



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 27 Meán Fómhair 2022

Tuesday, 27 September 2022

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Teachtaireachtaí ón Dáil - Messages from Dáil

Senator oirleach: Dáil Éireann has passed the Bretton Woods Agreements (Amendment) Bill 2022 on 21 September 2022, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired. Dáil Éireann has passed the Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 on 21 September 2022, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from the following Senators that they wish to raise the following matters on the Commencement of the Seanad:

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people to make a statement on the establishment by CORU of a registration board for psychotherapists.

Senator Maria Byrne:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the number of vacant posts in the diabetes service within the University of Limerick Hospitals Group across the following areas: consultant endocrinologists; advanced nurse practitioners; clinical nurse specialists; staff nurses; and dietitians.

Senators Mark Wall and Robbie Gallagher:

The need for the Minister for Transport to extend the youth travel card or young adult card to include 17- and 18-year-olds attending third-level education.

Senator Lynn Boylan:

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The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to ban fossil fuel advertising and sponsorships.

Senator Malcolm Byrne:

The need for the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to make a statement on the Government's strategy to develop film and television production in Ireland.

Senator Seán Kyne:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the future of Clifden District Hospital, County Galway.

Senator Eugene Murphy:

The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the requirement to improve safety measures on the footpaths and bridges over the River Shannon in Rooskey on the Leitrim-Roscommon border.

Senator Sharon Keogan:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the progress being made with Vertex Pharmaceuticals to secure access to Kaftrio for 35 children who are not in receipt of it under the original reimbursement agreement.

Of the matters raised by Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected Senators Fiona O'Loughlin, Maria Byrne, Mark Wall and Robbie Gallagher, who are sharing their time, and Lynn Boylan, and they will be taken now. I regret that I had to rule out of order the matter raised by Senator Murphy on the ground that the Minister has no official responsibility in the matter. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Mental Health Services

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I appreciate that the Cathaoirleach has selected this important Commencement matter. I raised it last week on the Order of Business and the Cathaoirleach rightly pointed out that I should do so as part of a Commencement debate.

Recently, during a constituency clinic in Newbridge, I met Olive Cross, who heads up a group called Therapists For Change. This is a group of 900 psychotherapists who have come together to work towards improving the mental health service in Ireland and to professionalise the service they are offering. These are very highly skilled and educated practitioners. At present, we have over 8,000 psychotherapists and counsellors qualified, accredited and insured in Ireland, which is a very valuable resource. The issue I raise with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is in regard to the registration of these professionals. As it stands, the HSE will not employ someone with a level 8 honours degree in psychotherapy and counselling without them having a second allied health degree, such as social care, speech therapy or nursing.

We all know the number of people who need support with their mental health. However, in many instances, people are using medication and are being prescribed medication when they really need talk therapy, and the underlying issue is not actually being dealt with. It is very important that they have the opportunity to access these professionals.

We are aware of previous issues with rogue psychotherapists. In 2019, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, appointed 13 experts in the field to a new board. This board was tasked with ensuring high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence among counsellors and psychotherapists. We were told at that stage that the new board would undertake a substantial piece of work before it launched a register. That is obviously something that Therapists For Change is very keen to see established. It was envisaged that this would take up to two years but it is now three years later and we have not heard anything. I want to know where this project is at and when we can expect to see progress.

This is very important. Ensuring that the people of Ireland receive timely, high-quality and impartial counselling and psychotherapy is of paramount importance. A recent report from Jigsaw noted that, in 2021, it had received its highest ever number of referrals and it saw a 104% increase in demand for its online live chat service and a 144% increase in demand for its email support. In February, the HSE's child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, reported a 40% increase. Recent analysis from the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has shown the impact of Covid, with 40% of young men and 55% of young women classified as depressed, which is very concerning news for all of us. We all know of the waiting lists for people trying to access psychology services.

I have painted the picture. As the Minister of State knows, I could go on with stark statistics in the area of mental health in this country. We have seen failures in the past. We have all lost someone to suicide. We all know someone who has suffered with their mental health. Most of us, if we are to be honest, can say that we have at times suffered with our own mental health. We need to do what we can to ensure people get the services they deserve. The overriding message that I took away from my dealings with Therapists For Change is that they want to be able to help. Its members want to be able, in a regulated and compassionate way, to relieve the pain faced by so many. At the moment, they are being blocked from doing this due to the lack of a central registration process and by burdensome admittance criteria. Psychotherapists have been promised regulation but it has not been delivered. As an addendum to that, students who are looking to go into this area need to see a clear path to how they can receive accreditation to do the work. I appreciate the Minister of State listening and I hope there will be a response on this issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Senator O'Loughlin for giving me an opportunity, on behalf of the Minister for Health, to inform the House of the progress made to date on the establishment of the registration board for psychotherapists. The Minister apologises for not being able to come to the Chamber to take the matter.

The Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 provides for the protection of the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, professional education, training and competence through statutory registration of health and social care professions designated under the Act. The legislation is being implemented on a phased basis as registration boards and their registers are being established. Out of the 17 professions designated for regulation, 12 registration boards are currently operating for 15 professions. A profession for regulation is either

designated in the Act or can be designated by means of an order made by the Minister for Health under the Act when, following a consultation process, he or she considers it is appropriate and in the public interest that the profession be so designated.

As the Senator will be aware, regulations under SI 170 of 2018 were made by the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, in 2018. The effect of those regulations is to designate the professions of counsellor and psychotherapist under the 2005 Act and to establish one registration board for both professions. The Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board was established in November 2018 and its members were duly appointed in February 2019. The board held its inaugural meeting in May 2019 and has held a total of 20 meetings since it was established. Its work includes consideration of the titles to be protected, the minimum qualifications to be required of existing practitioners and the qualifications that will be required for future graduates.

While the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board has begun working towards regulation of those professions, a substantial body of work requires to be undertaken before a register may be opened. The work of the board is significantly more challenging than it is for registration boards for some of the more established professions, owing to the many different educational pathways into the professions and the variety of specialties and titles used. To date, the board has made progress in a number of areas. This includes the identification, verification and comprehensive assessment of legacy and historical qualifications to determine whether they are appropriate for transitioning existing practitioners onto the respective registers when open. The board has also conducted scoping and research on the regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists internationally. In addition, it has commenced the drafting of separate and distinct standards of proficiency for both counsellors and psychotherapists.

To add my own tuppence worth, I could not agree more with the Senator that young people who are qualifying as psychotherapists and counsellors need clear pathways to professionalism. As Minister of State with responsibility for disability services, I am concerned that parents who seek an assessment of needs from private practitioners are protected. They must be sure the people from whom they seek a service meet the professional criteria. We need a proper register for those practitioners. Far too often, when parents have sought a private assessment of needs, the practitioners are not recognised. This issue is relevant not just in one field but right across the board, including the disability sector. I welcome the Senator's Commencement matter.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for responding to my Commencement matter. I appreciate that she has outlined the progress made in terms of what the registration board must examine. However, I am concerned that no timeline was mentioned in the response she was given by the Department of Health. The reality is that while we await proper and appropriate accreditation, there is nothing to stop me, her or anybody else with no qualification or training from opening a counselling service tomorrow morning. That is a danger to which members of the are exposed.

As I mentioned, in the absence of the HSE being able to refer people who need counselling and psychotherapy reports, people on waiting lists are accessing medication as a support. Obviously medication has its place but in the majority of cases talk therapy gets to the root of the problem. I honestly believe we have a mental health crisis and not only based on some of the statistics I mentioned. This issue must be a priority for the Government and Minister for Health. I would appreciate if the Minister of State conveyed that message and asked for the coherent and cogent timelines we would expect.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I trust the Senator will appreciate that, but for the day that is in it, the Minister for Health would be in the Chamber to address this very serious issue. I will inform him that no timelines were outlined and that significant work is required to prevent rogue operators operating in the industry. That is why we need this sector regulated to protect all. I thank the Senator for tabling her Commencement matter.

Hospital Services

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this important topic and the Minister of State for coming to the House to address the issue.

I recently met members of a concerned support group which works with diabetics in the mid-west. The issues they raised included long waiting lists, having to wait for appointments and insufficient staff numbers. As late as yesterday, I spoke to somebody who has been waiting for eight years to see a consultant endocrinologist at University Hospital Limerick, UHL. Yesterday, the individual in question received a phone call to say that a diagnosis would be done over the phone on Thursday. While I know this involves the public health system, a wait of eight years is unacceptable.

Diabetes is a very serious condition but it can be managed and people can have a great quality of life. The other day, I attended a briefing in the audiovisual room and I am grateful to the people who contributed. While I know a little about diabetes, I still found the briefing an eye-opener. Meeting members of the support groups has been education for me as regards the current shortages.

How many vacant posts are there for consultant endocrinologists, advanced nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, staff nurses and dieticians in the University Limerick Hospitals Group, ULHG? These staff are very important and play a key role in treating and working with people who are diabetic. Many people have type 1 diabetes, while many others have type 2 diabetes or are borderline diabetic. Having proper staff in place helps people to change their lifestyle and eating habits and prevents the development of type 1 or type 2 diabetes. The person to whom I referred had hair eight years ago but now has none. That person is still waiting to see a consultant, which is a serious situation. This person does not know whether they have diabetes because they have not seen anyone. They have been attending his own doctor but they have waited eight years. That is not acceptable. That is why I put down tabled a question regarding how many vacancies there are and whether they are being filled. One or two nurse practitioner positions have been filled but there are still many vacancies. If the positions are being filled across the sector, how many staff do we expect at UHL in the near future? If vacancies are not being filled, when is it planned to fill them?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Senator for the opportunity to address the House on this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. I assure the Senator that the Government remains fully committed to improving patient services and ensuring patient-centred care throughout the country. That commitment can be seen through the unprecedented level of funding that is being targeted right across the health service from budget 2022. This investment is benefiting many patients throughout the country and will ensure hospitals can continue to develop the services they provide, including diabetic services in the mid-west region. The University Limerick Hospitals Group has advised that it has made positive progress recently in recruiting staff for the adult diabetic services. Follow-

ing successful recruitment campaigns a consultant endocrinologist commenced post in UHL in May 2022 and an additional consultant endocrinologist is due to take up post in October 2022. That is welcome, although it is little comfort for the person waiting eight years. It is a positive step in the right direction.

In December 2020, the University Limerick Hospitals Group received funding to recruit three additional dietetic posts for the treatment of adult diabetes. The funding was made available through the national clinical programme for diabetes and these posts include two senior dietitians and one staff grade dietitian. These posts have now been filled. The adult diabetes service is also supported by a dedicated team of four clinical nurse specialists, CNS, and staff nurses. Four diabetic CNS posts have been approved for UHL and following recruitment campaigns, all four CNS are now in place. Three diabetic staff nurses are also in post in the hospital.

UHL recently became a dose adjustment for normal eating, DAFNE, accredited centre. Staff training is currently taking place and the University Limerick Hospitals Group anticipates that this programme will commence in quarter 4 2022. It is clear that significant work has been progressed in the hospital regarding the development of its diabetes service and some of that work is ongoing. The group informed the Department of Health that diabetes services continue to be a core focus for it and it remains committed to improving this service for patients in Limerick and across the mid-west.

Senator Byrne has asked clearly for the staffing of the service in a tabular format. Unfortunately, that was not available at such short notice but the Department has advised me to inform her that as soon as it comes to hand it will be forwarded directly to her.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State of her comprehensive response. I welcome the fact that staffing levels have increased. However, for quite some time there was a limited number of staff and that has created a fear factor among people who have the condition. As I said it is a serious condition but once managed, people can have a good quality of life. It is most welcome that staffing levels have increased in recent times. It is totally unacceptable for people to have to wait eight years for an appointment. I welcome the fact that a second consultant has been appointed. It sounds as though an assistant is due to start. That is most welcome. Staff nurses and nurse specialists are covering other areas as well. The clinic is not run every day of the week. People do not have the confidence, because it was not being run every day of the week, and getting an appointment was driving them to other centres of excellence. While the endocrinologist that is there is excellent, getting an appointment is the biggest problem, because of all the other clinics the endocrinologist has to cover. It is welcome but there is much more to be done. I look forward to the figures coming because there are certain areas where there is a shortage and if staff were there, it would give people with this condition much more confidence to attend the clinics. The shortage of staff was the problem all along so I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: When the HSE provides the documentation, it will clearly outline exactly what posts are filled and the whole-time-equivalence the Senator talked about regarding how often the clinic is run. I hope the HSE's response also addresses paediatric diabetes in order that we know exactly what will be covered. We in Galway travel down to Limerick for the support on its paediatric diabetes site but I know we are backing up down in Galway and I wonder if the post is still filled in Limerick. I look forward to the Senator getting a response on it. I look forward to the Minister getting the response on it and I think perhaps, on return of that, there might be a further Commencement matter taken.

Seanad Éireann
Transport Costs

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin): I could not believe more in the third Commencement matter. I raised it in the House last week and I am fully supportive of this. The Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is very welcome.

Senator Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister of State into the House and I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this Commencement matter. I hope the Minister of State comes with good news. I have heard, in the past number of days, that the young adult card will be extended to 16- to 18-year-olds. I hope the Minister of State will confirm that in his reply. I and, indeed, other colleagues have called for this on a number of occasions in this House.

Over the past number of weeks, I have been contacted by a large number of students and parents who are worried about the cost, especially those who are starting third-level education for the first time. Some of those are only 16, 17 or 18 years of age. They sit alongside colleagues and other fellow students who are aged 19 and who are paying twice what those students pay. That is not acceptable.

I will give some examples in my own area of Kildare South. A 17-year-old who is just beginning first year in Maynooth University is paying €90, compared to the student's older sibling who is paying €45 to take the same bus. In South East Technological University Carlow, we have students who are paying €35 while those under 19 are paying €70. There is an accommodation crisis, of which I am sure the Minister of State will be aware, and a climate crisis. We need to look after those younger people who are travelling and have been left with no option but to travel to third level education.

I hope the Minister of State will confirm in his reply that he has extended this card to 16- and 18-year-olds. That extension would be accepted and welcomed by a great many people, because it is totally unacceptable to have one sibling paying less than another on the same bus or young people paying up to €200 and €250 per month more than those who are older.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I very much welcome the 50% public-transport fare reduction for young people aged between 19 and 23. It is a positive development. It makes public transport more accessible for younger people who are attending colleges and universities or doing apprenticeships and training courses. It makes public transport more of an option for those people, as well as helping our emissions from a transport perspective. It is very positive.

I have a number of issues with it. One issue that I have raised along with my colleagues in the House is that the younger cohort of students, namely those doing their leaving certificate examinations at 17 or 18 years of age, unfortunately do not qualify for this. That is something I would like to see addressed. I look forward to the Minister of State's response on that.

The other issue I wish to raise is more of an issue for those of us who live in the Border counties, including Monaghan, Cavan, Donegal and Louth. In that geographic region, there are many students who travel up north to go to college in places such as Belfast and Derry. Unfortunately, the scheme does not cover them either. Therefore, I have two asks: first, that the scheme be extended so 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds will also be able to avail of the 50% reduction; and second, that the Minister of State consider allowing the students who travel up north for their education to be included in the scheme.

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Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I thank both Senators for raising this issue. Both are correct in the sense that the initiative has been very transformative and positive. It has been very well received. The numbers speak for themselves in terms of both climate action and reducing costs for students.

I understand that the Senators' questions concern plans that the Minister may have to expand the young adult card and student Leap card fare initiative to include all students attending third level education so they can avail of the 50% fare discount on both public service obligation, PSO, and commercial bus operator services.

The Department of Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in regard to public transport. However, the Department is not involved directly in the day-to-day operation of public transport services nationally. It is the National Transport Authority, NTA, that has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally by way of public transport service contracts, and for the allocation of associated funding to the relevant transport operators.

I reassure the Senators that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in meeting this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2022 the Department of Transport secured €538 million of funding for PSO and Local Link services provided by State operators and under contract by the NTA this year. A cost-efficient public transport sector, including affordable and accessible public transport services, is vital to a functioning economy.

As Senators are all aware, in recognising the importance of incentivising more young people to use public transport, as part of budget 2022 the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, secured €25 million in funding for the introduction of the young adult card. This exciting initiative allows any young person nationwide between the ages of 19 and 23 to avail of an entitlement to discounted travel and to increase the level of discount over and above the current student discount to an average of 50% across all services, including city, intercity and rural services. Mature students in full-time education are also included in the scheme, as are eligible visitors to Ireland within the young adult age cohort.

The young adult card was initially introduced on PSO services on 9 May, and since then there has been extensive engagement between the Department of Transport, the NTA and representatives from the commercial bus sector to agree upon extending the initiative to commercial bus services as well. That extension has now been agreed and has been in place since 4 September.

This extension of the scheme to the commercial sector means the 50% fare discount for holders of a young adult card, namely those aged between 19 and 23, or a student Leap card is now available on bus services provided by participating commercial bus operators. It is important to note that the discount is in addition to the 20% average fare discount on PSO services that was introduced in May as part of a suite of Government measures to help combat the rising cost of living.

Specifically on the Senators' questions on the eligibility requirements for the young adult card, I am happy to clarify that I have been advised that the NTA is widening the age rules of the scheme to allow 16-, 17-, and 18-year-old students in third level education to apply for the

student Leap card so they can also avail of the 50% discount. This is in line with the approach taken with mature students in full-time third level education.

On Senator Gallagher's question on students who travel to the North, the issue of the Border counties is one we can raise with the NTA on foot of this Commencement debate. What I have announced is good and welcome news all round. I thank both Senators for raising the matter.

Senator Mark Wall: The Minister of State kept us waiting right until the very end to announce the good news, but it is very good news that he announced today, as before. I want to welcome this initiative. As the Minister of State said, it is very positive for students and public travel in this country.

The one issue I would like to bring to his attention is the commercial bus operators, to ensure that they are offering this service to as many students as possible. That is essential to this working. Particularly in rural areas, it is commercial bus operators that operate the scheme, as the Minister of State is probably aware. To get as big a bang for our buck as possible, we need to ensure that those bus operators are carrying out the scheme.

It is very positive news. I thank the Minister of State for confirming that with us today.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I, too, would like to welcome the fact that this scheme is being extended to cover 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds. That is a very positive development.

I have a question for the Minister of State in relation to that extension. Is there a timeframe for its introduction? Many people will be asking when this will come into vogue.

As to students who travel to the North, I would be grateful if the Minister of State could come back to me on that issue after his deliberations with the National Transport Authority, NTA. Bualadh bos. It is very worthwhile and I welcome the news.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: It is a day of good news all around Leinster House today. It is a welcome development that the eligibility requirements for the scheme are being expanded to allow 16-, 17- and 18-year-old students in third level education to apply for the student Leap card so they can also avail of the 50% discount. I am pleased to be able to reassure Senators Gallagher and Wall that the NTA has already commenced the technical work on expanding the scheme.

I am advised that this work is scheduled to be completed in the coming weeks, at which point those third level students aged 16, 17 and 18 will be able to order a student Leap card and avail of the discount.

On the two specific questions, as I said, we will ask the NTA and get a response on Senator Gallagher's question on the Border counties and particularly on the question on the commercial operators. We will get a response on those.

I thank both Senators for raising this matter. It is certainly a very positive development that young people all over the country and their families will welcome. There is no doubt about it.

Environmental Policy

Senator Lynn Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I dtús báire ba mhaith liom

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fáilte a chur roimh an Aire Stáit chuig an Teach. The Minister of State may be aware there is a European Citizens' Initiative at the moment to call on the European Commission to propose an EU legislative Act to ban sponsorships and advertisements by fossil fuel companies. We all know that fossil fuel companies are perpetuating the climate crisis and that advertising climate-damaging products leads to an uplift in their sales. If it did not, why would these companies bother spending millions of euro on ad campaigns? It is very interesting that one case study carried out by the New Weather Institute think tank found regarding a single Audi advertising campaign there was an uplift in sales of up to 132,700 cars. That led to an overall increase of greenhouse gas emissions of 5.2 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent due to a single advertising campaign by the Audi car company.

We know that banning fossil fuel adverts is a no-brainer. Oil and gas companies have spent decades continuing to mislead the public and politicians on climate change and undercut global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We know that the advertising campaigns focus on idyllic images of wind turbines and solar panels being pumped into our homes, phones and streets.

I have complaints against a number of misleading advertisements in this country by companies such as Applegreen, Bord Gáis and Flogas. It is not fair leaving it to citizens and politicians to be the watchdog and take the individual complaints. Individuals cannot stem the torrent of disinformation; it is just not possible. That is why I am asking that the Government would act to cut the flow at its source.

A ban may seem like a bold move, but Ireland showed great leadership when it did that with tobacco. We can take pride that our State stood up to big tobacco. Now, we have to stand up to the big oil and gas companies by banning fossil fuel advertisements.

Fossil fuel sponsorships are also being used for political access. In 2016, an Unearthed investigation found that BP used its sponsorship deal with the British Museum and a specific Day of the Dead exhibition to further its oil plans in Mexico and Australia. Freedom of information, FOI, requests revealed that BP had sought to access Mexican and British Government figures at a private event by the British Museum as part of the BP-sponsored Day of the Dead festival just one month before bidding opened for new deepwater drilling permits controlled by the Mexican Government. There are multiple examples of fossil fuel companies using these sponsorships to advance their own business via the granted access of sponsorships. In Ireland, for example, we have the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre and sponsorship of the GAA, and Mag Mell Energy and other gas companies sponsor conferences. I commend the Irish comedians Michael Fry, Hannah Mamalis and Seán Burke, who have done stellar work over recent weeks in making arguments for the European Citizens' Initiative. I do not know if the Minister of State has seen those comedians' videos but, if not, I urge him to take a look at them because they are excellent. If I have not convinced him, the Irish comedians might.

The latest figures show that thousands of Irish people have signed up to the European Citizens' Initiative. However, the proposal has to be considered at a European level, and thousands more would have to sign up at *banfossilfuelads.org* in order for that to happen. At this point, therefore, we need the Government to show leadership, take that initiative, follow other European countries and ban fossil fuel adverts, rather than waiting for the European Commission to do so.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I agree wholeheartedly with all Senator Boylan has said in the

sense that we know the divisiveness of advertising in general by companies that are environmentally destructive. As for attempts to compare advertising of tobacco, fast food, gambling and alcohol, they are distinctly different but similar in many ways. I will not name companies but we have seen that one company was able to rebrand itself as Beyond Petroleum for many years.

I have seen the videos the Senator spoke about and they are excellent. I welcome the fact that the Department has signed a number of European citizen initiatives, with Irish citizens also involved in signing them. I urge young people and people all over Ireland to get involved in the European Citizens' Initiative.

The matter the Senator has raised for discussion is really one for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, but I will outline briefly, in the time I have remaining, Ireland's commitment to transitioning away from fossil fuels. It is recognised internationally that that is the best way forward. As a founder member of the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance, an international coalition of governments and stakeholders working together to facilitate the managed phase-out of oil and gas production, Ireland is committed to that initiative.

Domestically, new solid fuel regulations will come into force on 31 October and will introduce minimum quality standards that will apply to all solid fuels distributed throughout the State. That will ensure that the most polluting fuels can no longer be made available on the Irish market and will assist the public in transitioning to less polluting alternatives. The regulations also ensure that selling non-approved solid fuel products from retail premises, on the Internet or by means of other media will not be permitted. The new regulations are necessary as each year some 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to air pollution from solid fuel burning. It is estimated that over 16,200 life years are lost, while many people also experience a poor quality of life due to the associated short-term and long-term health impacts of pollution. It increases hospitalisation with respiratory illnesses every year as well.

I turn now to the vast programme of work the Government is doing to rapidly replace fossil fuels in our energy system directly with renewable energy sources, led by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and his Department. It is important to emphasise the scale and ambition of the programme the Government is delivering on to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels and make Ireland a world leader in the delivery of renewable energy as part of a global drive to a net-zero carbon economy.

