different heartbreaking stories and we hear them all the time in our constituency offices. One story which comes to mind is that of a young lady in my area who has locked-in syndrome. The only part of her body which she can move is her eyes. Her family can provide full-time care. The HSE has approved a home care package in which carers are supposed to visit three times per day. That package has never once been fulfilled in total. The family is left in a situation whereby it does not know from one morning to the afternoon to the evening whether it will get the three carers it requires to use the hoist or whether it will get one or two. The family is on a knife edge completely and it is not fair. A statutory home care package for people is really important. Someone made the point that if carers could actually work in a more flexible way and go out, they might be able to provide a few hours of care to another person in another house or something like that. It could be something that is looked at to address the shortage we have in the care sector. It is a very serious issue.

The means test is a big issue as well. It is something which has to be addressed. As I said, I would appreciate getting the difference in the costings the Department has around abolishing the means test and how its costings are €200 million more than the costings Family Carers Ireland, myself and another group have got from the Parliamentary Budget Office. We all need to work on this together to try to find a way to either raise the threshold significantly or abolish the means test completely.

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands has completed its consideration of Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024 and has made amendments thereto.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

31. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for an update on the CDNT recruitment campaign, 'Be part of our team, be part of their lives'; the number of people who have been recruited to the CDNTs through this recruitment campaign; the current number of staff vacancies nationally in CDNTs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26214/24]

Deputy Pauline Tully: I wish to ask for an update on the children's disability network team, CDNT, recruitment campaign, Be part of our team, Be part of our lives. How many people have been recruited to the CDNTs through this campaign? What is the current number of staff vacancies nationally in CDNTs? Will the Minister of State will make a statement on this matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Deputy Tully for raising this question. It will be the second time today I address her, after being in committee earlier.

The CDNT recruitment campaign, Be part of our team, Be part of their lives, has closed across CHOs. To date, 190 job offers have been made and 55 individuals are currently in the final stages of recruitment. Funding has been provided in recent years for additional posts to enhance the capacity of CDNTs and to shorten the waiting times. The funding amounts to a total of 800 whole-time equivalent posts, including an additional 175 therapy assistant posts which were approved in budget 2024. However, as we all know from the 2022 staff census, there are more than 700 vacant whole-time equivalent posts in our CDNTs. It did not change much in the 2023 staff census, either.

The HSE has been asked to conduct another CDNT recruitment campaign in the coming months which will ensure there is continued recruitment to the CDNTs, which in turn will hopefully strengthen the CDNTs' provision of services. It will be important that the HSE identifies and applies any points of learning from the first campaign. The HSE is operating in a very competitive global market for healthcare talent as there are significant shortages of qualified healthcare professionals across the globe. The HSE community operations disability services are working collaboratively with the CDNT lead agencies at CHO level to promote CDNTs as a workplace of choice in a competitive employment market.

Some 93 CDNTs are aligned with 96 community healthcare networks, CHNs, across the country and are providing services and supports for children from birth to 18 years of age. The CDNTs are currently providing services and supports for 46,000 children. However, there are significant challenges for CDNTs including staff vacancies, the growth in the numbers and the demand for assessments of need. I can come back in on the second point.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The Minister of State mentioned the staff census of 2022. The 2023 staff census has yet to be published. Does the Minister of State have a date for when it will be published? I know it was delayed because of the industrial action but I wonder is there a date for that in order to be able to compare across the board.

I wish to focus on my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. The HSE-run team in Monaghan

had a vacancy rate of approximately 40%. The Cavan team, which is a section 39 organisation, had a 60% vacancy rate. The Minister of State indicated to me before that in this recruitment campaign there were approximately 80 applicants in the CHO 1 area. Does she have figures of how many of those people have actually been offered positions within that area or specifically within the Cavan and Monaghan area?

How long is the recruitment taking? I know that sometimes there are significant delays with CORU. Have those delays been addressed? Time is of the essence. We are all hearing from families who are looking for services and not getting them at the moment. Recruitment needs to be beefed up as quickly as possible.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The date for the publication of the 2023 staff census will be in the next two weeks. While I do not have a specific figure for Cavan and Monaghan, I know that for CHO 1, which covers the Cavan and Monaghan areas, there were 88 people who expressed interest.

As to what measures are being taken, the national team development of the programme is holding lunchtime webinars. There are confined senior-grade competitions going on. It is marketing the CDNT as a workplace of choice. There are human resources engagements with graduates, in person and via webinars, as well as recordings of CDNT staff and parents around the benefits of working with it. There are also student sponsorship programmes, an additional 20 senior clinical psychologist training placements, confined senior-grade competitions and a recruitment plan for 462 health and social care workers by the end of 2024. The HSE has set its own target it wishes to achieve in the health and social care profession, which is 462 this year.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The Minister of State mentioned graduates. Have the numbers entering these professions in college increased and have they increased dramatically? Are we seeing an increase in the number of people graduating and staying in Ireland to work?

11 o'clock

The Minister of State mentioned the apprenticeship model, which is an excellent model as well. Are we seeing a lot more people taking up these courses or is it proving difficult to get people into them? Some people have said that the points' requirement can be extremely high. Many people would be interesting in doing courses in the likes of occupational therapy but the points requirement in the leaving certificate is too high.

Every week I deal with families who are being really messed around. Families have been referred from primary care to the CDNT and then on to CAMHS. They do not know where they are going. Even the ones who are with the CDNT are not getting services. I am constantly sending emails but I do not even get responses anymore. One mother who got in contact with me has a child with epilepsy so it is not like she requires an assessment of need. She needs supports because she is starting school and the school needs to know what it has to do. The mother cannot get a reply from the CDNT.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Regarding the right front door, it is called the national access policy, NAP. This is a HSE policy document. Under the leadership of Bernard Gloster I have seen huge improvements in communication between primary healthcare, CAMHS, acute services and disability services. They are talking to one other and not working in silos. Granted, there are variances across the country. Some are working really well and others could do with improvement. That policy is being rolled out. It is totally understood at a senior level and it is

filtering all the way down.

Regarding recruitment and attraction, I agree. I spoke earlier today about the excellent programme in social care that was launched in Cork in the past month with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. We have seen some 30 students take places on the apprenticeship programme. I would really like to see that stepped up now to occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy. Students can earn and learn as part of a pathway through education that also provides the proper clinical governance. It is a way of attracting and retaining people.

