



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 19 Deireadh Fómhair 2023*

*Thursday, 19 October 2023*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Seán Canney) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

*Paidir agus Machnamh.  
Prayer and Reflection.*

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## Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Seán Canney):** Seanad Éireann has passed the Control of Exports Bill 2023 without amendment.

## Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

### Broadcasting Sector

1. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to provide the most recent update in relation to the two ongoing reviews she has commissioned into governance, culture, contractor fees, human resources and other matters in RTÉ, including timelines for their completion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45983/23]

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I ask the Minister to provide the most recent update in relation to the two ongoing reviews she has commissioned into governance, culture, contractor fees, human resources and other matters in RTÉ, including timelines and dates for completion.

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** First, I want to acknowledge the absolute devastation across Cork and Waterford due to flooding yesterday. My thoughts are with homeowners and to people working in tourism and hospitality businesses in the region. I know the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Heather Humphreys, has activated the humanitarian assistance scheme which will give assistance to householders affected by flooding. The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Simon Coveney, has committed to working with the local councils, including Cork County Council, to assess the damage and respond quickly with financial supports for businesses.

On Deputy Munster's question, on 4 July last, following the revelations of governance failings in RTÉ and with the agreement of my Government colleagues, I announced the commissioning of an examination of RTÉ composed of two separate and parallel reviews and an examination of the RTÉ barter account by a forensic accountant. The two separate reviews are a review of governance and culture that is being overseen by an expert advisory committee led by Professor Niamh Brennan and a review of contractor, HR and other matters led by Mr. Brendan McGinty.

The work of both committees is being supported by a professional services firm, Crowe Advisory Ireland, which was appointed following two separate procurement processes undertaken by my Department with the assistance of the Office of Government Procurement. The committees are also supported by a secretariat comprised of officials from my Department.

I understand that under the direction of the expert advisory committees, the two reviews are making good progress. I have been informed that both expert advisory committees have undertaken an information gathering and analysis phase based on their terms of reference and are now in the process of engaging with key stakeholders. They have also met with the Chair and director general as well as sub-committees of the board which have been set up for the purposes of engaging with the respective expert advisory committees for the reviews.

As I originally set out when I announced the reviews, due to the complexity and breadth of issues to be reviewed, I expect that they will take six months to complete. Accordingly, I expect to receive the reports from the expert advisory committees early in the New Year.

These two independent reviews are a central component in identifying the corporate governance, cultural and other operational issues at RTÉ that have led to the current crisis and in addressing them to ensure that trust can be restored in our largest public service broadcaster. Given the complexity of the issues involved, it is important that we give them the time to do so.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I thank the Minister for the reply. It is good to get that update. I did submit two other questions that were disallowed by the Department relating to inquiries into RTÉ. One of them was about when RTÉ appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts two weeks ago. Serious concern has been raised about RTÉ's refusal to furnish us with the key documents around the setting up of the tripartite agreement. RTÉ claimed initially that it was because of legal privilege, then that it was because of client confidentiality. RTÉ has the right to waive client confidentiality.

In light of all that has unfolded, I want to get the Minister's opinion as to whether or not she feels that RTÉ should furnish the Committee of Public Accounts with those documents and not force the committee to compel them to do so. It is the ideal opportunity to build trust and regain confidence in people.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** As I have stated on many occasions, the Oireachtas is right to expect maximum transparency. The director general pledged to cooperate at the end of that particular meeting with requests in relation to that. He has cooperated with other queries from the Oireachtas and has given a significant amount of documentation.

While RTÉ has provided certain details, on GDPR grounds it has stated that it is not possible to share certain information. I understand that the committee is frustrated with this and is anxious to have full transparency and clarity. That will help in the rebuilding of trust.

Last week, Mr. Bakhurst said that he had to have regard to legal advice and I believe we should await his response in this regard. In relation to that note specifically, my officials followed up after the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts. I understand that the director general is seeking to arrive at a solution now, which I welcome, that will be acceptable to the committee. There is an effort underway and that is key.

I am aware that there have been other documents which RTÉ was not in a position to share for reasons of GDPR but I suppose it has to uphold the law in this regard about the rights of individuals. In relation to that note specifically, he said towards the end of the meeting that he would try to find a way and my understanding from follow-up from my Department is that he is really trying to seek a solution.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I sincerely hope he does. It is in the interest of RTÉ as much as anyone else's not to frustrate the workings of the committee and not to force us down the legal route of compelling the documents.

The other issue I wanted to mention was in the other question that was disallowed. This is about the issue of bogus self-employment in RTÉ and the fact that €1.2 billion has already been paid to Revenue for workers that were bogusly classed as self-employed. It was the first time ever that RTÉ put on public record that it has set aside up to €20 million out of the remaining €68 million because they know that Revenue is going to be coming after them. At a minimum the figure is €19 million. It goes back decades, where workers within RTÉ, the public service broadcaster, were bogusly classed as self-employed and denied pension rights, holiday leave, holiday pay, sick leave, all of the entitlements that other workers are entitled to.

We were listening to that and then we had heard about exit packages that were given to those at the top. Some of these people were not even entitled to those packages. The ones at the top walked off into the sun with their exit packages, some of whom who were not entitled to them, and the workers were left in limbo, having been denied their entitlements.

The worst thing of all is that RTÉ had set aside the sum for Revenue but not one cent for workers. I would like the Minister's opinion on that.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** As the Deputy knows, the investigation by the Department of Social Protection is ongoing. There are a large number of cases to be examined and adjudicated on. RTÉ is obliged to make provisions for such payments as they outlined last week at the meeting last week. This will be required to be paid and to correspond and to correct the PRSI contributions of the workers involved, as they are determined by the Department.

RTÉ officials responded to the question of providing for the potential PRSI liabilities at the committee meeting last week. The officials were not in a position to give a definitive figure on the provision but they outlined that it was under €20 million, as the Deputy is aware. The provision is being kept under review. There is a total of 695 cases involved. Investigation of 149 of these has started or has been completed. It is an ongoing process that is likely to take considerable time to complete.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** It is in relation to the workers. RTÉ has not set aside any money to compensate workers.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** On the question of retrospection, these are employees and contractors of RTÉ and it is a matter for it to address any such questions. The rights of individuals

must be protected. I am aware that previously, after the Eversheds review, RTÉ engaged with unions in a facilitated process to address questions of retrospective compensation but any future retrospective compensation is a matter for RTÉ and not me, as Minister.

## **Sports Funding**

2. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the Government will consider reintroducing a large-scale sport infrastructure fund; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45984/23]

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I ask that the Government consider introducing a new large-scale sports infrastructure fund and I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** The national sports policy, which was published in 2018, provided for the establishment of a large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. The first call for proposals under the LSSIF closed in 2019 with applications confined to local authorities and national governing bodies of sport. All applications were assessed in accordance with the published evaluation procedures and guidelines and the first allocations were announced in January 2020. Thus far, approximately €86.4 million has been awarded to 33 different proposals. Details of all allocations, a number of which are in Galway, are on the Department's website.

The first LSSIF allocations were announced just prior to the arrival of the Covid pandemic. The pandemic obviously gave rise to financial challenges for all grantees with many of them having to reprioritise their own expenditure plans due to reductions in their income streams. In more recent times, the high level of construction inflation has also presented considerable challenges for grantees.

In light of these issues, it was considered timely to review progress on all projects allocated grants and meetings with all grantees have taken place. It is encouraging that, based on these discussions with grantees, a majority of the 33 projects should be in a position to draw down funding in the next 12 months. While this progress is very welcome, these discussions also confirmed that some projects in receipt of LSSIF grants may not proceed in the short to medium term.

Following engagement with the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, and in recognition of the challenges I mentioned, officials in my Department wrote to all LSSIF grantees inviting them to apply for additional support by 4 August. To be considered for additional funding, grantees were advised that the key elements of the project should remain as set out in the original application and that priority would be given to those who provide evidence-based documentation to support their application. I hope to be in a position to announce further allocations to grantees in due course to ensure that all existing LSSIF projects are advanced.

With regard to a possible new round, I am determined to see continued investment in sports facilities in order to ensure we achieve our ambitious targets for sports participation. Accordingly, I will continue to engage with the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform on the funding required to underpin any new round.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I welcome the Minister of State's response. As the Minister of State said, in 2020 the large-scale sports infrastructure fund awarded over €86 million to 33 projects across Ireland. This was a very welcome innovation by the Government at the time and ensured that many clubs and sporting organisations were able to develop ambitious plans to improve sporting facilities and increase access for all ages, groups and ability levels.

Many sports clubs and organisations around the country are looking to build large-scale facilities but with a cap of €200,000 on funding available under the sports capital and equipment programme unfortunately, many projects simply cannot go ahead as the shortfall between funding available and fundraising capacity is just too great. Given that the Government has set a target of increasing the percentage of people participating in sports from 40% to 60% by 2027, I would ask that the Government would seriously consider introducing a new large-scale sports infrastructure fund.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I support Deputy Grealish. The large-scale sports infrastructure fund has been very important and we should have another large-scale sports infrastructure fund as soon as possible. The Minister of State will be familiar with one club in the north west, Sligo Rovers, a co-operative venture owned by the people of Sligo and surrounding areas. They want to apply along with many others in my area. It would be very good to have this sports fund set up.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I know my own local League of Ireland team will be playing in Sligo the weekend after next. Who knows, maybe we will catch up there. I do not know just yet but I certainly have interest in that.

We want to see another large-scale sports infrastructure fund go forward but we also want to see projects built. One of the flaws with the previous programme was that many of these projects were not built. Galway has a number of projects, one of which I do not know the status of, namely, the Galway regional aquatic and fitness centre. It is in a category of site difficulties delays etc. The Deputy could inquire with Galway County Council. My officials are engaging. Others are the New Inn sports campus and the sports community centre in Renville. I visited the club in Renville and I know the people there are determined to see it. That is undergoing due diligence at the moment, which has to happen for grant-aided projects of this nature. We want to see this happening and we hope to be announcing further funding for those who applied in due course.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I welcome the support of Deputy Feighan. In Galway alone, there were three projects as the Minister of State mentioned. The proposed €20 million project for Connacht Rugby has actually started and a new surface has been put on the pitch. The project in Renville and Oranmore is being prepared to go out to tender. They have raised over €1 million locally to get that project over the line. I compliment the people in Oranmore. More than 10,000 people live in the area. The project covers 35 acres comprising four pitches, and includes a walkway and a greenway. Those two projects have benefited from the large-scale sports infrastructure fund. They would not have happened but for that fund. I compliment the Government on bringing that forward at the time. I would like to see another fund introduced. Sport plays a major part with our young people. An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Canney, is involved in a major project in Tuam with the Tuam stadium. I am sure funding from a large-scale sports infrastructure fund would benefit that immensely. I ask the Minister of State to look at it seriously. It could be done every two to three years; I would welcome that.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** On a point of clarification, Sligo Rovers will play the Minister of State's club, Drogheda United, on 28 October at 6 o'clock. When he comes to visit his in-laws, he and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, are more than welcome to call in.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I did not mention the Connacht Rugby project, which is one of the most significant ones. The thinking in the Department about any new round should be borne in mind by anyone considering it because there is considerable work to do. Any facilities that we will be funding in the future, including the top-ups, will need to have published policies on similar access to facilities for men and women. That is an innovation I introduced. It is absolutely necessary and when we award grants, clubs will be required to set that out so that the women and men can see this is a fair division of the facilities. That is for every project.

If we are granting significant amounts of money to a particular project in an area in the future, we will need to think very hard about other sports being involved. They should not just be allowed to use the facilities, as has been required in the sports capital projects for forever and a day, but should be integrated and part of a joint venture. Those types of projects will find favour in any future round of sports capital funding.

### **Artists' Remuneration**

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to comment on the ongoing campaign led by Irish Equity seeking to end the practice of Irish performers and writers facing obstacles such as needing to sign so-called buy-out contracts in order to work in the audiovisual arts, including projects funded by her Department; and if she will ensure that the issuing of funding of cultural certificates by her Department will be contingent on eradicating this practice and supporting performers and writers. [45920/23]

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I ask the Minister to comment on the campaign led by Irish Equity seeking to end the practice of Irish performers and writers facing obstacles such as needing to sign so-called buy-out contracts before they can get any work and the associated loss of earnings.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** This is a complex and nuanced issue. Screen industry contracting may vary from production to production with a range of production types from lower budget domestic productions to higher budget incoming international productions. There are different approaches to purchasing rights for film and television projects.

Standard contracts between producers and creative rights holders vary from country to country, with different approaches throughout Europe. In this context, creatives currently operate under a range of different work-related agreements. Section 481 does not obligate one set of terms over another.

Matters relating to intellectual property rights, copyright and the transposition into Irish law of the EU copyright directive fall under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The transposed directive aims to strengthen and protect the rights of authors, performers and the wider creative community, notably with online platforms. Certain provisions within the directive, designed to help Irish copyright law keep pace with the digital age, require all industry stakeholders to work together towards establishing new frameworks

and agreements.

The acting profession in the audiovisual industry is represented by Irish Equity-SIPTU. In the first instance, SIPTU may negotiate and agree contracts, arrangements and rates for stage and screen actors in Ireland. SIPTU also represents many of the screen workers guilds and, in that context, a shooting crew agreement is in place and operates in the sector.

Earlier this year Screen Ireland, the State body with responsibility for the development of the Irish audiovisual industry, retained an independent facilitator to meet stakeholders to understand and discuss issues that have arisen since the transposition into Irish law of the EU copyright directive. During the first phase of the process, individual stakeholder meetings were held and, subsequently, moderated group discussions took place with screenwriters, directors, composers, actors, and animation and live action producers, with a view to finding common understandings and potential clarifications that might be required around the legislation. As a collective, the industry representative group has proposed next steps that Screen Ireland is reviewing with a view to supporting progress. It is important to allow that process the opportunity to address some of these concerns in the first instance. As Minister, I encourage all representative groups to continue to engage in this process and in negotiating fair agreements to ensure the continued success and growth of the industry.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** This has been an ongoing issue. In recent days and weeks two sets of email pleas have inundated my email account. One has to do with the slaughter in Gaza by the Israelis; the other pertains to this question of creatives, as the Minister calls them, that is, performers and writers, and their families demanding that Irish performers be paid fairly for their work, in line with what is common in other countries. This has to do with the increasing practice - it was not always there - which is, in fact, nearly compulsory now, that those creatives, in order to get any work in the audiovisual sector in Ireland, have to sign buyout contracts and waive their future residual payments. Yet we see, under section 481 and other encouragements for the audiovisual sector, that those who are in charge or the producers get the benefits whereas the workers, the creatives, do not seem to get them and are forced to sign away their rights.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I am aware of the communication with Deputies and understand that a petition that was handed in stated that every Irish performer and crew member deserves the right to appropriate and proportionate remuneration and that Irish performers will not be subject to lesser terms and conditions regarding their intellectual property rights than international performers in similar roles. I am in full agreement with those sentiments and want to see a sustainable screen industry in Ireland in which everyone is treated fairly and receives fair and equitable remuneration. If an Irish performer is in a situation in which he or she is subject to lesser terms and conditions than others in similar roles, or is aware of such a situation, I ask him or her to bring it to the attention of my Department or of Screen Ireland.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I can tell the Minister from having met many creatives, some in my family, that only up the road there are better terms and conditions for those creatives who are on film sets in the North than there are for those in this State. Yet with the section 481 relief the Government facilitated the industry once again in the budget. I am not arguing about that - there is a vital need for section 481 - but, hand in hand with any changes that benefit the industry, we have to make sure there is a benefit for the creatives working in the industry, and we have not moved in that regard. I think the Department is well aware of situations in which, whether in England or in the North, writers in Equity have shown to everyone that they have



different terms and conditions and are not forced to sign buyout contracts in the way they are here.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I am asking for any specific cases to be brought to the Department or to Screen Ireland. As the Deputy said, the section 481 cap was lifted. That was welcomed by stakeholders, including Irish Equity, which sought that. There is a process in place whereby Screen Ireland has put in an independent facilitator. There is that lack of clarity around the assignment of intellectual property in the screen industry. There is also a lack of clarity about the ability of some creatives to enter into collective bargaining. That issue has also emerged. I hope that the outcome of the process is to reach an agreement on the operation of the new law and identify all matters that need clarification. I encourage full engagement with that process.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I thank the Minister for that. I agree, and I hope the process will have a very short timeframe to ensure that it is delivered. We are in a cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis. Those creatives, as the Minister calls them, deserve to live and to see the benefit of their work in the same way as in other countries. Will the Minister try to accelerate the process to ensure that there is delivery and that we will not be back here in a year's time asking the exact same question and getting the same answer? This did not just pop up in the past while. While the issue has gained heightened awareness because of the campaign by Equity and others writing to us all, it has been an underlying issue that has been raised with me and with former Ministers in the past. It is a condition of employment now in the audiovisual industry for most companies. That is not good enough and it needs to stop. Will the Minister call on the industry to stop the current practice, especially while that Screen Ireland process is in place?

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I ask the Deputy to bring the specific examples to my attention. We need to be contacted and need the specific examples brought to the attention of the Department or of Screen Ireland. That is crucial in this.

As regards the process, Screen Ireland has put in an independent facilitator, and that is really important. The Deputy asks for haste there, but haste sometimes can be the enemy of the good. The process needs to be given the proper time to give the stakeholders the time to flesh out the issues of concern. As I said, I encourage all representative groups to continue to engage in the process. I met many of them in Galway in July. As I said, the outcome of the process, I hope, will be to reach agreement on the operation of this.

## **Tourism Policy**

4. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will address concerns expressed by the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation that the recent increase in the VAT rate has eroded competitiveness; if she agrees that, at a minimum, the 9% VAT rate should be kept under review for the food services sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45981/23]

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Will the Minister address the concerns expressed by the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation that the recent increase in the VAT rate has eroded competitiveness? Will she agree that, at a minimum, the VAT rate pertaining to the food sector should be kept under review? Will she make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** While elements of the hospitality sector are also important parts of the wider tourism ecosystem, as Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media I do not have responsibility for the general hospitality sector or the food services sector. However, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and I co-chair the hospitality and tourism forum, which brings together regularly these two important and interrelated sectors.

The Government has strongly supported the tourism and hospitality sectors through a range of fiscal supports, particularly during the Covid pandemic and more recently in dealing with the challenges facing the sector. Those supports have included the retention of the lower VAT rate from November 2021 until 1 September of this year.

In 2021 supports from my Department included €55 million for a dedicated tourism business continuity fund, €17 million in capital investment for an outdoor dining scheme and €5 million for an urban animation scheme. In budget 2022, the Government allocated €67.6 million in additional funding for tourism, of which a further €50 million was for tourism business continuity supports. These were in addition to significant supports provided through the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and the Covid restrictions support scheme.

The Minister for Finance has responsibility for VAT rates and other taxation measures. In assessing any proposals on such matters, the balance between the costs of measures against their impact and the overall budgetary framework is a critical consideration. The total estimated cost of the reduction of VAT to the Exchequer over that period is €1.2 billion. Notwithstanding this, the Government recognises both the challenging business environment within which key elements of the tourism and hospitality sectors are operating this year and the role that such businesses play in driving employment and economic activity across Ireland.