The 2021 climate action plan sets out the roadmap to meeting Ireland's target of a 51% greenhouse gas emissions reduction by 2030, including a suite of measures and actions to increase the share of electricity demand generated from renewable sources to up to 80%. With the agreement of the sectoral emissions ceilings in July of this year, the Government has committed to an increase in the renewable energy targets, including additional resources for solar - more than doubling the target to 5,500 MW - and offshore, moving from 5 GW to 7 GW, with the additional 2 GW earmarked for the production of green hydrogen. The Government is committed to increasing the supply of renewable energy to our grid in line with these targets and the overriding need to accelerate the delivery of renewable energy projects in the context of energy price rises and energy market volatility. Renewable energy is critical to enabling our transition to a low-carbon economy. Ireland is a world leader in onshore wind energy and we have enormous potential to similarly become a world leader in offshore wind energy and to harness our solar energy resources, including rooftops and ground-mounted solar. I welcome the Senator bringing the issue forward. It is a matter for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and

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Employment. Ireland is committed to eliminating our reliance on fossil fuels. That is the way forward. The Senator made a valid point regarding how dangerous, sinister and manipulative the advertising can be. I welcome the European Citizens' Initiative and any issue the State can raise on that.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I thank the Minister of State for endorsing and supporting the European Citizens' Initiative. I encourage anybody who has not yet done so to sign up for it. The Minister of State might have a chat with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when he sees him next and suggest that he supports a ban at state level. France and the Netherlands have done this. Lanzarote has gone one step further and banned advertisements altogether across the island, which is my preferred model. We will take it in baby steps. Fossil fuel adverts are misleading and are deliberately trying to give an impression that these companies are focusing away from fossil fuel extraction and looking at renewables when we know the reality is that a tiny percentage is focused on renewables. Theirs is a business-as-usual philosophy.

If the Minister of State wants to help and cannot get a ban over the line, he might have a chat with his Government colleagues about how we regulate advertising in this country. It is a process of self-regulation and it is cumbersome to make a complaint. It takes a long time and advertisements are rarely overturned for being misleading. At the end of the day, they have been run anyway and have done their purpose. It would be good if we could at least tighten the regulation of advertising, if not implement a ban on fossil fuel adverts.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: As a positive way forward, I support the thrust of the Senator's proposal. One way forward might be to bring the matter before the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment for discussion as well as before the Joint Committee on Climate Action. It would be worthwhile to discuss the impact of such advertising and how we could meet that challenge in an Irish context. Good work has been done in recent years on restricting gambling advertising and advertising in respect of alcohol, and the harm that is doing. A discussion at both those committees, for starters, would be a positive step forward in trying to address the issue. As I said at the outset, I see how sinister and manipulative the advertising can be as companies scramble when they see their business model is failing. It is important that we have these discussions.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.48 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.48 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 and the Planning and Development (Solar Safeguarding Zone) Regulations 2022 - referral to joint committee, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, statements on budget 2023 from the Department of Finance, to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 7 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the Minister's opening speech not to exceed

12 minutes, those of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, and the Minister to be given no less than 12 minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3, statements on budget 2023 from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to be taken at 7 p.m. and to conclude at 9 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the Minister's opening speech not to exceed 12 minutes, those of group spokespersons not exceed eight minutes and all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given no less than 12 minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I support the Order of Business as outlined by the Leader.

I listened to "Morning Ireland" this morning and, in the midst all of the talk about the budget and what was going to happen, I was appalled by one of the stories I heard. We have been listening to similar stories over the past while regarding recent reports of violence at local GAA matches. Four specific instances were mentioned this morning. These ranged from the one that we knew about in Roscommon to incidents over the weekend in Wexford, Mayo and Kerry. I was very shocked because what is sport about? It is not just about wanting to win but it is about supporting physical and mental health, learning how to co-operate as part of the team and also in providing entertainment to those in attendance and who are supporting us.

While the competitive element is very important, what kind of lessons are we giving to our young people when we see adults getting involved in attacks on referees and other officials? As we know, a referee was even visited at his own home outside the match situation. It is shocking and it has to stop. We all love the GAA. It is a core element of our culture and of our communities. So many people give of their time on a voluntary basis so we have to crack down harshly on these issues. I am very pleased that the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, has confirmed that the Department has asked Sport Ireland to engage with governing bodies on the issue as we have to put a stop to this violence and abuse.

Today is World Tourism Day 2022. Tourism is obviously a big part of our own country and is something we need to support at every level. I have no doubt that some of the measures in today's budget will do that. Thinking about World Tourism Day 2022, I will inform the House that my weekend in south Kildare was just fantastic. I did not have enough time to take in everything that was happening. There was Culture Night, where one could go to art and photography exhibitions in Rathangan and then go to the opening up of the Sult Gallery which will be a permanent gallery in Kildare town and is very much worth checking out. This is the first time we have had a permanent art gallery as such in south Kildare.

One could go then to Newbridge to the local choir, which was just incredible. On Saturday and Sunday we then had Taste of Kildare at the Leger Restaurant where all of our top restaurants and hotels came together to organise the taste of all of the fabulous food. We got to see the very best in craft, food and, of course, racing. Prior to that we had an unveiling of a sculpture to "Squires" Gannon, who was the captain of the 1928 All-Ireland Senior Football Championship winning Kildare team. That was the very first Sam Maguire trophy competition, and indeed the only such trophy win we have had. I am fortunate enough to have had two O'Loughlin relatives on that team. It was a wonderful occasion.

There was also a walk along the Barrow Blueway and a visit to Lullymore Heritage and Discovery Park. I am just saying to everybody that today is World Tourism Day 2022, and while I cannot extend an invitation to all world tourism, I ask everyone to come and see everything we have to offer in south Kildare. Gabhaim buíochas.

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Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am glad that Kerry gave Kildare the Sam Maguire for the day on Sunday. We will probably be looking for it in Cork also.

Today is budget day and it is a very important one. I commend both Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, for their cost-of-living budget which will rightly put a focus on people because people matter. The budget today is about ensuring that people receive taxpayers' money and that we have a balance struck between helping people, families and businesses, along with ensuring that our country remains competitive and that we protect, maintain and retain jobs.

I know that the Ministers will not be in this House for the budget debates tonight but can I ask that we might have them to the House in the coming weeks in advance of the Finance Bill? I appreciate that they cannot be here tonight.

This is the most important budget in two decades. It shows, despite what people say, that the Government listens, has listened, and is acting across all of the heads of the budget. In particular, I welcome in my role as Seanad Fine Gael spokesman on transport, the whole issue around transport as to the BusConnects in Cork, the Cork commuter rail projects, and in particular, around the measures that are being taken by the Government to support new infrastructure in roads, but also to show that we are making that modal shift from the car. That is what is important about this budget in the transport piece.

In particular, in the context of Project Ireland 2040, it is important that the Cork commuter rail project is advanced along with the whole issue of BusConnects in Cork which I know is fraught with tension. The National Transport Authority was before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications last week. From the Government's perspective, the budget is about ensuring that people receive money and that we support the cost-of-living measures people need. All of us understand the suffering, hardship and pain that people are going through. Anybody who says Government representatives do not is not telling the truth. We do understand. We live in the real world, among our people and in our communities. Today's budget is a balance that is being struck. Not everybody will be happy. Everybody will have an issue they want to see addressed. It is a very positive budget notwithstanding the huge pressures in terms of the cost of living, inflation, energy and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

I call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, to come to the House to discuss the war in Ukraine. It is important that we get an update on foot of last week's UN meetings in New York. We are all seriously concerned about the rhetoric of President Putin and what he has said in recent weeks. It is important that we hear from the Minister and the Minister of State on the Government perspective arising out of what happened at the UN regarding Ukraine. It is also important that we stand with the people of Ukraine once again.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I suppose it is "happy budget day" to all. The amount of €11 billion is nothing to be sniffed at and there are certainly provisions in the budget that are welcome and overdue. I will say once again that the drip-feeding of budget information in the weeks leading up to the date is unhelpful in the extreme. It makes a farce of the system and the procedures we have in place for having budgets decided upon and finalised, with members of the Cabinet bouncing prospective measures off public opinion and the media farming these leaks for free clicks. The move to provide publicly-funded schoolbooks at primary school level is to be welcomed as is the decision to expand GP and medical cards. These measures right-

fully reflect the attitude we should have towards education and healthcare, one of making them both accessible while remaining sustainable. Unfortunately, other measures are little more than drops in the ocean. Housing charity Threshold has stated the tax relief for renters is worth only seven days of rent in Dublin. It is a massive cost on the Exchequer for what amounts to very little change on the ground. It is the worst of both worlds.

There will be €600 in energy credits over three instalments. Citizens pay the Government their taxes, the Government hands some of this back through energy bills and the money goes into the pocket of the energy companies. Surely this is inflating a burst tyre. Why not put a €600 solar panel on every home instead? Let people make some of their own electricity and lessen reliance on these companies now charging unprecedented energy prices. Better yet, take all those €600 payments and investigate having a nuclear power plant, which would achieve energy security, end reliance on Russia, slash household energy costs and give us clean sustainable power. We are putting a 10% levy on building materials in the middle of a housing crisis. These extra costs will be passed on to prospective homeowners, further freezing out young and first-time buyers from home ownership when it comes to new builds.

There seems to be a touch of a circus and being out of touch about the budget, deflecting from systemic failings, putting money into people's pockets and having something for everybody in the audience. At this stage, I am not sure that what the Government spends or gives people will make much difference. People are ready for change. Unfortunately in Ireland the only option for change seems to be Sinn Féin. Meanwhile centre-right parties are topping polls and winning elections throughout the Continent. We tend to be a bit slow when it comes to political change but I hope it is a sign of things to come and that some young political leaders will step up to the challenge and return common sense and traditional values to the fore.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I am shocked to hear Senator Keogan say the only option is Sinn Féin. There are many colours to the political rainbow. The Senator also has very good Independent Members sitting behind her.

I wanted to speak about the budget but, sadly, I was at an event on Sunday and I must talk about that instead. The quarter final of the senior hurling club championship took place. My parish team of Inagh-Kilnamona was playing Éire Óg, the Ennis town team. One of our best players, Jason McCarthy, was injured. We waited almost an hour for an ambulance to come in our county's capital town of Ennis. There are two issues here. First, why does it take nearly an hour for an ambulance to travel from Ennis to Ennis? This is not to mention those living in Carrigaholt, Doonbeg, Mountshannon and Ballyvaughan. Second, why does the GAA think it is okay to have our best, brightest and fittest playing hurling at that level and not have an ambulance on call?

I did some research on this. For €350, an ambulance can be booked from bodies such as Civil Defence or the Red Cross, both of which could badly do with the money, to be on call for the game but that was not done. We each paid €15 at the gate to attend the game. The cost of the ambulance would be covered by 24 ticket holders out of the thousands of people who were there. Luckily, Jason McCarthy will be okay. He has to have surgery but to be left on a pitch for almost an hour is just not good enough. What is happening to our ambulance service if we cannot get an ambulance from a hospital that is probably 1.4 km away from the pitch? If it took nearly an hour for an ambulance to arrive at that incident, what will happen with others? I want to again highlight the issue. I appeared on television about five years ago regarding this issue, when the programme needed someone in Clare who could speak Irish for TG4's "Nuacht". I

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talked about this seven or eight years ago and it is still an issue.

It is not fair on our hurlers to treat them as if they should not have an ambulance on call. It also highlights the appalling lack in our ambulance service. A girl who fell down a little cliff in Lahinch a few months ago had to wait four hours for an ambulance. She was in Lahinch, which is half an hour from Ennis. If a hurler is waiting 50 minutes on a pitch for an ambulance in our county town, where we have a hospital and an ambulance service, it does not say a lot about the ambulance service for all the people who live in Clare or for how the GAA values its players.

I played camogie for Clare many years ago. We had a little training and we had to fight for a pitch because we were girls, which is still an issue, but the lads and girls dedicate their lives to this amateur sport for which they do not get paid any money. They change their diet and where they work, and their whole lives revolve around the club game. It is not just a county game. Even at club level, it is a serious commitment. Jason McCarthy, and all the hurlers, camogie players, Gaelic football players, and those in whatever sport we are talking about, deserve better than this. We need to have an ambulance on call. What is wrong with booking the Red Cross to have it there? I wish Jason McCarthy a speedy recovery.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I am glad to hear Jason McCarthy will be okay. We have to absorb the budget details but I wonder how much additional money, if any, has been allocated towards ambulance services. It is maybe worth looking at and making the case for over the coming period. It is a great shame if that has not been done. We will have statements on the budget later this evening so I will resist the urge to turn the Order of Business into statements on the budget, which I am sure the Leader will be glad to hear.

This Saturday will see a large coming together of civic society, political parties and the culture and arts sector in the 3Arena, still known to many of us as the Point Depot, for a conversation on Ireland's future. It is being convened by the Ireland's Future organisation, which is very ably chaired by our Seanad colleague, Senator Black, who will take part on the day. It is indicative of what I spoke about last week and what I have been speaking about with other colleagues for a long period in this institution and outside it. The conversation around the type of Ireland we want to build for the future is live, dynamic, increasingly inclusive, exciting and very hopeful. I am very encouraged by the broad participation in Saturday's event. I am also very enthused by the opportunity it offers us. Certainly, the Seanad plays its own part in that. Senators can be very proud of the part they will play under the Chair's leadership through our Seanad Public Consultation Committee to look at this issue. Our first meeting will take place on Friday afternoon.

I did not want to let this week pass without referencing that very important event. It comes off the back of a whole range of local meetings that have taken place throughout Ireland and internationally, in which many Senators, from their respective parties or none, have been involved. If people have not signed up for Saturday's event, I encourage them to take part. It will be an exciting day. I thank and commend the organisers on it. I look forward to taking part but, more so, to the work in the time ahead of ensuring we deliver that new and agreed, and ultimately united, Ireland.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I will confine my comments on the budget to the statements on budget 2023 later today. Last Friday night, Culture Night was a success across the country. I offer my congratulations to all those involved, including the Arts Council, local authorities, Creative Ireland and all the other organisations. I was in D-Light Studios in Dublin 1. For

once, it is a good news story. It was a studio that ended up being in NAMA and Dublin City Council bought the building. It goes to show what can be done to save studios. The Leader has heard me speaking previously about the hollowing out of arts spaces across this city.

All Members saw the reports on the horrendous death of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old Iranian woman originally from Kurdistan who was killed in police custody in Iran last week. I listened to a radio interview yesterday morning with an Iranian woman living in Dublin who wished to remain anonymous and used the name “Zahra”. She made a particular plea, which was that if you support women’s rights and human rights, this is something about which you have to speak to politicians. We have to keep the story alive. That was her request to everybody listening to the radio programme. She is asking for us all to stand with Iranian women. I refer to the history of Iran, particularly going back to 1979 and what has happened since then in terms of the continuous encroachment upon women’s rights, the initial decree for hijabs to be worn and now, in August of this year, the use of CCTV to monitor and fine unveiled women, along with mandatory prison sentences for any Iranians who question the hijab rules online. It is outrageous. What happened last week is horrifying. It is appalling that so many lives have been lost in the protests since then. We have to stand with women and all those in Iran who are speaking out now. I know the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has made a statement but I ask that we see something much stronger from the Government with regard to the Iranian Government. It is simply not acceptable for women to be treated in such a horrendous way.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Hear, hear.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I, too, will be taking part in the Ireland’s Future event on Saturday in the 3 Arena. Ireland is changing, and thankfully for the better. We may see far-right changes in Europe but I hope for the sake of my children and the next generation that we are a long way from ever having a far-right Government on the island of Ireland.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Eileen Flynn: It genuinely gives me hope to see the good turnout on Saturday on our streets. It is people power and people fighting back.

An equally important matter relates to the budget. I genuinely welcome the €2 billion that has been provided for humanitarian supports for refugees but it has been bluntly and openly stated that it is for Ukrainian refugees. While I am a big fan of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, I am in here two and a half years and it is more than a year and a half since the White Paper was published but I have not seen an end in sight for direct provision. I am not living in those horrible situations or living through that life experience. People in direct provision are in desperate need of answers. Before the summer recess, the Leader said she would try to get that debate with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman. I am begging him, along with all the human rights organisations in the country, to include all refugees. When I am with the Traveller community, I make the point that when women are here but men are there in terms of how they are treated, there is something wrong with our culture. As a society, we are putting white refugees here but black refugees there. There is something wrong with that. The Minister needs to come to the House and address the refugee crisis in general.

At 2.30 p.m. yesterday, a fire struck Labre Park site. If seven children there had been in a caravan they would have lost their lives, which would have been a tragedy similar to what hap-

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pened in Carrickmines. The safety switch for the electricity did not work in the trailer. I call on the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to come to the House, speak to us and provide us with Traveller appropriate accommodation. We are waiting for another Carrickmines to happen. It was sheer luck that seven weeks ago a fire wall was installed to separate two of the caravans at the end of the Labre Park site. The impact of the fire was devastating. Only ashes are left. The fire could have extended to the next trailer. Halting sites need to provide appropriate accommodation.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Like other speakers, I welcome today's budget, which will protect families, individuals and businesses and invest in social infrastructure. It is important.

I would like to raise with the Leader the ongoing closure of the Dublin 7 Intreo office. It is located on the Navan Road at Cabra Cross and serves Cabra, Phibsboro, Stoneybatter and the general Dublin 7 area, with a population of more than 10,000 people. It was closed last year for refurbishments and upgrading, but has remained closed. It was an important service for people in need of help.

There are significant increases in today's budget, with double welfare payments for children's allowance, pensions and invalidity and disability allowances. That is really important. However, if somebody wants to apply for an additional needs, an exceptional needs or a supplementary welfare payment, he or she cannot make such an application online. People living in Dublin 7 have to go into Parnell Street or apply via post. At a time of a cost-of-living crisis, people need welfare supports. It is disappointing that the Department of Social Protection has not reopened the office. I would appreciate if the Leader could ask Minister for Social Protection to meet the local community to talk about the future of the office and its reopening.

Senator Barry Ward: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire Airgeadais as ucht an bhuiséid a chonaiceamar inniu. Tá a lán rudaí ann is féidir linn a cheiliúradh. Welcome as they are, I am amused when I hear Senator Keogan talk about how important change is, notwithstanding the fact that we can look at so much good news today. Change is not always necessarily a good thing, in particular when it is change for change's sake. When things are going well it is important to stick with what we know and the proven success that we saw today.

I want to focus on one issue, namely, GP care. It is also worthy of note that many more people will now be eligible for GP visit medical cards as a result of measures brought in today. That is obviously to be welcomed, but it creates a knock-on difficulty in that GPs are not available to people, in particular those in receipt of GP medical cards. GP practices do not want to take those people on. It is increasingly difficult for people to find a GP in their local area. In addition, out-of-hours services are essentially non-existent.

Unfortunately, at the weekend a member of my family required a GP. I rang East Doc and did not even get a reply. I rang DL Doc and it did not even answer the phone. At least I could leave a message with East Doc. The idea that an out-of-hours GP service does not answer the phone is absolutely preposterous. It is something that must be dealt with in tandem with expanding the GP card and other services. It is no wonder accident and emergency departments are full of people if we are not putting in place a provision to stop people who need medical care from having to go into hospital at weekends. We need to do that if we are to deal with all of the other problems that exist across the health service. While I welcome the GP visit card, the Minister for Health has work to do at the very basic level of the health service to put in place systems that deal with people's needs out of hours and during the week.

4 o'clock

Senator Victor Boyhan: I also wish to bring up the issue of GPs. I do not know if anyone heard on “Morning Ireland” the doctor from Killarney who spoke with great clarity on the issue of GPs and, as Senator Ward said, about the GP visit card, etc. The challenge now is the GPs. We have people unable to access GPs out of hours. It is common all over the country in both rural and urban areas. This doctor made the point that it would pile up and pile up. That is a real issue and we need a debate on that issue.

In a number of the newspapers and in the media, people talked over the weekend in the lead-up to the budget about bed capacity in the hospital system. With all the additional funding, and I welcome any funding for medical services and developing the health system, we also must have efficiencies and value for money. We must have our theatres open for longer hours every day and we need a more slick and professional operation. Reading all the commentary over the weekend, I was struck by this issue of bed capacity. The professionals are telling us we do not have the bed capacity.

I travelled last week or the week before and I so happened to be sitting beside a surgeon in a Dublin hospital who told me a very strange story. He told me he is a vascular surgeon and when he has patients going to surgery, he has to check, particularly if they are critically unwell, if there are intensive care beds. We now have surgeons in hospitals checking minutes before people are going into surgery to see if they have capacity in terms of acute beds and, in the event of intensive care beds, specialist beds for cardiac and vascular surgery. We have a situation where at one point I was told 12 patients’ procedures were cancelled that day and could not proceed having been prepped for, robed for and on the way to surgery. This is in our public health system.

Could we have the Minister back in to deal with two issues? The first is the issue of GPs that Senator Ward outlined well. That is a major concern. Could we have a special focus on that and the other issue about bed capacity? With additional resources which I welcome into the healthcare system, we must have capacity. Without the bed capacity, we cannot proceed to seriously tackle the issues of people who are waiting for critical, essential surgery in the public health service.

Senator Maria Byrne: I rise today to highlight two issues. One of them is the launch recently of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, programme between Johnson & Johnson and the University of Limerick. It is a collaboration. This year Tús has been accepted into the programme. It is about encouraging young women to participate in science projects. It is also about supporting these young women in mathematics and the different sciences. It is about encouraging them to go forward and to study science subjects. Certainly, it has supported so many young women to date in their careers and so many people have gone on to excel in the courses. It is down to this collaboration between Johnson & Johnson and the university, and now Johnson & Johnson, the university and Tús, which has been accepted. I pay tribute to Ms Anna Rafferty and her committee from Johnson and Johnson who have been out there to the forefront in promoting this worthwhile project.

The other issue I would like to draw attention to is that there have been many business supports announced today for entrepreneurs and small businesses. There are so many entrepreneurs out there. The schools’ enterprise week is coming up shortly with the local enterprise offices. It is about encouraging young students to go out there and set up their own business

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- their mini-companies. It is about showing them how to run their accounts and, I suppose, training them young in terms of entrepreneurial skills. So many people who have gone on to win the Young Scientist started off under this programme. So many students have gone through this programme over the years.

These are two positive steps that are coming to the doorstep shortly. In terms of the STEM programme, the closing date for applications is 14 October.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I wanted to raise today what some of us might have been looking at in horror, that is, the election of what looks to be a fascist leader in Italy. While the Italian people have had their say and that is their democratic right, it is a sad and dangerous time, especially following on from the recent elections in Sweden. It seems Europe is becoming an increasingly less safe place for our LGBTQ community, and for women and their bodily autonomy.

We know that through her election campaign, Meloni worked hard to hide her political beginnings in a neofascist political party, as well as her admiration and praise for Mussolini, which is on the record. We have seen the rise of the extreme right in a number of European countries, those who seek to enforce their moral codes on everybody else and who believe they and only they are always right, the gay community should have no rights and women should not have bodily autonomy.

We in Ireland must be alert to what is happening throughout the EU. It is alarming that it always seems to be centrist neoliberal political parties that provide the stepping stone for the far right to take power. We have seen it with Victor Orbán in Hungary. He was a member of the EPP group in Europe for years and a blind eye was turned to what he was doing there. Likewise, yesterday, the EPP group congratulate Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, another party that again has facilitated the rise of the far right in Italy. Berlusconi has his own colourful track record from when he was in leadership, and now the EPP expects him to put manners on an actual fascist.

We all need to be vigilant to the rise of the far right. Nobody can be complacent. I send my solidarity, particularly to the LGBT community, who must feel devastated that another country has become a cold home for them.

Senator John Cummins: I appreciate that we have statements later but not everyone will get the opportunity to contribute and, therefore, I want to acknowledge the budget that has been announced by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Deputy Michael McGrath. It is one of the most expansionary budgets of recent times. It is, of course, about putting money back in people's pockets but it is also about supporting all cohorts through universal measures and the most vulnerable through targeted measures.

In my brief of housing, I want to mention a few of the measures. Renters were referenced by Senator Keogan. It is important to say that the tax relief of €500 is per person and can be claimed for this year as well as next year. That results in a couple getting a tax credit in quarter 1 of 2023 of €2,000, that is, €500 for 2022 and €500 for 2023, which, for a couple, will amount to €2,000. That is substantial and will go a long way towards achieving that slogan the Opposition likes to bandy about of putting one month's rent back in people's pockets. What the Opposition do not say is that they are actually going to take €30,000 with the opposite hand because they want to abolish the help-to-buy scheme, which the Government has rightly chosen

to extend for another two years. That is all about supporting young people in getting their foot on the ladder. When that is combined with the first home shared equity scheme and the local authority affordable purchase scheme, the Government is about supporting those who want to buy and those who want to continue to rent.