Childcare Services

32. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to provide an update on attempts to re-establish childcare and early learning facilities at a location in Churchfield, Cork (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26300/24]

Deputy Mick Barry: I ask the Minister to provide an update on attempts to re-establish childcare and early learning facilities at the site of the old Before 5 Family Centre in Churchfield in Cork city.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. From his engagement and that of other Deputies from Cork I am well aware of the issues facing Northside Community Enterprise and of the funding that is required to support the reopening of the Before 5 Family Centre in Churchfield. The centre is in an area of undersupply and of high need for childcare places. The ambition of Northside Community Enterprise to reopen this centre, with an expanded offering of full-time, full-year places for children under three, as well as places for school-going children, is very welcome.

I had the opportunity to meet representatives of Northside Community Enterprise a number of weeks ago while in Cork visiting one of its other services. I was able to clarify that the capital funding I announced earlier in the year for the childcare sector under the national development plan was designed towards the expansion of existing services and that particular funding stream did not apply to the scenario that Northside Community Enterprise finds itself in with the Before 5 Family Centre. However, I was able to confirm to the representatives of Northside Community Enterprise that I and my Department are looking to see what solutions can be put in place in this situation. We see how vital this community facility is for Churchfield. Work is ongoing between officials in my Department and Pobal to find a solution.

Pobal, the scheme administrator, and the local childcare committee have engaged with Northside Community Enterprise and offered support in this regard. There was an initial meeting on 17 May and there has subsequently been a follow-up meeting. I do not have the conclusive answer for the Deputy but we are aware of the importance of this service. We are aware of the significance of Northside Community Enterprise stepping in to take it on and we are looking to bring forward a workable solution.

Deputy Mick Barry: When the Before 5 Family Centre was closed suddenly last August, the community lost a facility it had enjoyed for 50 years. It lost a pre-school, an after-school

service, childcare provision, play therapy and adult services. More than 100 parents lost out directly. More than 150 children lost out directly and 14 workers lost out directly. There are three other childcare providers in the area and all of them have lengthy waiting lists. There are 303 children in the Churchfield area aged four years and under. This community is crying out for the restart of these services.

I listened with care to the Minister's reply. It is a carbon copy of what the people in that community were told in the middle of March, at the time of the Minister's visit to Cork. I hoped for an update that showed some degree of progress in the past five weeks. Perhaps in his reply the Minister might be able to give a bit more detail on any progress since the last report that was given. This is moving at a snail's pace.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I do not accept the Deputy's assertion that it is moving at a snail's pace. We are looking to create a new funding stream that will deal with situations like this where there is an existing service that is using a building that is no longer fit for purpose and requires significant capital support. That requires my Department to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform to create a new capital stream. As with so much in the bureaucracy of Departments, I wish this would move so much faster. It does not always move as fast as we would like but significant work is being done. We recognise the importance of this particular service and that it is an area of undersupply. We also recognise that a very significant number of parents and young children benefited from this service previously. We want to continue to provide that support to the community.

Deputy Mick Barry: I suggest that the Minister ask the parents in the area whether they think things are moving at a snail's pace or not. I do not think the Minister would be too surprised by the reply he would get. The delays in this case are unforgivable. The family centre was shut last year at the end of August. That should have been the signal for urgency in organising a replacement. On 6 February, the company appointed to organise replacement services - not Northside Community Enterprise - wrote to the Minister and other Ministers outlining the need for €366,000 in fresh funding to do necessary works in advance of a reopening. Last month, three months after that, on 13 May the Minister told the *Irish Examiner* that he was hard at work trying to source alternative funds. Now, we are five weeks on from that and there does not appear to be anything new here. Northside Community Enterprise reckons that there is somewhere between two and four months' work to be done in that building. The chance of it reopening for September is gone but we want to see something happening there in a serious way this year. I will be coming back to the Minister on this before the summer recess. It is disappointing and it is happening at a snail's pace.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: When I was in Cork I sought the meeting with Northside Community Enterprise in order to be able to discuss the need for particular support to get this service reopened. I was able to see the amazing work it has done in other services and understand the particular ethos behind the organisation as a community organisation. This is something we in the Department want to support. I outlined the challenges we faced in terms of creating a brand new stream of funding to meet the organisation's particular needs. I also made it clear that it is something that my Department is willing to do because of the importance of this service and the need to support services like it. We will continue to work on it and look to put in place the necessary new funding stream. I will keep Deputy Barry and the other Deputies from Cork who have been in touch with me about this issue fully abreast of what we are doing.

International Protection

33. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to detail what current communications plan is in place in respect of the IPAS accommodation crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26299/24]

Deputy John Brady: I ask the Minister to give detail on the current communications plan when it comes to engaging with public representatives and members of the community about the provision of IPAS accommodation. Communication has been lacking and this has caused a lot of concern and anger in communities. What is the current communications plan for the provision of IPAS accommodation?

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Joe O'Brien): Ireland and many other European countries continue to experience a significant increase in people seeking international protection. The arrival numbers remain significantly elevated. In the first 23 weeks of 2024, more than 9,000 people arrived in Ireland seeking accommodation from the State, an average of 394 people per week. This is more than five times the average for the period 2017 to 2019. Government is working to ensure an integrated approach to communications and community engagement and to deepen the understanding of all aspects of migration in the Irish context. Communicating with local communities and the public at large requires a series of multifaceted approaches. I understand a national communications plan is being developed and led by the Department of an Taoiseach. My Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has responsibility for community engagement. As the Deputy will be aware, a community engagement team has been established to engage directly with elected representatives, relevant local authorities, local development companies, and other entities and individuals. The purpose of the team is to improve the flow of information regarding arrivals into areas and to help equip local communities with the accurate information required to help them understand the current situation and to assist with the welcome and integration process for new arrivals. This team has been operating since October 2023. It consists of a national lead on civic engagement, two additional team members to support the on-the-ground engagement and a small administrative team.

The CET is activated for openings which need additional support. The openings which the team support can also be selected if requested by a public representative or a local community leader and when it is deemed appropriate. It is acknowledged that different sites will have different requirements, and this approach, while offering a standard process for engagement and communication, can be adapted depending on specific circumstances. To date, the CET has issued 79 detailed briefing notes to stakeholders and has actively engaged on 52 open or proposed accommodation centres. The work of the CET is supported by a whole-of-government approach, engaging with sectors and providers nationally and locally to respond to some of issues raised by local communities.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister of State. That does not really answer the question. It probably raises more questions and concerns about a comprehensive communication plan which he seems to bat over to the Department of the Taoiseach. The need for a proper and comprehensive communication plan is something I have raised consistently. This is something we were told was being worked on 12 months ago. It was supposed to have been brought before Cabinet back in February and we are now being told by the Minister of State that this is still being worked on by the Department of the Taoiseach. We need clarity here. There is a com-

munication plan or there is not. As I see it, there is no communication plan. There is no plan full stop. However, the critical part is engaging with communities and that has failed dismally. Public representatives have been lied to regarding the provision of IPAS accommodation and have been given half-truths, mistruths and total untruths. Communities feel abandoned by the lack of communication. It is one thing coming in retrospectively to tell them what is happening in their community, but that engagement needs to start from day one and that is seriously lacking.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta.