As the Deputy will be aware, I am concerned about the possible impact on other tourism businesses impacted by the reduction in tourist footfall due to tourism accommodation stock displacement. In this context, my primary focus is on supporting those businesses that most merit further assistance. In the period before the budget, I raised with the Minister for Finance the question of applying separate rates of VAT to food and accommodation as a transitional measure on the road to the restoration of the full rate. The Minister reiterated his view that the conditions justifying further adjustments to the VAT rate no longer existed. He also outlined that the Revenue Commissioners have advised that there would be significant practical operational concerns in having different VAT rates applying to hotel accommodation and meals, given how the sector operates, with various packages ranging from bed and breakfast accommodation through to all-inclusive board and lodging packages. I am conscious of the points raised in this regard by the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation, ITIC, recently. I intend to meet ITIC next week and I look forward to that engagement.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** As the Minister will be aware, the Irish Hotels Federation has pointed out that Ireland has the third-highest VAT rate in the EU. I know the Minister said she does not have direct responsibility for VAT but with her responsibility for tourism, it is important that the view of the sector is articulated and that the sector is supported. More than 285,000 jobs are directly related to tourism in 46,000 tourism businesses. This is a profoundly serious issue as it is a huge sector. In my constituency, in County Offaly in particular, I can see that it is having a profound effect already and businesses need more support. My colleague, Independent local election candidate, Jonathan O'Meara, who owns and operates an outdoor adventure company, Mid Ireland Adventure, as well as Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Centre, based in Banagher,

has also said, as the Minister noted, that the lack of budget hotel accommodation in Offaly is having a knock-on effect. This needs to be resolved. We know there are Government contracts and these mean that tourism is not happening the way it should. People are not coming into the county; they are leaving it and crisscrossing between Dublin and Galway but they are not spending time in Offaly and I am sure the case is the same around the country. This needs to be addressed.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I agree on the knock-on impact on downstream tourism businesses. That is being felt and that is why, as part of the budget settlement, I have secured up to €10 million for tourism in 2024 for a comprehensive programme of supports targeted at downstream tourism businesses experiencing particular trading challenges linked to the reduction in footfall in respect of activities and attractions in regions most impacted by tourism bed stock displacement. This programme of supports includes investment in sustainable tourism development and promotion, industry digitisation, promotion of domestic tourism and festivals and recruitment and retention initiatives. I have also asked Fáilte Ireland to engage with the impacted businesses to consider the scope for a specific tourism support scheme that could help the most affected tourism activities and attractions. I have asked it to report back to me on options and recommendations within four weeks. I wrote that letter last week on the day of the budget. A strong evidence base will be critical in this regard and I have asked the tourism sector, particularly activities and attractions, to please engage with Fáilte Ireland so we can gather that real data in order that we can provide direct and verifiable evidence of how tourism accommodation stock displacement has negatively impacted their businesses and then look to devise a scheme.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I thank the Minister for her response and I acknowledge the support package. However, this is a short-term measure. We need long-term vision and supports and a way of dealing with the fact that so many contracts that have been signed by Government have made it impossible for hotels. The support package will help them to keep their doors open and that is about it in the short term but what about the long term? As the Minister mentioned, we need a specific tourism support scheme but that has to be a long-term initiative. I understand that last month ITIC launched its strategic vision for the sector to 2030, which suggests that tourism revenue has the potential to increase by 50% over the coming years. That is only if Government takes a grip of the reins and promotes pro-tourism and pro-enterprise policies and has a vision. The Government needs to have a vision because it is one thing giving these businesses money and support packages to keep their doors open in the short term but it needs to think long term. For every €1 spent by tourists, 23 cent is generated in VAT. Tourism is vital to our national and local economy and we need to see Government come in with more pro-business and pro-tourism vision and with more of those policies.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** This Government has hugely stepped up for tourism since 2020 and the start of the Covid crisis, with funding of €216 million to the sector, which is an increase of 33% on the 2020 level. In the intervening period, massive additional support was pumped into the sector, with my Department's funding for tourism reaching a peak of €286 million in 2022. Today, thankfully much of the tourism sector has recovered to a significant extent. The Covid crisis is over, although a range of challenges remain. Tourism demand, airline capacity and intention to travel to and within Ireland are at strong levels. In the context of this four-year arc of collapse and recovery, it is entirely reasonable that some of the one-off supports we put in place in recent years will taper off. What I have managed to do in this budget is maintain most of the additional funding I had last year. I am aware of the wider costs of doing business

for the sector and the Government has taken a range of steps to help address this. As Minister with responsibility for tourism, I have fought hard to help bring this sector through the worst of the Covid crisis and the strength of the sector today is a testament to the collaborative approach we have taken with the tourism agencies, the sector itself and key stakeholders. As I said, I will engage with and meet ITIC early next week.

## Údarás na Gaeltachta

5. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán maidir le Ceisteanna Parlaiminte Uimhreacha 67 den 13 Iúil agus 385 den 20 Meán Fómhair, soiléiriú a thabhairt ar an athbhreithniú atá faoi chaibidil ag Údarás na Gaeltachta faoin bpunann iomlán maoinne atá aige agus faoi na féidearthachtaí forbartha atá ann; an bhfuil an taighde críochnaithe; soiléiriú a thabhairt ar an bplean ag eascairt as an taighde sin agus ar na hacmhainní airgeadais a bheidh ag teastáil chun an plean a chur i gcrích; soiléiriú a thabhairt ar shonraí na teagmhála a bhí ag an Aire leis an Údarás maidir leis na hábhair sin; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [45986/23]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Baineann mo cheist le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus go háirithe leis an athbhreithniú atá faoi chaibidil aige maidir leis na foirgnimh, na suíomhanna agus an talamh atá i seilbh an údaráis. Cá bhfuil an t-athbhreithniú sin? Ba mhaith liom soiléiriú a fháil ó thaobh na hathbhreithnithe agus ó thaobh aon phlean atá beartaithe maidir leis an taighde sin. Freisin, rud atá an-tábhachtach, luaim na hacmhainní a bheidh ag teastáil chun aon phlean a chur i gcrích.

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Tuigim go bhfuil athbhreithniú Údaráis na Gaeltachta ar phunann maoinne na heagraíochta críochnaithe anois. Le linn an athbhreithnithe, rinneadh taighde ar na féidearthachtaí a bhaineann leis an bpunann sna seacht gcontae Gaeltachta agus tá cainteanna ar bun anois ar bhonn leanúnach leis na cliantchomhlachtaí atá ina dtionóntaí cheana féin agus le cliaint nua atá ag iarraidh spáis tráchtála nó spás níos mó a thógáil ar cíos.

Níos minice ná a mhalairt bíonn obair le déanamh ar fhoirgnimh mar chéad chéim do thionóntaí agus bíonn aon chaiteachas caipitil le glanadh ag bord an údaráis. Bíonn iarratais ar allúntais caipitil ag dul os comhair an bhoird ar bhonn leanúnach agus ceadaítear tograí agus maoiniú ina leith de réir a chéile agus ar bhonn riachtanas. Mar is eol don Teachta Connolly, mar shampla, fógraíodh 100 post i monarchan theic-leighis Freudenberg ar an 2 Deireadh Fómhair sa Spidéal i gContae na Gaillimhe. Bíonn saolré fada i gceist lena leithéid de fhógra ar mhaithe le foirgneamh ar an gcaighdeán cuí a fhorbairt a mheallfaidh rólanna ar ardchaighdeán chun na Gaeltachta i bhfianaise géar-iomaíochta d'infheistíocht dá leithéid.

Tá ráite ag an údarás go bhfuil próiseas inmheánach pleanála ag teacht chun críche a bheidh mar bhunchloch d'fhorbairtí nua a bheidh ag dul os comhair bhoird na heagraíochta le hallúntais caipitil a cheadú do thograí a bheidh ar bun as seo go ceann roinnt bliana. Mar a thuigim ón údarás, tá teagmháil leanúnach ar bun le cliaint reatha, cliaint nua, údaráis áitiúla agus soláthróirí seirbhísí. Beidh na tograí sin ar fad á bhforbairt go céimiúil le dul i dtreo an próisis pleanála agus aon chomhairliúcháin poiblí a bhaineann leis an bpróiseas sin.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Tá neart istigh sa fhreagra sin. Mar sin beidh orm é a léamh go cruinn. An rud is tábhachtaí ná go bhfuil an taighde críochnaithe agus is dea-scéal é sin.

Tá a lán ceisteanna curtha agam agus freagraí faighte. Is rud maith é. Is buntáiste é go bhfuil réimse leathan foirgnimh, talún, agus suíomhanna i seilbh an údaráis a bhuí don obair a rinne sé agus Gaeltarra rompu. An rud a chuireann isteach orm ná go bhfuil na suíomhanna agus na monarchana folamh le tréimhse fhada anuas. Tá an taighde críochnaithe. Níor chuala mé aon fhocal maidir le plean a bheith ag eascairt as an taighde sin, go háirid ó thaobh úsáidí eile don talamh ar son foirgnimh agus suíomhanna agus le dul i dtreo, mar shampla, cúrsaí tithíochta. Tá an téama céanna tagtha aníos go mion minic ó thaobh géarchéim na tithíochta atá ar fud na Gaeltachta uilig. Cén soiléiriú gur féidir leis an Aire Stáit a thabhairt dom maidir le húsáid difriúla talún a chur chun cinn?

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Tuigim tuairimí an Teachta ar an ábhar sin. Tá na tuairimí céanna aici maidir leis an eagraíocht eile atá faoi mo chúram, sé sin, Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí. Maidir leis an taighde agus cad atá i gceist ag an údarás a dhéanamh faoi láthair, úsáidtear maoiniú an údaráis ar mhaithe le cuspóirí na heagraíochta mar atá sonraithe sa phlean straitéise 2021 go 2025 a chur i gcrích chun leas pobal na Gaeltachta. Tá an taighde seo mar ghné tábhachtach don anailís criticiúil gur gá a dhéanamh go tráth rialta chun deimhin a dhéanamh de go bhfuil úsáid na maoinne ag sásamh na cuspóirí straitéiseacha. Beidh an t-údarás ag baint úsáid as an taighde sin go luath.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an taighde. Tá sé críochnaithe agus mar a dúirt mé is dea-scéala é sin. An cheist anois ná cén plean atá ann le dul i ngleic leis na foirgnimh atá folamh agus an talamh áit nach bhfuil aon fhorbairt agus mar sin. Tugaim moladh i gcónaí don údarás. Gan é, bheadh an ghéarchéim i bhfad níos measa. Tá féidearthachtaí anseo. Céim a haon ná an taighde a dhéanamh agus a bheidh ionraic ó thaobh stádas na punainne maoinithe seo. Anois an t-am do phlean. Níos tábhachtaí ná sin ná oibriú amach an féidir na suíomhanna a úsáid ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta de. Cén taighde atá déanta air sin agus cá bhfuil na teoracha pleanála do na Gaeltachtaí?

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Is ceisteanna iad sin do bhord an Údaráis féin. Rinne mé dearmad mo bhuíochas a ghabháil agus rath a ghuí ar na baill atá ceaptha ar bhord an údaráis le déanaí. Is iad sin: Máire Áine Uí Ailín, Sonya Uí Shíoda, Caitlín Ní Bhroin, Mícheál Ó Drisleáin, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, agus cathaoirleach an bhoird, Mary Uí Chadhain. Tá súil agam go mbeidh mé in ann buaileadh le baill an bhoird go luath agus na ceisteanna atá ag an Teachta Connolly a chur ós comhair an bhoird. B'fhéidir go mbeidh díospóireacht againn maidir leis an taighde atá críochnaithe acu agus ar na ceisteanna atá ag an Teachta. Ní aon amhras orm ach go bhfuil na ceisteanna sin an-tábhachtach do phobal na Gaeltachta agus b'fhéidir go mbeidh seans agam filleadh ar an Teach nuair atá an cruinniú sin leis an mbord críochnaithe.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Tourism Promotion**

6. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when a five-year plan for tourism will be announced for the Lee Valley area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45708/23]

19. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht,

Sport and Media that an area (details supplied) will be included in any tourism plan for the Lee Valley area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45709/23]

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I am really excited about the tourism potential that exists across the Lee Valley. At one end of it, we have the globally-known Blarney Castle, right the way up through the Gearagh and on to Gougane Barra, for example, and there is zip lining, activities in Coachford, cultural tourism and so many other opportunities. Will the Minister outline the plans to promote the Lee Valley and whether a five-year plan can be established for that?

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 19 together.

Before I reply to these questions, I wish to acknowledge the devastation in Cork due to the floods. We have opened the humanitarian assistance support and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Coveney, has also committed to working with local councils to assess the damage and respond quickly. I will liaise closely with the Minister and have asked my officials to engage with Fáilte Ireland to assess the situation from a tourism perspective. However, our thoughts are with all the people and businesses, who have woken up to an absolute nightmare this morning, as they try to recover.

Regarding the Deputy's questions, the tourism sector continues to play a significant role in supporting the State's humanitarian effort in response to the unjust Russian war against Ukraine. In June 2023, Fáilte Ireland carried out a detailed analysis of the data provided by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, concerning the bed stock under contract to accommodate Ukrainians. The data identified that, in five counties, more than 20% of the registered stock is used for humanitarian purposes, peaking at 33% in County Clare. We are looking at supporting various businesses in the Lee Valley and developing the potential there. We are engaging with Fáilte Ireland on that too.

On the five-year plan, I can liaise with the Deputy and officials will link in with him regarding the tourism plan for the Lee Valley. There is huge potential in this area and he has named some of the opportunities there. We will engage with Fáilte Ireland on that and will look at the development of the plan.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I thank the Minister regarding her acknowledgement of the current situation locally after the torrential downpours and the pressure people are under. Support will definitely be needed to help with the clean-up and to get them back up and running. People are just stunned by the volume of rainfall and are dealing with it.

Focusing on the tourism potential of the Lee Valley, there is a broad offering. Having spoken with Fáilte Ireland officials again more recently, I know it has been making efforts to put in place a plan and that the area would be a spur off or a loop on the Wild Atlantic Way. While I welcome that and that is very positive, there is much more potential within the Lee Valley that would almost warrant a stand-alone plan. Can efforts be made to use the current plan as a stepping stone to take this on to a stand-alone plan?

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** As the Deputy knows, significant supports have been provided to Cork. The Lee Valley features on Fáilte Ireland's *discoverireland.ie* website for domestic visitors. This is the one-stop shop that showcases the wealth of attractions to see and Cork features heavily there. Tourism Ireland has Ronan O'Gara as an ambassador, which is very much putting Cork on the map. Regarding the regional tourism development strategies, Cork City

and east Cork is included in Fáilte Ireland's new Ireland's Ancient East development strategy; west Cork is included in the new Wild Atlantic Way development strategy; and the Ballyhoura region is included in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands development strategy. These roadmaps for the tourism industry, and all stakeholders involved in tourism in the regions, will help navigate the current challenges and steer a course towards a sustainable recovery and continued success. They will ensure a focus on tourism and development is sustainable. We have the capital investment in Cork, the platforms for growth, the shared water facilities, the urban animation scheme with Cork City Council, the destination towns initiative, the Digital that Delivers programme and Cork Harbour development plan. It is an area that gets support because it is such a tourism heaven for attractions, and we absolutely identify that. The budgetary supports we have put in place for downstream businesses will also help with developing and supporting tourism activity providers in the region.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** The opening of the new N22 Macroom and Baile Bhuirne bypass will make east-west tourism flow much more freely. It means the thousands of tourists who disembark in Cobh and face west will be able to reach their destinations that much faster. Instead of getting to Killarney any faster, why would they not spend more time in the Lee Valley and places such as Macroom? Tourism products such as liners take some years to plan ahead. We really need to be getting a foothold in this tourism product and promoting the Lee Valley to the cohort of people coming off the liners. The bypass also means the Lee Valley is that much more accessible to Killarney-based tourists. There should be some way to promote and encourage this. Macroom is only 20 minutes from four of the biggest fishing rivers in the country - the Bandon, Lee, Ilen and Blackwater. There is real potential but some steps need to be taken ahead of time and we should be starting sooner on it.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Everything the Deputy said points to what we are trying to do in the sustainable tourism strategy, which is to get people into the regions where there will be so much to choose from that they will stay for longer. What is needed is connectivity and we are developing a national tourism strategy. Activities such as walking in the Lee Valley, water skiing and golf can be available so that when people arrive they will stay in the region. We need connectivity. Fáilte Ireland's website and Tourism Ireland initiatives are driving this. We need to look at directing domestic and international tourists into the regions. The Lee Valley is a perfect example of this. We will continue to engage with Fáilte Ireland on developing this strategy for such a wonderful tourism resource.

## **Sports Funding**

7. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to outline how the increases in funding for women in sport, announced in budget 2024, will take shape. [45182/23]

63. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to outline the women's sport that will be advanced and supported at all levels with the announcement of a doubling in funding for women's sport; the plans that are under way to ensure more women and girls participate in all sports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45548/23]

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** This question focuses on increased funding for sport for women and how the allocation in this year's budget will be implemented to encourage greater

participation of women in sport.

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 63 together.

The Minister and I were very pleased to be able to announce an increase of €2 million in funding for the Women in Sport programme for 2024. This is a very important funding scheme for sporting bodies and it will continue to support those bodies in putting programmes in place to increase women's participation in their sports and to progress their strategic objectives for women in sport across all areas, including active participation, coaching, officiating and leadership.

The increased budget will also facilitate Sport Ireland to continue to lead out on programmes and initiatives that support the implementation of the Sport Ireland policy on women in sport. The additional funding that the Minister and I secured will double Sport Ireland's budget under the Women in Sport programme next year. The funding will be administered by Sport Ireland, which will set out the terms and conditions of funding. It is anticipated that the 2024 scheme will open for applications in the first quarter of next year.

Sport Ireland's funding guidelines for the Women in Sport programme continue to encourage organisations to develop women in sport programmes and initiatives focused on the key areas outlined in Sport Ireland's policy on women in sport, namely, coaching and officiating, active participation, leadership and governance and visibility. Investment in the programme to date has enhanced all aspects of female involvement in these target areas.

The Women in Sport funding programme has been in place since 2005 and since then, more than €22 million has been invested through the national governing bodies, NGBs, of sport and local sports partnerships.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** There is often focus on the international teams and the national bodies but the real nuts and bolts of it happen on the ground. The Minister of State had the opportunity to visit Naomh Abán's mothers and others team, St. Val's in Kilmurry and Éire Óg's camogie and ladies Gaelic football teams. Deputy Murnane O'Connor is an enthusiastic supporter of women in sport and she would have mentioned many local organisations. We see the day-to-day energy and enthusiasm in local organisations and it is very important that the funding makes its way onto the ground to support them. Is there an outline of what the split will be between national bodies and organisations on the ground to ensure the everyday real energy on the ground is supported?

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** Research has clearly shown the inequalities in structures and supports for women in sport. Quite simply, more investment will lead to more exposure and more success. As my maths teacher in school used to say, nothing succeeds like success. Seeing women athletes, and broadening the definition of what it is to be sporty so that more girls can feel they can participate and identify with it, is incredibly important. This massively increased funding through doubling the budget is very welcome from the Department and the Minister of State. I congratulate the Minister of State. Like my colleague, I would like more information on when local clubs and local initiatives will be able to see some of the money so they are able to invest it in young girls so that we do not have, as happens now, girls at the age of 13 saying they are not sporty and are not participating in sport. We need to address this and we need to change it.