It is also appropriate that we have introduced a vacant homes tax. We have done so at a point when many measures are in place to support bringing vacant homes back into productive use, such as the repair and lease, and buy and renew schemes, the living city initiative and Croí Conaithe. Now, if somebody chooses not to bring a property back into use, they will rightly be penalised through a vacant homes tax. We want to bring those units back into productive use for renters or purchasers.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I am not going to mention the budget as I will speak on that later, and I am not going to speak to a national issue. I want to speak to a local issue. I apologise for that because it is probably very small in the overall scheme of things.

Rooskey is a village near me. It is in the parish of Kilglass, which was the home of the former Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds. It is a lovely village and a great community but we have one huge problem, which is that a pedestrian or cyclist cannot cross the bridge if there are two vehicles on it. Rooskey was the site of the Glanbia factory in which almost 600 people worked but, unfortunately, it was destroyed by a fire in 1997 or 1998. All the hope of getting a new bridge dissipated then and it will not happen now because that business is gone. However, we have come up with the idea of building a footbridge across the River Shannon, which would make the crossing safe for pedestrians and cyclists. Will the Leader make a request in this regard to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan? I understand such a project would be dealt with by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and I ask that it be treated as a matter of urgency. I understand Leitrim County Council has made an application for funding under the active travel programme but we need to get a report done on it and get it done as quickly as possible in the interest of safety. It is a health and safety issue. I appreciate the Leader, the Cathaoirleach and Members listening to me going on about something parochial like this.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I appreciate we will be talking about the budget later but I want to acknowledge that the Government really seemed to have a go today at making a tangible, robust response to the crippling issue of the cost of living. It has done so in a robust way but in a way that is not economically reckless.

In this cost-of-living crisis, we should not lose sight of mental wellness and the power of sport to connect and help people. Last weekend in Belfast, at the ripe old age of 37, Eric “Lily-white Lightning” Donovan from County Kildare fulfilled a dream by becoming a European boxing champion.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear. Well done.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: As he would tell people, his life was full of adversity but he turned it around. He would say boxing probably saved his life and now he is a role model who visits schools and gives talks. TG4 brought his boxing fight live into many homes in Ireland. Gabhaim buíochas le TG4 agus déanaim comhghairdeas le Eric Donovan. Is ambasadóir iontach é don dornálaíocht agus don spórt. Tá an-áthas orm ar a shon. Gan dabht, tá súil agam go mbeidh seans aige troid i gCill Dara le haghaidh craobh na hEorpa. Bhí mé ag caint le muintir Bhaile Phúinse, lena bhainisteoir, le Eric féin agus lena lán daoine eile ó Chill Dara. Ní raibh

troid le haghaidh craobh mar seo sa chontae seo ón uair a throid fear cáiliúil, Dan Donnelly, ann fadó. Tharla an troid sin sa Churrach tamall fada ó shin, sa bhliain 1815. Le cúnamh Dé, tarlóidh sé arís sa chás seo.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Before I talk about a budgetary measure that was brought in today, I want to pick up on Senator Flynn's comments on refugees and remind Members of the question of comparing like with like. It is important to say that the 50,000 Ukrainian people coming into this country are not refugees. They are here under an EU temporary protection directive. Their position is nothing similar to being refugees and comparing them with refugees is not comparing like with like. When the Senator talks about people in Ireland meeting treatment based on the colour of their skin and gives the impression the Government is making decisions based on the colour of people's skin, it is a very dangerous comment to make. I ask the Cathaoirleach to review the comments that were made and to suggest to the Senator to retract or rephrase them. It is dangerous commentary to make. People should understand Ukrainians coming here are not refugees. That is a said quite a lot on all sides of the House but they are not, in fact, refugees.

Lots of Members will speak later about the budget and what it contains. It is very positive in terms of putting money back into people's pockets but one measure that has been taken will change people's lives, namely, the provision of State-funded IVF treatment for women and couples throughout this country.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: Hear, hear.

Senator Garret Ahearn: It is long overdue. This House has played a key role in advancing it, with a large number of Members having spoken here on the issue. The Cathaoirleach has given me three opportunities to table a Commencement matter on this issue over the two years that I have been a Senator and an awful lot of people of people have pushed the issue. Whatever we talk about in terms of the budget supporting people financially, giving people the opportunity to start a family is a real change and will have an impact. I welcome the initiative.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I could say lots about the budget and I will do so when we have statements this evening. The things that I will speak about are not unlinked in context to budget decisions and conversations.

I read an article dated 25 September that stated Fine Gael limits conversation or debate on joyriding in which the Chair of the Joint Committee on Justice was quoted. It was a private committee meeting but the Chair did not hide behind it. He was literally quoted and delved into a private committee meeting on what was meant to be a meeting on community safety, which did not mean inviting in two or three Garda representative bodies. The rest of the committee understood that very well. I thanked Deputy Carroll MacNeill, Senator Ward and others who advocated for a well thought out session on community safety that includes the Irish Youth Justice Service and the other Department of Justice organisations like youth workers, and local people. We discussed how we can have a real conversation on trauma, and the impacts of trauma and poverty.

The Chair literally used a situation that happens in communities like mine, where communities are on their knees, to play politics against another party about a private committee meeting. That showed me where people's care lies when it comes to this subject. What actually happened at the meeting was a real conversation about how we can support communities. We

cannot do that by only inviting in Garda representatives and only framing the debate through the lens of Garda safety. I say that because Garda safety should mean safety for the young men in those communities because if they are safe then behaviours change. If they are safe, and their poverty situations and access to education change, then everybody is safer. People must work on the root cause if we hope to ever have a long-term effect on anything, which was understood by those in that committee room. I am absolutely appalled that a Fianna Fáil member would use his position and have details splashed all over the *Irish Mail on Sunday* at the weekend. It is a misrepresentation of the conversation. It is a misrepresentation of the contributions made by the two Fine Gael members who joined the meeting because they actually said this is not about adding heat, that we have to be responsible, make sure we have a conversation, and should hold off for about four weeks and then consider the witnesses who come in so that we have an enabling and empowering conversation not a stigmatising conversation. I thank for that and I just cannot believe that a private committee meeting was used in such a way.

Senator Seán Kyne: I will refer to the budget later.

I wish to pick up on some comments made by Senators Ward and Boyhan about GPs and my comments relate to the recruitment of health staff. I have previously sought within these Houses for a discussion on a number of things within the health sector, including capital builds. It is important that we have a discussion on the recruitment and retention of staff within the health services.

GPs will face challenges. Westdoc is a GP service in my part of the world that is under pressure. It does not serve the communities nearest to me in Moycullen, Rosscahill and Oughterard, as I have pointed out before. I do not know whether that is due to a reluctance by city-based GPs or due to financial and staffing issues. There are challenges in district hospitals and I have tabled a Commencement matter for tomorrow on Clifden District Hospital. It takes an hour and a half in bad traffic to travel from Clifden to Merlin Park Hospital, which is an alternative location for respite care yet there are recruitment and retention challenges when it comes to physiotherapists, occupational therapists and nursing staff in areas. We have met management representatives and we will meet union representatives. They have told us that it is difficult to recruit people to stay in some of the most remote district hospitals in the region. While there has been some success in recruiting nurses internationally, challenges exist. I would like to hear from the Minister for Health on his plans, in conjunction with the Government, to encourage greater international recruitment, more places in our universities or greater incentives to encourage people to work in the remotest communities and district hospitals and serve patients. Rows between management and unions are one thing but caught in the middle are the patients and their loved ones in communities where convalescence and respite, palliative or end-of-life care are a necessity.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: There are many issues on which I would like to address the House; I am spoiled for choice. I thank Senator Ruane. What is needed in the incidents that hit the news last week is a conversation regarding the entirety of the community and the safety of young people in the community as well as the intergenerational trauma and the affects of that happening.

I welcome the cost-of-living budget. It is fantastic. There is loads of good news within it. We will have statements on the budget twice later and I will speak in both debates. Hidden among the good news is the fact that the 9% VAT on remaining period products has been reduced to zero as a consequence of the budget and the decisions that were being made today.

I have campaigned on this for a long time so I am thrilled with that.

I would like to address a serious issue, which is the fact that apartment owners throughout Dublin South-Central, the constituency in which I live, and throughout the country are facing horrific bills for the defects in their homes. These include fire defects as a result of shoddy workmanship and the appalling aftermath of the Celtic Tiger era building. Homeowners in one apartment complex are facing bills of €68,000. In another complex owners face bills of €32,000. These are people in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis who are being faced with an appalling bill and frightening prospects if the work is not carried out. I raised a Commencement matter on this two weeks ago and to say that I got an underwhelming response is mild. That is either contempt for the Seanad and its Members or else it reflects reluctance. Apparently a memorandum went to Cabinet this morning and the rumour leaked from that meeting, that there is not going to be an instant answer, is worrying. I ask that we have the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien, comes to the House as a matter of urgency to address these apartment defects because a person is in an apartment, paying a mortgage and facing a €68,000 bill, that is no small issue. We need an urgent response to that. I have asked for an urgent response to it for this week to coincide with the budget. I ask that we have an urgent debate in this House on this issue.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I support Senator Kyne's proposal for the Minister for Health to come to the House to discuss staffing levels throughout the HSE. There is a particular issue within the disability teams throughout the country in regard to occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and the lack of qualified people coming out of the colleges to fill positions. It is an important issue. We are going to discuss it at the Joint Committee on Autism in the coming weeks.

With regard to the budget, as media spokesperson, I welcome the reduction of the VAT rate on newspapers to zero. The report of the Future of Media Commission, which was published just prior to the summer recess, highlighted how trusted our media are compared with social media, which carry a great deal of disinformation. I thank the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, for her support in making sure that VAT rate was reduced to zero.

Delving through the budget documents, there are lists of road projects that will be funded through capital expenditure. When I noticed one that is important was not on that list, it tweaked my nerves. The Minister for Transport needs to come to the House to discuss the capital projects going forward. I reiterate my comments last week regarding the N4. The only region in our country that is not serviced is the entire north west. The N4 is not on a list of road projects. While the list is not exhaustive, it is not on it. It should be one of the top priorities in the country for investment to get it across the planning permission stage. We fought tooth and nail last year - my colleague, Senator Ahearn, had issues with a road in the south - to get it back into the capital programme and get an identified route picked but we need to put funding and planning permission in place so that the road project proceeds at some stage in the future. I ask that the Minister for Transport come to the House to give positive answers to my query.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I note that what we have seen today is a budget of more than €90.4 billion. It is an increase on last year's budget and it is to help families at a time of crisis. Supports are being put in place. There is an increase in the pension, more social welfare supports and greater numbers of people are able to access the fuel allowance. All of this will tackle issues for the most vulnerable, those who are in need and those who are waiting to get energy retrofits done and cannot get access to or are waiting months for the warmer homes scheme. It

is crucial that we are seeing this increase in supports, especially for people who are most vulnerable.

One interesting comment the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, made in his speech was when he highlighted how one third of our corporate tax income is dependent on a cohort of 500,000 workers and ten multinationals. They account for one third of the total tax revenue. That is incredible. It shows the importance of foreign direct investment into this country and of our education and research sector. It shows how crucial those funds are but also, as the Minister highlighted, how important it is that they are not seen as funding permanent expenditure to fund this budget or budgets going forward and how we need to have the national reserve fund in place.

One other point to highlight, especially for towns throughout Ireland, is that Fine Gael is backing business. We see that with supports being put in place such as the temporary business energy support scheme. That will be absolutely crucial for businesses in the months ahead.

In recent months, I have spoken with businesses that are seeing increases of nearly two thirds in their energy bills. This will be capped at over €10,000 and will be backdated to September. It is one of the phenomenal initiatives that has come through in the budget this year.

I will be speaking later on education and research but we need to look at the shortfall in school transport, especially with the Minister for Education. It has been highlighted that this will be reviewed. Will the 6,000 families waiting for tickets hear news very soon? They have been waiting for more than four weeks. We live in uncertain times and face challenges but, right now, we have a budget that will support people in the times ahead.

Senator Emer Currie: I am thinking of all of the doors I have knocked on in the past three to four years and the issues that have come up time and again. People care about their families, communities and those who need help most and they want to see this modern, progressive Government provide the services that people need.

Today has been a good day for that. Childcare fees will be cut by 25%. That is the beginning of it. Some €2,500 will be put back in the pockets of people in west Dublin who are paying €200 per week and might be paying €10,000 per year. This is a good day for families who have been desperately seeking publicly-funded IVF treatment. We are already moving from offering free contraception to 17- to 25-year-olds to offering it to 16- to 30-year-olds. Student fees will be cut by €1,000. Income tax changes will be made on the higher rate.

Help will be given to our local SMEs. We have been speaking to their owners on the phone and they are incredibly worried about their energy bills. Renters will receive a €500 tax credit for this year and last year and primary school children will receive free school books. An increase in special education classes should benefit 2,000 students. There will be a reduction in the teacher-pupil ratio, a double payment in child benefit in November and 1,000 new gardaí. This is a good day. I am sure as the day goes on, we will be able to pick holes in it but, right now, it is a good day for our cost-of-living budget.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the cost-of-living measures in the budget. They are very welcome at this difficult time for hard-pressed consumers and families. I also welcome the reduction in VAT for the media. This issue has been raised on several occasions in this House by various Members over recent years. The measure is very welcome, particularly for local media, which provide a great service throughout the country.

I ask that the Leader arrange a debate at some stage with the Minister responsible for housing on funding for local authorities. Some local authorities are at crisis point. They need matching funds for various projects proposed by the Government and Government-funded projects. The matching funds required usually amount to about 20%. On foot of the proposed pay agreement, local authorities will have to find 20% of the increase. Energy costs must also be considered because they have gone way up. My local authority, Mayo County Council, has got to find €3.5 million to cover the proposed energy costs and the cost of the proposed pay deal. That is just to stand still. I welcome the fact that there has been an allocation in the budget today for local authorities – it could be €50 million. However, in addition to the funding needs I have mentioned, local authorities have a considerable number of projects they have to co-fund. They have to find local funding in this regard. There are not many ways in which local authorities can raise funds now. They do not have fees to collect in respect of water, sewerage or refuse. There are very few means by which local authorities can gather money other than the local property tax. In many cases, because of the raising of the bands, the amount of money local authorities are collecting through that tax has gone down. Given the loss of money in this and other areas, many of them could be in very serious financial difficulty. We should have an early discussion with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the future funding of local authorities.

Senator Michael McDowell: I will reserve what I have to say about the budget until later. In the past couple of weeks, I was honoured to have been invited to go to County Sligo to commemorate the six men who were executed on top of Benbulbin by the Free State Army on 20 September 1922, one of whom was my uncle Brian. While I was looking at all the documentation that surrounds the event, I was conscious of one thing, namely, that when I did a documentary on the subject, I did not want to be one-sided. There were, of course, many Free State soldiers who died in the Civil War in Sligo and elsewhere, and those men largely go uncommemorated. During the week, there was an article in *The Irish Times* on this very subject. The National Army soldiers are never commemorated. There is not even a decent memorial to them in Glasnevin. Those in this House who may have seen Michael Collins's grave in Glasnevin are probably unaware that he is buried in a plot surrounded by graves of National Army soldiers buried four deep. They are more or less completely uncommemorated. During the documentary, in order to attempt to bring balance, although it was edited out, I interviewed former Minister Michael Ring, whose great uncle, Joe, a Free State general, was shot at Bunynconnellan, Mayo, in 1922. We went to see his memorial. It had been a modest little cross about a foot or 18 inches high in the middle of a bog off the road but was broken and lying in pieces. It occurred to me that it was sad that a general in the Free State army would have a monument to him that was broken and lying on the ground. Now that we are in the decade of centenaries, I ask that somebody from the Taoiseach's Department come in to the House and indicate what is proposed to be done to commemorate those soldiers of the National Army - those on the other side are well commemorated, with monuments virtually everywhere in the country – who lost their lives fighting for the establishment of a democratic state in this country.

Senator Regina Doherty: I thank colleagues.

I thank Senator McDowell for his contribution. I do not think the matter he raised is one people consider until it is put foursquare in front of them, but it is definitely worth exploring. I will write to the Minister and maybe then I will send the Senator back copies of the correspondence and we will see in what forum the matter should be discussed. It might be kind of lost in this Chamber, but I will come back to the Senator once I make the response.

Senator Burke welcomed the cost-of-living budget and asked for a debate with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, particularly on funding for local authorities. Senator Currie welcomed the cost-of-living budget and said it was a good response so far, particularly to the issues that have come across her desk in recent years.

Senator Dolan welcomed the €9 billion in expenditure on education, probably the largest spend we have ever had in that sector. She said Fine Gael is backing business and welcomed the budget.

Senator Carrigy spoke, as did Senator Kyne on a similar issue, about resources and staffing, not only in primary care but also in our acute settings and all disability and mental healthcare settings. It would be very valuable for us to have a workforce planning debate with the Minister. It is very easy for us all to stand around here and to give out about the length of queues without realising what is causing them. Most of the time it is a lack of recruitment within the HSE. I will try to arrange such a workforce planning debate as quickly as I can.

Senator Carrigy looked for a debate on the capital plan with the Minister for Transport. Senator Seery Kearney talked about a debate with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the apartment owners who face absolutely massive bills. I think other people had expected a response today, particularly when we saw the response to the issue of mica today, especially around funding and how we will resource that. I think we expected a response today and did not get it, so I will certainly ask for a debate on Senator Seery Kearney's behalf.

Senator Seery Kearney also touched on the issue Senator Ruane spoke about. It is an awful pity when people use issues of such real importance on a human level to communities and to families to play politics with one another. It is even worse when the two parties involved are supposed to be in government, in a coalition with each other. The way the report was done at the weekend is really regrettable, but the Senator and the other people who were at the committee know exactly what the intentions of those people are. I would support and applaud her because that is the route to go. While there needs to be a response from the Garda for the actions that were avowed, we are going to have the same conversation in six weeks, six months or six years if we do not do something different, and I think that is what the community wants to see. I applaud all the people who want to take this seriously as opposed to just playing politics with it.

Senator Kyne spoke about the lack of GPs, particularly in rural areas, and the challenges they face. I do not really live in a rural area and we face the same challenges, so I think we need to have that conversation about workforce planning.

Senator Ahearn welcomed the budget, particularly the Government's and the State's funding of IVF treatment, one of the really welcome measures announced today.

Senator Martin spoke about the robust response in the budget. He then touched on other issues such as the power of sport and mental wellness. He congratulated his local boxer, and we join in those congratulations.

Senator Murphy raised the requirement for a footbridge in Leitrim and an application that has been made by Leitrim County Council. I have told the Senator that I will follow up with the Minister and come back to him.

Senator Cummins welcomed the cost-of-living budget, particularly the targeted and universal mix. He welcomed the extension of the help-to-buy scheme and the €500 per-person tax

credit for those who are renting.

Senator Boylan spoke about her upset at the results of the Italian election and the mood there. The majority of the people who supported the winning parties was surprising. I was struck by what Ruairí Quinn said when Meloni was making her thank-you speech on Friday evening and the idea that while we campaign in poetry, we govern in prose. I very much hope that that is true and reflected within the Italian community and the Italian Government because if half the things the new Prime Minister campaigned on come into force, we will have a very different Italy from that most of us know and have enjoyed and loved over the years.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about the STEM programme in co-operation with the University of Limerick and Johnson & Johnson, and Tús joining the project. It is a wonderful project and it really supports young women and gives them confidence and all the conditions they need to be able to shine within STEM courses in our universities. Limerick is a shining light in that area.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the number of GPs and bed capacity. He was talking more, I suppose, about acute settings. The 650 beds that were announced by the Minister earlier as part of next year's funding are very welcome. However, as we know, a bed is not a bed without the teams and staff that work around it. The workforce planning is very welcome.

Senator Ward welcomed the cost-of-living provisions in the budget but again raised the GP issue.

Senator Fitzpatrick welcomed today's budget but asked me to follow up with the Minister for Health on the ongoing closure of the Intreo office in Cabra, which I will do today.

Senator Flynn spoke about the Ireland's Future conference this weekend and is looking forward to participating in it. She asked again, as she has been asking for the last couple of months, for a debate on direct provision. It has been requested but I will follow up today to see if we can get a date.

Senator Sherlock spoke about the real success of Culture Night in all of our towns, villages and cities last Friday evening. It is just wonderful. Most of us only get to see areas that are not our own on Facebook, Instagram or whatever but it is wonderful to see people enjoying stuff they would not get access to on a normal weekly basis. It was a real success and is a credit to the Department and the Minister.

More importantly, Senator Sherlock spoke about Mahsa Amini, and the brutal murder of a 22-year-old stunning and beautiful woman. While it is probably a failing on my part that I never paid much attention before, in recent days I have been absorbed and engaged in all of the social media around that particular murder and the murders and killings that have happened since. Notwithstanding the lack of response not only from our own Government but also from others, particularly from the UN and UN Women, the Iranian women are not willing to take what they have had to put up with in the Republic of Iran, where the ideal of a republic is a far cry from the reality. The Senator stated that the Iranian women need our solidarity in whatever way, shape or form we can give it. I will certainly follow up with the Minister for Foreign Affairs to look for a better response than we have received to date.

Senator Ó Donnghaile spoke about the large coming together this Saturday in the Point Depot, the Ireland's Future conference. He wants to have a proper debate on what kind of Ireland we want for the future.

Senator Garvey spoke about a horrific incident at a hurling match at the weekend, when Jason McCarthy was injured and had to wait over an hour for an ambulance, which is not acceptable. The Senator asked whether the funding taken at the gate would be more appropriately spent on a reserve ambulance just in case. I wish to pay tribute to the dedication and commitment that our senior hurlers and footballers give us from an enjoyment perspective week in, week out.

Senator Keogan welcomed some elements of the budget. I am sure more debate will be had later this evening. She also welcomed the elections in Italy over the weekend.

Senator Buttimer welcomed the cost-of-living budget and commended the Ministers. He wants to see the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. We will not have them this evening because they will be in the Dáil but we will get them as soon as we can.

Senator Buttimer also looked for a debate on Ukraine and the ongoing impact of the war, particularly as we come into the winter months, and how we can continue to support them. I will amalgamate that with Senator Clifford-Lee's request last week for a debate on Ukraine, particularly around the use of rape as a weapon of war.

Senator O'Loughlin opened the Order of Business today by speaking about the growing violence at our GAA local matches and the kind of example we are setting for our younger children. It is absolutely shocking. It is really important that Sport Ireland engages with those local governing bodies immediately so we can see an immediate response because these things are now happening on a weekly basis and it is really not a good sign.

Order of Business agreed to.

Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 and Planning and Development (Solar Safeguarding Zone) Regulations 2022: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 3) Regulations 2022, and

Planning and Development (Solar Safeguarding Zone) Regulations 2022,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 19th September, 2022, be referred to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in accordance with Standing Order 71(2)(b), which, not later than 4th October, 2022, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 75, and Standing Order 77(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

27 September 2022

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.44 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.44 p.m. and resumed at 5.02 p.m.

5 o'clock

Budget 2023 (Finance): Statements

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, to the House for statements on budget 2023. He has 12 minutes to address the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Seanad today to contribute to the debate on budget 2023, which the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform presented to Dáil Éireann this afternoon. As with the budgets of the past few years, budget 2023 is being framed against a difficult and uncertain economic environment. While we all hoped this year would see us building our recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the domestic and international landscape. The war, which first and foremost has had a devastating humanitarian cost, has also created substantial economic costs and elevated uncertainty. This presents a significant challenge as we set out budget 2023.

Inflation has hit its highest level in decades. The latest projections are for it to average 8.5% this year and around 7% next year. This is a familiar picture across international economies. The impact of the war is also weighing on economic growth. Higher inflation will reduce purchasing power and consumer spending, with rising interest rates and uncertainty dampening investment. While Ireland recorded strong growth in the first half of the year, we are now revising downwards our forecasts. Modified domestic demand – the preferred measure of domestic activity – is projected at 1.25% next year. This is having a very real effect on our day-to-day lives. It is directly impacting businesses' and households' incomes and living standards. It is for this reason that the Government has today presented a cost-of-living budget focused on helping our citizens in meeting these challenges and putting money back in their pockets.