Deputy John Brady: Is there a plan, at the Department of the Taoiseach level or at any level?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I want to push back on the Deputy's assertion that people are being lied to or are being told mistruths and untruths. It is very problematic and, frankly, it feeds the people who are spreading lies. What the Deputy said is simply not true.

Deputy John Brady: It is true.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: It is not.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: When we have information that is available to share, we share it. These are fluid circumstances. Sometimes circumstances change regarding capacity, in what the provider is able to do and as to what we are able to tell people. There are fluid circumstances. We have unaccommodated people. We are trying to move as quickly as we can. The problem with that is when we give people information as soon as we can, the process can change. As we are telling people information early, the situation very often changes. If we were to wait until everything was lined up, perfect and done, it would be weeks into the process and we would be accused of not telling people early enough. The fact is, we are telling people early and the reason people are not getting everything they want is because it is at an early stage. We can only tell people a certain amount when the process has started.

Deputy John Brady: The lack of a comprehensive communication plan is fanning the flames of hate and resentment being led by right-wing people exploiting the vacuum that the Minister of State and the Government have created because it is not putting out the accurate information. We see an analysis was carried out by Sky News on foot of a recent protest. A total of 56% of the online content originated in the US, 20% in Ireland and 10% in Britain. There was no strategy there from the Department and the Government to counter that. Public representatives such as me are being lied to and have been lied to by the Department regarding the provision of accommodation where bulldozers were on the site in my constituency stripping back topsoil and putting down hardcore and members of the community and I were being told no decision had been taken on that specific site. I have a role. I want to play a role in bringing communities with us, but when that information is not there and there is no comprehensive communication strategy with communities or public representatives, it makes my job very difficult if not impossible-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Time is up.

Deputy John Brady: -----and that is a failure of this Government and that of the Minister.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I again refute the word "lie". The Deputy was not lied to. What happens is, because these situations are fluid and because we move early, that information can change. What little bit of knowledge I have of the situation to which he refers, information changed and was not communicated in a way it should have been. That is very different from being lied to. Members of the CET are trying their best. When they get information, they communicate it out as best they can, but as I said, situations change very often. I totally respect that the Deputies have a job to do as well and I thank them and councillors for showing leadership at a local level in bringing the community along. We do our best to get information out as quickly as possible. The core issue remains in that we have to move fast, and in those fast-moving situations, the facts can change regularly.

Deputy John Brady: Is there a communication plan at any level?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I can only talk about the community engagement team and how it is working. It is working very well because there are lots of places opening and there is not an issue because the information is getting out. It has not worked perfectly everywhere but we are learning as we go along and it is improving.

Question No. 34 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Care Services

35. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the measures that are being taken to ensure sufficient residential respite services are available for families in a health area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26064/24]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I ask the Minister about the efforts to ensure there is adequate access to residential respite services for young people with complex needs and their family carers in the Cork area.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Government and the HSE are very much aware of the importance of respite service provision for the families of both children and adults with disabilities and the positive impact it can have on people's lives. Respite is a key priority area for the HSE for people with disabilities and their families, and there has been significant investment in respite services in recent years. New development funding of €15 million in 2024, specifically for respite, will ensure provision continues to expand significantly across the country. This funding will rise to €25 million in a full year. The HSE's National Service Plan 2024 commits to increasing occupancy of existing respite capacity, where feasible, and alternative respite provision, including in-home respite support hours and group-based targeted measures such as summer camps and evening provision.

Cork-Kerry community healthcare disability services provides respite services for children and adults residing in Cork and Kerry. To respond specifically to the Deputy's question, the

funding has been allocated to CHO 4. That will look after Cork and Kerry. Funding for respite has been specifically allocated for Cork and Kerry. This will ensure that where we have four out of seven nights available, the services will go full tilt to seven out of seven. We are also looking at additional capacity of houses to come on stream, and there are business cases in at the moment awaiting our approval. Some will be as part of shared care, where eight children or young adults could share the same accommodation, increasing that capacity where there is a need. At the same time, we are also looking at bringing other buildings back into operation. I think of Sean Abbott and the Cope Foundation who have buildings available and have business cases on which we await a decision from the HSE to be made.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: First, I acknowledge the various services that are being delivered, including at the likes of Enable Ireland, where I understand 48 children are accessing residential respite in the area, and CoAction, which has capacity for two to three per night. I refer also to St. Joseph's Foundation, the Cope Foundation and Brothers of Charity Services Ireland, which are offering real meaningful services to people. However, they do have waiting lists. Enable Ireland, for example, has 16 children on a waiting list. While the organisations have capacity, a number of them are not all available or are being used to full capacity. Parents want to know that they can get access to those services for their children. The first question relates to ensuring that the capacity that is there is actually being used. Is some effort being made on that?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: There is no doubt that we have had challenges with recruiting staff. Funding has been provided. The Deputy has mentioned all the brilliant organisations in his area. When they are working at full tilt in the Cork area, they are providing 10,000 bed nights on an annual basis. That is just Cork alone. He talked about Enable's Lavanagh House. That has not got full capacity yet. It is operating four days out of seven and it is in a position to go to seven out of seven on the provision that it can recruit the staff. To give the parents reassurance we are also looking at adding additional capacity there, not just for children services but also for adult services.

When it comes to respite there is an acute need for higher needs dependencies. With some of the buildings that were procured in the past, when a child accesses the service, it may prevent other children from being in service with them, meaning that a child might only be there on one night. We are looking at doing a two-door model where a child with higher needs will be able to operate in their own apartment, which is part of a house and the other children will be able to operate where there could be three or four in the house.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: In some cases when residential respite is not being offered, respite in the home is being offered as a substitute. It can work for some people but for many others it does not really happen. It is not like the family will be going away for a family event without a key member of the family while the respite is ongoing. There might be a call to say they are in trouble and need the support of the parents back in the house. In the event where respite in the home is not suitable or not working out, should those families not be prioritised to access the residential setting? What measures are being taken on that? I recently had the opportunity to discuss with a mother the needs of a child in Baile Bhuirne. It is a very similar situation. It is very important that where the day-centre option does not work out it will be prioritised for the residential facility.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: There is no doubt that respite is not one-size-fits-all. Respite needs to be a suite of measures whether it is after-school, Saturday clubs, sibling clubs or holi-

day camps as well as the in-home support, the residential part of it, the shared care and the home support. It is a suite of measures. Where families are finding that the in-home support is not actually meeting their needs, that is the dialogue required to move to the next level or the next rung of the ladder, as I call it, of what is available in the suite of options, which would in that case be either the home sharing or the shared-care model before we move to that more residential respite. Once they start on that trajectory, they are actually looking at accessing residential respite somewhere down along the line into a full-time capacity. However, keeping that family unit in place for as long as possible with the shared-care or the home-shared model is a better fit for families because it prevents moving to the residential option too early.