**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I will give as an example the Her Moves campaign, which is part of the programme. This is designed to support, motivate and encourage more teenage girls to be active. Her Moves is being used by organisations at all levels, national and local, when rolling out physical activity programmes that target teenage girls using certain criteria. So far this year, 35 organisations have engaged with the Her Moves campaign. We had a brilliant launch for it at the Sports Ireland Campus. The website has had 57,000 hits and we will report on the campaign activity and how it is developed.

There are also other initiatives. The extra funding will allow Sport Ireland not only to develop initiatives, but to provide funding to sporting organisations that want to create initiatives to get funding through this. Recently, the GAA advertised a programme on encouraging women to get involved in leadership. The GAA has a course on leadership and people will take it up. It is funded through women in sport. In acknowledgement of the women's team qualifying for the World Cup, €500,000 extra has been provided to the FAI, separate from all of this, specifically for football initiatives for women in sport. There are also number of other initiatives and it is important to reiterate this.

We have brought in a new rule for sports capital funding that unless there is similar access for men and women, there will be zero funding. This will also apply to the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, LSSIF. Applicants for larger regional projects and LSSIF top-ups will have to produce access policies showing this to the public and to the users of facilities. In addition, there has been a long-standing commitment to have 40% of gender balance on NGB boards. I acknowledge some steps have been taken by NGBs. This will also change sport on the ground. If NGBs do not implement this by the end of the year, they will be subject to a 50% funding cut immediately. If an NGB does not have 40% of women on its board when organisations go to draw down funding from the current round of sports capital funding, it will be entitled to only 50% of the funding it has been awarded until the situation is rectified.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** There are several groups of people, including those whom we want to encourage into sport and those who are involved in sport whom we want to retain. I am involved at a number of levels with Naomh Abán's ladies Gaelic football team. Throughout ladies football, playing careers are getting shorter and shorter. Girls are dropping out at age 16, 17 or 18. This is similar in other sports and so many other clubs. Is there an initiative that can be taken to ensure people stay with the sport or, if they do not want to stay playing, that they stay in some way or another with the club and stay active? These are people who have a positive disposition towards sport and we should look to encourage them or keep them involved in some way. Will some of this funding be focused on keeping people participating for longer?

*10 o'clock*

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** My concern is another of the groups mentioned by Deputy Aindrias Moynihan, namely, those who are not involved in sports at all. We see poor levels of participation in sport and activity among young teenage girls. Much research has been done into this topic and how to break down these barriers. Girls talk about limited opportunities to try new things or learn new skills. I hope this investment, the doubling of funding, can provide new opportunities to learn new skills. Will the funding simply be for capital acquisitions for equipment and grounds, or can it be used to fund coaching and leadership staff as well? That would provide the place to learn a new skill and the person to teach it. The extra leadership would help to address the point made by Deputy Moynihan as it would give people something new to do and a new outlet, thereby keeping them involved in their club, sport or community

even longer.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Seán Canney):** I call Deputy Cathal Crowe.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for giving me a few moments to speak. I will speak briefly about those who play our Gaelic games. Yesterday, I hosted a group from the Gaelic Players Association, GPA, here in Leinster House. The money GPA members get trickles down to their pockets. The male players get €1,490, on average, while the female players are getting a take-home grant of €945. They explained that 37% of the money going to female members goes into the organisation to cover all sorts of administration, right down to the county physios and whatnot. Female players want parity. That was put at the top of the priority list by the Minister of State and his predecessor, Deputy Chambers. I want to see this issue addressed because we need parity. Female GPA members are players too and are very proud to wear their county jerseys.

I heard yesterday that there is now something called “player poverty”. On county WhatsApp groups, players are saying they will not be back for next season because they cannot afford it and they need to get a job or move out of the county. This grant is essential. GAA is not a professional sport. The GAA also needs to play a role. It is making serious money. Everyone at GAA grounds, from those selling ice creams and programmes to the managers, is getting money, except the players. I am not suggesting Gaelic games should be professional, but the players should be bringing home some money in their pockets.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Regarding the points raised by Deputies Aindrias Moynihan and Costello, the Her Moves programme is specifically designed to keep teenage girls in sport. That is only one of the programmes. It is based on research, the Adolescent Girls Get Active report, done only two years ago. It was important research done by Sport Ireland that informs us about what the Deputies spoke about. We have facts in this regard.

The gender gap between men and women in sport was 15.7% in 2005. That was the percentage difference between men and women taking part in sports in 2005. It is now 5%, so the gap has narrowed but it was only 3.4% before the Covid pandemic. There is, therefore, a gap between the numbers of men and women who take part in sport and that is why this funding is important.

To address Deputy Costello’s specific point, the funding is for current spending, coaching and initiatives. The capital funding is entirely separate.

On Deputy Cathal Crowe’s point, the Ladies’ Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, and the Camogie Association would acknowledge what we have done on capital funding. Absolutely no funding is available if there is not parity of esteem between men and women and similar access. That is the end of that. Things like being told not to use pitches because it would destroy the grass for the men, which one ladies player told me about, are over. We will not be funding facilities where that is the case. This message has got out loud and clear.

On the GPA and the lack of parity of esteem, there is not as much I can do about that, except to make the important point that I strongly encourage the organisations concerned in their integration journey. That will answer all these questions. The Minister and I had a meeting this week with the presidents of all three associations, as well as Mary McAleese, who is driving this, and several staff members. This is an important endeavour, which we fully support. In fairness to the organisations, they also want to see an end to what the Deputy referred to. I want

to see an end to it. My wife is a former county player as well, and I have seen how things are not always equal in that regard. That must end, but I think it will end with the integration process. We wish that process very well. We want it to happen. Significant progress seems to be being made in this process, and I think this will be the answer to those issues the representatives of the GPA raised with me when I met them, and with the Deputy and other colleagues as well.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister of State.

## **Ukraine War**

8. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the action she is taking in relation to the reduction in tourist accommodation resulting from the refugee crisis. [45705/23]

18. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will elaborate on the “targeted measures to support downstream business impacted as a result of the war in Ukraine” announced on budget day. [45069/23]

31. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide an update on the impacts of stock displacement within the tourism sector, with 30,000 beds now under contract to the Department Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, of which 25,000 are hotel beds; if she will consider a business support scheme in regional areas with the highest occupancy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45524/23]

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I wish to ask the Minister about the Ukrainian war. We are quickly approaching its second anniversary. I think it was around 20 March 2022 that it began, so we are coming close to the two-year mark. The response from Ireland has been immense. In the main, we have done a good job as a country but our response has had its struggles. One of the fallouts from our response has been a major withdrawal of accommodation across the country. Our response has been tied into providing accommodation. I would like to know if there is a medium- and long-term response to that, specifically for those businesses locked out of and not benefiting from the lucrative contracts. Is there any support that could be given to them?

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 18 and 31 together.

The tourism sector continues to play a significant role in supporting the State’s humanitarian effort in response to the unjust Russian war against Ukraine. In June 2023, Fáilte Ireland carried out a detailed analysis of data provided by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth concerning the bed stock under contract to accommodate Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection and international protection applicants and established that 13% of the tourism accommodation stock nationally that is registered with Fáilte Ireland was under contract to the Department. An additional quantum of tourism-type accommodation that is not registered with Fáilte Ireland is also contracted to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

The data identified that in five counties more than 20% of the registered stock is used for humanitarian purposes, peaking at 33% in County Clare. The analysis shows that in certain counties, such as Offaly, Mayo, Leitrim, Meath and Clare, the scale of accommodation stock

displacement is significant and is a factor in downstream economic impacts. Recent research undertaken by Fáilte Ireland looked at the impact of stock displacement on tourist attraction and activity providers operating within those regions most affected. The overall findings are that most attractions, experiences and activity providers experienced a drop in business volume compared to 2019 across all three markets and that nearly 20% of businesses surveyed have been substantially impacted, with a decline of at least 30% in business volumes compared to 2019. The evidence collated suggested that bed stock displacement was one of the main factors that has led to the decline in business volumes.

As the businesses impacted are varied and range from small and micro-sized enterprises to family-run businesses, there is no one-fits-all solution to address the issues they are facing. For this reason, I have secured funding to implement a broad range of supports. As part of the budget settlement that I have secured for tourism in 2024, up to €10 million has been identified for a comprehensive programme of supports targeted at downstream tourism businesses experiencing particular trading challenges linked to the reduction in footfall to activities and attractions in regions most impacted by tourism bed stock displacement. This programme of supports includes investment in sustainable tourism development and promotion, industry digitalisation, promotion of domestic tourism and festivals and recruitment and retention initiatives.

I have also asked Fáilte Ireland to engage with impacted businesses to consider the scope for a specific business support scheme that could help the most affected tourism activities and attractions and to report back to me on options and recommendations in four weeks' time. A strong evidence base will be critical in this regard, and I have asked the tourism sector, particularly activities and attractions, to engage with Fáilte Ireland to provide direct and verifiable evidence of how tourism accommodation stock displacement has negatively impacted their businesses.

While the precise breakdown of the €10 million in funding I have secured to support downstream tourism businesses will not be finalised until I have received Fáilte Ireland's report, I will be ring-fencing specific funding to the organisation for sustainable tourism development to help tourism businesses improve their energy efficiency. This investment will help businesses to reduce overheads and dependency on fossil fuels while supporting the sector in the delivery of its climate targets by reducing carbon emissions.

Examples of the types of activity that can be supported under this sustainability heading include assistance to activity providers to extend their season, encouraging visitors to travel in April, May, September and October. Such businesses range from surfing providers to walking and cycling operators and an extension to their seasons greatly benefits them and their surrounding communities who provide supporting services. I refer as well to media partnerships with specialist websites, brands and publications in key markets such Germany and the United States, plus media visits by key travel and tourism journalists, and building linkages between Irish tourism industry providers and large tourism travel associations. Additionally, there is building awareness of the move by inland cruisers on the Shannon away from fossil fuels to the use of hydrogenated vegetable oil, which will reduce carbon emissions by 92%, and help to extend season business for the inland cruisers sector. I also intend to target additional funding to support ongoing work under Fáilte Ireland's employer excellence programme, which aims to address the current recruitment and retention issues.

Tourism businesses are in every region of the country and sustain people living and working in areas where often there is no other industry operating. This is a three-year programme

that has, since 2022, supported 390 tourism businesses and Fáilte Ireland will now be extending the scope of the programme to engage and support businesses with fewer than 20 employees, with a particular focus on attractions and activity providers. This funding will get more small businesses into the programme, which will help them to attract and retain workers. With this investment Fáilte Ireland will continue to build on this important work through a range of innovative initiatives to support industry in the recruitment, retention and upskilling of staff across the sector. This will comprise of multifaceted campaigns to target key cohorts of talent and to reposition the industry as an attractive workplace, the roll-out and development of the new learning management system, including an extensive programme of skills and professional development, and a programme of activity to target second-level students and their key influencers.

Most funding directed towards Fáilte Ireland's digitalisation initiative will continue to assist businesses to tackle low levels of digitalisation, which result in poor online visibility and, by extension, low levels of e-commerce activity. An effective way to assist destinations to increase dwell time is by enabling visitors to book more product in advance of arriving in destinations. Fáilte Ireland will commence a further intake of tourism businesses into its digitalisation programme over the next year. In addition, it will prepare an industry digitalisation strategy to support businesses to harness the power of new and emerging technologies such as AI and virtual and augmented reality. On the ground this will help Irish tourism businesses to maximise sales from online channels and increase reach and bookings through connected distribution. Officials from my Department, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland continue to engage with the sector to support tourism development at home and among overseas visitors, while supporting the continued recovery of the sector.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. One third of tourism accommodation is pretty much tied in providing refuge at this time for people who are fleeing the war in Ukraine and other humanitarian crises. It is felt in County Clare more than anywhere. There is a larger cohort of accommodation in Clare committed to these schemes than anywhere else in the country. There are, however, many businesses locked out of this. Businesses such as surf schools, open farms and restaurants or offering pony trekking as well as the four- and five-star hotels that are not configured to take in Ukrainian refugees or international protection refugees have seen their business model totally collapse. People just cannot book in County Clare for weekend weddings or long-term trips. I know of one fleadh cheoil group that was coming to Clare from the United States. They were going to stay for a while but could not get accommodation and had to cancel their entire trip. We are seeing this repeatedly.

I am particularly keen to hear more on the business support scheme. I want to home in on the types of businesses that are locked out of what we have just spoken about. Hotels in County Clare have received, I believe, in the region of €23 million so far for engaging in the scheme but so many businesses have seen their income go the opposite way. I would love to hear what the Minister can do for those businesses to pick them up a little and ensure they survive this crisis.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** As I said, €10 million has been identified for the comprehensive programme of supports. The key element is that I have written to Fáilte Ireland to see if there is scope for a specific business support scheme similar to the supports we provided during Covid. We cannot devise a scheme based on anecdotal evidence. If the Deputy is aware of businesses such as activity providers or tourism experiences, he should ask them to engage directly with Fáilte Ireland. Last week, I asked Fáilte Ireland to get back to me within four weeks so that response will be provided in three weeks. It is key that businesses engage with

Fáilte Ireland in order that we can devise a scheme, if one is identified as needed, and have the evidence to do so.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister. When I submitted this parliamentary question I was thinking of Lisdoonvarna in County Clare, made famous of course by the Christy Moore song. Almost every September, the town hosts an incredible festival to which people from all over Ireland flock, certainly the single people of Ireland. Ordinarily there are 300 or 400 people in the town but that figure has increased fourfold. No other place in Ireland has had a fourfold increase in population. The people of Lisdoonvarna have been incredibly welcoming and we can be very proud of receiving refugees. On the accommodation front, nearly every hotel in the town has availed of the scheme but one or two four- and five-star hotels are not configured for it. Outside the town, there is pony trekking and there are surf schools over in Lahinch. These are not businesses that can reap the benefits - if I can put it that way - that hoteliers can reap. They are seeing their businesses collapse. I hope the Minister can push on with a business support scheme. I believe a lot more than €10 million is needed. The scheme needs to be targeted at places like Lisdoonvarna and other towns along the west coast that have had thousands of people funnelled through them without supports. As we head into the winter period, we need to fund these businesses so they start 2024 in good shape.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I have concerns about that impact on those businesses. My colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Simon Coveney, has put in place a scheme that would benefit up to 130,000 small and medium-sized business at a cost of €250 million. Hopefully, through engagement with the sector, including activity and tourism experience businesses, the Fáilte Ireland scheme will give the support that is needed and which the Minister, Deputy Coveney's scheme, has not been able to reach. Between the two Departments, we will be able to reach out to them. I have allocated that €10 million specifically in recognition of the knock-on effect on downstream tourism businesses.

I emphasise again that engagement is key. If the Deputy is aware of any specific tourism businesses in County Clare, he should ask them to engage with Fáilte Ireland in the coming weeks.

*Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.*

## Sports Facilities

11. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media for an update on the large-scale sports infrastructure fund; the number of projects that were allotted funding under the previous round and an update on progress from these projects; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45100/23]

26. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the large-scale sports infrastructure fund will open for applications. [45220/23]

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin):** We now move on to questions Nos. 11 and 26, and Deputy Brendan Smith has been nominated.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** The large-scale sports infrastructure fund is extremely important for the further development of all sports, for women and men. I was glad to hear the Minister

of State, Deputy Byrne, reiterate his commitment to ensuring that the projects that have already received approval will proceed as soon as possible. Apart from the important sports events in our own country, we need to ensure we have a range of sporting facilities to attract even more international games and events. Sports facilities and stadiums should be multipurpose and facilitate as many sports as possible.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 and 26 together.

I thank Deputy Smith for asking these questions and Deputies Pádraig O'Sullivan and McAuliffe for submitting them. The large-scale sports infrastructure fund, which I have outlined already, was a significant fund that awarded approximately €86.4 million to 33 different projects. Details, including the project cap, are on the Department's website.

I also outlined the difficulties with some of those projects due to the pandemic and, subsequently, construction inflation. We have gone through all of the projects to try to encourage them along. Only a very small number have opened. I was at the official opening of the athletics hub in Newcastle West, which is a fabulous facility. I particularly like that there is public access to that project and it is not only for the athletes who will need and use it. I officially opened the linear walkway in Dunboyne. Phase one of Walsh Park in Waterford is now complete.

Some projects are, however, very slow and that is an issue. We want to make sure we can get the rest of these projects, insofar as we can, off the ground. We recently engaged with the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, and officials wrote to all of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, grantees inviting them to apply for additional funding support by 4 August 2023. Work has been ongoing in the Department since then. In due course, I hope to be in a position to announce further allocations to grantees with a view to ensuring that all the projects that have been awarded grants will go ahead.

I hope there will be a new round of LSSIF and I will continue to engage with the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, on that.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. I also welcome the Minister's engagement with me to date on the proposed Cavan sports complex. I assure the Minister of State, as I did previously, that the Cavan regional sports complex has advanced significantly since the original decision in 2020 to award funding. I compliment the Cavan county board of the GAA, Cavan County Council and the Royal School Cavan, which are the promoters of this project, and welcome the strong support for the project shown by other local and national sporting bodies.

The Cavan sports complex will cater for as many sports as possible, with a very strong emphasis on minority sports and women in sports. The Minister of State and the Minister will be familiar with Breffni Park in Cavan. This proposed new sports complex will adjoin Breffni Park and will complement the excellent facilities we have there already. It will have a range of sporting facilities.

With regard to the application for funding for the project, I am anxious that the request to the Department for further funding, following the Department's announcement of possible additional funding, will be processed and approved as soon as possible.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I thank the Deputy. I am hopeful the Cavan project will be able to start and be completed. There have been active discussions between the Department and the promoters of the Cavan regional sports campus that Deputy Brendan Smith has been in touch with me a lot about. He is very committed to that project. We are very committed to that project as well. We did offer further funding during the summer to everybody. Almost all of the large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, recipients applied for further funding and I do hope to be in a position in due course to announce further funding. The idea of that funding would be to get these projects off the ground and I sincerely hope that it will. They had difficulties but they are really worthwhile projects that we want to see built. I know Deputy Brendan Smith and his colleagues in Cavan want to see this project completed as well.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister of State. Again I want to put on the record that I have been very glad to work closely along with Cavan County Council, with Brendan Jennings and John Donohoe, with the Cavan county board, Kieran Callihan and Martin Cahill, along with the Royal School in Cavan, Bishop Ferran Glenfield, Padraic Corley and Canon Lidwill. They are really working together to ensure that this is a real community project. We would have a huge range of new facilities catering for all sports. This includes quite a large number of playing pitches, hockey pitches, athletics tracks, all of that encompassing a strong sports complex. A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending Breffni Park for the Ulster rugby game against Glasgow Warriors. The Cavan county board of the GAA is ensuring its facilities are available to other sports. That is the type of policy we need going forward, so that our sporting facilities of all sizes, the smaller stadia and the larger ones, cater for different sports and not just those of their parent discipline.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** Very briefly, for future large-scale sports infrastructure funds, I want to flag that the potential benefits that will be presented by the hosting of Euro 2028 for soccer will be immense. I ask the Minister of State to give careful consideration to the sort of investment that will be required in football clubs, particularly the stadia up and down the country that are in desperate need of investment. It is a wonderful opportunity, not for this round but for future capital investment.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I am fairly sure the Minister of State welcomes the good news for Drogheda United on funding from a professionalisation point of view. If we are talking about development of a new stadium, that is what is needed in the League of Ireland as regards sustainability. That is the big byword. Obviously we have a particular high that is ongoing in respect of soccer and League of Ireland. A club I support, Dundalk F.C., is involved with the local authorities and others to develop a viable project to upgrade Oriel Park. With all the great history that Dundalk F.C. has, it is a stadium that is in real need of work. We would be looking at the likes of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund as a possible solution to part of this problem into the future.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I concur with other Members on the real need for increased sporting facilities within each of our constituencies. I thank the Minister of State for visiting Castlebar recently to launch a report on the importance of sport within the county town. We have seen the success of the Lough Lannagh project with a new swimming pool, adjacent tennis clubs, walkways and so on. Collaboration with the Minister of State's Department and local authorities can be a game-changer in ensuring we have more participation, better sporting facilities and better investment and use of Government funding. We know how important it is to get young people involved and get them active for their well-being and for their physical and mental health. The Minister of State talked previously about the increased applications that are currently being



reviewed for the sports capital programme. Going into 2024 I hope that we have one of the largest national pots in the sports capital programme to deliver all across Ireland.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I join with other Deputies in calling for the details for the large-scale sports capital grants to be made available and to allow projects to make applications. I have spoken to the Minister of State many times about Bohemians Football Club in Dalymount stadium, a stadium with a huge history but also great potential. The partnership between the FAI, Dublin City Council and Bohs has the opportunity to apply for such a scheme. It will have significant benefit in the community. It is not just about the club itself but also the work they do on and off the pitch and the partnership with Dublin City Council and the Phibsborough area, which I do not represent but I know many of the groups there, and also the wider community on the northside. These large-scale projects fall outside the normal run of sports capital grants but they are incredibly important and have a huge impact on the cultural and sporting life of an area. I do not have to explain that to the Minister of State or to the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, as I know they are massive supporters.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Of course I will continue to work with Deputy Brendan Smith on the project in Cavan. I hope to be announcing extra funding for successful applicants for LSSIF in due course. I agree with Deputy Alan Farrell on the Euros. Deputy Ó Murchú talked about Drogheda United. I am very grateful that the board briefed me on developments there. I am very conscious that it is a matter for the members of the club to make decisions there. I will not comment one way or the other but will let them make the decision. Investment from the outside is part of it too. It is not just about Government investment.