Despite the difficult and deeply uncertain economic environment, we should recall the resilience of our economy and society in responding to crises, not least the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government employed the full range of fiscal resources we had carefully built up over many years successfully to protect households and business, insulating our economy from long-term damage while supporting our healthcare and front-line workers. This approach helped to deliver a remarkable labour market recovery, with employment in the second quarter of this year reaching 2.5 million people, the highest level on record and, as of August, the unemployment rate had fallen to 4.3%.

In tandem with this, the public finances have bounced back strongly. This reflects the responsible approach we have taken in managing our response to recent economic shocks. The Government must find the correct balance that does not jeopardise fiscal sustainability. While the recovery in the public finances is broadly based, we must recognise a portion of the surge in tax revenue is due to windfall corporation tax receipts. The Department of Finance and many

other commentators have warned about the risk this could present, particularly if the situation were to change suddenly and significantly in the future. In light of this vulnerability, the national reserve fund will be replenished with some of these revenues, with €2 billion directed into the fund this year and a further €4 billion transferred next year.

It is also important to remember that, as in the pandemic, the Government has already responded quickly and decisively to support households and businesses, particularly the most vulnerable, with rising cost-of-living pressures. Not only did we take the decision to bring forward budget 2023 by two weeks to provide a more timely response, we have also announced cost-of-living packages amounting to just under €2.5 billion over the course of the year and amended our fiscal strategy for 2023 by doubling the size of the tax package and increasing public expenditure. While a strong fiscal response in budget 2023 is warranted, given the uncertain situation and the direction of monetary policy, we must carefully balance the provision of supports with not adding to demand pressures, ensuring the sustainability of the public finances and keeping resources available to respond to tomorrow's challenges.

Today, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, announced a package of supports amounting to some €11 billion, with a further €300 million in public service support measures funded from the contingency reserve fund. Given the urgency of the challenges we face, €4.1 billion of this package will be spent this year. In terms of taxation, the current excise reduction of 21 cent per litre in respect of petrol, 16 cent per litre in respect of diesel and 5.4 cent per litre in respect of marked gas oil is being extended until 28 February 2023. This extension is also being applied to the 9% VAT rate for electricity and gas.

In addition, the budget includes an income tax package that amounts to over €1 billion, with the standard rate cut-off point increasing to €40,000 and the main tax credits, that is, personal, employee and earned income credits, rising by €75. The home carer's tax credit is also being increased by €100 to support stay-at-home parents. The 2% universal social charge, USC, band ceiling is increasing and the reduced rate of USC for those who have a medical card and earn less than €60,000 per annum is being extended for a further year. Further consideration will be given to the introduction of a third rate of income tax, with a report to be published prior to next year's summer economic statement.

Alongside the cost-of-living crisis, housing remains a key focus of the Government. The unprecedented level of investment in housing is starting to yield results, with some 25,000 new homes built in the past year, which is the highest level in a decade. However, the Government is committed to doing more. Consideration will be given to the recommendations of the independent review of the help-to-buy scheme in future budgets. In the interim, the scheme will continue until the end of 2024 at the current rates. A vacant homes tax is being introduced to increase the supply of homes for rent or purchase to meet demand. This tax will be charged at a rate equal to three times the property's existing basic local property tax, LPT, rate. In terms of the rental market, the Government is introducing a new rent tax credit to support tenants, which will be valued at €500 per annum and will benefit 400,000 people. It is available this year and next year as well.

In the area of climate action, the Government remains committed to protecting the environment, reducing emissions and supporting newer, cleaner technologies. Carbon taxation is necessary to provide the additional funding for vital climate measures, such as retrofitting. As such, the rate per tonne of carbon dioxide emitted for petrol and diesel will increase by €7.50 to

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€48.50 from 12 October. However, given the current cost-of-living pressures, this will be fully offset with a reduction to zero of the National Oil Reserves Agency levy.

On agriculture, several important reliefs, such as the farm consolidation stamp duty relief, are being extended to support young farmers and the farming sector more generally.

The Government has also announced specific measures to support business and enterprises. These include amendments to the small benefit exemption and reductions in the excise fees for special exemption application orders to provide support to the night-time economy. More broadly, the Government is introducing a temporary business energy support scheme to assist firms with the rising cost of energy during the winter months. This scheme will provide eligible businesses with up to 40% of the increased cost in their energy bills.

Regarding revenue-raising measures, it is not appropriate for energy companies to earn excess profits from the current volatile conditions. The EU is undertaking work to capture the windfall energy gains of these firms. Ireland aims to participate in the EU-wide response, although if this is not feasible, the Government will propose its own measures.

To support public health objectives, excise duty on a pack of 20 cigarettes is being increased by 50 cent, with a *pro rata* increase on other tobacco products. Also, a zero VAT rate will be applied to defibrillators from 1 January 2023, along with several other VAT changes.

On longer term matters, the Department will develop a roadmap for personal taxation reform and commence reviews of other regimes based on the Commission on Taxation and Welfare's recommendations over the coming months.

It is clear that effective Government action had already put Ireland back on the road to recovery from the pandemic, with our employment levels and public finances in good health. This has put us in a strong position to confront the challenges we face today. Our decisive response to date has helped to mitigate the impacts of inflationary pressures on vulnerable households and businesses. Today's cost-of-living budget will continue to provide much-needed support over the final months of this year and into next year. Given the elevated uncertainty we are facing, we will continue to manage the public finances effectively to have the resources available to best respond to future challenges and support people.

Senator Pat Casey: There is a potential conflict of interest in this budget. It is partly a negative one, so I had better declare it as a negative one as well as a positive one.

Today's budget is further evidence that the number one priority of the Government is to protect all the people and families facing an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis caused by the continuing plague of populist politics, in particular the illegal invasion of Ukraine by the Putin regime. Populism has the easy answers. There is always an enemy of the people who exists in plain sight but who is never specified. Trump, those behind Brexit, and Putin, along with many other populists of the hard left and far right, always point the finger but never pull up their sleeves and get down to work on the solutions to the problems that nearly every sector of our society will face this winter. Older people trying to heat their homes, families trying to feed their children and make ends meet, and businesses trying to keep their doors open and retain jobs do not need fantasy policies that have wrecked other economies. Rather, targeted funding and tax measures are needed to ensure all homes remain warm, families can cherish their children and Irish businesses can face what will be a difficult winter given the rising costs of energy, food and supply chain goods.

The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, come from very different political traditions but have ensured the interests of our nation and all its people and communities are supported through these unprecedented economic challenges. The scale of the global economic challenge is being felt in every country, but because of the Ministers' responsibility and patriotic management of the economy, the Government has a budget package of more than €10 billion to deliver targeted help to all the people in need of supports. Facts matter. Policies and choices facing the Government must be based on facts. The Irish people deserve to know the facts. Our economic management through Covid, and now in the post-Covid world, is one of the greatest success stories in the world. Respected UN data prove time and again the massive success of the Irish economy and the political management of our redistribution under progressive budgetary policies.

A successful economy creates the tax yield that must be spent wisely and that supports society to ensure the values of our Republic are given real and practical purpose. The two Ministers have consistently been practical politicians who have avoided the showboating and negative populism of others to concentrate on doing the job the people want and elected them to do. I thank them for the seriousness with which they take their patriotic duty.

In the time left, I will outline just some of the measures announced today that will ensure we can deliver to the people at this time of need. We had a double payment of welfare in October in addition to the normal double payment at Christmas. We have an energy credit of €600 per family. Childcare fees will drop by more than €2,100 per year, on average. The increase to the higher tax band will give back up to €790 per person. There is a tax credit for renters of €500. There is a €500 grant for carers of those with disabilities. There is a €12 increase to all core welfare payments. There are free school books at primary level, and college fees have been reduced by €1,000 for all students. The Student Universal Support Ireland payment has been doubled. There are energy supports for SMEs of up to €10,000 per month, which is critical to keep jobs in the economy and family incomes intact. There is funding for more than 1,000 gardaí. An IVF scheme is publicly funded for the first time. The GP card scheme has been expanded, with more than half the population now eligible. There is free contraception for women up to 30.

I am delighted the first-time buyer's grant will be kept for another year. We look forward to some tweaking of it in further budgets. This is one of the key components and pathways to homeownership. It was pointed out today that in excess of 35,000 families have availed of it. In my constituency, Wicklow, 1,354 families are now living in their homes because of the grant.

I listened to the Opposition debate in the Lower House. I normally do not get dragged down into the politics of it but I believe facts matter. Fantasy policies and the figures coming from Sinn Féin need to be called out at this stage. According to Sinn Féin's housing budget, the party is to deliver an additional 2,900 houses, but it has based its figure on pre-pandemic prices. It takes no account of inflation and the supply chain issues. Only a few weeks ago, it called for a crisis intervention plan to slow down the disorderly exit of private landlords from the rental market. Its spokesman said all options must be on the table for consideration, including tax reform in the private rental sector. However, what would the party do in its budget? It would add €400 to the cost of a landlord who wishes to rent a property. Just over a year ago, Deputy Ó Broin was lambasting the State for the use of the private sector in respect of the purchase of turnkey developments, saying turnkey developments built by private developers and brought to the State comprise the single most expensive way to provide social housing. Lo and behold, in the housing budget of 2023 there is a reference to 1,000 turnkey social homes at a cost of

€256,000 each.

Sinn Féin does not believe in homeownership. It actually detests homeownership. In its budget, it is removing the three key planks of homeownership: the first-time buyer's grant, the first home shared equity scheme and Croí Cónaithe, which allows people to spend €50,000 purchasing a vacant property so they can build their own home.

In the minute I have left, I want to speak about my own sector and my disappointment today over the position on VAT. I hope this will be open for debate. I hope the decision was not based on the gouging that has been done by some hotels within this country, because the people gouging will gouge one way or another regardless of the VAT rate. Is this based on other statistics or figures?

One of the key issues at this point is the decoupling of food and accommodation because they are two completely different products. As the Minister pointed out, food has a huge cost input. All those costs have gone up in the past number of years. Food works on a tight margin. Regarding accommodation, from a Government point of view delivering budget hotels is complex, difficult and challenging. When the State takes nearly 20% of the budget accommodation out of the system, that causes problems. Airbnb is also an issue. Its business model is taking up hotel accommodation. People should be in hotels and homeless families should be in homes. Dublin has a shortage of approximately 20,000 bed spaces. Budget hotels are very hard to deliver and need a lower VAT rate. We need an open and frank discussion on VAT in the hospitality sector. The issue needs to be publicly debated because there are genuine concerns.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: That is crystal clear. I thank the Senator.

Senator Michael McDowell: In difficult circumstances, the Government has, on balance, done a good job with the resources it has. It is not simply a matter of a little for everyone; rather it is a matter of taking a look at the crisis we are in and making sure it does not derail the economy and plunge households and enterprises into a catastrophic crisis from which they may never recover.

I agree with the point made by Senator Casey on decoupling the provision of food and accommodation. I know that is easier said than done because a hotel bill is a hotel bill and covers both. In the past couple of days I had a problem with my mobile phone and had to spend the best part of 12 hours loitering around the Grafton Street area. I was struck by the number of businesses that are looking for staff. Staff are required everywhere. Since the Covid crisis the level of participation in the workforce has declined. Whether that is people who went home to eastern Europe or other parts of Europe or people who took a different pathway in their lives and took up educational endeavours, there is a huge shortage of staff in the city of Dublin. One only has to walk down to any street to see the notices on every window looking for staff. That is one problem.

The second problem is that many activities are highly dependent on keeping their energy costs reasonably low. I am talking about butchers' shops, small groceries with fridges, freezers and the like, restaurants with cooking facilities and so on. The crisis posed by massively increased energy prices is real and substantial. The Government has done a good deal to address that in a balanced way.

I welcome a number of measures, including the decision to reduce VAT to 0% for newspapers and online journals. Journalism is in crisis for various reasons, such as changing patterns

of consumption and free social media, in particular as consumed by the younger generation. This step has long been advocated and I am glad the Government is taking it because we need newspapers, balanced opinion and a variety of sources for information and opinion on current affairs and all the other matters dealt with by the media.

I wish to discuss the vacant home tax. It is designed to apply a multiple of local property tax to vacant homes, and they are defined loosely as homes which, I presume, are capable of being occupied but are not occupied for more than 11 months in any given year. I note it is to be a self-assessed tax. What is the likelihood of somebody who had a home that was not occupied for 12 months of the year actually fessing up and saying they would like to pay three times the local property tax on it? It is a huge gamble on people's honesty that somebody would be asked to do that. Could the Minister enlighten me on one aspect? If a person had such a home and there was a member of his or her family, a relative or even a total stranger to which he or she gave occupancy for two months, even without receiving rent, does that let the person off liability for the vacant home tax? If it does, what are we talking about here? People will play a game with the Revenue and say their first cousin was making use of a property for six weeks in a given year or their nephew from Canada came over and stayed in the house. It seems to me to be codology.

What is really needed is something that is not easy and that has eluded successive Governments for a long time, which is to look to towns and cities and put in place a series of measures that would use up vacant and under-used space above shops. For example, Boyle in County Roscommon has shops with dried up flowers in their windows and a vacant look to their upper storeys. I have come to two conclusions. First, commercial rates are a serious matter for small shopkeepers and businesses occupying such premises. Second, letting out upper floors under the current regime of the safety provisions relating to landlords' liabilities mean people would have to put in fire escapes and a lot of other things, and invest a lot of money, to make properties available, and there would be no certainty that people would pay a sufficient rent to remunerate them. On vacant properties and homes, in fairness, this is a token gesture that will probably have no effect. I am not saying that it is easy to mobilise all those resources, but I believe very strongly that something along those lines should be done.

The Government made a strategic blunder in granting the right of tenure of indefinite duration to anyone who is a tenant of a domestic dwelling for more than six months. Landlords have left, and will continue to leave, on that account. The Government may offer all sorts of tax incentives to landlords, but the real issue is that landlords now realise that if they let a property for three years they will never get it back under the current law. I hope the Sinn Féin party will not take offence when I say that the situation will get even worse if its proposals are adopted because it would mean that people could not even get vacant possession for the purpose of selling a property. We have to change and reverse thrust, and at least give people who have invested in making one home available to other people the right to recover possession of it after three or five years, and with adequate notice periods, in order to ensure that private landlords remain engaged in the provision of rented accommodation.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for coming to the House to discuss this very important topic. I commend the Minister of State and the Ministers, Deputy Paschal Donohoe and Deputy Michael McGrath, on a very welcome budget. It is offering support and it is putting money back in people's pockets, but it is also helping employers and helping employees to be kept in jobs, which are two core messages today.

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I would first like to welcome the increase in the tax band as people will now earn over €40,000 before paying the higher rate of tax. When that is combined with the changes being made to the USC, it will be an extra €831 onto the average wage. That is a lot of money and is very welcome. With regard to the small benefits exemption that the employer can give the employee, that used to be €500 and it is now up to €1,000. That will help in regard to the retention of jobs in a situation where many employers are finding it very difficult to retain their employees. Tenants will benefit from the €500 non-refundable tax credit for renters. So many people are renting privately but they are not in receipt of any supports. This is very welcome, given rents have gone through the roof, as we are all aware. Many of the higher costs are as a result of unprecedented challenges, first with Covid and now with the Ukraine war. I welcome that the Government is supporting businesses that are exporting to other countries and that are having difficulty because of the war in getting their goods out.

The measure for young farmers is very important. I compliment both Macra na Feirme and the IFA, which did a wonderful job in lobbying and putting forward the message that we need to keep young farmers on our land. It is such a cultural thing here in Ireland that there needed to be a roll-over of stamp duty relief, as well as the measure on slurry relief. I compliment the two organisations because they brought so many people on board with them. This will certainly keep young farmers in position.

I welcome the living city initiative. I am from Limerick city and I live just off the Georgian area. For many years, nobody was living in many of those houses. People have moved back in but there is still a long way to go because there are a lot of restrictions around planning permissions and a lot of red tape that people have to overcome. These are all costly exercises, for example, putting in fire escapes costs a lot of money. I would like to have seen a greater focus on this area. While it is most welcome that it is being extended for a further five years to 2027, I believe extra supports have to be given to people to encourage them to bring the houses back into use. The cost of goods and labour needs to be taken into account. The Minister of State might be able to look at this for the finance Bill.

The zero VAT rate for defibrillators, medicines and hormone replacement therapy is very welcome. The zero VAT rate for newspapers will help to bring down the cost of newspapers. The physical paper that the newspaper is printed on has gone up along with everything else, which has hit the media. I believe this was the right thing to do.

I also draw attention to the film industry. I have been very involved with organisations in Limerick like Troy Studios and Odyssey Studios. The Minister, Deputy Harris, was in Limerick last week and he announced almost €5 million for the development of that industry in Limerick College of Further Education, which is run by the education and training board. Because we have a film industry on our doorstep, many people have participated in the courses. One thing I would like to have seen mentioned is regional uplift, which is about investing in the regions outside of Dublin. The way it is at the moment, and I mean no offence to anyone from Dublin, the film industry is being driven towards the studios in Dublin and Wicklow, which is not helping with regional uplift. I believe that regional uplift needs to be looked at in the finance Bill. There are so many American film groups looking at this but because that regional uplift is being phased out and there is no mention of it in the Bill, they are saying it is going to be too expensive to come here. That is something I would like the Minister of State to commit to looking at.

I do not have a vested interest in the hospitality industry, although my family background is in that area, so I suppose I should declare that. On the 9% VAT rate, small businesses in the

hospitality industry are major employers and over 200,000 people are employed in that industry. I would like a commitment that the 9% VAT rate will be reviewed in February, when it is due to finish. I believe that if small businesses are still feeling the pain, we cannot let them feel unwanted, given so many jobs depend on it. I would like to hear the Minister of State give a commitment today that in February, when it is due to finish, it could be reviewed.

I know we will be talking about many issues in regard to the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath's budget, and many families will benefit from that. Certainly, lower paid income earners are going to get substantial payments. The business supports package that is being put in place is very important. To have a 40% increase compared to this time last year, and up to a total of €10,000 a month, is quite a fair scheme. I have met with many small business owners in recent weeks who showed me that their bills have trebled in the last six or eight weeks. People are facing very high bills and it is important to show the right message and show that the Government is listening. We had a small business conference over the weekend and I met many business owners. People are very concerned. I believe this 40% increase up to a maximum of €10,000 is sending out the right message to those small businesses. It will help to keep small businesses afloat and it will also help to keep the people who are employed by those business owners in jobs.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you. For what might turn out to be a slightly more jaundiced view of the budget, I call Senator Paul Gavan.

Senator Michael McDowell: He has gone very yellow.

Senator Paul Gavan: It is good to see the Minister of State. He is always welcome. I think the shine is going to go off this budget fairly quickly.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Already?

Senator Paul Gavan: I do. I know it comes as a surprise to the Leas-Chathaoirleach. There are a number of topics to cover in the relatively short time I have. I will start with the issue of how we deal with the huge surge in energy costs. Let me be clear. There is no ideal way to deal with this, and I want to acknowledge that straightaway. The difficulty with what the Government is proposing is that the €200 credit will be snaffled up by the energy providers - there is no question about that. The Government is only providing one €200 credit between now and Christmas. There will be children going to bed tonight without any heating because there is complete uncertainty. Nobody knows what that €200 credit is going to be worth, given the ability of energy suppliers to hike prices, and we know that is what they do. It is not effective. What families needed in this budget was certainty. Sinn Féin's proposal to roll over the price cut was the right way to go because pegging prices at a particular amount gives families certainty over this winter. They know what their costs will be, they can plan and they can feel that, if necessary, they can put on the heating. They do not have that certainty under the Government's budget proposal. I acknowledge that there are no easy solutions and there are flaws in both strategies. Certainty is the key issue, however, and the Government has let families down by not delivering that certainty. People do not feel they can afford to pay their home heating bills and credits are always snaffled up. There is a fundamental flaw in the proposal that needs to be acknowledged.

On housing and renters, from where did the Government get the €500 figure for its tax credit? Over the past year, annual rents in Limerick have increased by approximately €1,800.

As to the idea that a €500 tax credit will cover anywhere near the cost of the hikes renters have endured, that is clearly not the case. To compound matters, the Government has not done what Sinn Féin has called for, namely, place a ban on rent increases for three years. That would give people certainty instead of facing horrendous hikes. I know landlords in Limerick who will simply decide this evening to increase their rents again and pocket that money. The Government has no means of preventing that without taking the action Sinn Féin has called for.

I always get on well with Senator Casey but to hear him attempt to give a lecture on housing, given Fianna Fáil's track record, is embarrassing. Let me remind him of the facts. The July homeless figures showed there were 10,568 homeless people, including 3,137 children. Since his Government's decision to lift the ban on evictions, homelessness has increased by 25%, child homelessness is up by 43% and family homelessness is up by 30%.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: That is scandalous.

Senator Paul Gavan: That is the Government's record, yet Senator Casey thinks he can come in here and give us a lecture on housing. Let me remind him also that the Government's target of building 12,600 social and affordable houses this year is not going to be hit. The Minister admitted last week that the figure will be 30% off that target. The Government cannot even deliver the pledges it has made, which are clearly not good enough. I make no apologies for Sinn Féin saying we will deliver 20,000 social and affordable houses.

The Government's think tank, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, told Ministers last year that the Government is spending exactly half what it is needed on social and affordable housing. That is where the problem lies. Fine Gael tends to talk about housing like it is some kind of natural disaster saying. It says that what has happened is terrible. The current situation is all the result of Government policies. I remind colleagues that this is the seventh budget shared between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Fundamentally, they have failed year after year and that is why homelessness figures have hit a new record level again. That is their record and it is what they must deal with.

In the time remaining to me, I will deal with the income tax issue because I have a problem with the measure on income tax. It will cost taxpayers more than €500 million, yet three in four earners will not benefit from the measure at all. What message does that send to lower paid workers like a staff teacher or nurse who earns €35,000, for example? It is fundamentally unfair that three out of four workers will not benefit from this huge tax change. Someone who earns €135,000 will benefit by €830 but someone who earns €35,000 will benefit by €190. Whose side is the Government on in terms of looking after ordinary workers? Those figures make it very clear and very stark.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Paul Gavan: I want to mention the vacant sites tax. I think Senator McDowell will acknowledge just as happily as I will that he and I rarely agree on issues but, my God, this tax is a farce and a fig leaf. Fundamentally, Fine Gael will never tax vacant houses and we can see that now from this proposal. It is so easy to elude having to pay any tax under this measure. It is frankly pointless. Why can Fine Gael not acknowledge that one of the key solutions to the housing crisis is to tackle the issue of vacant homes?

Senator Michael McDowell: Hear, hear.

Senator Paul Gavan: The best way to tackle the issue is to apply an effective tax rate to encourage owners to move vacant sites on and back into the marketplace. Let us be frank. This is the last effort we will see the Government make on this matter and it is not an effort at all. It is just another means of avoiding a key issue and looking after its own people as opposed to tackling the issue of vacant homes. That is not good enough.

I am hugely disappointed that the proposed rise in the minimum wage is less than the rate of inflation. In effect what this Government is proposing for the lowest paid workers is a pay cut. How can that be justified? It is interesting to note that Cliff Taylor, who is certainly not a Sinn Féin supporter, wrote in an article in *The Irish Times* this afternoon that most people are still going to be worse off after this budget. The newspaper also rubbished the vacant homes tax as a fig leaf.

Fundamentally, the Government had opportunities to make fairer and better choices. Above all, the Government failed on the issue of certainty. As families go to bed tonight and face into the winter, what certainty do they have? Do Senators on the Government benches really believe that the energy providers will not hike their prices again to snaffle up the credits of €600 paid in three instalments of €200? Of course they will. Where is the certainty for working people and families? The Government has not delivered and people will quickly see that.

On a fundamental issue of fairness, the €12 increase in social welfare payments is simply not enough. Sinn Féin proposed an increase of €17.50, which is a significant difference, because we know people are hurting. The Government could have made better choices. I notice, for example, that the special assignee relief programme, SARP, is still belting away making sure that millionaires continue to get tax breaks so that they can become even wealthier. That is a political choice Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael make year after year. They take the richest people in the State and make sure they can write off even more of their tax to make even more millions for themselves, while social welfare recipients are left with just a €12 increase. The facts are stark. This is another budget that favours the better off and fails working families. We deserve better.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Well said.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I am delighted to be here on budget day. The marks of the three parties in Government are on this budget. It shows that collaboration across parties is fundamentally a good thing.