Questions Nos. 36 to 39, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Disability Services

40. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if there are plans for new therapies for autism to be used in the public health sector; if so, when it is hoped that they will be available for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26056/24]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Does the Minister of State have any plans for new therapies to be used? The question submitted stated "in the public health sector", but I mean across the board. We have spoken before about getting the best bang for buck. It is two things. We all know we need speech and language therapy, OT and other services. We need to put them where we get the best bang for buck along with any assistive technologies that can also be used.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Both the Government and the HSE acknowledge the ongoing challenges faced with the delivery of therapies for children with autism and their families. Disability services are provided based on the presenting needs of an individual assessment according to the person's requirements and care needs. The HSE is focused on implementing the actions of the PDS roadmap which will target enhancing capacity in our health service to deliver much needed therapies, including to those with autism.

With specific regard to therapies, the HSE provides information and training to carers and staff in the management of behaviours, such as de-escalation intervention techniques and positive behaviour supports, in addition to clinical therapies including OT, physio and speech and language therapy. Equine therapy, art therapy, pet therapy and music therapy are among the range of offerings now available. I would like to expand the conversation on equine therapy. I know I have two Cork TDs behind me. I first saw equine therapy in Liskennett. It is a phenomenal service involving 600 children each week accessing equine therapy with 20 ponies. That is a regional centre and we are looking at doing one in Stewarts Care in Kilcloon and one in Toghermore in Galway.

Equine therapy, art therapy and music therapy bring in other disciplines. It is a finite resource where we need to look at the training and skill sets. Children's advancement by doing alternative therapy of expression is a game changer and can add huge value to de-escalating young people's agitation. We also have the Cubbie in some libraries here in Dublin. It was designed in Mayo and is in 320 facilities in Ireland and the UK where children are allowed to sit in a little space with the music, colouring and lights to meet their needs.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will break this into two parts. There is assessment and then ensuring there are therapies. We know a workforce planning piece needs to be done. I do not know how many times I have said that even if we get that piece right, it will take a number of years to have everybody in place, involving CDNTs, primary care and all the rest of it. We need to find the best means to provide the best service to the children and their families. There is that piece and also the assistive technologies particularly when we are talking about non-verbal children and AAC. Beyond that, I know of people who have tried experimental therapies, if I may use that term. This is occupational therapy and speech and language therapy but further enhanced. Some of this is operated in labs, for want of a better term, abroad. It is just looking into what the best practice is.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: When looking at the alternatives, the Deputy is right about the AAC devices. That is why we funded AsIAm this year to purchase more assistive technology devices. The HSE and the Department of Education are purchasing in whole. AsIAm will purchase the guts of 600 devices to be made available to children. Not only will they be made available to children, but they will also be enhanced with speech and language as part and parcel of it.

The Deputy and I are very aware of the trikes. It is important this evening to acknowledge the role of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. When I could not get funding initially, he co-funded with me to ensure I could have trikes. Trikes provide alternative occupational therapy. I know they are available in Dundalk cycling club. They are phenomenal and allow people to experience greenways and walkways while also getting into the mobility piece.

The last piece is the role of the assistant therapist. We should focus on that in the next part of the Deputy's contribution.

An Ceann Comhairle: I hope he was not out canvassing on his trike.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I would say he would.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: As it has been brought up, I commend the work of the Louth Disability Cycling Club. I should particularly mention Gary Shields, the chair, along with Paul Callan, Paul Newman and the rest of the guys who do great work. It is one of the most impressive things I have seen in a long time. It brings families together and is brilliant. They would always commend the work done by Variety and the Minister of State has her own connection there. That is absolutely brilliant and the more, the merrier. We can never have enough bikes. More children and families come every week to use that service. I have had families come to me who have kids with autism and Down's syndrome who have used particular technologies abroad that assist speech and language, and occupational therapy in particular. I have spoken at the disability matters committee about how this needs to be teased out. I would like to send some of this information on to the Minister of State. If it works, we should use it.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My own connection with Variety is that I fund them. For clarity, it is the guts of €440,000 annually.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Personally.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: It is from the Department, thanks to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman. We play an important role. It is also important to inform the House that in recent weeks, we signed an agreement with the WHO, which has given us a lever into the next five

years of assistive technology and looking at best practices, new models and how we can partner with a larger grouping to see where the best models for intervention are available in assistive technologies. If the Deputy has other suggestions, I would love to sit down and discuss them with him. We could perhaps also organise a meeting the next time members of the WHO are here to continue that dialogue.

Questions Nos. 41 to 44, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

International Protection

45. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to provide an update on plans to house direct provision, temporary and international protection applicants in reception centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26057/24]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister to provide an update on plans to house direct provision, temporary and international protection applicants in State-run reception centres. It is moving away from the issues that exist with the private sector, whether the loss of hotel beds as regards the D Hotel and other hotels throughout County Louth and across the State. There are probably other places that are not that suitable and I understand the issues in the Minister's Department. The sooner we can do this, the better.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: As the Deputy knows, on 27 March 2024, the Government agreed a new comprehensive accommodation strategy, CAS, for international protection applicants. This has a twofold aim. The immediate aim is to deal with the situation where we are not able to offer accommodation to everybody right now, and a significant number of people were sleeping rough on our streets. The secondary aim, as the Deputy said, was to move away from that massive over-reliance on the commercial sector and have a core of State-owned accommodation. We are looking at a number of strands in terms of how we deliver this. There is the use of State land for prefabricated and modular units, the conversion of commercial buildings, a targeted purchase of medium and larger turnkey properties, design and build of new reception and integration centres and the upgrading of existing IPAS centres.

From 2028 onwards my Department plans to achieve the following composition of accommodation. This includes State-owned reception and integration centres and accommodation centres, at national standards with an overall bed capacity of up to 13,000 beds. We would have a further 1,000 beds in-community accommodation for vulnerable people. We would also have contingency accommodation with bed capacity up to 11,000 and emergency accommodation with a bed capacity of up to 10,000.