Dalymount Park is a place I know well. My late father played there against Bohemians and probably others at the time. That is a project I have visited with Senator Mary Fitzpatrick. It has received funding to go to planning. The LSSIF funding has allowed that to go to planning. They are waiting to submit an application for LSSIF funding. Deputy Dillon mentioned Lough Lannagh which I visited recently in Castlebar. I wish I could have one of them in every town in Ireland of a similar size. It is an incredible facility and it is very welcome that it was supported by the Government.

## **Acht na Gaeltachta**

9. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán maidir le Ceist Pharlaiminte Uimh. 98 den 13 Iúil 2023, cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir leis an obair athbhreithniúcháin ar na chéad 10 bplean teanga a ceadaíodh faoi Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [45677/23]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Maidir leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga, an féidir leis an Aire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt dom ar an athbhreithniú atá ar siúl?

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Ar an 28 Meitheamh 2023, d'fhógair mé go raibh conradh bronnta ar an gcomhlacht Barr Feabhais Teoranta chun athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an gcéad deich bplean teanga a ceadaíodh faoi réir Acht na Gaeltachta 2012. Cinnteoidh an tion-snamh seo, a bhfuil buiséad suas le €92,500 á chur ar fáil ina leith, go ndéanfar athbhreithniú neamhspleách ar fheidhmiú na bpleananna teanga seo. Cuirfear aiseolas maidir le feidhmiú na bpleananna ar fáil agus, bunaithe ar an méid a aithnítear san athbhreithniú, beifear in ann céime-

anna a ghlacadh chun cur i bhfeidhm an phróiseas pleanála teanga a fheabhsú.

Is iad seo a leanas na deich limistéir phleanála teanga atá i gceist: Cloich Chionnaola, Gort an Choirce, an Fál Carrach agus Machaire Rabhartaigh i nDún na nGall; na Déise; Ciarraí theas; Gaoth Dobhair, Rann na Feirste, Anagaire agus Loch an Iúir; Ciarraí thiar; Conamara láir; an Cheathrú Rua; Maigh Eo thuaidh; Ráth Chairn agus Baile Ghib; agus Árainn Mhór.

Tá curtha in iúl ag Barr Feabhais go bhfuil teagmháil ghníomhach déanta ag an gcomhlacht le páirtithe leasmhara éagsúla i leith an athbhreithnithe ó cuireadh tús leis. Tá comhairliúchán déanta ag Barr Feabhais Teoranta le ceanneagraíochtaí agus le coistí stiúrtha pleanála teanga i seacht gcinn de na limistéir theanga go dtí seo. Tá sraith chruinnithe reáchtáilte ag an gcomhlacht le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus tionóladh cruinniú idir mo Roinn, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Foras na Gaeilge agus Barr Feabhais le déanaí freisin.

Is léir go bhfuil dul chun cinn á dhéanamh ag Barr Feabhais agus é ag obair i dtreo athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar na pleananna teanga ábhartha. Tá deimhnithe ag Barr Feabhais le hoifigigh mo Roinne go leanfaidh sé ar aghaidh go dícheallach lena chuid oibre chun a chinntiú go gcuirfeadh tuarascáil chuimsitheach ar fáil de réir na dtéarmaí tagartha agus na spriocdhátaí a aontaíodh. Tá tréimhse naoi mí ó thús an chonartha luaite chun leagan críochnúil an athbhreithnithe a chur faoi bhráid mo Roinne, rud a chiallaíonn go mbeadh toradh na hoibre ar fáil faoi dheireadh Márta 2024.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Ar a laghad, tá dáta againn anois - Márta na bliana seo chugainn. An mbeidh an tuarascáil nó an t-athbhreithniú sin á fhoilsiú ag an Roinn? Tá an t-ábhar seo thar a bheith tábhachtach. Bhí sé conspóideach ón tús maidir leis an gcóras pleanála teanga. Dar len a lán daoine, saineolaithe san áireamh, bhí an t-uafás ualach á chur ar an bpo-bal. Beidh sé suimiúil a fheiceáil cén dul chun cinn atá déanta. Maidir leis na deich bplean atá faoi chaibidil ag an gconradh, cén chaoi ar phioc an Roinn na deich ndúiche sin? Mar shampla, níl Cois Fharraige i nGaillimh san áireamh. De réir mo thuisceana, tá an plean sin ag feidhmiú le fada an lá agus roimh na cinn atá piochta ó thaobh an chomhlachta de.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Tiocfaidh mé ar ais arís maidir leis an bplean a luaigh an Teachta i nGaillimh. Sular éirigh mé tinn i rith an tsamhraidh, bhí sé i gceist agam cuairt a thabhairt ar na ceantair Ghaeltachta timpeall na tíre. Go dtí seo, bhí mé i nDún na nGall, i gConamara, i Ráth Chairn i gContae na Mí, i gceantar na Déise, i gCorcaigh, i gCiarraí theas agus i gCiarraí thiar. Is é an rud a bhí i gceist agam agus mé sna ceantair Ghaeltachta sin ná cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé na pleananna teanga a fheiceáil. B'fhéidir go mbeidh seans eile againn, sa choiste nó i gcruinniú i m'oifig, tuairimí an Teachta ar na pleananna teanga a bhaineann le Conamara agus le Gaillimh a phlé.

## Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

### Budget 2024

74. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the rationale for the one-off cost-of-living measures in budget 2024 associated with his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45691/23]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Students were expecting and hoping to see a permanent reduction in the student contribution charge in the budget last week, rather than a once-off measure. Students I have spoken to in the past week are really disappointed about it. Will the Minister explain why there was temporary reduction in the charge rather than a permanent one, with a view to abolishing it?

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Deputy and I must talk to different students, which is entirely possible. I have met many students and parents who really welcome that rather than having to wait until next September for a fee reduction that might happen, we have taken the opportunity in the cost-of-living package to ensure tens of thousands of students will get €1,000 back before Christmas and tens of thousands of people will get an increase in their postgraduate fee contribution. In addition, the PhD stipend will rise for many from January.

I fully accept that we have more to do. However, I certainly was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth when money was available right now by way of cost-of-living measures. I put that money to good use for students and families. I have made it a priority to reduce the cost of third level education. Cost should not be a barrier to education, as the Deputy and I agree. It should never be a barrier to people reaching their full potential, pursuing their goal and getting to where they want to be in life. Over several budgets, we have made a number of significant policy changes to reduce the cost of education for families. Since my appointment as Minister, student grants have increased by between 28% and 101%, depending on the grant received.

Budget 2024 aims to remove more barriers and make further and higher education more accessible. The measures in the cost-of-living package for my Department, which total €115 million, will support young people and their families. For the second year in a row, we have reduced the contribution fee by €1,000 for 94,000 eligible undergraduates. This reduction will apply automatically. If students' household income is less than €100,000, they are eligible for a further €500 reduction in fees, meaning the college fee will be halved to €1,500. This will automatically put money back in people's pockets. Apprentice fees for 11,000 apprentices will be reduced by one third. There will be an increase of €1,000 in the postgraduate tuition fee contribution grant for student recipients, to be paid by Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI. From January, for the first time since the financial crash, the postgraduate maintenance grant is coming back. We have topped up the student assistance fund. We are making permanent increases to the student grant, which will apply from January. As I said, we have more to do. I share the Deputy's aim to reduce the registration fee over time but I wanted to make real progress in this budget.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** The Minister mentioned the financial crash. In 2008, when the registration fee was first increased by a significant amount - by 67%, as I recall - I had just started college. Students came together to protest outside Leinster House, in Galway and all over the country. They knew that fee was simply the start of what was to come and, indeed, it has increased massively since then. It certainly is true that people will be pleased to see some money going back into their pockets by way of the reduction in the charge. The problem is that we need a view of the long term. People want to know the reduction of €1,000 will be permanent, with a view to the charge being abolished. We talk about free fees. We see the benefits of free secondary school education, how transformative it was for so many people and how fantastic it has been for society. That is the kind of vision we need for third level education.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am sure the Deputy will agree that we must start with those most

in need. Ministers have to work with the resources that are available and it is right to target them at those most in need. From next September, any student with a household income below €56,000 will pay a grand total of zero in undergraduate fees. I often see that among secondary school students, many of them think their parents will have to pay €3,000 in college fees, which they may not have. This is not true. Anybody in this country with a household income below €56,000 pays zero fees. That needs to be said. Any family with a household income below €100,000 has had student fees halved if the student is doing a full-time undergraduate degree. Anybody with an income above €100,000 is getting €1,000 off college fees.

I did not think it right that people would have to wait until next September for a reduction, as per the budget proposal by the Deputy's party. I want to make real progress and permanent reductions. The fact we have reduced fees not once but twice is a clear indication of the policy direction in which both the Deputy and I want to go, which is about reducing the cost of education for families.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** One thing we definitely can agree on is the need to make education as accessible as possible. We know many people do not realise what is available to them and we must ensure they are made aware. This is really about the type of vision the Minister has for third level education. I think he probably does have such a vision. It was a disappointment that the reduction in the charge is not a permanent measure, with a view to abolishing the charge. Sometimes, these decisions are made by the Ministers for Finance and for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. People knew this issue would continue to put pressure on families. There is concern about whether they will be able to afford third level education. It is not just the student contribution charge; it is also the impact of the accommodation crisis and the difficulty of finding somewhere to live. The issue is a lot broader than the student charge. It is about what kind of vision we have for third level education, which should be that it is free.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** My vision on this is really clear. I believe education is a public good and that people should have a right to access it regardless of their means. Free education in Ireland now starts at age two, with free preschool education, and goes right the way through. That should continue on through to an undergraduate degree. Some people will go to college full time, some part time and others will do a third level course online. People will not necessarily want to go straight from school to college. There needs to be flexibility. The idea of education as a public good that can be accessible regardless of means is really important. The student grant is increasing significantly from January. That is a direct recognition of the need to support people, including those most in need. I chose to increase the money from January rather than telling people they must wait until next September. We are bringing in postgraduate maintenance grants for the first time in more than a decade.

The Deputy is right that the cost of student accommodation is a huge burden on people. That is why I worked with the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, to ensure there was provision in the budget for the rent tax credit to be applicable to parents who are paying their child's rent. They can get that credit backdated for the past year. Parents with a child in digs in the third year of college can claim back €1,750. That will really help people.

### **Third Level Education**

75. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will, in light of the independent national review of State supports for PhD researchers, review his recent announcement and bring the stipends of all PhD researchers, not just those funded by Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, and the Irish Research Council, IRC, up to the living wage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45985/23]

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Earlier this year, the Minister made a commitment to make Ireland one of the best places to do a PhD. In the recent budget, he failed to live up to that commitment. He provided for an increase to €22,000 a year in the stipend, but that applies only to PhD researchers funded by SFI and IRC, who make up fewer than 30% of the total. The payment is still well below a living wage or the average stipend for PhD students in the rest of Europe. What will the Minister do to fulfil his commitment and ensure PhD candidates have a living income?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I acknowledge that the Deputy raises this issue with me regularly. Every year since I became Minister, we have made improvements to PhD stipends, and rightly so because they are not where they need to be. The first change we made was to address a bizarre discrepancy that existed between the stipend for a PhD researcher with the Irish Research Council and that for a PhD researcher with Science Foundation Ireland. In last year's budget, the stipend was increased by €500 for both SFI and the IRC, bringing stipends in Ireland to €19,000, and under the budget delivered in recent weeks, I have secured funding to increase the PhD stipend provided by the competitive funding agencies under my Department to €22,000 per student per annum, an increase of €3,000.

I acknowledge clearly, and am not in any way reneging from the fact, that the independent report I commissioned recommends getting to €25,000. Anybody reading the report honestly will also recognise, however, that that may not be done in one go, and the report recognises that clearly as well. I do not want PhD researchers to think this is the end of the matter; it is not. The Government remains committed to getting to €25,000. We have gone from €19,000 to €22,000 and I hope to finish the job by getting from €22,000 to €25,000 in future budgets.

The Deputy asked why this applies only to funding agencies under my remit. I can direct and instruct only those agencies under my remit, but I hope others will follow suit. My understanding is the Health Research Board, HRB, is already ahead of the €22,000 and that Teagasc and individual universities will now consider this. Of course, they have until January before that PhD stipend comes in.

I have received the final review from the co-chairs. The Deputy will recall they gave us one report, which related largely to stipends, and another report was due. I have received that and am working my way through it with my officials. I am putting in place a work programme to see how we can progress the recommendations and I hope to be in a position to publish that in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Minister said he just cannot increase the figure to €25,000.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I did not say that.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Why can he not do that? I do not accept he cannot. The re-

search and development tax credit is worth €750 million a year in most cases to multinationals. I would much rather give our PhD researchers a living income and cut slightly the money going to the most spectacularly profitable companies in the world, and the Minister would have plenty of money. In our budget submission, we proposed a stipend for all PhD researchers and costed it at €100 million. We could take €100 million, therefore, off the super-profitable multinationals and give it to PhD researchers to allow them to have a living income. The Government does have a mechanism to do this because it gave a once-off cost-of-living payment of €500 to everybody. The idea, therefore, the Minister can do it only for people in agencies under his remit is simply not true because the Government did it on a once-off basis for everybody. Let us give everybody who is a PhD researcher a living wage. The money is there.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Of course, what I say is true in that I can direct only agencies under my remit, but the Deputy is entirely correct that, generally, other parts of government follow suit as well. The main funders of PhD researchers, from a State point of view, include individual institutions, SFI, the IRC, Teagasc and the HRB. The HRB has moved, the IRC and SFI are now moving and Teagasc will consider the matter. Moreover, I know from conversations with individual university presidents that they, too, are looking at this issue. In fairness, they have been among the strongest advocates for our PhD researchers and I expect announcements in that regard.

Budgets, however, are about trying to strike a balance between the variety of priorities I have within my Department's Vote, and while I want to look after PhD researchers and have increased their stipend by €3,000, I also thought it was important that we increased our student grants, reduced fees and could extend the rent tax relief to families and invest in literacy. The Deputy and I might have differing views on economic policies but I think supporting companies locating in this country is a good thing. We are going to get to the €25,000. Our stipends are now ahead of the UK, at €22,000, as a result of the budget.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Will the Minister clarify whether PhD researchers are treated like workers? Members of the Postgraduate Workers Organisation are in the Gallery and this is another issue they have asked about. If a PhD researcher has the same status as a worker, they should get sick leave and all the other entitlements a worker gets, given they are workers and without them our universities and other third level institutions would not be able to function. They need to be acknowledged as such.

When the Minister says he is going to try to increase the stipend, will that be for everybody? Huge numbers of our PhD researchers are on miserable incomes, far less than the stipend, and the Minister could have at least met the recommendation of €25,000. If one deserves it, they all deserve it but even that is far less than the average among the rest of Europe and very significantly less than would be required to make the country, as the Minister suggested will be the case, the best place in Europe to be a PhD student. Our PhD researchers, who are driving research and innovation and keeping our universities going, are living in poverty. Moreover, there are also the visa and immigration issues that many of them are facing and they would like to know what the Minister is going to do about them. He knows what the issues are.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I do know what the issues are and I have engaged with many of our PhD researchers. As the Deputy knows and as I said earlier, a second report that was due from the co-chairs has been received by my Department and will be considered and published in the coming weeks. That report was charged with looking at a variety of other issues above and beyond the issue of stipends, and I know those issues are very important to PhD researchers, as

they are to higher education in general and to Ireland Inc. I look forward to having a chance to consider that report, publishing it and publishing an action plan and work programme to progress those recommendations.

It is important, however, when we commission independent reports, that we do not just pick bits out of them. An excellent job was done in the independent report I commissioned, with excellent engagement from PhD researchers, which I acknowledge. It did recommend increases in stipends up to €25,000, but it did not say we should get there in one go and it did say the increases should be from January. That is why I have made sure, quite unusually for a budget, that when an increase comes in, it will come in from January, as opposed to having to wait until next September. Contrary to what people might be saying, this is not the last word on the matter. We will get to the €25,000 and I want to see that for all PhD researchers.

### **Student Accommodation**

76. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the reason there was such an absence of measures related to purpose-built student accommodation in budget 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45692/23]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** It was astonishing for most people that student accommodation was not mentioned once in the contributions of the Ministers, Deputy Michael McGrath and Donohoe, on budget day at a time when people and students are struggling as a result of a lack of student accommodation, both purpose built and general, to be availed of. Will the Minister give an update on the issue of student accommodation within budget 2024?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** As the Deputy well knows, student accommodation is addressed through capital. The Government made clear on budget day, in advance of budget day and in a previous Government decision that in the national development plan, NDP, the uplift and extra funding in capital would be dealt with through the NDP review process, which is due to conclude around the end of the year. That will be an opportunity to try to progress a number of important student accommodation projects and I am actively working with colleagues across government, including the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, on a number of exciting initiatives.

The Deputy and I agree we need to increase both the supply and the affordability of student accommodation and to recognise, as I do, that it is a significant challenge for students, parents and families. That is why we have changed the policy on student accommodation since last November. Until then, the State was investing zero euro and zero cent in direct funding for student accommodation. It was being done through the private market or through colleges, by borrowing or accessing the European Investment Bank, EIB, or in other ways.