Senator Maria Byrne: Hear, hear.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: There are areas of this budget where I wish more had been provided, specifically stay-at-home parents. This is an area I feel very passionately about and it one the Minister of State mentioned.

I am astounded by the 25% cut in fees provided in the childcare package for people who avail of a crèche. This was one of the Green Party's core commitments when we went into Government. We thought the initiative might take another few years to introduce but it has been accelerated, with funding of €1 billion provided for childcare next year. When it comes to stay-at-home parents, and this falls under the Department of Social Protection, we must ensure that all parents, regardless of the choice they make, are supported and protected. Those who forgo an income to care for their children also have childcare costs because they are no longer in receipt of an income. The number of stay-at-home parents in Ireland is particularly large when

compared with other European countries, which is no bad thing. This area needs to be looked at again next year, notwithstanding the increase of €100 in the tax credit.

A couple of weeks ago, the Government announced that childcare professionals were to be paid properly for their work. This is the first time a Government has ever used core funding to support crèches and enable them to pay their workers a proper wage.

If we consider the other benefits for families, I believe this is a budget that supports families. It recognises that people with dependent children, who cannot work, do not have tax credits or are not entitled to social welfare payments, need more support. That is exactly what this budget does.

The Green Party had five specific asks going into the budget, all of which are being delivered. The first was to provide financial assistance to families and small businesses under financial pressure due to the rise in the cost of living, with particular emphasis on those least able to meet the rising costs. That is being delivered in the budget. The second was to help to accelerate Ireland's move away from fossil fuels to renewables so that we end up producing our own clean energy rather than importing expensive dirty fuel. The third was to place a windfall levy on fossil fuel companies that would go straight to those who need it most. The fourth was to cut childcare costs and the fifth was to ensure continued investment in public transport, delivering low-cost, high-quality services. All five of these measures are provided for in the budget. One of these was financial assistance for families and small businesses under financial pressure because of the rise in the cost of living, with a particular emphasis on those least able to meet the rising costs. This is being delivered in the budget. We also asked that help be provided to accelerate Ireland's move away from fossil fuels to renewables so that we end up producing our own clean energy rather than importing expensive dirty fuel. We asked that a windfall levy be placed on fossil fuel companies that goes straight to those who need it most. We also asked for cuts to childcare costs and to ensure continuing investment in public transport delivering low-cost, high-quality services. All of these measures are in the budget.

The fossil fuel crisis warrants some comments from me as the Green Party representative. I agree somewhat with Senator Gavan that there is no easy way to deal with this. This is because we are dealing with a fossil fuel crisis not of our own making in this country. It has been caused by a war and Putin. The cost of gas on the international market is 14 times what it was several years ago. We must deal with this responsibly as a Government. I do not believe that an energy cap is a responsible measure and I will explain why. Sinn Féin states that underpinning this policy is that it creates security. We have seen that it absolutely does not create security. The UK, which has been using this for some time, has had to keep increasing the cap. In fact the cost has been increasing for the end user. Windfall taxes are the correct approach. What we have outlined in the budget is that if we cannot secure windfall taxes against fossil fuel companies at European level we will introduce them in this country. Energy caps take from the people in Ireland who most need it and hand it over to fossil fuel companies. Essentially the companies are told they can continue with the fossil fuel industry as long as they want and the country will back them up and hand over the hard-earned cash of our people. A windfall tax looks for energy companies to give back and then for us to use that money for the most vulnerable. This is the correct approach even in these difficult circumstances.

As an education spokesperson it is important that I commend the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is supporting her, on installing solar panels on every school in Ireland. This

was announced in recent days. It got every child in the country very excited. Even children who do not have solar panels at home, or who do not have a prospect of having them in the next short while, can be part of the energy transition. The whiteboards in their schools can be fuelled by the sun. Nothing brings it home more to children than seeing how they can be part of climate action.

The Green Party is very supportive of the measure regarding free school books for primary schoolchildren. I note, however, that the cost of €110 per child for school books is predominantly as a result of book companies bringing out edition after edition. Families who have several children or who know people in their community who have used older editions are not able to reuse them. They have to buy a new book. This is why it was in the programme for Government that we would try to end the practice and look for a more sustainable approach to school books, have more lending of school books and end workbooks. It is important to make sure we are not now saying that families will not pay for school books as the State will do so but that new editions will still be created, unnecessarily creating more waste and wasting money. It is important to voice the perspective of the Green Party on this issue. It is probably slightly different to other parties in this respect. It is an important point. Families know they have older editions of books sitting in the press that they are no longer able to use. I could say an awful lot more. I took up a lot of time discussing energy, which was correct. I will now hand over to the next speaker.

Senator Marie Sherlock: Budget 2023 takes place at a remarkable time for this country. While we hear a lot about Putin's war and what else is happening in the world, it is very important to remember that our State is in an extraordinarily well-off situation. That we have an Exchequer surplus at all is simply remarkable. We are one of only two countries in the European Union that has a surplus, Denmark being the other. If we think about it, we do not have to borrow for current expenditure or capital expenditure and this is the equivalent of being a cash buyer with very deep pockets. Our debt maturity is one of the longest in Europe. The vast majority of Irish debt is fixed at a 1.5% interest rate. While the era of low borrowing rates may well be coming to an end we cannot forget that at the beginning of this year we had approximately €27.5 billion sitting in reserves with the National Treasury Management Fund.

Even though we have all sorts of uncertainties in the State with regard to the future, we cannot underestimate how fortunate our fiscal situation and stance are. It is remarkable to look at the figures today and in the White Paper last Friday. Even if we take the corporation tax revenues out of the public finances for next year we are still on track to record a surplus. No other country in Europe can lay claim to this. In thinking about this extraordinary good fortune that our State has, it is unconscionable that anyone should go cold or hungry or would ration heat for fear of running out of money this winter. Despite some very positive measures today people will go cold and hungry. There will only be one €200 credit between now and Christmas. People will go short. The one-off payments are welcome but Threshold summed it up very neatly today. The €500 renter's credit is the equivalent of one week's rent. When we think that renters in this country spend an average of €20,000 on rent, €500 is a drop in the ocean.

Senator Paul Gavan: Hear, hear.

Senator Marie Sherlock: It will not have a life-changing impact on them. Extension of eligibility for the fuel allowance is great but it will not kick in until January. I would argue there is a lack of urgency with regard to some of the measures introduced today.

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In thinking about the impact of the budget and the extraordinary situation we find ourselves in, we must look at the two permanent cost-of-living crises in this country. These are childcare, on which there were some positive developments today, and housing. Some Senators will have seen the *Financial Times* report last week that declared to the world this country is no place for young people. It spoke about the huge number of young people actively contemplating leaving these shores, even though they have jobs and decent incomes, because of housing. In a report the National Youth Council highlighted its research that seven out of ten young people aged between 18 and 24 are actively thinking about leaving these shores principally because they have no real prospect of accessing affordable housing for purchase or for rent anytime soon. We have a paradox of plenty in this country. Evictions have increased by 54% and rents have increased by more than 12%. People in secure good jobs are unable to do what their parents were able to do before them. Does the budget do anything real for them? I do not think so.

6 o'clock

I am the Labour Party spokesperson on workers' rights. When we launched our alternative budget last week, we set out five key tests. The first is that no job would go under this winter as a result of a company's crippling energy bill. We wanted to see an energy wage subsidy scheme but we saw something different from the Government today. While we are yet to see the detail in that regard, I am alarmed that there are no reassurances that the companies that could benefit, particularly those whose energy bills double between 2021 and receiving the payment and which could have 20% of their energy bills paid for by the State, will not be subject to any conditionality in terms of there not being any pay cuts, redundancies or dividends. My direct appeal to the Minister is to put that conditionality into that scheme when it takes effect because we cannot see companies benefit to a significant extent in terms of helping them with their energy bills and yet them enforcing pay cuts or redundancies or, indeed, paying out dividends this winter.

The second test was that we wanted to see a boost to the pay of the lowest paid in this country. The report of the Low Pay Commission has been sitting on the Tánaiste's desk since summer and it is appalling that the 80 cent increase in the national minimum wage, which is a cut in pay in real terms because it is less than the current rate of inflation, will only take effect from January. The increase being below the rate of inflation is a second key issue. As regards those who are marginally above the minimum wage, people earning between €23,000 and €36,000 per year will only get a measly extra €4 per week as a result of the tax changes announced today. Anybody earning below that will get four times that amount. How can that be fair? There is an irony here because although the indexation of the standard rate threshold matches inflation projections for quarter 3 of the year, the increase in the minimum wage does not, and nor does the €12 increase in social welfare rates.

The third key issue relates to boosting the pay of the lowest paid and the cost of disability. For years, disabled workers have been crying out for a cost-of-disability payment. The once-off €500 payment is to be welcomed but it will be spent between now and Christmas. What are disabled workers going to do when they start into 2023? There is a real issue for the Government in responding to that need. The Labour Party wanted the Government to respond to the call by trade unions and employers to facilitate once-off pay increases and, to be fair, the small benefit exemption does increase to €1,000, and we welcome that.

The final issue I wish to raise in the few seconds I have remaining has been touched on already. A lot of fuss has been made about the introduction of a vacant homes tax and that it

was necessary to carry out research on how many vacant homes there are in the country and the appropriate rate and all of that, yet the detail we have been presented with today is a joke.

Senator Paul Gavan: It is a joke.

Senator Marie Sherlock: It will be a self-assessed tax. Who is going to ‘fess up and say their home is vacant for 30 days of the year? The rate of just 0.3% is a joke. The Department of Finance is setting itself up for failure. It is saying the vacant homes tax is not expected to yield significant revenue. If the Government is serious about a vacant homes tax, the rate needs to be significantly higher and it cannot be self-assessed. The local authorities need to be engaged.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator but we have to move on, although not because of the sentiment she is expressing. I call Senator Ruane.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. Budget 2023 comes at a time of great anxiety for many people across the country. The cost-of-living crisis has been extensively discussed already but I wish to give the context that, for many people, there has been a cost-of-living crisis for years, if not forever. During recessions and after recessions, during booms and after booms, before the Ukraine war and during it, people have experienced significant deprivation and poverty. Last year, my colleagues in the Civil Engagement Group and I described budget 2022 as a missed opportunity and called on the Government to use the suspension of EU fiscal rules and learn from the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic and the vulnerability it exposed within our society to take transformative action. The opportunity was not taken and people are paying the price for those decisions today.

I will speak briefly on energy. We know that people are struggling with rising costs. While I welcome the €600 energy credit for households, it does not go far enough. We should be regulating and capping standing charges. We need to ensure that ordinary people are never again exposed to the volatility of fossil fuel markets. That means investing in renewable energy and scaling up retrofitting, including the retrofitting of social housing. This necessary action for people and the planet is missing from budget 2023.

We must ensure that we not only temporarily alleviate people’s circumstances but look to addressing them in the long term with a vision for generations to come in terms of market income inequality, that is, income inequality before transfers are applied. Ireland has one of the highest rates in the EU in that regard. More than half a million people in this country are living in poverty. Civil society groups working on behalf of those living in poverty, including Social Justice Ireland and Barnardos, called for an increase in social welfare payments of €20 this year. The €12 increase announced is insufficient and the purchasing power of those payments will be lower in 2023 than it was at the start of 2022. Let me be clear that the decisions made in respect of social welfare payments are decisions on whether people will live and stay in poverty, whether single parents will be able to afford to feed their children, whether pensioners will be able to heat their homes and whether people with disabilities can afford the additional items they need to survive.

On disability, we know from the Indecon cost-of-disability report that households with disabled persons face additional annual costs of between €8,700 and €12,300 and that the bulk of these costs are not met by current supports. Although welcome, one-off measures such as the €500 lump sum payment for disability allowance recipients simply do not scratch the surface of what is needed to tackle the true cost of disability in the long term.

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More broadly, I ask the Minister of State if, in devising proposals in respect of social welfare payments, the minimum essential standards of living developed by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice were utilised to inform the rates of payments. People need to live, not just survive.

On the issue of pensions, the recent announcement of the increase in the requirement to attain a full contributory State pension to a 40-year contribution rate is a deeply regressive and discriminatory step. It discriminates against those who engage in care work and, frankly, will simply be unattainable for many people. Women are already disproportionately under-represented among those claiming the full contributory State pension. According to the National Women's Council of Ireland, only 16% of those in receipt of the full pension are women. The increase in the contributory threshold will only save the State €400 million per year up to 2040, yet it continues to spend €2 billion every year on private pension tax relief - expenditure that the ESRI has described as regressive - while employer PRSI is among the lowest in Europe.

Staying with the issue of gender, and equality more broadly, in 2017 the Government made a commitment that gender and equality proofing would be utilised in the budgetary process. Last year, however, we saw that policies were not gender and equality proofed. I ask the Minister of State to provide information on how the measures in this budget have been subject to gender and equality proofing. Sometimes there can be a misunderstanding of gender proofing as it being the inclusion of measures in the budget that positively affect women. While some people may point to that, and I obviously welcome the moves in respect of IVF, budget equality proofing and gender proofing are also about how other aspects of the budget negatively affect and have consequences for women. They are not only about the positive things in the budget, but how other decisions negatively affect women, such as the decision in respect of the pension issues.

On housing, long-term solutions to the housing crisis are not coming forward in the budget. Although tax credits for renters may provide some relief, they will not solve the housing crisis in the long term. Earlier this year, the Seanad passed a motion proposed by my group that called on the Government to introduce progressive long-term solutions such as committing to the defnancialisation of housing as a core principle of future housing policy, ending the State's over-reliance on the private market to address the shortcomings in housing, establishing a construction company owned and operated by the State and investing radically in the development of public homes on public land. Instead, we are seeing poor use of State money, including spending of more than €102 million between June 2021 and June 2022 on leasing for social housing. It is planned to spend an additional €98 million this year. The State should instead use that money to invest in the development of social housing to be owned by the State.

I welcome the announcement of a vacant homes tax, which I hope will see more homes coming back into active use. This was proposed in 2017 by our group and championed by our colleague, the former Senator Grace O'Sullivan, in the Derelict and Vacant Sites Bill 2017.

I welcome the provision in the budget for the creation of two new data commissioners. Along with other members of the Oireachtas joint committee, I called for this to be done. While I would have liked to have seen a greater increase in the moneys available to the commission to undertake the work, the creation of the two new commissioner posts is welcome.

The increase of €177 million in overseas development aid, ODA, is welcome, but we are still a long way from the €232 million increase required to put us on track to meet our com-

mitment of 0.7% of GNI expenditure on ODA. I note that €75 million of this additional ODA funding is to be dedicated exclusively to the humanitarian response in Ukraine. While this is welcome, it means that just €100 million in new funding will be allocated to address the multiple other humanitarian crises around the globe, including the devastating flooding in Pakistan and the famine in the Horn of Africa.

On a related note, I ask if the budget includes scope for climate finance and, crucially, loss and damage payments for global south countries outside the existing ODA budget. This is extremely urgent. We know that tens of millions of people who have been displaced recently in Pakistan and in other countries that have done the least to cause the climate crisis need to begin receiving the reparations that are owed to them to survive.

I acknowledge that €1.1 billion has been announced in shock measures relating to small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs. I appreciate that this may be more relevant to the next debate, to which Senators Black and Flynn will contribute. These one-off payments seem to be lumped together. A mixture of areas, including community and voluntary organisations, the Gaeltacht, sports, culture and the arts, are getting €60 million. Due to Covid-19 and the Ukrainian crisis, community and voluntary organisations, like people in other areas, have huge costs. However, some €1.1 billion is being allocated to SMEs. I am confused by the small allocation within this budget to an area that has six or seven different sectors within it. I ask for clarification on why they are being rammed together and just €60 million is being provided to them. Why is such a big investment being made in SMEs but not in the community and voluntary sector?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Ruane. That concludes the official party spokespersons. We now move to the regular speakers, each of whom has five minutes. Some speakers are sharing time. I call Senator Cassells, who has five minutes.

Senator Shane Cassells: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach. It is great to have the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, in the Chamber on this very significant day when we see expenditure on this country's budget exceed €90 billion. As I sat in the Dáil today and listened to both Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, I thought about the bravado of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in England last week. He rocked up in the House of Commons like Arnold Schwarzenegger, with both barrels loaded in typical Tory style. The only problem was that he held on to the ammunition too long and now it has exploded in his hands. It is like a warzone in the UK Cabinet now because the bravado has dissipated. Some people in here are suggesting that we should be reckless and spend beyond what we have. I remind them that being reckless with expenditure has a real impact on real people. We have seen what has happened this week as the result of the nonsense from the Tories last Friday. The international markets do not believe what they are at. They do not believe they can balance their books because they cannot. The levelling out or fall in the value of the pound has a real impact for real working people in the UK in terms of pushing up inflation and making life more expensive. People's mortgages are going to increase. As we have seen, they cannot access borrowing to buy a home.

Let us counterbalance that and contrast it with what happened today, with the presentation of a balanced budget that has delivered for real people. The Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, may not be Arnold Schwarzenegger - they are a bit more like Ben Affleck in "The Accountant" - but they are equally ruthless. This morning, "Gift Grub" portrayed the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, as Rocky. Like Rocky, he delivered some good knock-out blows this afternoon when he knocked bluster, nonsense and spoof on the head and instead dealt with real issues, real measures and key asks from all our communities. Week in and week out, we

make speeches here and in the Dáil looking for key asks. I know that the simple measures which were announced today, such as the free books scheme, are going to make a difference to people's lives. As a dad of three kids, I know about the cost of sending kids back to school. This measure will have a huge impact on reducing costs next autumn when kids go back to school.

I attended a joint policing committee meeting for more than three hours last week, when our new chief superintendent spoke about how he wants to be obsessed not with creating physical Garda stations but with having a simple philosophy of putting gardaí on the street. The speech he made last Monday in Navan will be made a reality as a result of today's announcement of 1,000 new Garda recruits. The electricity credit of €600, along with the double payment of the children's allowance, will make a big difference in people's lives when they are balancing the budget for Christmas. If you are a mum or dad at home this evening thinking about Christmas, which is only a short period of time away, you may be wondering how you will have the money to pay the household costs and to make sure your kids have the decent Christmas you want them to have, like any mum or dad wants for their kids. They are going to bed tonight happy because they have the financial assurance that they can make that happen - they can buy the kids the presents they want from Santa, they can provide the food on the table, they can heat the house and they can keep the Christmas lights on the tree. They know they have that because of the certainty the Government gave them today. That is what governments are there for.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: As a courtesy, I will let the Senator know he has one minute remaining.

Senator Shane Cassells: I will watch the clock. Just as governments are supposed to do, the responsible people in the room got up and did that today. When you look at this budget in the round in terms of what it has achieved, you will see that it has achieved the key principles of helping people with real financial assistance, putting money in people's pockets to give them certainty to plan for the next year and addressing in the round the very structures that make society function in regard to education, policing and housing. That is a real use of State benefit for the majority of people. It is a hugely commendable budget. What will make the big difference is that people know that as they go to bed tonight. I congratulate the Minister of State.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Cassells. As we will be tight on time, I ask all Members to co-operate. I call Senator Kyne, who is sharing time with Senator Seery Kearney. Is that agreed by the House? Agreed.

Senator Seán Kyne: Every measure in today's budget, as announced by both Ministers, was welcome and necessary. More importantly, we were able to do it because we had the resources to do it. Tax revenues have stood up compared with last year because of every person in this country who is working, paying tax, purchasing and living. We have seen the resilience of our labour market after the Covid supports we put in place, the purpose of which was to protect jobs and the link between employees and employers. That has meant we are able to put in place the initiatives today in regard to spending and tax. The surge in taxes from corporation tax is welcome. At the same time, the Minister has taken note of the reliance on that. We have to be cognisant of that. People will not see the VAT and excise reductions because they are already there in the case of diesel and petrol. It is certainly necessary that these reductions are continued and their impact can be seen in reduced prices at the pump. Their extension up to 28 February next year is to be welcomed.

The income tax package of more than €1.1 billion is also extremely welcome. The standard cut-off rate is increasing by €3,200 to €40,000 before hitting the higher rate of tax and that is very welcome. I have said it in the House at every budget speech that if the bands are not changed, eventually everyone starts paying higher rates. The bands and thresholds have to increase. I also welcome the increase of €75 in the personal, employee and earned income tax credits and the increase of €100 in the home carer tax credit. The USC thresholds have increased as well to ensure the increases in the minimum wage are not gobbled up by the USC. The band is increasing from €21,295 to €22,920 for the second USC band. I also welcome the comments by the Minister about the preparatory work on the third rate of income tax. The Government will look at that. If it is decided that it is the right thing to do next year in advance of budget 2024, it can be looked at again.

I welcome the extension of the help-to-buy scheme to be continued under the current conditions and rates, and its review. I also welcome the new rental tax credit of €500 for this year and next year as well. It is prudent that some of the revenues collected this year in corporation tax will be put into a reserve fund for this year and next year.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: Today has been a good news day for those in a family, including those in a lower-income or middle-income family. We saw the announcement of both universal and targeted measures to assist families as they face into this cost-of-living crisis. This crisis can be supported by reasonable and prudent measures. We still have a reserve in case the situation gets worse and that is important. Putting in place a cap and writing blank cheques to energy companies outside the State does not give certainty. It empties our coffers instead of giving certainty and support to families and being responsive where we need to be. Families with a child in full-time childcare are looking at getting €175 per week off their childcare costs. That is an enormous intervention. For families where the monthly childcare fee is the equivalent of a month's mortgage or rent payment, this has now gone down by 25%. The number of people who will get fuel allowance is going to increase as we widen and increase the eligibility criteria. Those people will get a lump sum of €400. Pensioners, carers and people on disability benefits will have €624 extra, plus the €500 lump sum in November. Families with young children will receive double child benefit and those on the working family payment will get an extra lump sum of €500. This is about giving money to people and putting it in their pockets at the time when they most need it, and the Government being responsive to that in a responsible way.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We are keeping to time now as if everyone turns up, it will be very tight. I call Senator Murphy.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. On a different note, I have been talking to a number of people involved in the credit union in recent weeks and they have asked me to pass on their thanks for the work he has done. All politicians recognise the work he has done in that area and hopefully more progress will be made in the months ahead.

How do you define poverty? Somebody on a low-to-middle income, which we might think is a decent wage, can experience poverty because they are trying to pay a mortgage and high childcare costs. The cost of fuel is a big one for people who have to travel to work and do not have an allowance. We have to look after people on social welfare and make sure they do not fall through the net. We should also accept and realise that there are people on low-to-middle incomes who have a lot of issues with poverty.

This budget has been fair and has addressed the issues. There has been much criticism of corporation taxes in the past but by God, there are not many criticising them now. While the Minister was right to point out that relying on these taxes totally would not be a good idea, the fact of the matter is that if we did not have them now, this budget would not be as good.

The €12 rise in social welfare payments is not the whole story. The fuel allowance has increased, childcare costs have been cut and a double social welfare payment is to be made. We have introduced a renter's tax benefit and announced additional electricity credits. Some previous speakers have not mentioned those measures. It is only fair in this debate that they are mentioned. Apart from the €12 increase, there are all these other issues.

A budget will not suit everybody. Of course everybody will not get what they are looking for. Electricity costs and energy costs are huge at the moment and are definitely a worry for many families. I firmly believe the three €200 credits that are being given represent the right way to go. People might refer to Britain and other countries capping the payments or the energy bills. We do not know how that is going to work out. We are all in no man's land here. It is a new situation. I think Britain will be in a lot of trouble. It is costing it £100 billion. If Britain has no money in the kitty in February or March, where will it be then? I believe the Government here will move on a windfall tax. When that money is taken in, obviously it will be regurgitated out to the consumers. The ESB earned approximately €700 million last year in this country. The dividend to the Government was €126 million. That figure must be increased when we are going through a crisis. Companies will say they have to invest their money in renewables, which is fine. However, for the times we are in, we must ensure the consumers - the people out there who are worried about energy or keeping the lights on - are looked after.