As detailed in the updated strategy, accommodation will be delivered through a blended approach looking at a number of strands, whether purchasing turnkey properties or primarily delivery on State-owned sites. My Department launched an expression of interest, EOI, process on 30 April 2024 for the sourcing of suitable properties. The EOI seeks to identify properties for acquisition under the following criteria. The properties would have more than 150 beds. The bedrooms would be in line with national standards. There would be existing properties or buildings in turnkey condition, or existing properties that would require some degree of upgrading or refurbishment. Again, my Department is also working on existing State-owned sites to convert them into reception and integration centres.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister provide further information on the timeline? We would all welcome that there needs to be a move away from the private sector. Some of the locations have been utterly unsuitable for all. It is fair to say we have to do whatever we can to look after people who are fleeing dreadful sets of circumstances and the rest of it. However, we need to get a system that works and that is sustainable. That also means improving processing times. The Taoiseach and others have used that term. When that happens it reduces the numbers coming. Everything is exacerbated by the accommodation crisis and the huge number of people seeking temporary protection before we had a spike in international protection. There is a need to get this piece done as quickly as possible.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I agree with much of what the Deputy said. We have to remember we are rebuilding our international protection system in real time. For years we were not getting anywhere close to the European average for international protection applicants. Since 2022 we have been getting the average, but our system was not built for those numbers. We are having to rebuild the processing system. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has done really important work. In my Department, we are rebuilding the accommodation system. It is important to note that prior to the comprehensive accommodation strategy being published, we had a significant number of male international protection applicants sleeping rough in our streets, from Christmas into March. Since then, more than 1,000 additional male applicants have been offered accommodation. There are still some people sleeping rough. We have not solved this problem yet, but we have been able to bring more than 1,000 people into the system, the vast majority of whom were sleeping rough between December and March. That is a significant achievement.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Has the Minister further information on the timeline and when we will see this move occurring? That is obviously accepting that as things happen there needs to be a huge amount of planning work done. There has to be interaction with those communities where some of these are to be located. Suitability has to be at a premium. Beyond that, will the Minister say where we are as regards improving the efficiency of the system and faster processing of those from safe countries or from where we have a significant number of people coming? There is a wider issue related to work permits that needs to be looked at across Europe. There is also a wider issue of what the western and eastern powers have done to destabilise the Middle East, Africa and other places. That is something that needs to be addressed.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The comprehensive accommodation strategy is to run until 2028. The vision set out in my answer of 13,000 beds and the various elements is something we wish to achieve by 2028. We have already taken significant steps in the use of State land. That has been a huge change. There is the site at Crooksling, County Dublin, and at Trudder, County Wicklow, where we are now accommodating a significant number of applicants. They are initially being accommodated in tents, but we will look to upgrade the accommodation to prefabricated rapid-build units. We are also looking to bring forward significant accommodation on the Thornton Hall site, which is another State-owned accommodation site. We are looking at two other existing sites at Athlone, County Westmeath, and Knockalisheen on the border of counties Limerick and Clare to improve and bring additional capacity and upgrade those to reception and integration centres.

The issue of processing is primarily one for my colleague, the Minister for Justice. She has put in significant investment over the past two budgets and has been able to dramatically shorten processing times. I think she would recognise there is still more work to be done. Part of that is signing up to the EU asylum and migration pact, but very significant progress has been

made in that area.

Questions Nos. 46 and 47 taken with Written Answers.

Disability Services

48. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he is aware of the critical shortage of personal assistant hours for people with disabilities in this country in general; the reason a person (details supplied) has been put in a position where their 70-year-old parents are assisting them because they receive no PA support two days a week and only half-day support for two other days; his views on whether his Department is adequately supporting disabled people that require personal assistants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26062/24]

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I ask the Minister if he is aware of the critical shortage of personal assistant hours for people with disabilities across the State, and the reason a person whose details have been supplied has been put in a position where they receive no PA support two days a week and only half-day support for two other days. I ask for his views on whether his Department is adequately supporting disabled people who require personal assistants.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The HSE, either directly or indirectly through a range of voluntary and private service providers, provides a range of assisted living services including PA and home support services. Some 80% of specialised disability provision is delivered through non-statutory sector service providers. PA services provide one-to-one support to people with physical disabilities in their homes and communities by trained, professional personal assistants. The PA service facilitates a person's independence, improves their quality of life, and supports them to participate in their local community. In 2024, 80,000 additional hours have been funded, bringing delivery to approximately 1.77 million PA hours supporting more than 2,600 adults across the country.

Currently, each CHO has a process to manage applications and referrals for PA services. The needs of the individual, compliance with prioritisation criteria and the level of resources available determine allocation. As with every service, there is not a limitless resource available for the provision of home support services, and while the resources available are substantial, they are finite. While many individuals are adequately provided for by their current level of support, many would benefit from more support hours if they were available.

Acknowledging this unmet need, the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026, published by the Department in December, commits to the delivery of 110,000 additional home support hours between 2024 and 2026 to address shortfalls in services and support people with disabilities to live at home, in line with Article 19 of the UNCRPD. The action plan also commits to 800,000 additional personal assistance hours in the same period. A policy review of PA services in light of the UNCRPD, with a working group involving key stakeholders and disabled persons' organisations, to develop formal policy and service description is under way.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I asked this question because of a constituent, who was mentioned in the question, and because 40% of those surveyed by the ESRI in 2022 felt their lives

had been significantly impacted by insufficient PA hours. The Irish Wheelchair Association estimates that more than 60% of individuals currently receiving personal assistance services or home support require significantly more hours than they are receiving, and that is only an estimate because no comprehensive data on the issue currently exists. The constituent of mine named in my question is wheelchair bound but his independence is curtailed not by his physical ability but, instead, by the fact personal assistants in Clare are so overstretched, and hours so underassigned, that he is reliant on the gaps in his care being provided by his parents, both of whom are in their 70s. This issue is not restricted to my constituent. There is not adequate support for this young man.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: With regard to the individual case the Deputy mentioned, officials in the Department have contacted the HSE and a response will issue to her in due course. It is being dealt with, therefore.

There is no doubt we do not have enough PA hours or personal assistants to provide them. Nevertheless, as part of the transfer of function, this was one of the issues on which we were able to shine a spotlight. PA hours had been muddied in with home support and we had to untangle that. PA and home support are two completely different things, but some CHOs were using PA hours as home support. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I have managed to unravel this in the past 12 months and we are continuing to unravel it, and as we do so, people should feel they are getting more support.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I do appreciate the work the Minister of State has been doing and I have recognised that a light has been shone on this issue, especially in respect of PA hours and in separating, as she pointed out, the issue of home support. In regard to my constituent, the Minister of State has indicated the Department will be in contact, which is positive news to hear, and I really appreciate the work being done in the background to ensure this young man is being supported. It is great because social anxiety is an issue as well for some people and I know that in this case, pointing to the day centre and to maybe taking up additional hours there was not going to work, so I appreciate any support in addition to what he was receiving. I again point to the need to reform PA hours and to enshrine that right for all people with disabilities.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Absolutely. On the reform of PA hours, even though we are spending so much on PAs, at in excess of €60 million on PA support, we do not have it underpinned with a proper framework, so work is ongoing in that regard and we are engaging with stakeholders on the review while, at the same time, ensuring we do not stop the delivery of hours or the roll-out. We are also looking to see what other countries are doing when it comes to PA support, because it can give people back their independence and the life they may have had before they had an accident, or where they were in education or in employment, rebuild their confidence and get them back into the community. It is about working with employers or education and ensuring proper accommodation that meets their needs to integrate them completely.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. The Deputy who submitted Question No. 49 is not present.