We are now, rightly, using taxpayers' money to fund projects and get them going and, as we have discussed previously, that means projects in Dublin City University, DCU, Maynooth University, the University of Limerick and the University of Galway. Students have gone back to college this year with about 900 additional student accommodation beds owned by colleges that opened this year compared with last year, and with about 2,000 more private beds this year than last year. Furthermore, the budget helps with the affordability aspect by expanding the rent tax credit. In addition, after meeting students' unions, I recently approved an additional €440,000

to the student assistance fund, specifically targeted at students who are experiencing difficulty with the cost or availability of student accommodation, and that has been dispersed across the universities, which I hope and know will help in a meaningful way.

The Deputy will have seen the benefit of the 674 beds that are being delivered for University of Galway, but we are absolutely determined to do more at pace on student accommodation. There are significant opportunities for University College Dublin, UCD, and Trinity College Dublin, in particular, and more for DCU, and I will be happy to work with the Deputy in the context of the NDP review.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Students protested outside Leinster House just days before the budget because the cost of student accommodation is at an all-time high. When we hear about people paying the likes of €12,000 for student accommodation, we know something has gone terribly wrong. Affordability is the crux of the issue. We are seeing high-end accommodation coming on stream. Students are saying they do not need this kind of high-end accommodation and cannot afford this kind of high-end student accommodation. Students are having to commute long, crazy distances to try to get to college. To be perfectly honest, I cannot even imagine the impact that level of stress and strain is having on the dropout rate. Will the Minister also clarify when the student accommodation strategy will be published because students are waiting to see that published?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** While I agree with the Deputy about affordability, you come at affordability from a range of ways. Affordability is about making sure a family or student can afford to pay the price of college and of renting for college. Reducing fees, increasing grants, extending the renter's tax credit and specifically putting €440,000 into the student assistance fund for students having difficulty with the cost of accommodation means we have help in the here and now and from the get-go. I agree fully with the Deputy about standardisation. I have spoken to student unions and they tell me they are being asked to pay for accommodation at a spec, for want of a better word, they never sought. We need to get to standardised design. We need student accommodation as it is being built in Sligo and Athlone, County Westmeath, and the technological universities in Waterford, Carlow and other places. We need a standard approach across the country. I am concluding a piece of work with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on standardised design that will be due in quarter 1 of 2024. I think that will make a real difference in terms of the affordability and speed of rolling out new projects.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Will the Minister say when the strategy will be published? Despite being in this role for only a few months, from going around the different universities and speaking to them I think the issue of affordability stems both from the housing crisis and from the issue whereby we are seeing really high-spec accommodation people would never be able to afford. Even if you were working full time, you would not be able to afford that kind of high-spec accommodation. That comes from the for-profit model universities have to operate because of the funding gap. They obviously then have to rent it out over the summer months. As a result, it obviously impacts on students with regard to affordability.

I also have a question about the digs and money coming back. Usually for that tax credit people have to be registered with the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. As most of those digs obviously are not, what is the exact story there and how would that work?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The short answer is that for the digs you do not. We had this issue



last year too. I plan to publish a new student accommodation strategy by the end of the year. I prioritised trying to move on the legacy projects that had planning permission but that had stalled for economic reasons. I think on balance that was the right call. Those were priorities one, two and three. We will have a new strategy towards the end of the year.

We need to get to a situation where we have more college-owned affordable accommodation, built to meet the needs of students and no more than that. As we increase core funding into our universities, which we are, I hope the point made by the Deputy about being reliant on income as in the past, becomes less relevant. I want to get to a position where we have a standardised design approach, as we see with other public buildings, where student accommodation looks like one of two or three options. That speeds up the planning and design process, helps with affordability, and makes sure we are building stuff students want and can afford. We will have that piece of work concluded in quarter 1 of 2024.

### **Traveller Education**

**77. Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to assist members of the Travelling community in accessing third level education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44897/23]

**Deputy Seán Canney:** This is a simple enough question for the Minister, but it is an interesting and important one. What steps is he taking to assist members of the Travelling community to access third level education, and will he make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am committed to making progress in enhancing access, participation and success for learners across further education, apprenticeships and higher education. Recent data for 2021-22 indicate that the current number of new Traveller entrants to higher education is 52. The national access plan targets 150 new entrants to higher education from the Traveller community by 2028, so there is a lot of work we need to do collectively to get to that target. I also had a good meeting on this issue with Pavee Point in recent weeks.

Last year, I allocated a fund of €1.35 million over three years to a pilot programme to support learners from the Traveller and Roma communities. The key objective of this funding stream is to increase the participation and progression of Traveller and Roma students in higher education. The fund can be used to support the development of community-based partnerships with the Traveller and Roma communities. The impact of that will be reported by the Higher Education Authority, HEA, in quarter 1 of 2024. I think that word, “impact”, is really important. We all want to get to the same point here. We have had targets for Traveller participation in higher education for many years, and over successive Governments, but we have never yet got there. Measuring against initiatives and the HEA reporting on that will be key to success.

The project plans show there are a diverse range of projects and activities being carried out at both pre- and post-entry levels. A number of other social inclusion measures are aimed at supporting Traveller and Roma learners as part of our action plan for apprenticeships. This includes the Traveller and Roma apprenticeship incentivisation programme. To date, 22 Travellers and one employer have been funded. While an apprenticeship involves a paid employment contract, there may also be associated costs for apprentices, such as buying tools or equipment. To help with this, the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation scheme and the new social inclu-

sion bursary will provide sums of between €2,000 and €2,500 to apprentices for such costs. There are also a number of programmes and strategies such as Youthreach and the adult literacy for life strategy that are vital in supporting members of the Traveller and Roma community. This includes supporting learners to develop literacy, numeracy and soft skills, in line with the further education and training strategy.

I am conscious that the requirements of full-time education can sometimes provide a barrier to many people, including members of the Travelling community. That is why I am pleased we have a new initiative in place from September 2024 around part-time education and the removal of fees.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Minister for that positive response. As a former lecturer in the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, in Galway, I saw very few from the Travelling community passing through the built environment section as students. When I was working in the private sector I experienced Travellers who had gone to third level education, got their engineering degrees, and were out on sites working and contributing to society. They were also models for other young Travellers who might be contemplating third level education. That is one of the issues. They may feel there is a barrier or attitude that if they go to university they will not be treated properly. The most important thing is that we need a system where Traveller students in universities are sent out as ambassadors into the communities, secondary schools and other areas, to explain their experience in education to other Travellers. I understand this is happening with some success in the university in Galway. Maybe it is something that should be looked at so every college and university would have an ambassador type situation to try to encourage more people.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I agree with all of that, and join with the Deputy in commending the University of Galway on all of the good work it is doing. I have had the opportunity to meet them on a few occasions specifically on the subject of Traveller participation. What I like about what they do is that it is not just about just getting somebody in the door. It is about getting somebody out the other side, through the education process and into the world of work. I think we are doing a reasonable amount, quite a lot in many ways, at third level with bursaries and incentivisation and having this as a priority area in the national access plan. We are reporting against it through the HEA. We are up for doing more and want to do more. We also have to be honest, however. The Deputy mentioned secondary schools. A lot of the barriers and blockages are encountered long before second and third level education. There needs to be a joined-up approach to all of the different blockages and barriers somebody may experience throughout their life. That is why I am working closely with my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, and his Department on the successor to the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy. It is a way to look at things in the round, and how we remove any block or barrier at any stage of the education journey for our students, in this case in particular for members of the Traveller community.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I agree wholeheartedly with the Minister’s approach. It is important and a matter of changing attitudes. We will reap the benefits with more people coming into the workforce and more education within the Travelling community, which will be of benefit to everybody and to create that as a norm rather than an exception. I cannot let the moment go without asking how the Minister got on in Mountbellew at the agricultural college. If they were to do veterinary courses we would have a situation where people locally, including Travellers, could become vets in Galway or across the country. I know the Minister met them last Friday and I wonder how that went.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy shows admirable ability in terms of how he got from here to there.

*11 o'clock*

I was pleased to visit Mountbellew in recent days and honoured to open the Aleen Cust library, named after the first female veterinary surgeon in Ireland and the UK, who was an incredible woman. I have been reading up on her in recent days. I was delighted to meet the team there and to see the good work going on in Mountbellew.

The factual position is the Government wants to expand the number of veterinary medicine places. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and I conducted an exercise in which we asked the higher education sector to put forward ideas of what more it could offer. A number of projects came forward that were deemed to be viable at the first stage. One was Mountbellew working with Atlantic Technological University in Donegal, one was University of Limerick and one was the South East Technological University's plan for Kildalton college. All of them will be assessed by our two Departments and considered in the context of the NDP review. I hope to be in a position to provide an update towards the end of the year. I am very impressed by what is going on in Mountbellew and it was good to be there.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

78. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current number of apprentices waiting for off-the-job training at levels 2, 4 and 6 in addition to the numbers waiting for such training in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45695/23]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I have put this parliamentary question in since the start of September and have not got the kind of response I was looking for. It relates to the number of apprentices waiting for off-the-job training at levels 2, 4 and 6. I have sought a tabular breakdown, which I obviously will not get in oral questions. Will the Minister of State clarify why I cannot get that as a response at all?

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science(Deputy Niall Collins):** I hope the reply will be of use to the Deputy. The Department has placed an unrelenting focus on the area of apprenticeships. One of the first actions the Minister, Deputy Harris, and I took was to publish a dedicated action plan for apprenticeships to drive this important reform. The impact has been clear. The growth in apprenticeships in recent years has been significant. Since 2021, more than 22,000 people have started their journey as apprentices. Craft apprenticeship registrations for 2022 and 2021 were totalled 13,254, an increase of almost 40% on the preceding two years.

This increased demand has posed challenges for the system at a time it has been dealing with the impact of Covid-19. At the end of September, 5,345 apprentices were waiting longer than six months to access off-the-job training. Of those, 5,194 were at phase 2, while the remainder were at phases 4 and 6.

In budget 2024, we have received a €67 million investment in the apprenticeship system. This will enable growth in the craft apprenticeship training system from 13,000 in 2022 to more than 16,000 places in 2024. That represents an increase of almost 25%. This will allow SOLAS, the National Apprenticeship Office, NAO, and the education and training boards, ETBs, together with staff representatives, to work intensively with our Department to deliver the required additional apprenticeship training capacity to ensure the reductions waiting times, in particular for phase 2 training. The Department holds weekly meetings with stakeholders in the area and the Minister and I will meet SOLAS and the NAO again next week to discuss the impact of the budget investment.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I still do not understand why I could not get the response in writing at the start of September. I have never seen it happen before that I have not been able to get a response when I have continuously asked the exact same question and the exact same response was given. It really annoyed me. The Ministers have taken their eye off the ball. The response I got after much pestering was that 7,500 were waiting. That is a significant number of people. We were just discussing student accommodation and we are aware of the housing crisis in general, not to mention the impact it is having on these people's lives. The eye was taken off the ball and I could not get a response because nobody wanted to admit it. That is my reading of the situation.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** We will send the numbers to the Deputy afterwards. At the end of September 2023, 8,757 apprentices were waiting to access off-the-job training, of which 5,345 were waiting longer than six months. At phase 2, there were 7,096 apprentices, of which 5,194 were waiting longer than six months. At phases 4 and 6, there were 1,161 apprentices, of which 51 were waiting longer than six months. I do not accept we have taken the eye off the ball. SOLAS and the NAO are leading on developing a series of options, which will significantly reduce the backlog by the end of 2024. This work has been the output of activities and stakeholder engagements that occurred at an intensive pace on the ground between July and September this year. The options are focused on increasing the capacity of the education and training boards by 3,000 places in phase 2 and delivering apprenticeships supported by other initiatives such as the temporary and emergency delivery of approximately 600 places in phase 2. We will send the Deputy the follow-on on that.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I look forward to reading it in detail. Obviously, the Minister of State will not say to me on the floor of the Dáil that he took his eye off the ball. I am aware he will not do that and that he is trying to fix the issue, but how did we get to this point where he is saying the number was more than 8,000 at the end of September? The response I got was from the start of September. This is really important. I know the Minister of State knows that but the eye has to have been taken off the ball. I do not see what else could have happened leading to so many people waiting. When we talk of increasing capacity in housing, the first thing the Government constantly says is we need workers who are able to do it. We have people who want to do it but cannot. They cannot access the training they need to complete their apprenticeships. I do not see how the Minister of State can say he did not take his eye off the ball.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The training of apprentices is important and must be done in a timely manner. There has been a hugely positive reaction to the level of apprentices going into the system and the expansion of apprenticeships but I concur with the Deputy that if we do not have the processes right for people to get qualified in a timely manner, the good work being done will be in vain. Young people get demoralised by having to wait. They are not moving up the scale from phase 2 to phase 3 or getting the increment in their pay. They see this as holding

them back when they want to get out there. It is timely to discuss a review to make sure that, as well as have the policies and input right, we get people through the system in a timely fashion and maximise the number of people in apprenticeships.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I recognise and acknowledge the concerns raised by the Deputies. Suffice it to say the eye was not taken off the ball on this. It has been a continual focus within our Department. At the same time, we have to protect the quality of training provided and we had to build capacity to deal with the backlog. The backlog has dropped since 2021 from in excess of 11,000 to approximately 7,500. The will and resources are there to eliminate that backlog by the end of next year. It is a high priority for us. We, of course, recognise it but we have to engage with the stakeholders who provide the training, their staff and the representative organisations of the staff. We cannot flick a switch and double or triple capacity. There has to be a consultation process to ensure the quality of training provided to apprentices meets the required standard.

*Question No. 79 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Medical Research and Training**

80. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide an update on his efforts to increase the number of graduate entry medicine places; the reason he has not tried to reduce fees as a means to attract more applicants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45694/23]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I would be interested to hear an update on the efforts to increase the number of graduate entry medicine places. Maybe it is my age but more people I know are going into graduate entry medicine than before. What are the efforts to increase the number of such places and the reasons for not reducing the fees to attract more applicants and from more diverse backgrounds?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** There are two main factors driving my approach to addressing issues with medical education: ensuring we produce enough doctors to meet the requirements of our healthcare system and our society and providing more places for students in a context where the level of demand has consistently exceeded the number of places available. It was encouraging this year that, for the first time in a long number of years, when the CAO offers came out for undergraduate medicine, we saw a fall in the points required.

Last year, the Minister for Health and I announced an agreement with Irish medical schools to increase the number of places available for EU students by 200 over the next five years. This began with an additional 16 students in September 22, climbing to 122 in September 2023 and to 200 by 2026. This agreement included additional graduate entry medicine places. To date, an additional ten graduate entry places, with five in 2022 and another five in 2023, have been created, while the other 110 places were on direct entry programmes. The Deputy will also be aware of the work we are doing on an all-island basis. From next September, we are enabling access to medical education on an all-island basis through the work we have done with the University of Ulster in Derry and Queen's University in Belfast.

As the Deputy knows, the free fees initiative pays the tuition fees of eligible students undertaking their first full-time undergraduate programme. The free fees initiative does not meet fees

in respect of students who are completing a second undergraduate degree. For better or worse, that is currently how the graduate entry medicine programme is classified. However, unlike for other second undergraduate degree programmes, the State provides a subsidy to institutions towards the cost of provision. The tuition fees payable by students are determined by the higher education institutions, taking the availability of this subsidy into account. In the academic year 2022-23, the State contribution was €12,100 per students, the balance of fees being payable by the student. This State subsidy is now being increased incrementally. The State contribution for graduate entry medicine places this year is €14,500.

Regarding funding for graduate entry medicine, Department is also working with the Department of Health on these matters. I am sympathetic and supportive of the case being put forward by graduate entry medical students. We need to find a way that works and does not have unintended knock-on consequences because the policy direction has always been that we have the free fees initiative for one undergraduate degree programme. We need to tease our way through that. I have given a commitment to meet graduate entry medicine students in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I thank the Minister. I am not harassing the poor souls who write responses to parliamentary questions but I am a little bit confused. I submitted a parliamentary question on this issue because I am confused about the current approach.

The response to a parliamentary question I received from the Department stated: “The State contribution was €11,950 per student with the balance of fees payable by the student.” Different colleges have different fees. In UCD, for example, students pay fees of just under €17,000. Taking what the Minister has told me and what was stated in the parliamentary question to which I refer, surely the balance should be €5,000. That is clearly not how the system works because that is not what is happening. When it was first introduced, the purpose of graduate entry medicine was to open up the discipline to those people who would not traditionally have had the ability to study medicine. We also need more doctors to be trained.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** On that, we have to be honest. The graduate medical entry programme was introduced to try to diversify the medical profession. We also have to be truthful that in recent years we have seen points for undergraduate medicine places skyrocket to the point that accessing those courses became prohibitive for many. People could achieve the best points possible in the leaving certificate and still only go into a random selection lottery for a place. We have tried to break that cycle via a very significant increase in undergraduate medicine places. The all-island approach coming next year will help further, with additional places in this jurisdiction. That has seen the points for undergraduate medicine places fall.

The Deputy is right to be slightly confused because it is a little bit confusing. The answer to the parliamentary question is entirely correct. Universities set the fees, as they do for any second undergraduate degree or postgraduate programme. The State makes a contribution towards the cost. We have increased the subsidy we are providing. Universities have not reduced their part of the fee. That is a matter for them. The fact is that the State subsidised these courses by €11,950 between 2021 and 2022 and the figure is now €15,500 for new graduate entry medicine places from this year.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** That confuses me in a different kind of way. I am not suggesting that the Minister is not outlining the facts but if the money coming from Government for fees is increasing, surely there should be some kind of conditionality that the fees charged to

students decrease. It is my understanding that the fees will increase again next year. That is what students have told me.

The reality is that the cost of these fees has a corrosive effect on diversity in the medical vocation. The cost of fees continues to make medicine and the studying of medicine a privilege. It is, of course, a privilege but it should not be something that is almost an elitist privilege rather than something that should be available to everybody. There are more people studying medicine now but older people are trying to study medicine and find it-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Does Deputy Durkan want to come in?

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** No, I am happy so far.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** With my questioning. I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I hope he is happy with my answers. I agree with the Deputy's point that we do not want people who want to access the medical profession to reach barriers and blocks that mean we cannot diversify the profession. I know, as a former Minister for Health, how important diversification in medicine is.

When we talk those most in need, as recently as last year we extended the 1916 bursary to general entry medicine students. For the first time, the most financially disadvantaged students can use the 1916 bursary for graduate entry medicine. That was an indication of how we wanted to make progress in diversification.

In defence of the institutions, if that is the right phrase, we have examined how to properly and sustainably fund medical education in Ireland. Everyone would think that the model had been too tilted in favour of international students rather than providing opportunities for Irish and EU students. That was probably because of financial holes in funding over many years in universities. We have seen a conversion of many international places and we are increasing the funding provided. As part of that, we are increasing the subsidy. I want to do more to help our graduate entry medicine students. I will meet them in the coming week. We will tease through some of the issues and see what practical steps we can take to help them.

*Questions Nos. 81 and 82 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Third Level Education**

84. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to address the sharp increase to 15% in undergraduate drop-out rate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45701/23]

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The dropout rates for undergraduate students have jumped very significantly in recent times. The rate is now up to 15%, a shockingly high figure. For example, the number who dropped out in first year across higher education was up to 5,000, an increase from 9% to 12%. There are a range of reasons for this, including the cost of accommodation, transport, having to travel long distances, mental health, the impact of the pandemic and the lack of mental health support for students. What is the Minister going to do to try to address this very worrying increases in dropout rates for undergraduate students?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Dropout rates often do not factor in those who may have moved from one course to another within an institution. That is important to say because many of us will know somebody who might have started one degree or area of study and moved to another. The Deputy is right to highlight this issue.