I welcome the 9% VAT reduction. We have often spoken about this in relation to newspapers. They have been struggling and this reduction will be welcomed. I also hope the music industry will be looked after in terms of the moneys for the arts and culture because that area is still struggling. While it has got back on its feet to a degree, it will still need support going forward. I am confident there is money there for that.

I will make a final comment on vacant homes. I have said this before. There is a bit of a myth with regard to this particular issue about hundreds of thousands of vacant homes. Thinking about this in my home county, while I acknowledge there are some vacant homes, and we should go after those and put a tax on them, there are many problems involved in vacant homes. There are often legal problems, family problems and a myriad of other problems out there and many of them will never be sorted out. By all means we should go after the 20,000, 30,000 or 40,000 vacant houses that are there, put a tax on them and get them into use, but there are a lot of houses for which that vacant tax will not work. It will be found not to be constitutional and all sorts of issues will hold things up for quite a long period.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Murphy for being so helpful with the time. We are motoring on. I understand Senator Ahearn is proposing to share time with Senator Burke.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I am sharing with Senator Dolan, if she arrives, and Senator Burke in her place if she does not.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed with the House?

Senator Paul Gavan: Agreed.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Agreed.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I also welcome the budget announced today by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath. It has to be put into context. Every party comes up with its proposals on what it wants to do in the budget and what money should be spent on. The most important thing to recognise is that the position we are in enables us to do what we are doing. That does not happen by accident. The public is looking in and seeing that today's measured decisions are being made in recognition of the challenges ahead over the next number of years and on the back of a strong economy. That has been achieved by managing the economy well over the past ten to 12 years, after coming out of a recession, going through three crises - Brexit, Covid and a war in Ukraine - and now inflation. We are in a position where we can support people, households, families and workers. We do not have to look too far abroad to see how difficult it would be if we were not in that strong economic position to be able to protect people. It seems, day after day, things are getting worse in the UK where they have to borrow to lower taxes. Today, we have managed to put money back into people's pockets and lower taxes, yet hold money back for a future point if we need it. As well as this budget being a spend-budget and giving money back to people, it has also been prudent. We have held back €2 billion this year and propose to hold back €4 billion next year because we do not know where we will be in six months and, therefore, it is important to be in a position where we can introduce measures over the next six months.

I could go through a load of measures that have been brought forward and welcome them all. The main point is that we recognise people are struggling, and money has been put back into their pockets today to help them get over the winter months.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I also welcome budget 2023. I have been a Member of the Seanad for quite a few budgets and this is the best budget I have ever witnessed in these Houses. Great credit is due to Governments over recent years that we are in such a great financial situation in which the current Government can give out such an amount at this time. It is greatly needed by the people.

A lot of money has been given to health, education, local authorities and many agencies. It is time that we should look at efficiencies. There is a responsibility on governments to check efficiencies and determine how efficient local authorities, the health system and the Department of Education are, because some money is not well spent. It behoves all of us as in this House as public representatives and the Government, in particular, to hold everybody to account and to see how public money is spent. This is taxpayers' money. It is ratepayers' money and money from people who pay the property tax. Hard-pressed people's money is being given out by the Government. There is an onus on every one of us to see that we get value for money in education, in health, and in our local authorities.

The most efficient body I have dealt with in the past 12 months has been the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI. Staff there are very efficient and get back to people. They tell people whether they will get a grant. When a person lodges an application, staff get back to them straightaway to say whether the application has been successful. It is great to say that about any State agency. I am pleased to see how efficient SEAI is.

All in all, I welcome budget 2023. With 2.5 million people employed, we are nearly at full employment. Great credit is due to the Government on the way the economy is being run.

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An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for that different perspective. I call Senator Ollie Crowe, who has been waiting patiently. I apologise; Senator Lynn Boylan is next.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I will wait another minute.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Crowe will have another wait.

Senator Ollie Crowe: No. problem. Ladies first.

Senator Lynn Boylan: My place is down to being first on the speaking list regardless of my gender. Tá áthas orm go bhfuil an deis agam labhairt sa díospóireacht seo. I will use my time to focus on some environmental aspects of the budget.

The big-ticket item is retrofitting. It was rightly pointed out that the Government has not allocated as much to retrofitting as Sinn Féin did in its alternative budget. We would invest €503 million in retrofits in 2023. That is €153 million more than the Government's 2022 allocation and far in excess of its 2023 capital allocation. More important, it is about how the money is spent, and budgets are all about choices. We would have spent that money in a fairer and more efficient way. I recognise it was said that the SEAI is great at getting back to people. It is great at getting back to people to tell them that they will not get a retrofit for years. My father is waiting four years at this stage to get a retrofit done on his house.

Unfortunately, there was no proposal in the budget to fix the broken retrofitting system. While the Government gives ever greater amounts to those who can afford the large upfront payments, more people continue to be locked out. Sinn Féin has proposed a radical overhaul of the broken system. We would abolish the Government's national home energy upgrade scheme and establish a new tiered retrofit scheme. We would replace the Government's better energy warmer homes scheme with a new retrofit scheme for low- and middle-income households. We would also put a cap on households with an income of €130,000 or more receiving support because they do not need a State handout to afford to retrofit their home.

On solid fuel, people have been browbeaten over turf but no alternatives have been provided for them. We know that 10% of households rely on solid fuels mainly in rural areas, and they tend to be the poorest, coldest and most carbon-intensive homes. Sinn Féin would establish a new retrofit scheme for solid fuel homes, targeted at low- and middle-income households. This is typical of the Green Party approach that we have come to expect. There is plenty of stick and very little carrot when it comes to helping people transition to a decarbonised future. Instead, Sinn Féin would take a targeted, plan-led and area-based approach based on need rather than ability to pay.

We would also provide a 50% increase in funding for local authority housing retrofits, which would again protect those most at risk of poverty, fuel poverty and the impact of the rising cost of energy. The Government announced the provision of €2 million compared with Sinn Féin's €42 million for social housing retrofits. The Government's climate watchdog, the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC, called on the Cabinet to reverse its policy, which excludes hundreds of thousands of homes from attic and wall insulation, because they require up-front payments. Sinn Féin would heed the CCAC's call and make sure the payments are made quickly and in advance of works. We are in a time of crisis. The money needs to get out as quickly as possible and contractors need to be put to work in the households that are in most need.

We know families want the opportunity to put solar panels on their roofs and we would pro-

vide grants for that. Unlike the Government's approach, which provides the same grant for all households, our scheme would provide different levels of funding, ranging from 100% to 10% depending on household income. We would introduce targeted measures based on fairness. We would also provide funding for solar panels for schools, and we have the legislation ready to go to alleviate the planning issues.

As to a windfall tax, we accept the surge in energy prices has been turbocharged by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, but it is not all down to the war. We cannot ignore Government failures that have led to the price shock now facing households. Our wholesale energy market is broken. I raised this issue in December 2020 when I called for reform of the wholesale energy market. The Government objected at every stage to reforming the market. We now see electricity generators making windfall revenues and profits on the back of a surge in gas prices, even when most of the energy is coming from renewables. It is an outrage that budget 2023 contained nothing on a windfall tax. Despite all the bluster that we heard from Government representatives on the airwaves in recent weeks, they now seem to want to wait for the EU to make the move to take on price gouging rather than do it themselves.

I fear the energy rebate will not work. We have called for a cap on electricity bills that would give people certainty going into the winter. The credit provided will quickly be overtaken by price increases and hard-pressed families will still be left worrying. Many people are turning back to solid fuel stoves. If the Minister of State was listening to "Today with Claire Byrne", he would have heard that elderly people are buying Superser heaters. People are reopening their fires because they are terrified of the energy bills that are coming. That is why a price cap gives people the certainty that they can get through this winter and afford to pay their bills.

Sinn Féin disagrees with the energy credit. I have one request of the Minister of State in that regard. The Traveller community was left out of the previous energy credit. The credit was not received on many halting sites. I was on a radio show the other night with a colleague from Fine Gael who admitted this, but said there was nothing that could be done where there was a single meter point reference number, MPRN. The energy credit was €20 million underspent in the last budget. We need a commitment that the Traveller community will not be excluded from the energy credits in this budget.

Senator Ollie Crowe: To clarify, it was the Leas-Chathaoirleach's mistake to call me. It was certainly not mine. The Senator certainly had plenty to say.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, to the House. He is a regular visitor. We are living in extraordinary times with considerable challenges. The Government needed to deliver a budget to match these times and I am delighted to say it has done so.

The healthcare plan is especially welcome, with 430,000 more people becoming eligible for free GP care next year. For the first time, more than half of the population will be covered by either a GP visit card or a medical card, representing the biggest expansion in eligibility for decades. Hospital inpatient fees will be abolished for adults, representing a saving of up to €800 per year. These are significant strides forward and they will make an incredibly positive difference to the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Similarly, the new, publicly-funded IVF scheme that will launch in 2023 is very welcome news. As I have highlighted previously, this issue affects tens of thousands of families supports are needed for those wishing to have children.

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Parents will see childcare fees fall by an average of €1,200 per year per child, a reduction of 25%. This measure will mean subsidies paid to childcare providers under the current scheme will increase from 50 cent per hour to €1.40 per hour for a maximum of 45 hours per week. Childcare is a major issue in west Galway, Galway city and throughout the country. I welcome this announcement.

As Senators will be aware, healthcare and childcare were two of the major issues leading up to the last general election. Since that time, we have faced a global pandemic and we now face a global cost-of-living crisis. Despite these extraordinary events, the Government continues to make progress on these issues. Regardless of political allegiance, that should be acknowledged and applauded.

There are a number of very positive social welfare initiatives in the budget, including an increase in €12 per week in payments, double welfare payments in October and December this year, an increase in the fuel allowance and the lowering of the fuel allowance threshold, which will mean tens of thousands of people will become eligible for the payment. The once-off payment of €500 for carers of people with a disability is welcome, but more must be done for carers. Their role is not talked about often enough and they need more support.

I also welcome the energy credit for all households, the tax credit for renters, the reduction in college fees, increased SUSI payments and free school books for children in primary school. It is clear the Government has introduced a wide range of measures to assist people in getting through the cost-of-living crisis, which is exactly what is required.

With regard to what the budget provided for businesses, we know that SMEs are the heart-beat of the Irish economy. They have once again shown their resilience as they emerged from the pandemic and rebounded quickly. However, the energy costs they face are simply unsustainable. The temporary business energy support scheme will cover 40% of the increase in electricity or gas bills, up to a maximum of €10,000 per month per SME. As the Minister of State will be well aware, in Laois and throughout the country, many public houses and restaurants are heated by kerosene oil which does not fall within the conditions of the scheme. That issue may need to be looked at to support the hospitality sector. While this is a welcome measure, the Government must be aware that even more supports may be required. Energy bills have more than doubled in the past year for SMEs in the past year and the gap between the increase in cost and what the new scheme will cover is what made SMEs sustainable in many cases.

I listened to the contributions made by Senators Casey, Cassells and Murphy on the hospitality VAT rate, which is also very important. As Members will be aware, the current rate of 9% is scheduled to return to 13.5% on 1 March, as indicated in budget 2023. I strongly urge the Government to push the timeline back by an additional six months until September 2023. This would allow SMEs some breathing space as they attempt to come through the energy cost increase. It is essential that we provide SMEs with the greatest possible supports during this period. From talking to people in the restaurant, bar and hotel trade, I know the VAT hospitality rate is a very important issue for them.

I especially welcome the 50% reduction in the fee for special exemption orders, from €410 to €205. This is a significant boost to the late-night economy. Having spoken to operators as late as this evening and bodies representing the sector in recent weeks, I know the reduction will make a significant difference.

The Government has delivered an ambitious budget that will make a real and meaningful difference to the lives of people in this country. Any day that can be done is a good day. Small and medium enterprises will still need further support and I look forward to discussing that issue in the days and weeks ahead.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming. This is a cost-of-living budget of more than €90 billion. We see the Government responding to a need and an energy crisis for families throughout Ireland. We hear from the Opposition that retrofitting needs to be done but we need people in place to do that job. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, has provided for 4,000 additional places on the apprenticeship programme. This will ensure people are trained up to deliver the trades and skills we need to do the work.

We also have major shortages in many areas, for example, healthcare assistants. We need to ramp up the upskilling of people in all sorts of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, qualifications in order that they can take on these roles.

I was pleased to see we will again reduce the teacher-pupil ratio. That is crucial in our primary schools. We know the impact of early years education so it is crucial that we do this. It is also important that we fight for teachers in rural areas and ensure we maintain teachers in primary schools. We will also have 2,000 special needs assistant, SNA, posts and free primary school books. This will be a huge benefit to families throughout the country.

The third level student contribution will be reduced by €1,000 this year and €500 next year. This will have a considerable impact on students and their families. The PhD stipend for researchers who are on Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, or Irish Research Council, IRC, grants, will increase by more than €500.

We are also seeing the largest ever special education budget. This Government, in particular Fine Gael, is focused on special education. We know through the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, Deputy Madigan, that more than 27% of the budget for education will be spent on special education.

The National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, is being offered to schools and it is crucial that they have access to this when identifying special educational needs in special schools and special educational classes. Its funding has been increased by €2.9 million which will fund 54 additional professional and technical staff.

We live in uncertain times. It is crucial that this budget will give certainty to families.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister of State. I also welcome today's budget which is very fair and targeted. I compliment the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform on their prudent management of the economy, which means we have the funding in place to deliver a budget today. Earlier today, the Minister cited the example of a single pensioner living alone in receipt of fuel allowance who will receive €2,375 between now and the end of 2023. That is extremely positive and it is an example of the targeted funding provided the most vulnerable in society.

I join a number of colleagues in expressing disappointment that the tourism VAT rate of 9% was not extended and that no signal has been given that it will be extended. I agree this needs to be looked at for the 2023 season. As I said, a number of hotels, particularly in Dublin city,

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that gouged should not be responsible for an entire industry being targeted like this.

I welcome the extension of the health device scheme, which is something the Opposition was not in favour of. More than 35,000 people have availed of this scheme since 2017. I welcome the addition of at least two more years of this scheme.

I have been well known for promoting saving An Post and I am delighted that €10 million was allocated in the budget for 2023, with another €10 million for 2024, followed by another €10 million for 2025 for the scheme to maintain the network throughout the country. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, in particular, for her work on that.

Senator Dolan mentioned significant investment in special education. There will be a total of 686 additional teachers and 1,194 additional special needs assistants, SNAs, with an additional €20 million allocated for the summer programme for 2023, which needs an overhaul. That funding will put special education on a steady footing for the year ahead.

Overall, it is a very fair and targeted budget for those who are most vulnerable in our society.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank the Senators for their contributions. I have taken copious notes of what each Member said and I will bring them back directly to the two Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and McGrath. I know Members will be discussing some of the expenditure measures in more detail immediately ahead. I want to touch on the comments people made. Some of them were repeated and some people had different angles on the same topic, which is fair.

Senator Casey said the reason we could do this today is because of the good management of the economy in recent years. Somebody pointed out that what is happening in relation to packages in other countries is all on borrowed money. Not a penny is being borrowed to finance what is being done here today. That is an extraordinary achievement for any country anywhere in the world. It is an example of how well the economy was managed during Covid. We kept businesses alive and pumped money into them, so when Covid was over, their employees were still on hand and they all came back to work. We now have 2.5 million people in the workforce. The hospitality industry is suffering, as we speak, trying to recruit staff. Things have gone a full circle in that regard. Obviously, the main issue that was mentioned was VAT in the hospitality sector. All I can do is repeat that the Minister said today that the current rate will continue until 28 February 2023. He did not say anything more or less. He did not say it was going to stop before then or that it will go on beyond that. He just used one specific date. That is where we are for the next five months. Senator Casey raised that issue.

Senator McDowell raised the issue of VAT on newspapers, which many people said needs a long discussion. On property, there is the new vacant home tax. In particular, he felt self-assessment was the issue. That was mentioned by another Senator as well. Somebody suggested it would make a joke of the system, because who would own up to pay a tax? This tax was based on houses that are in the local property tax net already. Revenue has been clear in following up on houses around the country it believes are habitable but were not in the property tax net in the past two years. It has a comprehensive list that is different from what may be coming from the census of population, where somebody calls once or twice over a couple of weeks and finds no one there. The Revenue Commissioners list is the most accurate. Somebody queried the local authorities did not do as well. Simply, I have great confidence in Revenue. Its people are the best to collect money in Ireland. The local property tax is self-assessment and the rate

is almost 100%. Income tax in this country is self-assessment and the rates are very high. The idea of saying we do not trust the people to do their tax return sounds like a popular thing to say. However, in reality, it does not bear any truth when 97% or 98% of people operate the self-assessment situation because they know they are subject to audit, which keeps people on the straight and narrow. Self-assessment is the way to go on that.

Senator McDowell asked about over-the-shop allowance as well, which was mentioned by Senator Maria Byrne in respect of Limerick in particular. She also highlighted the issue that people would now not pay the top rate of tax until €40,000. I mentioned the rental credit and the issue of the rollover relief for young farmers.

Senator Gavan raised the issue of energy costs. Definitely, there are mixed views in the House around the three €200 payments and how much we get before Christmas. There is the situation where some will get it through their bill and others who have meters and do a top-up can get it on a more ongoing basis every time they top up. The specifics of that have yet to be worked out.

On the issue of rental credit, again, there always an element of truth in what people say, such as that it does not cover everything and landlords can continue to put up the rent on existing tenants. Of course, most people know that most areas now are rent pressure zones and that cannot and does not happen. Again, it is an easy thing to say.

Senator Paul Gavan: It is factually incorrect-----

(Interruptions).

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Sean Fleming: In rent pressure zones, there can be a specific increase that is specifically limited to the figures in the zones. Obviously, when there is change of tenancies, that is a different situation. The next issue was mentioned by several Senators. Again, I will repeat the phrase that there was an element of truth in what they said, but it was not the full truth - one Senator gave the full truth - regarding some of the people on social protection, that the €12 increase they will be getting is totally unsatisfactory. It has been made very clear today. To take a simple, typical example of somebody on social welfare, for example, a single pensioner living alone and in receipt of a fuel allowance, that person will receive an additional €2,375 between now and the end of next year. That is €45 a week; it is not €12 a week. The €12 a week is one little bit of what is being done. Those people will have the fuel allowance, which is an extra payment of €400, the living alone allowance of €200, the energy credit of €600, and the extra double week in addition to the Christmas bonus, which was always there. That person, who people in the House have said will only get €12 a week, but it is €12 a week on one particular aspect of all the increases we are giving, will get a €45 a week increase – not €12. It is important people get the full, rounded picture of what is happening and it is important we give the full, rounded picture on that.

The free book scheme was mentioned, as well as the extra Garda recruits, which are very helpful. Templemore will be able to process those on an ongoing basis. There will be a new recruitment procedure for the Garda shortly.

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Again, people said there were targeted measures and universal measures, which is correct. The childcare cost changes were welcomed by many in the House, as was the fact more people are getting the fuel allowance. The social welfare increases, as I just mentioned, were not just the €12 that I highlighted. A number of people welcomed the reduction in the VAT rate of 9% for newspapers as well.

Senator Shane Cassells: I apologise for interrupting. The closure was announced today of the *Fingal Independent*-----

Senator Paul Gavan: Is that allowed?

(Interruptions).

Senator Paul Gavan: It is because he is a Government Member.

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Again, there are mixed views on the efficiency of Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI. Some said it was a very efficient organisation and others said it was quite slow. Others said we should spend more on retrofitting, but started off by saying they would abolish every scheme that is there already. If we abolish all the schemes that are up and running and starting to have an impact and start from scratch, in about three years' time, we might get a house retrofitted. The idea that we will do more by abolishing every one of the schemes in place, as was said today, will not be accepted. If somebody supports the policy of abolishing every retrofit scheme in the country, that is fair enough. However, I would not accept that approach and the people will not accept that. They are promising something in the fine day ahead.

Senator Lynn Boylan: The Minister of State's own party-----

(Interruptions).

An Cathaoirleach: Senators-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: Many people mentioned the help to buy scheme. That has helped 35,000 people-----

(Interruptions).

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Am I okay on time?

An Cathaoirleach: You are grand. Keep going.

Deputy Sean Fleming: A number of people mentioned the help to buy scheme, from which 35,000 people have benefited. There is a clearly a philosophical difference in this Chamber, and in other chambers and between people. I am one of those people who got mortgage interest

relief to help me buy my house. I would always like to live in a country where the Government supports people buying their own houses. Some people have a philosophical difficulty with the State not owning every house in the country. There is a different philosophical view on that and it does not have to do with money. I support homeownership and I support the State supporting people to get homeownership.

A number of issues were mentioned relating to extra people getting the GP cards and removing the hospital inpatient charges, as well as on higher education.

7 o'clock

A number of people spoke towards the end of the debate about the importance of special education. There is a big emphasis on special education facilities in secondary schools because, while we all know there has been a big expansion of such facilities in the primary sector over recent years, now there is an emerging issue at second level.

The question of the €10,000 for post offices was mentioned in the context of its importance in keeping those local facilities fully in operation.

One topic I should have mentioned in my earlier statement - one of the Senators mentioned it early in the debate - is an assessment of gender equality and equality generally in respect of the budget. The new report Budget 2023: Beyond GDP - Quality of Life Assessment refers, among other things, to the distributional impact of the main tax and welfare measures in the budget. The report shows that that impact is strongly progressive and that households in the lowest income deciles will benefit the most from the budgetary measures introduced over the two periods detailed in the report. That continues the trend of progressive budgets that was found also in the Department's analysis of budget 2022.

I thank all Senators for their time and all their contributions. It is good that we had a positive, healthy exchange. As I said, my officials and I will bring all the points raised back to the two relevant Ministers for consideration in respect of the finance Bill and the social welfare Bill, which will come before this House in due course.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all Senators for their contributions.

Budget 2023 (Public Expenditure and Reform): Statements

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, is most welcome to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Seanad to contribute to the debate on budget 2023, which the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform presented to the Dáil just a few hours ago. Budget 2023 is first and foremost a cost-of-living budget. The Government is delivering a budget against an extraordinary backdrop of uncertainty and challenge. We know that many of our people are finding it very difficult to make ends meet, are facing difficult choices in their daily lives and are seeing their household bills rise seemingly by the day. We know that many are genuinely worried about what lies ahead in the months to come.

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Budget 2023 sets out a substantial package of measures for the remainder of 2022 and into 2023. That builds on the €3 billion package already delivered over the past 12 months. Today the Minister, Deputy McGrath, has announced further winter cost-of-living, business and public service support measures totalling €4.4 billion, comprising €1.7 billion to be administered through the tax system and €2.7 billion in spending measures, with €0.3 billion of that amount funded from the contingency reserve. This is in addition to a core budget 2023 package of €6.9 billion: €5.8 billion in expenditure and €1.1 billion in tax measures.

There will be immediate assistance, including electricity credits totalling €600 for all households, to be paid in three instalments of €200. The total cost of this measure is €1.2 billion. In addition to the normal weekly fuel allowance payment, a further payment of €400 will be made before Christmas to recipients of that support. We have also provided for a once-off double-week “cost-of-living support” to all qualifying social protection recipients; an additional lump sum payment of €500 to those in receipt of the working family payment; a double child benefit payment to all qualifying households in November worth €140 per child in addition to the normal monthly payment; a payment of €500 in November to those who qualify for the carer’s support grant; and a one-off payment of €500 in November to those who qualify for disability allowance, invalidity pension or the blind pension. The Government has also announced the extension of the 20% reduction in public transport fares and the young adult card discount of 50% on all operators’ services to the end of 2023. The total value of the new cost-of-living measures for households is €2.2 billion. This will provide much-needed help to individuals and families.

Taking account of the pressure that rising prices are putting on the delivery of public services, this budget allocates funds across a number of different areas in order to ensure continuity of service delivery. This includes a further €100 million to be made available to schools this year to assist with energy and other costs and with school transport, with an additional €10 million provided for further and higher education institutions. Some €60 million is allocated to local authorities and €110 million to bodies funded by the Department of Health, including nursing homes and section 39 organisations. An allocation of €60 million is provided to ease the pressure on not-for-profit and voluntary organisations in the arts sector, sports clubs, the Gaeltacht and the community and voluntary sector.