Question No. 49 taken with Written Answers.

Childcare Services

50. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of registered childcare providers who are not taking part in the core funding model; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26060/24]

Deputy David Stanton: How many registered childcare providers are not taking part in the core funding model? Is the trend going up or down? Have any registered childcare providers opted out of the core funding model? In general, how is the model progressing?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Core funding has been in operation since 15 September 2022 and has achieved significant successes in terms of the high level of participation we are seeing. Right now, 4,632 services nationwide are eligible to partake in the core funding scheme. Of those, 4,369 are partner services, meaning 267 services have not signed up to core funding. We allocated €259 million to core funding in the first year, in which there was a 95% uptake. We grew core funding in year 2 to €287 million, which is what we have for core funding this year, and there was a 94.5% uptake, reflecting a decrease of 0.5% in the uptake between year 1 and year 2. In real terms, there was an increase in the number of services, given the overall number of services grew. These figures reflect greater engagement with the scheme in year 2 and, as I said, the numbers continue to grow.

My Department is very happy with the high level of engagement. Obviously, we cannot force services into the scheme, but every mechanism is being used to make the scheme attractive and encourage more providers to enter it. We have again grown the overall budget for year 3, with a very significant 15% increase. There will be €331 million in year 3, starting in September of this year, which is an increase far beyond the existing rates of inflation, recognising the pressures services face and the fact the number of services participating is growing, which is helping us to deal with that capacity issue the Deputy and I have spoken about previously. The additional money in year 3 will allow us to make certain enhancements to the scheme, and I am especially interested in what we can do to support the smallest services.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his response and congratulate him on the work he and his Department are doing on this important area. Has he or his Department carried out any audit of areas in the country to identify black spots where it is very hard for people to find childcare, crèches and so on, and if so, is that information available? One thing I came across when I was canvassing recently was the number of parents who are under an awful lot of pressure trying to find facilities, services and registered childcare providers, and it was put to me that some registered childcare providers were opting out of the core funding. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case, and if so, does he have numbers on it?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: There were a couple of questions there. We have some information about black spots, mainly through the city and county childcare committees. We have just set up a new unit in our Department, a bit like the forward planning unit in the Department of Education, very much designed around a better understanding of where pressure spots are, and we are feeding that information into local authorities for their development plans in order that they might be able to designate more areas as potentially available for childcare. We are just starting that process but it is a recognition we need to do more. We do not have the same levers as those we have with schools, but we nevertheless need to have that level of data.

Every year, some services will probably leave core funding. One of the reasons we have

put in that very significant 15% growth in the overall budget relates to the fact we have more money to support services. We are asking for a fee freeze so we are looking to provide more money through core funding to make up for what services might previously have gotten through raising fees.

Deputy David Stanton: I have two brief follow-up questions. Is it the case and can the Minister confirm that services which are not involved in the core funding model can charge what they like and that the Minister has no control over what they can charge?

Has the Minister or his Department entered into any discussions with the Department of Education - the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte might be interested in this as well - with respect to the possibility of registered childcare providers getting involved in the July provision model? They have the expertise, premises and staff who are quite often highly trained. Will the Minister initiate that particular debate and discussion with his colleague in the Department of Education? I am aware of places around the country where parents cannot get July provision yet there are very professional, registered childcare providers in place who can provide that service. I suggest the Minister investigates that. It might help a lot of families who are under pressure at this time.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Right now, where a service is not involved in the core funding model my Department does not have a mechanism to influence how much it charges. If the service is in the NCS the Department provides a significant subsidy to parents, which is growing this year - very significantly in September - and which will lessen the costs. However, right now the Department does not have a mechanism if services are not within the core funding model. That is why it is so important that 94.5% of services are in the core funding model.

In terms of schools, the Department of Education published a new document this week on the use of school buildings. I am not sure if the Deputy has seen it yet so it is worth a look. The Department inputted to that. It is certainly far more positive in terms of the use of school buildings for childcare but particularly for after-school. Sometimes new schools give an extra class TCC and need it later on and it becomes a conflict but for after-school the whole school building is free and it has been confirmed that the income that goes to a school from after-school will not be deducted by the Department of Education. That is a really positive step.

Children in Care

51. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 1347 of 17 January 2024, if he has followed up with the Minister for Social Protection on the issue of pension support for foster carers, as he promised in a response (details supplied); his views on whether the situation foster carers are in is acceptable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26063/24]

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: My question is to ask the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to a parliamentary question response to Deputy Emer Higgins in January of this year to liaise with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, on the disgraceful fact that foster carers do not receive pension support even if their child has additional needs and Tusla has advised the foster carer to be in the home to support him or her.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Foster care is the preferred method of care for children in

care who cannot live with their families of origin. As we know, foster care provides a safe, secure and stable home environment for some of our most vulnerable children. Tusla's assessment of any foster carer must consider the foster carer's expected availability to meet and support the needs of the child who has come into his or her care. The assessment and approval process explores what type of care the prospective foster carer can best offer to a child depending on factors such as accommodation, the age of the child in their home and the carer's availability and experience. Tusla does consider working foster carers but the main consideration will be their availability to meet the child's needs and for some children it may be necessary for one carer to be at home full time.

Foster carers are not employees of Tusla and the foster care allowance is payable to foster carers on behalf of and to offset the expenses that exist that are related to the child in foster care. The allowance is not considered as a means for social welfare purposes. It is not subject to tax. The allowance is in recognition of the vital and valued role foster carers play in the care of the most vulnerable children in our society. The allowance is one element of the supports given to foster carers but it is important to note we were able to significantly increase that allowance in January and will do so again in November of this year.