Ensuring that students succeed and thrive in their higher educational journey is an important issue for me and my Department. The HEA publishes data on the proportion of students who do not progress from the first to the second year of higher education. The latest figures published by the HEA relate to students who commenced in 2020-21 and consider progression to the 2021-22 academic year. Over the past decade, the data showed a gradual downward trend in non-progression rates from 16% for new entrants in 2010-11 to 12%, which is the figure the Deputy referenced, for 2020-21.

However, the figures are a little skewed because, as he pointed out, the figure dropped to 9% for 2019-20. However, this was heavily impacted by the exceptional circumstances caused by the Covid pandemic. The non-progression rate subsequently reverted to the pre-pandemic level of 12% percent. In 2010-11, approximately 16% of students did not progress. That dropped to approximately 12%. It dropped to 9% for brief period and is now back at 12%, but that is still down from 16%.

However, my Department is aware of some reporting regarding an increase in student withdrawals. The latest data and analysis is not yet available to me. My understanding is that the figures on progression rates are scheduled to be released by the HEA in the first quarter of 2024.

It is important to say that where a student withdraws from third level education, it can be for a variety of reasons. Changes in the progression rates are rarely influenced by any one single factor. In fairness, as the Deputy acknowledged, in budget 2024, I have sought to try to support students by reducing the fees, increasing grants, extending the rental tax credit and securing an additional €60 million in core funding for universities. This means more academic tutors, guidance, medical assistance, mental health supports and counselling and other support services that could be vital to many students.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Someone does not need to be a rocket scientist to work out why people are dropping out of college. Of course, if people actually studying to be a rocket scientist they would be living on less than the living income, as we know from our PhD students, but we have covered that ground. The Minister mentioned the increase in core funding. The Government accepted that there was a shortfall of €307 million in core funding but only provided €60 million in the budget. This is very significantly short of what is necessary. That puts pressure on the services that should be provided by third level institutions, such as counselling and others. That also puts pressure on the institutions to jack up the rents to ridiculous levels. Some of the rents being charged by universities for their own accommodation are off the charts for most students. Accommodation is a major issue. What has been done to actually increase the delivery of more affordable student accommodation, properly funding the universities and services such as counselling?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have an opportunity to come back in

**Deputy Simon Harris:** To use the Deputy's phrase, I am not in any way buying into the thesis that "jacking up" rents needs to happen in any university. The Deputy will have to agree with me on this point because it is a fact. Universities have seen an increase in their budgets



this coming year compared to last year and last year compared to the year before. There is no excuse and that should not be used as a fig leaf. In fact, a number of universities are reducing the cost of student accommodation. The University of Galway is one example where they have reduced the cost of the majority of the housing. I take the point that not all are but if anyone is using that as an excuse, that should be called out for the codology it is.

Let us talk about these figures because there are a lot of figures floating around. Many years ago, the Cassells report said that the higher education sector needed €1 billion extra. When I became Minister, we got the European Commission and Indecon to do an up-to-date report as to where we stood. The figure of €1 billion had become €307 million. It is a fact that we need to inject €307 million more into our higher education system to be at a sustainable level of funding that will get us to better student:staff ratios. In this year's budget, we put in €60 million more, along with €40 million last year. We have also given €35 million for pay and more than €50 million for university pensions so we are making real progress. Nobody said that we would put in the €307 million in one budget; that is not realistic.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I certainly agree that there is no excuse for universities jacking up rents to unaffordable levels. I was simply pointing out that if they are underfunded, they start to look for ways to increase revenue. They start to operate more like businesses and less like institutes of higher education. However, it is no excuse and the rents are often pushed down because students actually get out and protest about it. I commend the students who have done so recently.

There is a massive shortfall in the availability of affordable student accommodation. What is the Minister planning to do about this? The Union of Students of Ireland, USI, has asked for 30,000 additional affordable student beds by 2029. Is the Minister going to meet that demand? That is the sort of scale that is necessary. To refer to my earlier point, in a choice between hundreds of millions euro going into research and development tax breaks for some of the richest companies in the world or giving it to our universities to fund them properly, I know which one I would choose

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I also know which one the Deputy would choose.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Will the Minister indicate the three most commonly identified causes for dropouts from higher education? To what extent is it possible to address the issue in the context of providing graduates in the future?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** There is no list as such but we are doing a more in-depth dive into the data now. I think it can be for a variety of reasons, be they personal, health or cost. As a Government, we need to better understand the reasons but also recognise that sometimes people will choose to change and move to different courses. It is also important to bear this in mind when trying to improve a tertiary education system.

To address Deputy Boyd Barrett's point, rents were also often kept down in universities because we extended the rent pressure zones to our universities. That has been of significant assistance in keeping rents a lot lower than they would have actually been. Sometimes when the Deputy talks about investment in universities, one would swear the investment is going in the wrong direction. Last year, our universities got permission to be able to permanently recruit 1,500 more staff. Last year was the first in many years where we saw an improvement in the student:staff ratio. They have €60 million more next year to build on that.

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Regarding student accommodation, I am meeting USI next week. We have projects under way in DCU, Maynooth, University of Limerick and the University of Galway. I want to work with UCD and Trinity to get them over the line and will publish a new student accommodation strategy by the end of the year.

### Departmental Budgets

83. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to confirm the number of students that will benefit from measures aimed at those in further and higher education in budget 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45740/23]

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Will the Minister confirm the number of students that will benefit from measures in budget 2024 aimed at those in further and higher education, particularly in the area of apprenticeships?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Budget 2024 introduced what is, by any fair and objective measure, a significant package of supports for third level students and their families. I will take each measure in turn.

It is estimated that 94,000 students will benefit from the €1,000 reduction in the student contribution fee. Almost 52,000 students will benefit from the student grant increases. A total of 1,790 postgraduate students will benefit from the reintroduction in postgraduate supports. Some 24,000 students are expected to benefit from the removal of the PLC fees. Some 11,000 apprentices in higher education will benefit from the one third reduction in the apprenticeship student contribution fee. Furthermore, 3,000 PhD researchers will benefit from a €3,000 increase to the PhD stipends provided by Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council.

To put that in context, contrary to the air of negativity sometimes surrounding the issue, more than 185,000 students and their families will receive support as a result of budget 2024. They will have real money in their pockets and a real reduction in their bills and in the cost of education as a result of our budget. That includes targeting supports to those who are most in need through the student grant scheme and it also includes universal support, recognising that everybody needs a bit of help, including those who may not qualify for student grants.

We are also doing more. We are increasing the student assistance fund, which will benefit all students in need of supports. This brings the allocation for this academic year to more €17.6 million.

I am most excited about the fact that from September, we will have a new part-time fees scheme. For the very first time, we will have fee support for part-time students, including those studying online. Let us take a hypothetical mother raising two kids on her own, holding down a job and trying to pay a mortgage or pay the rent who has always wanted to go to college but is only able to do it part-time and has been hit with a wall of large fees, now if her household income is below €56,000 per year, she will have those fees paid for by the Government. These are some of the measures we have put in place.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** There is a substantial amount available to increase the number of

apprenticeships in various areas. The Minister now needs to look at increasing the number of places in our third level institutions for key areas such as healthcare and others. Taking dentistry as an example, in some colleges up to 50% of the places are taken by students from abroad because the colleges are trying to get money in. How can the number of places in universities be increased rather than them being reliant on students coming from abroad to make up the cost of running particular faculties? This applies in to radiotherapy, medicine, nursing and other areas that need to be expanded. I remind the Minister that the population has increased by 1.5 million or 40%, and therefore, the number of the training places in each of these areas needs to increase by 40% as well.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I could not agree more. That is exactly what we are trying to do. Yes, we need to increase the size of the tertiary education system and we are doing so year-on-year. However, we also need to increase it specifically in areas where we know there is one of two things - a need for more people to work in that area from a public services point of view or a demand for more students to study in the area that is not being currently met. Throughout 2023 we have done a number of exercises in respect of healthcare and veterinary medicine where we have asked the education system what more it can do on nursing, medicine, therapy places and dentistry. We are working with the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform and the line Minister, the Minister for Health, to see how we can fund that in the context of the NDP capital review. Next year we will do further work on other key areas. We will also work to ensure all institutions on the island of Ireland are helping to contribute to the skills needs of our island. That is why we now have ring-fenced a number of healthcare places in Queens University and the University of Ulster.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Is there enough joined-up thinking between education and placement in workplaces? As with getting apprentices the required training, people doing degree or diploma courses need to get placement in the workplace at the same time as studying and as part of an overall package, rather than it just being purely academic or purely focused on the college itself.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am glad the Deputy raised that because that is what the review has done. People often ask me to create another college place in X area. For some courses that is relatively easy to do. However, in a course with a clinical or work placement element, there is no ability to create the place without the matching work place. We have worked jointly with the Department of Health. We have identified what we can do from a university point of view and asked the Department of Health to identify the work placements. We have married the two and now we are progressing it. This is not all an exercise for the future. We have increased the number of medicine places by 60 last year and a further 60 this year. We have several hundred more nursing places and more therapy places, including in the North. We are actively on this journey. We want to make more progress on veterinary medicine. The Deputy has raised radiation therapy with me regularly and I will follow up directly with him on that.

### **Third Level Costs**

85. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the SUSI grant will be amended to cover part-time students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45527/23]

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I acknowledge the efforts of the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the

Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, in delivering for further and higher education in the budget. I have received several questions on the availability of supports for part-time students who cannot access SUSI grants. It is crucial to address this to ensure inclusivity, accessibility and equal educational chances for all. Many individuals are unable to pursue full-time education due to various factors. What can the Government do in this regard?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important question. I have been consistent in my position that we need to develop an education system that is more flexible and agile than the one we inherited. We need to recognise that learners come to education at different stages of their life and career and need access in a way that works for them. For many that will be part-time learning, some in person and some online. Increasingly we will have students in work as opposed to people straight out of school.

One of the overriding priorities in the budget has been reducing child poverty. Of course, child poverty can be reduced in a number of ways and income support is probably the quickest short-term way. However, to really break intergenerational poverty, access to education has the greatest power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty and break down the cycles of intergenerational poverty.

The fees associated with part-time programmes can be a real barrier to higher education access and I wanted to expand supports to part-time students in the budget. Therefore, I was very pleased to announce, as part of the tertiary education package from September 2024, a part-time fee grant scheme to provide support for eligible students who are undertaking undergraduate part-time programmes leading to a major award, whether in-person, blended or online. This scheme will mean fees for these courses will be abolished for eligible students whose household earnings are less than €55,924. The support and added flexibility will benefit many but particularly low-income families. The scheme will be administered through SUSI. The fees represent too big a barrier for too many people. The scheme will be developed in detail by my Department in the weeks ahead. The Department will engage in further discussions with key stakeholders and will outline the full details of the new scheme and how to apply early next year.

The Atlantic Technological University in the Deputy's constituency has been a leader in part-time education for many years. It has offered part-time courses to students. The scheme will mean that more students, including more students from diverse backgrounds, can access those part-time courses from September.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** It is very positive to hear of this additional part-time fee-support scheme, which will be an enormous boost for those who wish to enter part-time education while juggling work and family commitments. These additional grants will help with the expenses of textbooks, course supplies and other academic resources which play a crucial role. It is important that the Minister is backing part-time education. Many of the universities, technical universities and colleges are establishing part-time courses to meet the needs of the local enterprise plans and industries in their regions. Supporting part-time students will allow them to blend their academic commitments with their family obligations, etc. This will be versatile education and address the requirements in further and higher education.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for his support for the scheme. This scheme will help people who can now access degree programmes outside the CAO process. I was recently in the Atlantic Technological University in the Deputy's part of the country. I met nursing students doing the new tertiary nursing degree. These students had been assessed for eligibility for

the programme not based on their leaving certificate points but based on an interview and other assessments of their aptitude. That means students who might have had to go to the UK to study are doing nursing courses in the north west. We have enough challenges with staffing our own health service without staffing the British NHS. That is a really important development. More part-time and online education will remove the barriers for more people.

With the technological universities taking education into the regions, the degree courses available outside the dreaded points race and removing fees for anybody doing part-time or online education, starting with those most in need, those with a household income of just below €56,000, it gives us a real platform on which to build. We will build on it in the years ahead by continuing to reduce fees and increase grants. In the years ahead we will consider how we can incorporate maintenance grants as part of the free fees initiative for part-time courses.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** In his opening response, the Minister spoke about broadening the access to education for families who may be impacted by poverty, etc. This is a very worthwhile scheme. Broadening the support to part-time learners underscores the importance of continuous education. It is crucial that we continue to nurture our flexible workforce which is vital for our economic advancement and also for innovation and how we support our talent and knowledge economy.

Are the grants capped at a certain level? Is the ceiling of €56,000 for a household or for an individual?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The full eligibility for the scheme will be worked out and published early in the new year. The €56,000 limit is for a household. It is linked to the income ceiling to qualify for the SUSI contribution. We are trying to align part-time and full-time education. Clearly that number could move up in future budgets if that is the wish of Government and the Oireachtas. When the Taoiseach asked us to focus on child well-being and child poverty, it made sense to start at lower income levels, where we are most likely to capture those most in need. I gave consideration to trying to define certain groupings, such as parents, carers and people with disabilities, but then we would need to justify having one group and not another group. We are trying to ensure everyone can access education and that cost is not a barrier to anyone. I thought that the income threshold was an important place to start. There will be rules for the scheme. It will have to lead to a major award at level 6, 7 or 8. It will need to be done part time and can be online, blended or in person. There will be a set number of years in which to do it. The fee per module that would have been paid by the student will be met by the State.

### **Third Level Education**

86. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to the announcement of the significant funding that Magee University would receive from the shared island initiative to expand its capacity, if he will provide details of the nature of the arrangement; the way it will work in practice; the benefits it will bring in terms of workforce planning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45696/23]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** In recent weeks I have met students in the North. I ask the Minister to provide more detail, as per the question.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I really want to work with the Deputy and other Members of the Oireachtas on student mobility on the island of Ireland. The Deputy probably saw the ESRI report. We can do so much more on this. Perhaps we can return to it another day. We can all do good work together on this.

Following a Government decision in June, my Department is responsible for management of the implementation of this very exciting project relating to the Magee campus of Ulster University. It will see the construction of a new teaching block in the University of Ulster's Derry campus. The estimated cost is £45 million over a four-to-five-year timescale. Ulster University, UU, has committed to providing 15% of that cost, while the Department of the Taoiseach has committed to funding the balance, up to a limit of €44 million, from the shared island fund. As the project progresses over that time, moneys from that fund will be transferred into my Department's Vote. Officials in my Department are working with the senior management team in Ulster University, as well as officials in the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, to establish an appropriate framework to oversee the delivery of this complex cross-Border capital project. I will visit both Belfast and Derry before the end of the year.

The positive collaboration with Ulster University arising from this project has now led to further opportunities for collaboration outside of the shared island initiative. Specifically, a separate opportunity across the healthcare domain has now arisen, which has allowed me to secure additional places in Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast in key therapies and nursing for students from this jurisdiction. It is important to note that these places are funded by both my Department and the Department of Health. I am pleased to be able to confirm to the Deputy today, fresh off the presses, that we will see further college places ring-fenced for therapies students this year, and we believe we will be able to increase the number of places in this academic year. We intend to go further next year with medicine places ring-fenced for students from Ireland.

The Magee campus provides us with a huge opportunity. Magee now has a medical school. Derry has been underserved as regards education for so many years. We know that. It is a city larger than other cities on this island which have had much smaller student populations. Expanding the campus provides real opportunities for north-west collaboration. I was in Letterkenny recently and I know that the people there are very excited about the opportunities for Atlantic Technological University and Magee to interlock and work together on a cross-Border basis.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** That is interesting. What additionality does that new teaching block entail? I would be interested to hear about that. I am from Galway, and anytime I am in Derry I always think they are very similar cities. The benefit a strong university town can have for everybody across the city is really powerful. I therefore welcome this funding and the expansion in the form of the new teaching block. I would be interested to hear, though, exactly how that will work out and what it will entail.

I agree 100% with the Minister that it would be really good if we could work together to try to look at the student mobility issue. We know the difficulties with the differences between the CAO and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UCAS, and schools not knowing them and not being able to explain them to their students. Then there is a massive issue now whereby people are expected to have four A-level subjects.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy is entirely right. I really welcome the fact that Uni-

versities Ireland has now set up a group specifically to look at what I call CAO reform. It is chaired by the excellent Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh from the Deputy's parish, Galway. It is due to report by the end of the year. It is a matter for the group, but I stand full ready to support it with funding or whatever else. There are now ring-fenced places in Northern Ireland for students from this jurisdiction. Why can there not be the same in reverse? Student mobility is key not only in terms of educational access but also in terms of building peace and prosperity and getting to know one another better on the island of Ireland. I will work with the Deputy closely on that.

As regards the project at Magee, the current enrolment number on UU's Derry campus is 5,227 students. I am informed that, with planned programme offerings, it is estimated that planned growth using existing infrastructure can reach only 6,000. As part of its campus master plan, increasing UU's estate infrastructure is a prerequisite to growing student numbers, and UU envisages a staged growth to 6,560 students at the Derry campus by September 2026.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I was recently at Queen's, where I myself studied for a period. I was with our spokesperson on further and higher education, Pádraig Delargy, and we met with Queen's management and students. We met many students as part of the freshers' fair as well. Another group we met with that I thought was very interesting was the secondary students' union. It really wanted to highlight the fact that it can be so difficult for students from the North to study in the South. It is welcome that that group has come together, and I look forward to what it will propose come the end of the year.

At the moment most students do not take four A-level subjects. That is just not a reality. Not only is there the issue of the four A-levels but there is also the fact of the extra bonus points in maths. Most students, obviously, if they do not plan to study maths, will not be doing maths for their A-levels. That is really important.

I really look forward to seeing what comes out of this. I hope it will be workable and helpful.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Me too, and I really look forward to meeting the secondary schools group from Northern Ireland, which reached out to me today. I am very happy to meet the students in the coming weeks and will keep in touch with the Deputy in that regard.

This just needs to be fixed. The two systems do not seem to understand each other, but that is not a reason not to find a workaround and a way to fix this. Huge progress has been made, and I thank the universities, UU and Queen's in particular, for that, with the ring-fenced places for students from here to go to the North and to be able to study medicine from next year, nursing from this year and therapies from this year. That is real progress the universities have delivered. We need now to return the favour and we need to make sure we can do the same here for students from the North. There is no doubt in my mind that we have very many great brains working in the higher education system. We will bring them all together through Universities Ireland and come up with an ask and a practical recommendation, and let us try to get this done by the end of the year.

### Third Level Education

87. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the progress in the assigning of new schools of veterinary medicine and pharmacy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45218/23]

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I wish to ask a question about the plans to formulate new schools for veterinary medicine and pharmacy within our third level sector. The Minister will know I have a strong regional interest in this in that South East Technological University has strong bids for both courses. It is one of the things the university sector is very much looking forward to. There are a number of institutions, not just South East Technological University, SETU, looking at this. What is the progress in this regard, what is the timeline and when can we expect a decision to be made?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh for this question, which is about an issue we have discussed on many occasions. First, the fact that relatively newly formed universities, including South East Technological University, had the ability and the capacity themselves to put in such strong bids, as the Deputy said, that were deemed to be viable by an independent assessments panel speaks to the real credibility and heft of South East Technological University. That is the first thing I wish to acknowledge. I had a chance to congratulate and thank some of the team in person at the National Ploughing Championships but I wish to do so again on the record of the Dáil.