In addition to the winter cost-of-living initiative measures that the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, announced for the remainder of 2022, the Government is providing a social protection package for 2023 worth €1 billion to support households and families across the country. This will include an increase of €12 per week in social protection payments; an increase in the working family payment threshold by €40 per week; an increase in the fuel allowance means limit from €120 to €200 above the relevant rate of the contributory State pension and, for over-70s specifically, an increase in the weekly fuel allowance means limit to €500 for single people and to €1,000 for couples; and a rise in the qualified child increase for under-12s to €42 per week and for over-12s to €50 per week.

In core expenditure terms, the medium-term budgetary strategy has been modified on a once-off basis for 2023 to allow core public expenditure to grow by 6.3%. Overall, in 2023, the Government is providing €90.4 billion in public expenditure. Some €85.9 billion of that is core expenditure, an increase of €5.8 billion over the figure for 2022. This includes an additional €800 million which will be made available under the national development plan for core capital spending to help in delivering the largest, greenest and most ambitious infrastructure plan in the history of the State.

The Government is also holding €4.5 billion in contingency in 2023 to continue to respond to the aftermath of the pandemic, the repercussions of Brexit and the ramifications of the war in Ukraine.

In order to make childcare more affordable and to improve availability for parents, the Government has announced a reduction of up to 25% in the weekly fee for those availing of the national childcare scheme, costing €121 million, which will put up to €175 a month, or €2,106 a year, back in the pockets of parents next year. Further allocation of €59 million is made to the newly set up core funding model, which will provide for extra hours and enhanced capacity.

The Department of Education is allocated €9.6 billion in 2023, including a capital budget of €860 million for school building projects and funding to prioritise special education, allowing for an additional 686 teachers and 1,194 special needs assistants, SNAs.

The Government is allocating €3.9 billion for the higher education, further education and training, research and innovation sectors in 2023. That funding will support our delivery on the Housing for All and climate action plans by investing in skills through apprenticeships and further education and training, including over 2,000 Skillnet places in sustainable finance, green tech and climate change. An additional €36 million is allocated to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment supporting investment in areas such as digitalisation and the green economy.

Budget 2023 allocates €23.4 billion for health, including €1.15 billion increase in core current funding. Funding is provided for the recruitment of up to 6,000 additional staff. To tackle waiting lists next year, a further €225 million has been allocated to give an overall package of €443 million.

A record €6.3 billion in Exchequer funding is allocated to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, of which the majority, €3.5 billion, will be for capital investment in housing. We have announced a €99 million increase in funding to the social housing current expenditure programme to support nearly 6,500 new social housing units, through approved housing bodies, AHB, new build delivery and leases, a further €1.7 billion to deliver the social housing new build target of 9,100 homes, and an unprecedented €87 million allocated to the retrofitting of social housing in 2023, demonstrating the State's commitment to help people reduce their energy bills and to ensure that Ireland meets our climate targets.

Budget 2023 also provides record Exchequer capital investment of more than €930 million in our water services in 2023, and significant funding for our heritage programme, particularly including a focus on resourcing our National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The implementation of the national broadband plan has passed 75,000 households, with funding of €217.5 million allocated in 2023, to reach a target of up to 185,000 households by the end of next year. Some €390 million is provided for rural and community development and €11 million for the continued response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis at community level.

As recent developments in global affairs have shown, we need to reduce our dependence on energy imports, particularly from Russia, by becoming more efficient in how we use energy and especially by accelerating the shift to renewable energy in line with our existing climate goals. That is why the Government is providing €850 million in capital investment to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications in 2023. Some €337 million of this funding will go towards grants for energy efficiency, supporting in excess of 37,000 home energy

upgrades. This is the highest funding commitment ever to energy efficiency.

Some €4.3 million is provided to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support the formal establishment of the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, which will be a key enabler in respect of Ireland's ambitions in the offshore renewable energy sector.

As set out in the programme for Government, every additional euro raised in carbon tax will be returned to the people through energy-efficiency upgrades, social protection schemes to protect the most vulnerable and measures to incentivise farming in a more environmentally friendly way. An additional €211 million will be made available in 2023, bringing the total carbon tax revenue available in 2023 for investment to €623 million. Almost half the funds raised by the carbon tax will be invested in improving the energy efficiency of our homes. Carbon tax funding of €81 million will be provided to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in 2023 to fund the new agri-climate rural environment scheme in 2023 as detailed in Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy strategic plan. This will support up to 50,000 farmers who undertake actions that will support improved outcomes on biodiversity, climate, air and water quality. In addition, €2.14 billion is allocated to the Department for 2023, an increase of €283 million on the 2022 allocation. More than €500 million of the allocation will further strengthen the sustainability of Irish agriculture and drive the sectors climate ambition.

Government is allocating €3.5 billion to the Department of Transport. Of this, €2.6 billion is capital funding to transport, representing the highest level of capital investment since 2008. This will help us to progress key transport infrastructural projects, including BusConnects, MetroLink and the DART+ programme. This investment in our transport network, the reductions announced in passenger fares, and the continued roll-out of electric vehicle, EV, grants will greatly assist us in meeting our ambitious climate targets.

To support the tourism, culture, arts, Gaeltacht, sports and media sectors in progressing through the post Covid-19 pandemic recovery phase, budget 2023 provides an additional €45 million in core funding, and temporary funding of €90 million in 2023 to help consolidate their recovery. The Department's overall allocation of more than €1.1 billion includes €130 million to maintain the Arts Council's funding in 2023 and €15 million for Fáilte Ireland initiatives.

I commend the budget to the House and I look forward to engaging with colleagues on these important matters.

Senator Seán Kyne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach and I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I commend the Government on its work on budget 2023. As I said earlier on the finance part of it, everything that was done in the budget was done because it was necessary but also because we were able to do it. The resources were there because of a strong economy and because the supports were put in place last year and the year before to protect jobs and provide the linkage between employers and employees with the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and with everything that was done to keep people in work. The economy and the rate of employment have been maintained and enhanced over the past number of years.

There is a significant windfall in corporation tax, which is welcome. On the other hand, it is somewhat worrying that there is a reliance on it but Ministers are aware of that. That said, they have put some of the resources that accrued this year into a reserve fund, with €2 billion put into this fund this year and €4 billion to be put in next year. That is the prudent thing to do because there is that question mark over the medium- to long-term reliance on corporation tax.

Is buiséad costais mhaireachtála í buiséad 2023 atá dírithe chun cabhrú le daoine agus lena dteaghlaigh, le bearta do na daoine is leochailí agus do na daoine ar an meán atá faoi bhrú. Sa bhuiséad seo tá an Rialtas ag cur níos mó airgid ar ais i bpócaí trí cháin ioncaim a ghearradh agus le híocaíochtaí pinsin agus leasa shóisialaigh a mhéadú do theaghlaigh, do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas agus do chúramóirí. Tá an Rialtas ag cabhrú le daoine agus lena dteaghlaigh leis na costais mhaireachtála sna réimsí mar chúram leanaí, iompar poiblí agus costais a bhaineann le leanbh a chur ar scoil, nó sábháil airgid dá dtithe féin, is é sin dá chéad teach.

Tá an Rialtas ag tacú le gnó trí chabhair le comhlachtaí a gcuid billí fuinnimh a íoc an geimhreadh seo.

Táimid ag cabhrú ó thaobh na gcostas a bhaineann le bheith ag dul ar choláiste trí tháillí a ghearradh agus le deontais na mac léinn a ardú.

Tá pobal níos sábháilte agus níos láidre a thógáil trí níos mó acmhainní a chur ar fáil don Gharda Síochána agus d'Óglaigh na hÉireann a thugann cosaint dúinn.

Is é an tús is fearr chun é sin a chinntiú do gach leanbh ná go mbeidh infheistíocht mhór i gcúram leanaí agus sa luathoideachas.

Lena chois sin, tá €2 billiún freisin á chur ar leataobh i mbliana agus €4 billiún an bhliain seo chugainn i gcúlchiste chun Éire a chosaint sa toadhcháil.

Mar a dúirt mé, táimid in ann na rudaí seo a dhéanamh toisc go bhfuil sé d'acmhainn againn de bharr bainistithe cheart ar an ngeilleagar le roinnt blianta anuas. Toisc go bhfuil fás agus fostaíocht láidir againn, táimid in ann barrachas buiséid a chur ar fáil chun soláthar a dhéanamh le pacáiste mór an bhuiséid seo agus ciste fós á choinneáil againn i gcúlchiste. This is the managing of the resources that one has and the leaving of some aside in reserve for difficulties that may or may not arise. Who could have predicted Covid-19 in 2019 or, in 2021, that the following year would see an invasion of Ukraine and the impact that would have on the economy, on gas and oil, and on the rate of inflation? All of these are unknowns and we have to be prepared for the unknown, which is recognised.

I certainly very much welcome the increase in the numbers of teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, and the number of gardaí in the package of supports that was announced, together with the increased supports in the spending on defence.

Electricity credits, with three payments of €200, or €600 over the period of the scheme, are important because we know that one of the major cost-of-living pressures at the moment is in electricity and we know why that is the case.

Other budget provisions include the €400 lump sum to be made available before Christmas to recipients of the fuel allowance; cost-of-living supports to all qualifying social protection recipients; an increase in pension payments of €12 per week; payment of the Christmas bonus; an additional lump sum payment of €500 to those in receipt of the working family payment; a double child benefit payment in November; a payment of €500 to those who qualify for the carer's support also in November; and a once-off payment before Christmas to those in receipt of the living alone allowance. There is also a once-off reduction in the student contribution of €1,000 for eligible students in the 2022-23 academic year, a €1,000 increase in the postgraduate fee contribution, and the extension of the 20% public transport fare reduction and youth travel card discount of 50% on all operator services to the end of 2023. There is an increase in

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working family payment thresholds. The qualifying income threshold for fuel allowance will increase as will the rate of domiciliary care allowance. These measures are all very welcome and necessary. We are able to do it because we have the necessary resources. Childcare is a cost that many families have. The reduction of up to 25% in the weekly fee for those availing of the national childcare scheme is also to be welcomed.

On health, while I welcome the extension of GP care I am slightly concerned about the pressure this could put on general practitioners. There are communities where GPs are under pressure and certain communities where there are no GPs at the moment. We certainly have to be able to engage with the medical colleges to ensure we have that throughput of doctors and that they have the support to establish practices in areas as well. The removal of hospital in-patient charges for public patients is welcome also.

On education, buying school books can add pressure for families. From my own days in school, too often books were updated with minor changes and families had the cost of all that. It is probably more prevalent now. We need to look at that practice. The cost will now be absorbed by the State but is it the right thing that this is happening? Funding was announced for 4,800 additional apprenticeship places and 4,000 registrations under the Housing for All and climate action plans. That is welcome. There is great demand and opportunity in the whole retrofitting area. I know there is engagement and places are being provided in the technological universities, TUs.

I mentioned the energy credit for households and refer now to the supports for energy for businesses, which are most important as well. If the businesses are not able to survive, that would have a knock-on impact on job retention. Certainly the supports that have been announced for mid-size and larger companies are significant. The Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar has done a lot of work on that. The temporary business support scheme acknowledges the impact of high energy costs on businesses. It is welcome. I acknowledge the work of all in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in the forming of the budget today.

Senator Paul Gavan: The Minister of State is very welcome. I will try not to repeat points I made in my first speech with the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath. There are some points in the budget that I do welcome. The decision to cut student fees by €1,000 is very welcome. I do find it bizarre that the Government is going to put that back up by €500 the following year. Perhaps that is something the Government should reflect on. Hard-pressed parents might not tolerate it, having seen their fees reduced by €1,000 this year because of the cost-of-living crisis, if it reverts to just a €500 cut the following year. That seems to be what the Minister said today. If I have misunderstood, the Minister of State might please come back to me. It seems a strange way to proceed. Sinn Féin's position is that we believe fees should be abolished over a number of years. We believe education is a right and not a privilege. I would be interested in the Minister of State's comments on that point.

The provision in respect of primary school books is very welcome. It is something we have said for years in here. I recall the days when Fergus Finlay was in Barnardos and constantly made this point about how we can make a real difference for families by taking out the cost of returning to school each year. It is a welcome measure and I acknowledge that. A double payment of child benefit is something Sinn Féin has called for as well. We are glad to see it in the budget.

The key point, which I will reiterate because it is so important, is about giving families cer-

tainty. That is our difficulty in respect of the Government's decision on these individual energy credits, the €200 payments. I understand people will welcome them. The difficulty is that we know prices will continue to go up and that energy providers are really profit-gouging in some cases. That has not been said but we know it is the case. I would have every expectation that the €600 credit, provided in three €200 tranches, will be snaffled up in price rises. That is why we would prefer to see the energy price cap. I did say in my earlier speech that there are no simple solutions here. There are flaws whichever way we go about this. The energy price cap would make the difference in terms of giving families certainty. I do not think families are going to be switching on the heating this evening on the basis of today's budget, although it is quite chilly outside. They do not know what they are facing. Our price cap would have given them that certainty.

I want to check one thing which the Minister of State might confirm for me. As far as I can see, there does not seem to be one single additional acute bed delivered today in the budget. The Minister of State might let me know if I am right. I want to be fair to him but I do not see it there. On the situation in housing, I have to be frank. The Government is failing on housing. The Government's own targets are not going to be met this year of 12,600 units in social and affordable housing. It is going to be way off that from what I can see. We believe there should be 20,000 social and affordable houses built. In our budget costed by the Department of Finance, we have shown how that can be done. The homelessness figures are shocking. I reiterate that homelessness has gone up by 25% since April of last year. Child homelessness is up by 43% since April of last year. That is the record of this Government. It is clearly failing in housing. We need to see real action and I do not see it.

I am thinking particularly of the people I know in Limerick who still have adult children living with them at home at the moment, which is quite an unnatural state of being. They are living at home because they cannot afford the rents in Limerick. There are shocking rents of €1,200 or €1,400. I made the point earlier that rent increases in Limerick over this year have been €1,800. The idea of a renter's tax credit was first introduced by us. Our credit would certainly be a lot more than €500. It would be one month's rent. The key point is that we would freeze rents. If we do not freeze rents, we will end up with rent hikes continuing. I know of landlords who will be very quick to snaffle up that €500, unfortunately. The key issue in terms of affordability of renting has not been addressed in this budget. I asked the Minister who was here before the Minister of State to tell us where they came up with the figure of €500. It certainly does not relate to rent in an affordable way. As a colleague of mine said here, it is effectively about one week's rent out of 52. Is that the only difference the Government is going to make for renters who are getting hammered to the point where they cannot save money to buy homes of their own? It is a fundamental problem and it is now a generational problem. There is a whole generation of young people in their twenties who frankly have no hope of owning a home unless we see a drastic change in policy. The drastic change in policy we are calling for is the very one the Government's own think tank, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, called for, namely a doubling of investment in housing. The ESRI looked at the Government's housing programme and said the Government could double the figures, the State coffers would allow it to do so and it should be done. The Government has not done so and it is causing significant distress in terms of homelessness but also in terms of a lack of hope.

One of the things that concerns me about this budget is that I do not think there is enough in it to stop many of the young people I am talking to from continuing on in their decision to emigrate. That is now another factor that has come back into play in our country, ironically

not because of lack of work, which was normally the reason people would leave, but because they cannot afford to actually live in this country. On my way to the protest on Saturday I met a young teacher in Limerick who came on the bus with me up to Dublin. She explained how she had left Dublin the year before, giving up a teaching job in Dublin, because she could not afford the rent there. She is now living with her parents and plans to go to Dubai in a year's time. That is what is happening to our best and brightest young people. If the Minister of State can point to the measures in this budget that are going to help that person, he might please do so, but I beg him not to suggest the €500 tax credit is going to be part of that because it is next to worthless, frankly.

I would be interested to hear the Minister of State's views on the tax changes. We make no apologies for the fact that we would have focused tax cuts around universal social charge, USC, and low and middle-income workers. The bulk of the tax changes in today's budget benefit just one out of four workers in the State. I will cite again the example I gave earlier, because the previous Minister of State did not acknowledge it. Someone earning €135,000 per year will benefit to the tune of €830 in tax reliefs whereas someone earning €36,000 per year will benefit by just €190. That is just grossly unequal. It is not what will benefit our nurses, teachers and private sector workers on €36,000. The Government has spent over €1 billion on tax measures that will benefit mainly just one in four of our workers. Overall, this package is not one that delivers for people. As I said, the shine is coming off this budget very quickly.

I have a last point, on which I will be interested in hearing the Minister of State's comments. The only thing the Government has done for people who rely on home heating oil is increase the cost. One in three people in this country relies on home heating oil, yet the Government has effectively put the price up. How are those people supposed to manage? Why have there not been more measures for them, such as that suggested by Sinn Féin, namely, a focused retrofit scheme for people who use solid fuel? More could have been done in this regard today. It is another budget of missed opportunities.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber on this important day. I welcome my friends from Newbridge in the Visitors Gallery.

As we know, a budget is more than just a series of numbers on a page; it is an embodiment of all our values. Budget 2023 is a very clear commitment to the Government's values and those of my party, Fianna Fáil, on whose behalf I am speaking. Those values concern an Ireland for all and equal opportunities. This budget is certainly very fair and progressive and it responds to our current challenges. There are progressive supports for households, businesses and schools. The budget also supports families with childcare costs, students and those who face school costs. We cannot forget the help-to-buy scheme extension, which is important to those who want to buy their own homes.

Budget 2023 was unveiled today against a backdrop of considerable international unrest. There is no doubt that this is one of the most crucial budgets of this Oireachtas term. Many households and businesses that were very well served by the Government during the Covid pandemic face a winter of further challenge and, of course, adversity. However, I am thankful that the Government has again shown its commitment to workers, families and small businesses. No budget could ever absorb every cost, but today's budget strikes a really good balance between what is possible within our financial powers and protecting our longer term financial stability.

I commend the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, on putting his very clear stamp on this budget and ensuring it will intervene in a timely manner to assist households with the escalating cost of living. We have seen a huge rise in what is available for the winter cost-of-living package in addition to business and public service support measures, totalling €4.4 billion. That is incredibly significant.

The electricity credits, totalling €600 for all households, will be paid in three instalments of €200, one before Christmas and two early in 2023. This will certainly help every single household. It will make a tangible difference in paying electricity bills and help support families and households through the winter ahead. We know it is a tried and tested measure that can be implemented, and we know it will make a huge difference. In addition, the €500 tax credit per renter is an exceedingly positive measure. I have already spoken today to renters from south Kildare who are delighted to see action to help alleviate the pressures they are under.

With regard to childcare, I was very pleased to see the funding to support a reduction of up to 25% in the weekly fee applying to those availing of the national childcare scheme. This comes at a significant cost of €121 million, but it is an important measure. It will put up to €175 per month, or €2,106 per year, back in the pockets of parents next year.

The allocation of €59 million to the recently established core funding model will provide for extra hours and enhanced capacity. Again, this is very significant. It will be payable in November.

As education spokesperson for Fianna Fáil, I have been heavily involved in the pre-budget process and have worked closely with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and her senior team to help devise budget 2023 and determine what it will mean in terms of education supports. I am pleased that we have been able to deliver so much in one year's budget to support parents, families, students and the whole school community. A key issue for me was the roll-out of free school books for primary students, with over €50 million in funding provided. We will see an additional 370 teachers put in place to reduce the primary staffing schedule by one point to 23:1, the lowest ever level. This is the third successive reduction since the Government was formed. It is without precedent and something I have been lobbying hard for since my election to the Oireachtas in 2016.

The supports being put in place for special education are very significant. An additional 686 special education teachers will be put in place to help support pupils with additional needs across special classes, special schools and mainstream settings. There will also be an additional 1,194 special needs assistants. How we treat and support vulnerable students is a crucial aspect of our education system. There has been a huge step in the right direction. This is just a flavour of what we are doing in education, but it is very important.

As a proud Kildare woman and friend of and advocate for our local Defence Forces personnel and their families, I am pleased to see the increase of €67 million over the corresponding 2022 budget allocation. This provides a financial platform for the defence sector to initiate the required transformation, as recommended by the Commission on the Defence Forces. It is a long time coming but it is worth it now that we are here. It will assist in bringing our defence capabilities closer to European norms while also ensuring that proper pay and allowances are given to our Defence Forces. The defence group pay and pensions budget has increased to €823 million and is important, including in meeting the pay and allowance costs of civilian employees.

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From a housing perspective, I acknowledge the continued dedication of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in his housing brief. The retention of the help-to-buy scheme, which has already supported more than 32,000 buyers with the deposit for their homes, is a significant measure to support buyers in what remains a very expensive market. We have seen €250 million for lending under the local authority home loan scheme, under which over €471 million has been loaned since February 2018, helping many households to achieve house ownership. This is a scheme in which many who attend my clinics in Newbridge have a great interest. It is one that will help them to get on the property ladder.

I commend the supports that have been put in place for higher education students. If they have paid student fees already, they will get €1,000 back this year, and will have a minimum reduction of €500 next year. I refer to improvements to the SUSI grant plus the double payment in November.

The extension of the 50% and 20% reductions on public transport is significant. The 50% reduction has been extended to 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds and also mature students in full-time education.

Let me mention some of the measures put in place for women's health. The extension of free contraception for women up to the age of 30 is very welcome. That there is funding for the very first time for IVF in this State is really important. This is something on which my colleague, Senator Ardagh, and I had been working very hard. As chairperson of the all-party Oireachtas group on dementia, I can say that the extra €2.1 million to roll out day services for people with dementia and the ring-fencing of 15% of home care hours for people with dementia are very important measures.

Living in safe and secure homes is something that we all want. Therefore, the addition of 1,000 new Garda recruits will help.

In conclusion, I commend the tireless work of this Government in providing a very comprehensive, fair and progressive package to tackle an unprecedented crisis. This budget will support the people of Ireland and is a huge step towards delivering an Ireland for all.

Senator Frances Black: Can I share half of my time with my colleague, Senator Flynn?

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Frances Black: I welcome the Minister of State to the House.

Budget day is a very busy day of drama and pageantry, when Ministers are congratulated and denounced in equal measure. All of the drama and pageantry can feel very far removed from the people most directly impacted by the decisions made in this House. The people whose voices we most need to hear are those who experience deprivation and want. They are not part of our public discourse and at times like this I feel acutely aware of their absence.

Budgets are moral documents that illustrate what we do and do not value. An omission can say just as much as what is included. Does budget 2023 reflect the values of our Republic? There are many issues of concern in this budget. My colleague Senator Ruane covered many of these issues when she spoke eloquently during the earlier debate. I will focus on the single issue of mental health which, as members will know, is very close to my heart. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, cares deeply about these issues. I have worked with her on many differ-

ent mental health issues. I commend her on the €72.8 million commitment in the budget. She has fought hard for the funding and I am certain that it will make a profound difference in the lives of vulnerable people. Mental health issues affect us all but not equally. We are making several steps forward in this area but we must ensure the groups in our society who experience the most acute suffering, including asylum seekers in direct provision, people in prisons and Travellers, get the mental healthcare they need. Senator Flynn will speak about Travellers in a few minutes. People who are on the margins of society have been failed by the State and we owe them a duty of care.

I have congratulated the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on her role in securing mental health funding. I congratulate the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, for the €32.2 million in funding for women's health. As we all know, Irish women have been let down by the State and the healthcare system for decades. We are still dealing with the fallout from many of these failures. I welcome the new funding, which suggests we are entering a new and more enlightened era. However, I will flag an issue that has been raised by Mental Health Reform and other organisations. I refer to the lack of a specialised perinatal mental healthcare programme. At present, when new mothers require inpatient treatment for perinatal mental health issues, they are treated as regular inpatients and separated from their babies, which is a truly heart-breaking scenario. We need supports that care for women who suffer perinatal mental health illness to be provided in a way that supports their bond with their newborn children.

I have made mental health issues a key part of my work in this Chamber. Even before I became a Member of this House, I was very dedicated to the cause. I left school at a very young age, but I went back to college to train as a therapist in order to give back and do something more than just music. I find it a privilege to work with people who are impacted by these difficulties. I feel very privileged to have gained the confidence of people who have taken the very brave step to seek help, particularly people in addiction or with mental health difficulties and the family members who live with people with addiction problems. The work is fragile and fraught but it is wonderful to work with people who are trying to step into recovery. It is profoundly difficult work, and the people and organisations who undertake such work deserve support as it would provide certainty and peace of mind for these organisations.