As my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, has outlined previously the Department of Social Protection has a number of schemes in place that may be of benefit to foster carers. Foster carers are entitled to the benefits of PRSI credits, home making disregards and home caring periods when they meet the criteria in the same way as any parent. I have been advised that under these schemes if a foster carer is a recipient of child benefit or the caring periods are confirmed by Tusla he or she can register for caring periods for each child under the age of 12. In the case of a child who is over 12 years of age caring periods can be registered where the child requires continuous supervision and regular assistance throughout the day with the activities of daily living. The maximum caring period available is 20 years and I encourage foster carers who believe they may be entitled to the benefits provided under these schemes to so apply.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I raised this issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, during the 11 June session but he pointed to the Minister as being the best person to revert to on this issue. It seems to be a complex pension issue. I point to the fact that the IFCA found that 50% of the carers surveyed said they are experiencing financial difficulties due to their commitment to caring and have considered giving up fostering as they are worried about being able to provide an adequate level of care. Tusla is actively recruiting for foster carers in my constituency of Clare but is struggling to recruit. When consulted in January the Minister stated that foster carers are not employees and, accordingly, Tusla does not make pension contributions on their behalf. Is that an accurate summation of the Government's position, that it is aware of the issue but that carers are now employees? Home caring period schemes can help carers to qualify but as the Minister stated it only applies to children under the age of 12 or disabled children over the age of 12.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy for keeping the spotlight on this issue because it is so important that we support foster carers. I have met IFCA and Movement for Change in Foster Care and other organisations representing foster carers regularly. In particular, I met them after, not the 2024 budget but the 2023 budget, and I said I would work with them to deal with the allowance which was a key issue for them. The allowance has been raised by €25 from 1 January and will increase by another €50 from 1 November this year. This means foster carers this year will receive an additional €1,700 but in the full year of these increases

they will receive an additional €3,900. The Deputy is right that some foster carers struggle with the costs but that is a significant additional support my Department is making available to them. It is absolutely deserved and it is some of the best investment my Department can make both in terms of the quality of outcomes for children but also looking at the bottom line in terms of costings and savings for the State foster care is the better way to proceed on both of those bases.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: The increases in the allowances are welcome and Movement for Change in Foster Care and IFCA have pointed to that as well. The fact most foster carers are women and they are inhibited on this pension issue in particular is an area that needs further progress to be made. The organisations have done a lot on this themselves over the last number of years and have met with various Departments including that of the Minister but that kind of engagement needs to continue, maybe spearheaded by the Minister. It needs to move beyond the State. It is clear that all of the agencies, Tusla, the Minister's own Department and the Department of Social Protection need to apply themselves to find some workable mechanism to ensure no foster carer is experiencing that kind of financial hardship.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: When I met IFCA and Movement for Change in Foster Care, we spoke about five broad areas where they felt the State needed to be doing more. These were allowances - which the Deputy has discussed already; travel expenses - which I am working on with Tusla; and additional concrete supports particularly in terms of therapies and we now have therapist groups available to foster carers from which they can draw because often children in care have a range of significant additional needs. We have also put a much greater focus on foster caring within Tusla so now, for the first time, there is a national lead on fostering in Tusla. I was always shocked we did not have that position before but we have it now. I do not know if the Deputy attended Bloom this year but Tusla had an amazing garden highlighting the work foster carers do so we are seeing a real focus across there. Pensions is the other issue. I have engaged with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys and have met her twice on this issue. We will continue to engage to see what can be done within the existing framework to provide some additional supports there.

Question No. 52 taken with Written Answers.

Health Service Executive

53. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the engagement he has had with the HSE regarding the need to source private contractors following the recent announcement that the Government will finance an AON initiative; how soon he expects an impact will be made on the waitlist; if he is confident that progress can be made to clear the backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26000/24]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Minister about the engagement he has had with the HSE regarding the need to source private contractors following the recent announcement the Government will finance an assessment of needs initiative. How soon does he expect the impact will be made on the waiting list and is he confident progress can be made to clear the backlog?

12 o'clock

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy for raising this question. It is a little bit like

Cinderella at this hour, 12 midnight, and Deputy O'Sullivan appears. To be honest, we normally never get to deal with this number of questions. It is the first time we have done it, so I am answering this one totally unscripted. Luckily, I was at the committee today and I do remember what was said to his question.

Thanks to the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, who is here beside me, the Cabinet approved and ring-fenced €6.8 million, which is to look after 2,500 of our longest waiters. From talking to Bernard O'Regan earlier today, clear direction will be given from the HSE's national office of disability that the assessment officers will determine who are the longest waiters because they are the people in the nine CHOs who will have access to that information.

The HSE also has €5 million to carry out other assessments of need. That is going to ensure 1,850 children will have an assessment of need. At the same time, there is capacity of approximately 3,200 within our 91 teams across all of our services, which would mean that because of the additional funding, the overall assessments of need we should get through this year will be 7,650. That still does not address the fact we have 9,900 people who are overdue an assessment of need from a statutory viewpoint, and we are only in the month of June at this time. I have no doubt the figure will grow. Given that, we sought the funding in advance. Do I think they will get to it? Absolutely. Do I see it all done? I will ensure that when I meet with my disability managers, I know exactly what percentage they are doing each month.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome the initiative. It is just like in 2022 when the last attempt was made to clear the backlog, especially in my CHO in Cork, CHO 4. I have considerable concerns that we are here again, two years on, with another waiting list. Will the Minister of State elaborate on the reasons for that given, as I said, we thought we had cleared the waiting list two years ago and now we find ourselves back in this position again with another waiting list? As many TDs in the House recognise, one of the most significant issues in weekly constituency clinics is people struggling to access therapies, assessments of needs and so on. Will the Minister of State please clarify the position? I welcome the fact she has sourced the funding. To be fair, the vast majority of people and the stakeholders involved recognise her good work on this, but will she clarify the reason we are here again two years on?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Deputy O'Sullivan is right. We managed to clear the backlog with the funding that was sourced in 2020 when we had 6,500 children waiting for an assessment of need. It took us approximately 14 months to clear the entire backlog. Why have we found ourselves here again? We have found ourselves here again because of the soft model, which is the standard operational procedure, SOP, which meant that 10,000 children were deemed to have a right to access an assessment of need in its entirety. The assessment of need does not take one or two hours. It is actually the guts of approximately 30 hours of full assessment. Let us also be clear: when we cleared the backlog in 2020, it was also the full 30 hours' assessment.