Ensuring a supply of qualified vets and pharmacists to meet the demands of Ireland's agri-food and healthcare sector is a really important issue for my Department.

A number of institutions, as the Deputy said, put forward proposals, following a recent Higher Education Authority, HEA, expression-of-interest process. We basically went out and asked the system what more it could do for us in terms of veterinary places, pharmacy places and other healthcare places. The institutions outlined options not only for the expansion of existing veterinary medicine and pharmacy programmes but also for the development of entirely new programmes.

As Deputy Ó Cathasaigh is aware, there is a substantial capital cost associated with the development of any new school in veterinary medicine and pharmacy, and it is important we understand the full scale of all costs and what is planned for. The options identified through the HEA's process have the potential to transform - I do not use that word lightly - the number of students who can take up places in these key areas. This will be an expansion at a scale rarely seen across five high-demand areas, of which the Deputy has referred to two, and will of course require a significant investment of public funding in our institutions.

Detailed discussions need to take place and are taking place about the ways and means to address capital costs for the provision of any new school, including in the context of the expected upcoming review of our national development plan.

The factual answer is that I am now working on the veterinary piece with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, on the pharmacy piece with the Minister for Health and on the next steps with the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. I hope to be in a position to make progress in the NDP review, which I am led to believe is likely to be towards the end of this year or the very start of next year.



**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** We will not be unhappy with the idea of increased capital funding or increased capital costs because the university that has been founded in the south east to serve the needs of the region is crying out for capital investment. I know it has acquired the Waterford Crystal site and is acquiring another site in Wexford, but it will have to develop on it. Kildalton college stands ready to be a part of this offering. We have a strong agriculture sector in the south east. We also have the strong horse-racing element, which would justify the need for the veterinary training aspect. We also have an extremely strong and vibrant pharma sector in Waterford, which would fit very well with a new college in that regard, remembering what the point of developing a university in the south east is and was. It is about reversing that historical brain drain from the south east and providing university quality education in the region.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Without prejudicing processes or next steps in any way, it is interesting and encouraging that, on a regional basis, such strong ideas came forward. I mention not just strong ideas or hopes, because everyone is ambitious for their area, but when these bids were analysed by independent experts on an assessment panel that included, for example, the chief veterinary officer, they were deemed to be viable proposals for further consideration. The SETU proposed that veterinary would be provided through a three-partner model with Teagasc through the Kildalton Agricultural College and a distributive small animal clinical network as well. The factual position is that the higher education system has stepped up. It has told the Government and Oireachtas what more it is possible to do in key areas where we know we need more people and need to train more people to better deliver the services in agriculture regarding veterinary and in healthcare regarding pharmacy. Now the Government, in the round, will need to decide how it wishes to address this through the NDP review.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I am not at all surprised that the likes of SETU has provided something that has proved to be independently viable. Waterford Institute of Technology, as it was, had to punch above its weight for years. It was forced to do so and to behave as though it was the university for the south east because it effectively was. I am delighted to see that ambition remaining under the new configuration and management. It is vital for the region. Some 600,000 people live within a one-hour drive of Waterford. That figure relates only to the Waterford campus and does not take account of the number of people who would rely on the Carlow campus or the new Wexford campus, which is under development. There is a strong case to be made for this type of investment. It is exactly the kind of driver we need for SETU to allow it to take a great step forward and provide for the needs of the young people in the region. The capital investment that would be attendant on the development of a new school of this type, either in farming or veterinary, would be hugely significant for the university.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I welcome all support and allies in making the case for increased capital for the higher education sector given the difference the Deputy and I know it would make to the regions. I am not satisfied that so many young people are leaving the country to study veterinary medicine abroad. It is a disproportionately high number. We see in the number of people registering on the Veterinary Council of Ireland register every year how many of them have been educated abroad. The overwhelming majority of new entrants to the register each year are educated abroad. We have to be able to do better. This country is proud of its agriculture and agrifood sectors and our regions. Our higher education sector has put up its hand and said that whether it is SETU, the Atlantic Technological University, the University of Limerick or more than one university, we can do more and better. I will be putting our best foot forward in agriculture, with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and in healthcare, with the Minister for Health, to make the case in the NDP review for driving some of these projects

forward.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

88. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if consideration can be given to allowing an apprentice butcher who lives in the South and who has been offered an apprenticeship place at a suitable facility in the North (details supplied) to be accepted onto the SOLAS apprenticeship course; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45367/23]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I am dealing with a young man who works in Dundalk and wants to do an apprenticeship through SOLAS. He has a workplace in Crossmaglen in County Armagh that is happy to do this but there is an issue in delivering it. I have spoken to the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Harris, about this, and the matter is with the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, at the minute. There is a general view that we need to deliver cross-Border student mobility, so I am hoping for some good news.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I am glad to inform the Deputy that procedures have been put in place by SOLAS allowing for apprentices resident in the Republic to be employed outside the State, including in the North. The Department has been advised by SOLAS that the conditions are that the relevant employer is approved and registered to train apprentices and complies with specific taxation and company registration requirements, along with the appointment of a company representative to have overall responsibility for training the apprentices. I will provide full details separately to the Deputy of the conditions that must be met under these procedures. It is a matter for the employer of the person to whom the question relates to ascertain whether they meet these requirements, which would allow the apprenticeship to proceed in these circumstances.

We already have an all-Ireland apprenticeship programme, the accounting technician apprenticeship, with a second programme for accounting technologists in development. These are at levels 6 and 8, respectively, on the national framework of qualifications. This was a key commitment under the action plan for apprenticeship that we are glad to be able to deliver in partnership with the programme's consortium.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I am almost shocked with that positive answer, which is the one I had hoped for. Unfortunately, it is not the information the student in question, his mother or I had received previously when dealing with SOLAS so there may be a need for communication. If we ensure the employer meets the criteria and the correct people are communicating with SOLAS, we can get this sorted and bring the issue to an end. I ask for a promise from the Minister of State that we will ensure the right people talk to each other and deliver a solution so that this young fellow can get his apprenticeship and his mother is no longer giving out to me.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** As I said, we will endeavour to send the Deputy the information or criteria post-haste after this session.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Minister will not be shocked when I address my next contribution to him. I hope he is willing to accept it. I welcome all that has been said on mobility, whether we are talking about cross-Border, hard-to-reach communities or disability. I will return to the issue of personal assistants. I see the Minister has provided additional moneys to

deal with disability in further education. People are under severe pressure and becoming apprehensive. There are other issues, however, including a long-term issue related to contracts, issues with monthly rather than weekly payments and an issue with switching to jobseeker's payments because people do not have full-time contracts.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I acknowledge that Deputy Ó Murchú raises this issue with me on a regular basis and we have had good meetings and engagement on it, including with a group of personal assistants we met, who were largely, though not exclusively, from the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board. I am pleased that we received an extra €2 million in funding for students with disabilities in the budget. This will allow us to do more to support students with disabilities. That core part of supporting students with disabilities is the people who work with them. I do not want to get ahead of myself but in answer to a parliamentary question from the Deputy last night, I said I was looking to see if, as part of that, we can better support our personal assistants. A proper discussion on the role of personal assistants is key. Are there interim steps we can take? I am open to doing that and I look forward to having a follow-up meeting with the Deputy shortly.

### **Third Level Education**

89. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he is ensuring that the National Maritime College of Ireland has the required level of funding to continue providing the essential training in green technology and skills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45697/23]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I was down at the National Maritime College of Ireland, NMCI, which is a fantastic facility. If we are looking to create jobs for the future and the green agenda, the NMCI has so much potential. It is already delivering a great deal but it needs investment. It has always been ahead of the game compared to other colleges around Europe but we must ensure that it has investment. The amount of investment needed is not massive but some increase is necessary to ensure the college can remain ahead of the game.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The National Maritime College of Ireland comprises part of Munster Technological University, which is an autonomous body. The application of funding to specific programmes or for particular purposes provided by the HEA is a matter for the technological university. The Deputy may wish to note that core funding allocated to the higher education sector increased in 2023 and, following last week's budget day announcements, is set to increase further by €60 million in 2024.

The NMCI, through the delivery of courses in areas including marine safety training and marine engineering, plays a crucial role in delivering the green skills required to meet the Government's ambitious climate targets, particularly the skills required for offshore renewable energy. I join the Deputy in expressing positive and kind words about its work. The college is a key member of the expert advisory group convened by my Department to support the provision of the skills required for offshore wind delivery. Against this backdrop, my Department is not aware of any funding issue that is impacting on the college's ability to continue to provide training in the areas referred to in the Deputy's question but I am happy to discuss the matter with her.

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*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

*12 o'clock*

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I dtús báire, is mian liom mo dhlúthpháirtíocht a chur in iúl do mhuintir Chorcaí agus pobal iarthar Phort Láirge sna ceantair sin inar tharla tubaiste tromchúiseach inné nuair a bhí tuillte ansin. Bhí tionchar mór ag na tuillte ar go leor tithí agus gnóthaí ar fud an cheantair sin agus bhí go leor damáiste déanta. I take the opportunity to extend my solidarity, and that of my party, to the people of Cork and west Waterford who experienced serious flooding yesterday. I commend all of those who were on the frontline trying to save businesses, homes, and indeed, people, in their efforts. Many homes and businesses have been impacted and there has been very serious damage. The town of Midleton is the epicentre of this disastrous flooding and locals are describing it as the worst in living memory. Households and businesses are seriously damaged, roads are completely impassable, schools and local services for vulnerable people are badly impacted, and many homes are without power. A boil water notice is also in place and water stations have been set up in the Gaelscoil. It is a very tough time for the communities affected but their community spirit has shone through. Just one example of that is Sarsfields GAA club, which, in an effort to protect its community, made the decision to open its floodgates and have seen its pitch destroyed and clubhouse damaged. I know the Taoiseach is due to arrive in Cork around now and I hope he tells the community there that it will have the full support of the Government in recovering, rebuilding and putting in place the protections against the impacts of future storms.

We are fortunate that no lives were lost, given the fact that elderly citizens in hospitals right through to toddlers in crèches were left in flood waters. Many of the homes and businesses affected have no flood protection insurance so there is an urgent need to ensure emergency funding is provided to the local authorities involved and to the individual families and businesses. I ask the Tánaiste that all emergency funding necessary will be made available without delay. Will he spell out what that will look like and when it will be made available? We know parts of County Cork are prone to flooding. The Tánaiste knows this well. Yet, flood relief works are continuously being delayed. In Glanmire, which was once again hit by serious floods yesterday, the people of that area have been crying out for flood protection for over 20 years. The delays of the flood relief scheme, which spent years sitting on the Minister's desk, have come home to roost. These types of delays need to be addressed. That scheme disgracefully took three years to receive ministerial consent and because of those delays, work has only just now started. It is not good enough and many residents will justifiably be feeling angered about that this morning.

I am sure the Tánaiste agrees that we also need engagement between the Government, Met Éireann and local authorities to develop a more localised warning system. That would be a very positive step. Does the Tánaiste accept there could have been more of a concerted effort to ensure that families and businesses were sufficiently warned of yesterday's flooding? What will the Tánaiste do to ensure other flood protection schemes will be expedited so that the risk can be minimised in those parts of Cork most prone to flooding? Crucially, as families, businesses and communities wake up to the devastation of the floods that took place and which gripped their communities yesterday, those people who have seen their homes and businesses devastated

by the flooding want to know they will not be made to jump through hoops and go through all of this red tape to access emergency funding. When will they get the vital support? Will the Tánaiste spell out to people who do not have flood insurance because these communities were hit before by floods, what will happen, what support will be provided by Government and when will it meet them on the ground?

**The Tánaiste:** Níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil brú faoi leith ar mhuintir na tíre go háirithe i gCorcaigh agus i bPort Láirge de bharr an méid báistí a thit inné. Bhí sé uafásach ar fad agus tá daoine ag fulaingt dá dheasca sin. Táimid ag déanamh gach aon iarracht chun cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do mhuintir na dúiche, i Mainistir na Corann ach go háirithe, agus i nGleann Maghair agus i lár chathair Chorcaí. I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. Our immediate thoughts are with the households and businesses affected by the fierce flooding yesterday, particularly in County Cork, Cork city and west Waterford. It has been very distressing for many people. We are deeply concerned about what has transpired and I thank all the volunteers, the Civil Defence, the local authorities and the Defence Forces personnel who were deployed from mid-afternoon yesterday to the locations and particularly to Midleton, for the work they did. I also thank Sarsfields GAA club, which incidentally won the county final last Sunday against Midleton, for opening up their pitch to save a housing estate from flooding. We will make sure we work with the club to help it in any way possible because that is the kind of intervention that makes a huge difference to a community. It was quick decision-making and we applaud that action. Sarsfields is the club of the late Teddy McCarthy and has an outstanding tradition of serving its community.

The humanitarian assistance scheme is available to provide support to those living in properties directly affected by the flooding. A fund of €10 million is already in place for this scheme. It prevents hardship by providing support to people whose homes are damaged by severe weather. We will work with the local community on this and the Department of Social Protection is liaising on the ground with the people affected to make sure they have access to the help they need. If any home owner affected by Storm Babet needs to access these supports, they can contact community welfare service by phone. We will outline the numbers and so forth. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has an emergency humanitarian flooding scheme, administered by the Irish Red Cross, which is available to small businesses with up to 20 employees, for community, voluntary and sporting bodies. The Taoiseach is going down today and the Minister for Finance is also visiting, as is the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, with special responsibility for the Office of Public Works, OPW. We will examine the situation, assess it, and the Government will meet next week to see what additional work it can do to support the community.

The Deputy referenced the flood relief schemes. To be fair, the Government is in office three years. Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan prioritised the flood relief scheme for Glanmire and worked with the then Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, at the time to get it onto the agenda. There are many flood schemes out there. Construction began in July this year. There is a lot of design stuff and so forth. That flood relief scheme is to protect approximately 103 properties from flooding from the Glashaboy river and will take 32 months to complete. The OPW is also working on a scheme in Blackpool to protect 293 properties. The total project budget is some €21 million. Again, that was approved in March 2021 and the decision was challenged by Save Our Bride Otters, an organisation which wanted to protect the otter population there, and that has resulted in further information being requested from the OPW in support of requests for consent under the Act. The city's flood relief scheme has been

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delayed for a considerable length of time by civil society groups which have different views, notwithstanding all of the submissions and so on.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are way over time.

**The Tánaiste:** There is an issue but continuing objections that lack balance and perspective in the process are delaying many flood relief schemes across the country and that needs to be faced up to, not just by Government but by the entire House. We need balance and perspective in all of these matters.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** So in Midleton.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I made the point that the Glanmire flood relief scheme was announced in 2016. The floods happened in 2012 and it took three years for ministerial consent. Nobody in the community is opposing it or objecting to it. They desperately need it and they were hit again yesterday with devastating floods. The Tánaiste spoke about humanitarian assistance funding. It is means-tested. Will the Tánaiste outline that people in the community who have means above the €30,000 threshold will not be getting 100% support for the damage again caused to their homes? Will there be a look at this threshold? These communities have been left at the mercy of the elements because the schemes have not been put in place. Places where schemes have been put in place are being protected. We know it works. Will the Tánaiste address this issue? With regard to businesses, will the Tánaiste outline when additional supports will be made available to them? The Tánaiste mentioned Sarsfields GAA club. Donegal has had experience of this where we have had floods.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I will finish on this point. Many community facilities took years to be replaced. Sarsfields summed it up in one quote, “We won a county, lost a pitch but hopefully saved a part of the Glanmire community.”

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you Deputy.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Now it is time for the Government to step up and support not only Sarsfields GAA but also other facilities, including our hospitals, crèches, businesses and households-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is way over time.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----very quickly without delay. Crucially we need to speed forward the type of schemes that will protect communities in the medium to long term.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will Members please adhere to the allotted time?

**The Tánaiste:** There is no doubt that businesses have been severely affected, in Midleton in particular. Deputy James O'Connor was at the scene very quickly yesterday evening. He related to me how severe it was on businesses and households. As I said earlier in my reply, we are examining what level of intervention we can make in respect of supporting the households and businesses that have been undoubtedly affected.

We have always been strong supporters of Sars down through the years through various sports capital grants. Given its intervention on this occasion we will not be found wanting.

The wider community through Civil Defence and Defence Forces personnel are still there. We applaud what they are doing. There are also all those volunteers from businesses whose employees came out in Midleton and elsewhere to help. It was very severe. It is estimated that one month's rain fell in a couple of hours. I repeat that we need an honest debate on the flood relief schemes. Approximately 95 are either at design stage, under construction or in planning.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Tánaiste.

**The Tánaiste:** A total of 53 have been completed. Where they have been completed they are working to prevent damage. We have to bear this in mind and have an honest debate about it

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I will begin by expressing my solidarity with the people of Cork and west Waterford who have been impacted so severely by the flooding yesterday. I will return to this later. I want to raise the issue of healthcare spending. Last Tuesday the Government presented a "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away" sort of budget that was full of gaps with dodgy estimates. It has been exposed in many ways as a work of fiction. Nowhere is this clearer than in the health spend. The Government announced a health budget with a €2 billion hole in it. Bernard Gloster, the CEO of the HSE, has said the moneys allocated to the health service in the budget are inadequate and the funding is not sufficient to meet the expected demand for health services. This is very serious.

The front page of today's edition of the *Irish Independent* reveals that Government Deputies are apparently less worried about the substance of Mr. Gloster's concerns than they are about the very fact he stated them at all. These concerns are very real. It is extremely serious that the Minister for Health has announced a recruitment freeze during an acknowledged staffing crisis. This is a hammer blow to all those who work in the HSE who tell us how under-resourced they are. It is a hammer blow to Bernard Gloster who says that patients will be harmed without the recruitment of additional staff. Most of all, it is a hammer blow to the people of Ireland and those who are now wondering whether they will have access to health services if and when they need them.

The freeze on recruitment is outrageous. Having begged doctors, nurses and healthcare workers not to leave us for Australia and other places, the Government has effectively turned around and said never mind that. This week HIQA reported that staffing in hospitals such as St. James's Hospital and Mercy University Hospital is at a critically low level. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, is warning us that the recruitment freeze will send the healthcare system into freefall. Adding insult to injury were the comments of the Taoiseach in the Dáil on Tuesday, when he played down what he termed "talk" of a recruitment and retention crisis, one that we all hear about all the time in our constituencies.

The Tánaiste's Government's refusal to return to the rest of us here on Earth is evident throughout the budget on health. More than 4,000 patients may be unable to access potentially life-saving treatments next year due to the decision not to provide dedicated funding for new drugs. We know that more than 6,000 people throughout the country are desperate for access to home care due to a lack of carers available. Almost 900,000 people languish on some form of health waiting list, more than 100,000 of whom are children and young people.

Today we heard at the Committee on Public Accounts, under questioning from Deputy Kelly, that the new children's hospital is drifting further and further out of reach with a projected spend now of €2 billion. The blame lies squarely at the feet of the Government. Most galling

of all is that we do not know who is responsible for the shortfall in funding. Is it the Minister for Health or the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform? Will the Tánaiste explain whether the Government can ensure safe staffing levels through the winter? What plan is there for the health service to ensure that sick people who present at hospital will not be left on trolleys or sitting on chairs?