One of the big letdowns of this budget is that so much of what has been offered to community and voluntary groups is one-off core funding, which is worrying. The budget provides €110 million for section 39 providers, €60 million for community groups and €7 million for groups working with addiction, mental health, Travellers and refugees. That is a lot of money, and it will go to many worthy causes and do a lot of good, but it does not replace a properly resourced and supported community and voluntary sector. When I perused the pre-budget submissions for the sector, it struck me that organisations repeatedly wrote about the need to move to a multi-year funding model. They seek that because they need to be assured that there will be funding beyond the next calendar year in order for them to plan for the future and expand the number of staff to deal with increasing demand. Many community organisations are operating close to the edge of closure. In the scramble to be included in this funding, I am sure some organisations will scrape by but others will not.

In 2009, I founded the RISE Foundation to provide counselling and support to people with a loved one who struggle with addiction. Organisations like mine that serve vulnerable segments of society are really struggling. These people are more in need than ever before due to the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. These organisations do not have access to enough funding to sustain their services. The constant struggle for survival takes a huge toll on me and

many other people in the sector. We do essential work and fill the gaps in the State's provision of services yet it always feels like we are an afterthought. It is difficult to struggle on when the future is uncertain and we need a more farsighted vision.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I have only two minutes in which to bring a matter to the attention of the Minister of State. Not all people from vulnerable communities have availed of the €200 electricity credit that was promised in last year's budget and was meant to relieve families. Again, the most vulnerable in society who share one connection happen to be members of the Traveller community. Twenty-two families share six meter point reference numbers, or MPRNs, in Sligo. Nine families at another site share a single MPRN and therefore received just €22 each in respect of their electricity costs, even though the payment is meant to be €200 per family. The National Traveller Money Advice & Budgeting Service has written to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, seeking a meeting to resolve the issue. We were told that the local authority in Cork paid €200 out of the Traveller accommodation budget. While I welcome that, it should not be the case. We need Traveller accommodation money specifically for Traveller accommodation. When the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, said that he was going to spend money on Traveller accommodation before Christmas, we did not understand that it was going to be given for electricity. When we wrote to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, his reply told us to deal with the local authorities or the Residential Tenancies Board. Basically, when one lives on a halting site one cannot deal with these organisations. How can we reassure people that this will not happen with the next three electricity credits? The Government must protect the most vulnerable. The issue I have raised does not only concern members of the Traveller community but anybody who shares electricity. I would like to hear feedback on that from the Minister of State.

Senator Maria Byrne: I wish to share time with Senator Lombard.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to discuss the budget, which I will address along with other issues mentioned by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

I welcome the social welfare increases, one-off payments and lump sums. I welcome the fact that people over the age of 70 will now receive the fuel allowance because many of them did not qualify for it for quite a while. The expansion of the scheme is welcome, particularly now because a substantial number of citizens need the allowance to cope with the rising costs of fuel. I welcome the cutting of the cost of childcare for families, reducing fees by 25% for those under the national childcare scheme, which will put up to €175 per month, or €2,160 a year, back into the pockets of parents in 2023.

I know there will also be more support services for crèches and increased salaries for staff. This is very welcome because many of the staff in the childcare scheme are at the lower end of the scale. There are extra places and more hours, which is welcome. The sum of €59 million extra will help childcare providers to provide those extra places.

The total health budget will be €23.4 billion, with free GP care for more than 400,000 additional people, inpatient hospital charges being abolished and investment in women's health, which we are all very concerned about. A measure that is most welcome is free contraception for those aged 16 to 30. There is also, for the first time, access to IVF treatment. There are to

be 6,000 new health staff, who cannot come fast enough as there has been difficulty around trying to get staff, as well as €440 million to tackle waiting lists in 2023. Most importantly, 650 new acute and community beds will be added in 2023. The €150 million for older persons and €58 million for mental health are also welcome. Having gone through Covid, mental health is something that is top of all of our minds.

Another point is the 1,000 extra gardaí. When the recruitment of gardaí stopped, it was detrimental. It is good to see the Minister is able to bring 1,000 extra gardaí into Templemore again in the coming year.

I welcome the free books scheme and the funding towards SUSI and people going back to study PhDs. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, on all the work she has done around special needs and special schools. I am involved in a special school and I have to say there is now more funding available than ever. I will hand over to my colleague.

Senator Tim Lombard: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I acknowledge the commitment by the Government to the agricultural community in the last few hours. The budget has been very fair and honourable towards them, particularly when it comes to the energy crisis they are suffering. That acknowledgement is greatly welcomed by the farming community.

I acknowledge in particular the commitment to primary schools and to the free books scheme, which is a significant development and an important budget measure. As a parent of four who were in primary school last year, I know the weight of schoolbags is a significant issue for many kids. At some stage, we might look at the digital model which happens with another sector of society. Taking all of these school books to school is illogical in many ways. Maybe we could use the scheme to think outside the box.

There is a third issue the Minister of State might clarify in his own time, and I appreciate there are a lot of issues in the budget that need clarification. That issue is the €500 for renters. I have had several queries to my office already from people who are sharing a house about how that model is going to work. I do not have the answer for them so the Minister of State might be able to provide us with that answer. It is a form of accommodation used by many people who rent a room and share the bill but they are not sure who has the tenancy and how it operates. The Minister of State might come back to us regarding how this will benefit that section, including those on the rent-a-room scheme.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am delighted to welcome the Minister of State. As I discussed with the Cathaoirleach, I shared my time earlier with Senator O'Loughlin.

I commend this very balanced budget. Several things have been pointed out by Senators. The funding towards childcare is a very prudent and forward step and is something I have talked about on numerous occasions in the House. To follow on from that, Senator Lombard mentioned the grants for college fees and also the free books scheme for schools. I believe these are three very prudent moves in regard to education in particular, and they take in all cohorts of education. I want to recognise the work that is being done in that regard.

With regard to small and larger businesses, the 40% reduction in the cost of power for business up to a cap of €10,000 is a very prudent move and it will certainly keep the lights on in many small businesses, for want of a better phrase.

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I will not delay the House. I appreciate the earlier latitude from the Cathaoirleach with regard to time.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I almost missed my speaking slot because I was in my office fielding phone calls, text messages and emails from very happy people today. It was an excellent budget. There is a lot in it and we are all still going through what is in it. The really big headline measures that have jumped out for me are the IVF funding and the contraception scheme being extended, which are revolutionary steps forward.

We were laggards in Europe with regard to IVF funding. This is excellent news and gives families and couples hope during a very bleak stage. It is a very private matter to talk about but we have had Members of this House talk about their own IVF struggles and beyond. Those conversations that we have had in recent years have helped to move this as a political issue and made the Government realise how desperately needed are IVF funding and other supports around infertility. I commend the Minister for Health and the entire Government on moving forward on IVF funding.

The contraception scheme was something I had been campaigning on last year. We were delighted to get it going and there was a promise to roll it out to the other age categories. It is fantastic that, with the scheme just having commenced, we are in a position to roll it out to older age categories. I look forward to further progress in the coming years.

Cariban is a drug that I have spoken about *ad nauseam* in this House and beyond. I actually took Cariban during my second pregnancy and I know how vital it is for some people who are going through a very difficult pregnancy. It was a complete anomaly. I know there are some very happy campaigners out there today. I have a question which the Minister of State might clarify or he might get somebody in the Department to clarify it. When does the reimbursement begin in regard to Cariban? Is it immediately or is it at a future date? I would appreciate it if he could look into that for me.

With regard to the VAT on hormone replacement therapy, HRT, products, again, this is another part of the puzzle in closing the health inequalities faced by women in this country. It is a very positive step forward, as is the VAT measure on period products. Most period products had no VAT but some had, so this is a welcome step forward. It all goes towards addressing the cost-of-living crisis we are going through. All of these measures I have outlined will help families to get through this very difficult period.

My speaking time is limited but I want to touch on education issues. I believe the free books scheme will be as revolutionary as Donogh O'Malley's step forward in granting free second level education to the people of Ireland all those years ago. It brings more equality and will eliminate the panic and dread parents feel all through the summer before children return to school. Even from a headspace point of view, it is sometimes very difficult for parents who have a couple of kids in different classes to try to co-ordinate who needs what and fit that in around a busy family life. This will simplify things for families and provide equality and equity when everybody is getting their books from their teacher in school. That is excellent.

The refund of the registration fee has brought huge sighs of relief from many families who just this week and last week sent students to third level education. We in Fianna Fáil have always supported access to all levels of education but to third level especially. There are barriers to entry for many families, especially if students have to leave their home and come to cities

like Dublin, Cork or Galway and pay huge sums in accommodation costs.

8 o'clock

This is a very welcome break for those families who are working hard. Students who have done the leaving certificate and been very successful are looking to their future and want to add to their knowledge and skill base. This is a boost and a shot in the arm for them.

There is very little to find fault with in the budget. I commend the work of the Government in delivering it. We can face into the winter with a bit more confidence. We know the Government has our back and understands the needs of ordinary people and businesses. My colleague Senator Davitt referred to various business supports and I will not refer back to them. They are very welcome. They will keep the doors of businesses open and will keep people employed.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. In terms of the expenditure we are seeing today, this is one of the best budgets we have seen in a long while. It is to manage the cost-of-living crisis. The questions I have are specifically on education. In recent weeks we have had a big call on school transport. More than 6,000 families are waiting. I understand there will be with a review of this through the budget that is being allocated through education. If the Minister of State has further information on it, I would very much appreciate it. Many families are waiting to find out and we are almost into October.

With regard to the GP visit card, we see many initiatives that will bring benefits to many families. We have a challenge in rural areas with the recruitment and retention of GPs, with major issues with regard to work-life balance and a gender imbalance. How will we manage GP recruitment and retention with the extra numbers that will have GP visit cards? If the Minister of State will come back on these two issues, I would appreciate it.

Senator Emer Currie: Today has been a very important day. The Government has delivered a rounded package for people that reflects where we are, particularly with regard to the 25% cut in the cost of childcare. It will be good to hear confirmation that it is a starting point and that we will be able to signal this. There is core funding of €121 million. We see the difference the employment regulation order will make to pay and conditions. We still have a big problem when it comes to the supply of childcare and capital funding for it. Any information the Minister of State can give me on this would be great.

We have also seen funding for IVF, which is very important for those going through it. The removal of VAT on HRT and period products is significant. Free contraception has been expanded.

I am interested to know about the community services programme and community centres. I have not come across information on whether the salaries of those participating have been increased. This is something for which they have advocated. The budget is good for families and women. It is also good for communities with regard to the increased number of gardaí and increases in special education.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I congratulate the Minister of State for arguing for the increased budget for the Data Protection Commission. The increased provisions are very good. We are the supervisory authority for many multinational companies and it is very important that we are on our game in the Data Protection Commission.

I love this budget because those with babies in arms have provision for childcare and childcare access. We are promoting equality for children in their development through opportunities in a childcare setting and through primary schoolbooks. I want to give a nod to our colleague Deputy McHugh who started the pilot on schoolbooks. He launched it. I thank him and remember him today because it is very important. For those in school who need an SNA, we already had record levels of SNAs. There will now be an additional 1,190 SNAs, plus an extra 680 special education teachers. This is an excellent development. I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. She has taken on the need for additional and supported education for all children. Having it as close to home as possible is very important.

Today it was announced, and I have not heard many people refer to it, that we have 4,800 craft apprenticeship places. This is very important. We have focused on what is happening in third level, which is fantastic and there are great supports. I have received many texts supporting it from people who are delighted. The number of apprenticeships is very important for our housing sector. I would love to see apprenticeships extended into childcare. I have been having a conversation with the Minister, Deputy Harris, about how it would be possible. It would certainly assist childcare professionals to grow in what is now a good career. How will the 4,800 places be broken down? It is important that we look at these and value them. They start people at all levels. They are very precious. We desperately need craft apprenticeships. They are crucial for our housing sector, our development sector, our infrastructure and our green economy. There are probably apprenticeships we have not even defined yet that will be in our future. This has been a super budget for the very young through to training and self-sufficiency in employment. We have supports throughout.

Senator John Cummins: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and thank him for being here. Today is significant for our society and economy. We have had an €11 billion cost-of-living budget with a combination of universal and targeted measures to support and put money back into the pockets, wallets and purses of people throughout the country. It is good for families, individuals and business. I recognise and acknowledge the prudence shown by the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, over a number of years, by the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, in recent years and by the former Minister, Michael Noonan, prior to this. I am sure the Minister of State will agree this has ensured the Irish economy has the firepower to be able to tackle the significant challenges we face as a country, not least with regard to energy. I will home in on these measures. It is very important and welcome that we are supporting households across the board with a universal measure of three €200 credits. We are extending the threshold for the fuel allowance from €120 to €200 above the State pension and the limits to €500 per week for a single pensioner and to €1,000 per week for a pensioner couple aged 70 or over. This will result in a significant additional cohort of people being brought into the net of the fuel allowance. We are introducing a €400 payment along with this in November. We are putting money at the heart of supporting people at a time of great need. We have also put our money where our mouth is in supporting business. We did so throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and we are continuing to do it now with the new €1.2 billion temporary business energy support scheme, which will support businesses with 40% of the cost of the increase in their energy bills. These are welcome measures among many others. I would like to keep talking and go through the other measures but I will hand over to my colleague, Senator Ahearn, to discuss some of them.

Senator Garret Ahearn: There are three measures I want to mention out of the many there are to talk about and welcome. Householders throughout the country know the budget that has been delivered puts money back in people's pockets. It is as simple as that. The three areas I

will focus on relate to carers, pensioners and childcare.

Carers will very much welcome the announcement of a direct payment to them of €500. This is to recognise the increased costs family carers face and the work they do. Catherine Cox and the team at Family Carers Ireland have done impressive work on this.

A lot is being done to protect pensioners during the winter period. One of the fears we have is that pensioners may be too scared to put on the heating. We do not want them to be in that position, which is why the budget includes one-off payments for them in November and bonus payments at Christmas. There is particular recognition for pensioners living alone. The living alone lump sum of €200 is a really welcome payment because it recognises paying bills is much harder for a person living alone than it is for a couple. I think pensioners will be really happy tonight. They understand budgets because they have seen a lot of them. They know good budgets and bad budgets. This is a good budget for pensioners and they know that.

At the other end of the age spectrum are children. The Government made a commitment two years ago, led by the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, to make radical changes to the cost of childcare. Every parent is going to bed tonight knowing there will be a reduction in the cost of childcare of €1,200 a year, with a promise of a further reduction next year. The people I have spoken to cannot believe the size of the reduction this year, with a promise of a further cut next year. It is a radical step that has been well pushed for by all of us in government. It certainly has been welcomed by the parents to whom I have been speaking in the past few hours.

Senator Martin Conway: The Minister of State is welcome to the House on what is a good day overall in light of all the difficult, challenging and worrying days people are facing. We know the costs of electricity and energy are the big-ticket items. What we do not know is what the small, hidden costs will be. These are the costs people face as they go about their daily lives, such as when they go into the supermarket to buy a tin of fruit and discover it is almost double the price it was. I refer to own-label goods, not any fancy brands. The budget had to reflect and respond to that reality and cushion, as best as possible, the ordinary, decent people who have made this country what it is, especially in the winter months and the Christmas period.

With regard to tax breaks, it is long overdue that anybody earning up to €40,000 a year should be on the standard rate of tax. The bands should have been changed years ago. This is a welcome development that will immediately put money into the pockets of people in the squeezed middle. We all know who those people are because they come into our offices all the time. We are fully aware of the challenge they face.

We also know the challenges that face people who are on the fringes. They include pensioners, in particular, who need more heat in their homes, people on welfare, those in receipt of the fuel allowance and so on. The measures that have been announced are significant because of the size of the interventions but also because they will happen between now and Christmas. Pensioners will know there is money coming to fill the oil tank and pay the bills, which is important.

Regarding education, there are thousand of families in this country that include college students who do not qualify for Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grants. College fees have risen incrementally year on year. We now have a situation where €1,000 will be taken off that cost, with a €500 reduction next year. This is welcome, given that the cost of accommodation for students is spiralling.

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The provision of free schoolbooks is something that should have happened last year. We were an outlier internationally in this regard, with schools in most countries providing books. The school owns the books but they are provided to students. I have spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, to ensure there are no unintended consequences to this provision, that Braille books for the blind are also free and there is no cost for Brailleing them, and that digitally accessible books will likewise be free. Books are books, irrespective of the format in which they come. I have been given assurance that all books, including the ones to which I referred, will be free.

On healthcare, it is welcome that we are in a situation in which we can now offer free contraceptives to every woman aged under 30. It is only last August that this was offered to women under 25. It is great that we are in a position within a few months to extend the provision to those aged under 30.

Last week, it was announced that hospital charges would be eliminated for everyone aged under 16. We are now in a position where that can be offered to everybody, which is great. Hospital charges do not make sense. They hit those in the squeezed middle and can leave people facing a cost of €80 per day. This measure is welcome and will have an impact.

There is great news on medical cards. GPs are not happy about it, however, and something will have to be done to accommodate, facilitate and support them to deal with the queues they inevitably will see in their practices. The only way to deal with that is to create more places in medicine. It will probably take a few years for that to happen but it must be done. That is an absolute certainty.

I have spoken many times in this House about the cost of public transport. I am delighted the reductions in fares will continue but we need standardisation of prices and I am disappointed there is no reference to that in the budget. The distance from Ennis to Limerick is more or less the same as the distance from Maynooth to Dublin. However, a student or young professional making the first journey to college or work pays 30% to 35% more than a student or young professional making the second journey. That does not make sense in a small country. Fares should be calculated per kilometre and not depend on whether someone is in a rural or urban area. That is a disappointment.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat, Senator.

Senator Martin Conway: I will conclude now, although another three minutes would be appreciated.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator has it well covered. He has had more than three minutes.

Senator Martin Conway: My conclusions are usually long. The budget is very welcome. It is an important step in supporting families that need our support at this time. I commend it to the House.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator got an hour's worth into his contribution.

Senator Eileen Flynn: He got more time than some of us.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I invite the Minister of State to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth): In part, this budget is a response to the war in Ukraine, as a consequence of which Russia has put us under pressure. Russia has increased the cost of our imported fuel while it has in some cases simply turned off the supply of gas to Europe in an attempt to put pressure on European citizens, divide us, make people unhappy, polarised, turn against each other, abandon Ukraine and say that maybe we should let Russia have a portion of it or maybe we should walk away. Just as we have taken in nearly 50,000 Ukrainians, many of them into our own homes, we will not walk away from Ukraine. We will not crumble under this obvious pressure.

We think inflation is temporary. That is why many of the measures that we have taken are one-off measures. A large portion of the inflation is due to this artificial reduction in the supply of gas and we do not expect it will last forever. We do not expect Russia will be in Ukraine forever. The Russians seem to be retreating at this stage and taking desperate measures.

We have this package of cost-of-living measures to help people with their bills in November for electricity and gas, etc. They have been heavily targeted towards people who need them most. We worked with the ESRI to make sure that we would reach those people who are most likely to be in energy poverty as a result of increasing bills. However, it is also important that we take measures that last for the long term, and not only that get us through a few months, to prevent us from having to import fossil fuels in the first place. It is for that reason that the amount available for retrofitting will increase from roughly €330 million last year to more than €500 million this year so that we can do more than 37,000 homes.

The cost-of-living measures are temporary. Many of them will last only until the spring but they will be reviewed then. As a number of Senators said, we are in a strong economic position through successful industrial policy and prudence in our previous budgets. There is a war chest to deal with this. We have strong resolve to make it work.

A number of Senators referred to the historic introduction of a large reduction in the childcare costs. This will be worth up to €2,000 per child per year to families. That will have a significant effect. Ireland had the highest childcare costs in Europe up to now and many parents were suffering. It will bring some relief. We also understand that we have to make sure that the childcare places are available and we have to support childcare providers. We have increased core funding significantly this year. We introduced core funding for the first time this month. We have increased the amount available for next year. This is to make sure that the childcare providers can stay in business and do not shut down, and that there is availability. We have also increased the salaries that are available and improved the working conditions for people working in the childcare sector who up to now were reliant on the minimum wage but will now be paid €13 an hour. Those are the three different ways that we are looking at the childcare sector.

Many Senators, to be fair, on both sides of the House, gave credit for the many positive aspects of the budget. There were also questions and I will address some of those. The first, from Senator Gavan, is about the reduction in the registration fee for third-level students by €1,000 this year. Next year the plan in the budget states that we will change it from a universal measure to one that is targeted towards people based on their household income, and for households with an income between €62,000 and €100,000, there will be a reduction of €500 in the registration fee but for those households with an income under €62,000, there will be a reduction of €1,500 in the registration fee, which roughly halves the cost of going to college. This is in addition to the increase in the SUSI grants.

Senator Gavan had a question about home heating oil. The carbon tax increase on such oil will not come in until May of next year and in the meantime, the NORA levy is being temporarily removed, which will reduce the cost of home-heating oil by 2 cent. I understand that the price of oil generally has been moderating or softening over recent months, but it will be watched carefully. We are well aware that gas is available in urban areas but much of rural Ireland is dependent on oil.

There was also the question of how many acute beds are being funded out of the health spending increases. I need to check that with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I believe that out of the €1.15 billion extra in health expenditure, 650 acute beds are being funded.

Senator Black raised mental health funding and perinatal mental health and said that it should be provided in a way that preserves the bond with newborn children. That is a point well made. The Senator also expressed support for community organisations and asked how they would manage through this period. Although the temporary business energy support scheme is being introduced, there will be a support scheme for community centres as well, including for those that do not have trading income. There will be some form of supports for all those organisations that are part of the social backbone of our communities.

Senator Flynn asked about the problem with the energy credit scheme last year as it applied to halting sites or in Traveller-specific accommodation where there was one meter point reference number, MPRN, shared between multiple households. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan about this. We have agreed that we will guarantee that there will be the full amount for every Traveller family in the same way that people would be paid if they was living outside of a halting site or Traveller-specific accommodation. We will resolve that. We will do that by working with the local authorities. I take the Senator's point that this should not come out of the Traveller accommodation budget. It should not be taken out of funding that was meant to spent on something else. We will fund it separately and efficiently and we will make sure that Travellers are treated exactly as any other household, as they should be. There have been discussions about that.

A number of Senators referred to the fact that IVF is being funded for the first time, that contraception is being provided free of charge up to the age of 30 and that pregnant women suffering from hyperemesis will be able to get access to a drug, which they had sought for so long and which many of us had been asked to work on their behalf to obtain. Senators can see that women's reproductive rights are being asserted in a pragmatic way and women are being supported in their reproductive choices at whatever stage they are in their life, which is positive.

Senator Lombard asked a practical question about the rent credit, which is worth €500 annually for people who are in the private rented sector. He asked whether it applies to people who are renting a room and what happens if it is a couple. As I understand it, this will be €500 per person who is working. If it is a couple and both are working, they both get the €500 credit. If five people are sharing a house and they are all renting a room, each gets the €500 if each of them is working and they paid €500 tax in the previous year. It is available for 2022 and it will be paid at the end of this year after Christmas and again next year.

Apprenticeship funding was raised by one Senator. Apprenticeship funding is interesting because when we looked at it through the equality budgeting framework - there is a team who do equality budgeting in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform - they noticed that the money for apprenticeships was predominantly going towards men and that did not make any

sense because it was merely based on tradition and that with a little work, we could make sure that apprenticeships were equally available to men and women. The Minister, Deputy Harris, has made much progress with apprenticeships. He included them in the CAO scheme. He has done much to promote them. When I talk to people, it is something that they are much more interested in. It is crucial for our green transition that we attract people. We are very short of electricians and other tradespeople to carry out retrofits. We are short of people to service electric vehicles. In our new green economy, many people need to be trained up in those areas and the more that we can do in that area, the better.

I think I have covered most contributions. I am happy over the rest of the week to answer any questions that Senators may have on the budget that they want to put on the expenditure side to me and I will be happy to revert to them.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Aidan Davitt: Tomorrow morning at 10.30 a.m.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 8.30 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 28 Meán Fómhair 2022.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.30 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 28 September 2022.