The other piece we will have to look at is the flexibility of doing the interventions. The no-show rate is only 10%, so to be very fair to parents, they are very committed once they get a time to attend. Our no-show rates are very light in this regard. I have no doubt any parent who gets it will attend the assessment process.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Despite the difficulties we have experienced, I cannot reiterate enough that I commend the Minister of State on the work she has done. I know we have talked privately and we have met with stakeholders. We have talked about the benefits of AIM

classes in particular and access to language classes, especially for students who do not require an assessment of need to be undertaken. In the remaining time, will the Minister of State speak to the importance of AIM classes and language classes for kids who have a requirement for intervention and how we can best utilise that model and possibly expand those classes in future? What conversations has she had with the Minister for Education in that regard?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: This is a new concept I was not completely aware of, namely, that we have 63 specific speech and language disorder, SSLD, classes in the country, which are speech and language classes for children with very set criteria who have verbal dyspraxia. There are seven in a class with the lead teacher and a speech and language therapist. They know that with regular daily intervention over a two-year programme, the child's speech can come on. There is no doubt that is the case. The clinical outcomes of the classes are incredibly successful. In fact, the therapists in those schools come under the remit of primary care and the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. I will be appealing to him and to the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, to step up these classes because they are critical from a primary intervention point of view, as opposed to specialist disabilities.

We must also seek to widen the use of the 2007 circular. That circular omits the fact that children with Down's syndrome can participate in these classes. It does not include them or see them as being part of mainstream education. That is also the case with children with physical disabilities. When we talk about the UNCRPD and mainstreaming, the SSLD classes should be expanded to more than 63 schools but they also should be expanded to include children with Down's syndrome and physical disabilities. That is my appeal to the two Ministers for budget 2025.

Special Educational Needs

54. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for an update on the timeline for the reintroduction of therapists to special schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26001/24]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: This might be the last question for tonight. I now get why people were smirking and laughing when I came in. Will the Minister of State give an update on the timeline for the reintroduction of therapists to special schools and make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan very much. I have no doubt, given he is a Cork TD, that the introduction of therapists to special schools is primarily focused on Cork schools. To be honest with him, a comprehensive submission has been made in recent days by David Walsh and Bernard O'Regan. Officials in the Department have been meeting with the CEO of the HSE to address the introduction of the pilot scheme that would be required for the 14 special schools in the Cork area. One of the concerns was where the governance for the reinstatement would lie. All the therapists who will be returned to special schools in the Cork area will be part of the local CDNTs. First and foremost, parents will have the choice, which is very important, where they access CDNT services. Most children attending a special school are encouraged to choose the CDNT closest to the school so that the CDNT can provide the support, whether it be OT, physio, speech and language or psychology, but also at the same time the CDNT can provide the clinical governance piece and support the teaching staff and the parents. That is a piece parents in the Cork area had not been provided with. They did not have the op-

tion of choosing a service close to home or close to a school. That is part of the PDS framework document from its inception in 2009.

There is also a role for the assistant therapist post, which sometimes gets overlooked. When a clinician can write up the programme of works, the roll-out of the programme can also be done by the assistant therapist in the area of OT, physio and speech and language. To be very fair to us in our Department, along with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, we are working very hard. We have secured the funding for 125 therapists. The programme of works ensures they get the training they require and a placement within the CDNTs.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I again thank the Minister of State. I do not doubt her bona fides in this regard. I know she has been trying her best to resolve this issue in recent years. Approximately two and a half years ago in Limerick, we met all the principals of Cork special schools. I note that the Minister of State has been working away in the background trying to resolve this issue, but she is obviously acutely aware of the problem. I have no doubt that hiring therapists and people with specialties has been difficult right across the HSE and not just for special schools. Yet, we are being faced with the prospect of having one in three - even one in two in some cases - posts not being filled. Nobody here is going to call for the privatisation of any of these therapies but, unfortunately, the reality of the situation is that the HSE is finding it very difficult to appoint these people to posts and hence the call for these to be outsourced, for want of a better word, to private providers in the interim. I stress that this would not be my preferred route, but it is being considered as an interim measure.

The Minister of State mentioned 14 schools. In particular, St. Killian's Special School in Mayfield is ready to go and desperately wants a green light to ensure that the children concerned can get the services that are required.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: In relation to special schools, this has now been going on for in excess of two years. It was in May 2021 that we placed a pause on the removal of therapists from special schools. We then sourced our secure funding for 86 therapists to be replaced into schools. Overall, we secured funding for 221 therapists, and only 126 have been returned. When I say "returned", I mean that they were returned to special schools and that they are part and parcel of their local CDNT team. We have had some good success on this. Yet, in other areas, we are very challenged and unfortunately, we are quite challenged in the Cork area.

There is a complete willingness within the HSE to find a solution to work with ETBs. I must acknowledge the patience of the parents in this regard. I have no doubt that we will find a Wexford model that can be applied to a Cork solution.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister of State referenced how the Wexford model has worked. That is what I am hearing anyway, and I have discussed this with colleagues. Could the Minister of State again elaborate on this? She mentioned that 220-odd posts were required and that 126 of them have actually been appointed at this stage. There is therefore a shortfall of approximately 100 appointees that are yet to take up a post. Can the Minister of State clarify where things are? How many of those posts are outstanding in terms of advertising, whatever the case may be? I would appreciate any updates in relation to that.

Second, the Minister of State and I both know that other stakeholders in Cork have stepped up to the plate while people have been going without. I am not trying to come in here again and

speak negatively about the provision of service that people get in these special schools. Yet, for the largest part, many children are going without basic intervention and certain groups, such as Rainbow Club Cork, have stepped in. Can the Minister of State elaborate on the role of Rainbow Club Cork to bridge that gap in the short term?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: As I said to the Deputy, of the 221 whole-time equivalent posts, 126 have been filled. Wherever they are in the country, at this stage there is a shortfall of more than 700 whole-time equivalent staff on our CDNT teams, which have a role in supporting our special schools. The Wexford model has been phenomenal in the sense that there has been real collaboration there. I have no doubt the same collaboration is in Cork as well between our teaching body and local CDNT teams, where there is a knowledge of where the capacity was within the private sector to support this. There was no breach of data under data protection rules. They were able to support the local CDNT team in updating the children's records and passing on that information. That can still be done and the CDNT held the risk for all of the clinical governance on it.

I will finish on this point. As the Deputy quite rightly said, the role of Rainbow Club Cork is important. I have visited it twice and the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, has been to Rainbow Club Cork. To be quite honest, without Rainbow Club Cork, which provides an additional 500 therapy interventions on a weekly basis, we would be having a far different conversation about the crisis in Cork. Rainbow Club Cork, under Karen and Jon O'Mahony, has played a phenomenal role. I was delighted last week to hear that the National Ambulance Service base has moved off-site and the key has gone to Cork City Hall. I hope the expression of interest will move along at pace so we have the opportunity to develop a centre of excellence in a lovely area where children do not have to keep putting away their goods on a daily basis. It is the intention of both myself and the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, to support the Rainbow Club, as we do for any of these groups that provide valuable interventions when we do not have the capacity in our CDNT teams.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12.15 a.m. go dtí 9.10 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 19 Meitheamh 2024.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.15 a.m. until 9.10 a.m. on Wednesday, 19 June 2024.