**The Tánaiste:** It is the entire Government that produces the budget and delivers the budget across the board. In terms of any report, I fully respect the right of the chief executive officer of the HSE to comment on the budget, to brief Deputies - and he would not be the first CEO to brief parliamentary representatives in the House - and to engage with the Government in respect of issues pertaining to the budget. I have no issue with the new CEO engaging with public representatives or doing interviews. He is a very experienced public servant. He has been in public service for 34 years. He was very involved with Tusla and its reform. We look forward to working with him. He is only six months in the job.

The Irish healthcare system has received significant investment in recent years since the Government came into office. The health sector has been prioritised, with increasing budget allocations of more than €7.4 billion since 2019. This excludes funding for disability services. By any yardstick this is a significant increase in funding over a relatively short space of time. In this context, my view is that we need to do a deeper analysis of healthcare expenditure, parallel with analysis of future trends and ageing demographics more specifically. I noticed, leading into the budget, that the amount allocated in some Opposition budgets was very similar to what the Government has allocated. Sinn Féin's budget was the very same.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** You are hilarious.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** You will get on well so.

**The Tánaiste:** You are getting very nervous now when responding. It is the Labour Party that has an opportunity now and I am just making this point.

This analysis needs to happen in my view. I will come to the recruitment issue. Cost management is very important. When I was Taoiseach in 2020 we were presented with information that the 2019 budget would have a €1 billion structural deficit. We dealt with it and we added more. Lo and behold, there will be a substantial deficit again this year. It needs examination given the scale of increase that occurs on an annual basis. This applies to all parties in the House. Some of this is societal demands, such as ageing demographics and inflation. By the way, the expenditure overall in the past two or three decades has worked because our survival rates for cancer, stroke and infant mortality have really improved.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**The Tánaiste:** This year's budget will facilitate significant developments. I want to make a point on recruitment.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**The Tánaiste:** Many posts that have been funded have not been recruited. A lot of the recruitment issues we have experienced in the past year are not funding related but are human resource issues.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** The Tánaiste's replies just do not pass muster. He spoke of a need for



analysis and for examination but the reality is that the Tánaiste and Fianna Fáil are in government-----

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Since the foundation of the State.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** -----and the party has the Minister of Health portfolio.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Yes.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** We need to hear from the Tánaiste what the plans and the figures are that are going to work in the budget. I say this because clearly, the Government's figures in last week's budget simply do not add up. This is acknowledged. Where are the plans to help those struggling people working in the health service who are so under-resourced and overstretched? Where are the plans to help patients? I refer to patients like the woman who contacted me and told me she had developed blood poisoning and was left in a chair overnight, propped up against the wall, due to a lack of beds. All of us are hearing from people who are telling us they were turned away from scheduled appointments because of a lack of staff. This happened after they had booked time off work and fasted for their procedures. This sort of thing does not happen in a properly resourced health service. The Tánaiste is in government and it is simply not good enough to hear him speaking as if he were a commentator and saying there is a need for analysis and examination. He should do something about this situation, ensure the health service is properly resourced-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. The time is up.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** -----and ensure that the appropriate Minister, namely, the Minister for Health, is in charge of the budget. What we are hearing makes it unclear to us whether it is the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, or the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, who is calling the shots.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up, please.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Either way, there is not enough money for healthcare and it is the patients and staff who are going to suffer.

**The Tánaiste:** Deputy Bacik should talk to her colleague, Deputy Brendan Howlin, who was both a Minister for Health and a Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. He might fill in Deputy Bacik and give her some insights into how the process works.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** That was years ago. It was two governments ago.

**The Tánaiste:** What I can say is that-----

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** That is so patronising.

**The Tánaiste:** -----we have cut costs across the board for patients. We have removed inpatient hospital charges.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** The Government has cut services.

**The Tánaiste:** We have had the biggest expansion of access to free GP care in the history of the State. Up to 60% of our population now hold a GP or medical card.

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**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** If there is no problem, then give a card to every child.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** There have been record patient-----

**The Tánaiste:** We have reduced the drug payment scheme costs.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** -----and 1 million people waiting for care.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** There are record-----

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** So, there is nothing to see here and everything is okay.

**The Tánaiste:** We have funded diagnostic scans for patients. We have introduced free contraception for women up to the age of 31. We have publicly funded assisted human reproduction, including IVF, for the first time. We have agreed a new contract for consultants and up to 700 have signed up to it. We have added more than 22,000 staff since 2020. Funding has been provided for 22,000 staff since then.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Is the recruitment freeze on the Tánaiste's list?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** And child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS?

**The Tánaiste:** We have increased our hospital bed capacity by more than 1,000 beds at the same time, and we have also expanded our ICU capacity.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has said she-----

**The Tánaiste:** We are increasing college and training places. For every GP who retires, between one and a half and three new GPs are working. We also expended huge funding in the context of the pandemic.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Everything is fine.

**The Tánaiste:** We are doing the actions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Tánaiste. The time is up.

**The Tánaiste:** Having said all that, and with there having been €7.5 billion in additional funding since 2020, I am making the point and there is nothing wrong in saying there is a need for further analysis in this regard in terms of our growing population-----

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** We need further money.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** Analysis that is logical and informed-----

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Old habits die hard.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is enough now, thank you.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** -----and not just sort of-----

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Another report so.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Could we have a little less heckling, please? I call Deputy Mick Barry.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** More rain fell in parts of County Cork in a few hours yesterday than would normally fall in a month. Midleton, Castlemartyr, Glanmire, Killeagh, Cloyne, Whitegate, Blackpool, west Waterford and other places all experienced devastation to one degree or another. In Midleton, patients had to be evacuated from a hospital and children had to be carried out of a childcare centre by parents via piggyback. In Glanmire, Sarsfields GAA club allowed its pitch to flood to protect the wider community. The pitch, the drainage, the offices and the walls were all destroyed. We won a county. We lost a pitch but, hopefully, saved part of the community.

The Taoiseach is due to arrive in Midleton in 20 minutes' time. He will don the raincoat and wellingtons, pose for the cameras and say the right things. Come tonight, he will be gone and the devastation will be left behind. The Government will be judged not by the quality of the photo opportunity but by the quality of the relief operation, the speed and size of the compensation package and, crucially, on the actions taken now on flood defences. Again and again, in town after town and community after community, people are saying that the defences they were promised have not been put in place and the State's response is not keeping up with the climate threat. Spain and Greece have been hit by heatwaves and Canada has been swept by wildfires, but in this country, and in our county, the biggest threat is the rain and the floods.

The OPW organised the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme in 2018. Some €1.3 billion has been provided for the years from 2021 to 2030, which is €144 million annually. Does the programme need to be redone now, with updated climate models? I think more finance needs to be put aside and greater urgency needs to be shown in actioning the plan.

Great praise is due to the public sector workers who pitched in during this emergency. For the information of the Tánaiste, however, the workers who clean the gullies for Cork City Council have been asking and pleading for years now for simple tools like angle grinders to open up the gullies and for more staff and more vehicles, to little or no avail. The firefighters who intervened in Midleton yesterday should have had swift water rescue technician training, but they do not. They were not trained for such a scenario and were forced to take unnecessary risks. When is the State going to give these workers the backing, support, training and tools they deserve?

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy spoke about flood relief schemes. He may recall his own comments in relation to the Cork city flood relief scheme, where he described the OPW's proposals as crude and not taking into account the people of Cork's relationship with the River Lee. He backed the campaign to, essentially, undermine the OPW's programme of flood relief. I have no problem with people making submissions and trying to adjust and adapt schemes, but when this goes to the extent of delaying schemes for years, then I do have a problem. When the OPW does respond, change and adapt schemes, then I have a real problem.

There is about €1.3 billion in the national development plan, NDP, for flood relief schemes. The flood relief scheme design that has emerged from Glanmire is under construction now. I pay tribute to Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, because he drove that initiative prior to getting elected. He made it a campaign issue for himself. Those works are now under construction. To be fair to Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, he did work hard to put that project on the agenda with others.

In Cork city, the flood relief scheme has now been going on for years because of objections ending up in court and so on. People must have balance and perspective. Cork has been flooding since I was growing up. The quay walls have not been properly addressed. What is being proposed is excellent in terms of the public realm improvements such work would represent, as well as preventing flooding in the city centre. Yet there are objections. In Blackpool, an area Deputy Barry knows well, again there has been an inability to resolve the problems there and it is going the full distance in terms of objections to the flood relief scheme. If we were to talk to the traders and the people who live in Blackpool, they would tell us they have had numerous floods.

The funding is there and the schemes are designed but it is just taking far too long in terms of the planning process, in my view, with objections and people not looking at these proposals from a balanced perspective. We must weigh things up. We are not going to get the perfect solution. We all have subjective views as to what constitutes the best type of flooding scheme, but we are not all self-appointed experts either. There comes a stage when it is necessary to facilitate the construction of flood relief schemes that would make a huge difference. Where they have been put in, in Clonmel, in Fermoy and in Mallow, they have been effective.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** True.

**The Tánaiste:** In Douglas, close to where I live, there was a terrible once-in-a-century flood and the scheme there worked yesterday. On the Owenacurra river, a flood scheme is emerging for Midleton. Again, we want to see these developed. The money is there to get these projects done. I do not make these points to try to attack anybody or anything like that, but only to point out some realities and the need for an honest debate about this subject. I think adaptation is the key issue for the country in respect of climate change now. We are dealing with the causes of climate change but it is happening here and now.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Tánaiste. The time is up.

**The Tánaiste:** Getting one month's rain in a day means we have to adapt faster. This means we have to put in the flooding schemes much faster and society has to respond in that spirit.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Yes. If we are to be ahead of the curve here, and we see what is coming in terms of climate change, then in Cork city we need to be looking at options like a flood barrier. There are many experts, and I am referring to people who are qualified to speak on this subject and not lay people, who have said this is the way to go. I strongly urge the OPW and the Government to look at this possibility as an option. In Blackpool, I believe there are alternative ways of dealing with this issue, which would protect the wildlife and the village as well. These should be examined as well.

The final point I wish to make is on the question of insurance. Two days ago, Allianz Insurance announced profits of €50 million, which was an increase of 12%. FBD's pre-tax profits are up to €39 million for the first six months of 2023. We have a fabulously profitable insur-

ance industry that refuses to cover homes and businesses at significant risk of flooding. Homes and businesses have the right to insurance cover. We need not-for-profit insurance cover in this country. In my view, the industry needs to be taken into public ownership.

**The Tánaiste:** We will look at all of those issues in both schemes we have for flood relief, including the humanitarian aid scheme and the scheme for business. With regard to Midleton, there is a total project budget for the flood relief scheme of approximately €50 million. The option has emerged for Midleton to protect 250 properties and that will provide protection in flooding from the Dungourney and Owenacurra rivers. The environmental impact assessment is being prepared for the preferred option. Hopefully, planning will happen in the first part of early 2024. We need that to go through in respect to the project.

The Deputy referenced to a visit. It is important that the Government, that is the Minister for Finance and the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, would go down to see it. We will follow through with supports for businesses and for households, and see what we can do to be of assistance. This is a very severe flooding event. Of that there is no doubt.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, received a letter two weeks ago from almost 80 GPs in County Donegal and a letter last week from consultants in Letterkenny University Hospital in Donegal calling for urgent action in the emergency department at Letterkenny University Hospital. In the letters, GPs and consultants warn of a service collapse and call on the Minister and senior officials to step in and carry out an external review of the emergency department, with an action plan put in place regarding access to the emergency department and acute services.

Letterkenny University Hospital is in crisis. Over the past few weeks, patients have been forced to wait for more than 24 hours and, in many cases, 36 to 48 hours to be seen. There are no seats available for those waiting in the emergency department it is so crowded. There is a serious risk to patients in Donegal arising from deteriorating conditions in the emergency department and a lack of hospital resources. Letterkenny University Hospital is one of the busiest hospitals in the State, yet it gets far less funding per patient than most other hospitals. This is yet another sign of Donegal being ignored and under-resourced. It cannot be ignored and it requires urgent action from the Government.

The Minister has said there is a recruitment issue in Letterkenny. I once again take this opportunity to urge the Government and the HSE to collaborate with Cuba in sending doctors to Ireland to relieve pressure on Ireland's health service. Cuba has in the past provided medical services in 165 countries, with more than 605,698 employees. Cuba currently serves 59 nations, including Portugal, Italy and Sweden within the EU. The services are there and Cuba is willing to do it. All it needs is for the Government to ask. I do not believe that is too much to ask. If there are issues with recruitment, I am not sure why this solution has not been sought. Collaboration with Cuba would significantly improve conditions in Letterkenny University Hospital and the State of the healthcare system in this country overall. I have been raising this issue since June of last year but the Minister has failed to engage with me or with the Cuban ambassador on this issue, despite numerous attempts. The recruitment issue will not rectify itself. It requires thinking outside the box. If he was serious about addressing the situation in Donegal, he needs to consider this as an alternative as well.

Recruitment is only part of the solution. We also need to focus on retention. At least 88

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overseas nurses and midwives have taken up roles in Letterkenny University Hospital since the beginning of last year. I will take this opportunity to express my solidarity to the migrant nurses who were outside Leinster House on Tuesday calling for family reunification as many are separated from their spouses and children due to their low pay not meeting visa conditions. They provide a service to the country and they should not be punished for it. They deserve pay parity with HSE workers to bring them above the visa threshold.

What will the Tánaiste do to address recruitment and retention issues in Letterkenny University Hospital to allow the fourth busiest accident and emergency department in the State to respond to the needs of the community once and for all?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for the question and I thank all of the staff who help to keep our health services working on a 24-7 basis. They deliver a public service under very challenging circumstances.

The Minister for Health received a letter and I have read the letter. He is very concerned with the issues raised in the correspondence and will meet with representatives of the GPs next week and will discuss the issues they have raised in their letter.

The budget for the hospital has increased from €142 million in 2019 to €177 million, which is a 24.5% increase. This is significant in itself. There are 2,144 whole-time equivalents employed by Letterkenny University Hospital, which is more than a 20% increase since 2020. There has been a lot of capital investment in the hospital. Capital projects completed in past two years include the expansion of gynaecology services, the opening of the acute stroke unit, the provision of an additional endoscopy theatre and a new maternity theatre. An additional 49 acute beds have been delivered since 2019 to the hospital and further capital projects are under way that will add capacity and services for patients. These include expansion of the renal department, expansion of the oncology day unit and the electrical infrastructure upgrade.

There is a lot of pressure on the emergency department. I believe there were 43,000 attendances in 2022, which is a 13% increase on 2019. In 2023, there were 40,000 attendances between January and September, which is a 25% increase in overall numbers over 2019. Most importantly, the attendance figures for patients aged 75 or older is more than 6,200, which is a 1,100% increase compared to 2019. We are witnessing a post-Covid increase in attendance across the health system. It is evident in Letterkenny and it is evident across most European healthcare systems. It also reflects the growing and ageing population.

We have expanded community care and other measures with a view to providing people the care they need outside of the emergency department and improving patient flow and discharge from the hospital with more home support packages and nursing home supports. Increased funding has been provided for additional GP access to diagnostics and primary care allowing for patients to be referred directly for X-rays and scans. In community healthcare organisation, CHO 1, which includes Letterkenny University Hospital, 14,500 of these scans had been completed by early October this year.

The Minister will meet with the staff. I note that the letter relates to access to the emergency department but we need to look not just specifically at the emergency department but the entire continuum from primary care to community care to diagnostics and the wider hospital group. That is a management issue locally and regionally under the Saolta University Health Care Group in how hospitals are organised, how patients are triaged and how patients are referred to

various services.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** The Tánaiste has outlined some of the positive stuff that happened in Letterkenny over the past couple of years and that is true but in reality all of that happened because the hospital flooded. That is why it happened and that is why this work was carried out. The hospital is greatly increasing the numbers at all times and even with all the work that has been done, we are in this crisis situation.

The letter from GPs states : “We have patients who are refusing to attend the emergency department because they would rather ‘take their chances’ and stay at home.” From first-hand experience I know this is actually happening, whereby patients are deciding to stay at home rather than going to get the treatment they need. This is because of the delays and so on. The emergency department is being used as a gatekeeper for the rest of the hospital. This is part of the problem in what has happened.

Letterkenny University Hospital is consistently the fourth or fifth busiest hospital in the State with more than 23,000 patients a year being discharged from the hospital. Since 2020, the number of patients being seen in under six hours by the emergency department has declined from 80% to 52%. While the standard is 80%, only 52% are seen within the time. Patient numbers waiting for more than nine hours have increased from 6% to 27% in the same period. There is a problem. I am glad the Minister is meeting with the GPs. I hope an action plan will come out of that and we will actually see the problem being resolved.

**The Tánaiste:** The Minister will meet with the doctors. I take the Deputy’s point that emergency departments can become the gatekeepers for the rest of a hospital. That was the point I was making in that it does need a more whole-of-hospital approach. Where that happens, there are very good outcomes in hospitals across the State.

The Deputy referred to Cuban GPs.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Cuban doctors.

**The Tánaiste:** They are exported by their Government.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Yes.

**The Tánaiste:** I am not sure that is a system that I would like to be co-operating with.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** It is alright for Portugal.

**The Tánaiste:** They have exported their doctors for oil to Venezuela. They do so in some areas in Africa for humanitarian benefits. However, it is a very repressive regime in terms of the suppression of civil society.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Sweden takes them.

**The Tánaiste:** These are issues the Deputy would raise with me if it applied to a different jurisdiction. We need a more open and honest debate about these things. There seems to be certain countries we cannot talk about at all. It is dressed up in idyllic terms. I have been to Cuba and they have a strong primary care system. However, the level of State control over individuals and over people is not something we in this democracy cherish or would endorse. The day that governments get to export their GPs - try that with the Irish Medical Organisation,

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IMO, someday here, say “lads, actually we are going to export you now.” That is what has happened in Cuba for 50 years. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was an increase in export of GPs from Cuba to get oil back in.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What is happening in Ukraine?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Oh no, please. We are way over time. That concludes Leaders' Questions.

**The Tánaiste:** I do not understand.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Nor does he.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are not going to get into it. We are going on to Questions on Policy or Legislation. Can Deputies, please, stick to the allocated time for the questions and the answers?

### **Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation**

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** In last week's budget the Government made a conscious decision to under-fund the health system. That is well established. The impact is going to be felt by those unable to get a hospital bed, those who will remain on long waiting lists and thousands of seriously ill patients who may not be able to access potentially life-saving medicines. The Government is now playing the blame game, blaming the HSE chief executive, Bernard Gloster, for being too transparent; blaming the Sinn Féin health spokesperson, Deputy Cullinane, for being too effective in holding the Government to account. Fine Gael is blaming the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. Fianna Fáil is blaming the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. Is the truth of it not that it is the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and Deputy Eamon Ryan who sat down and agreed this with their Cabinet colleagues? They are to blame for under-funding the health system. What is the Tánaiste going to do about that? What is he going to do about the devastating consequences this decision will have for patients right across the health service next year? Does he accept the system is under-funded and what is he going to do about it?

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy should have listened to my reply to Deputy Bacik, who raised this issue in a substantive way on Leaders' Questions. I said it was a Government decision to bring in this budget between all of the Estimates for every Government Department. I upheld the right of the CEO of the HSE to engage with Deputies across the House. It is not the first time the CEO has done this.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste should talk to his Ministers, three of them together.

**The Tánaiste:** All of what the Deputy raised, I answered very clearly in terms of what I believe in respect of the HSE chief being in a position---

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The question is whether the Tánaiste accepts the under-funding of the health system.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sorry now, we are not going to start this racket again. The Deputy has asked a question. Do the Tánaiste the courtesy of letting him answer.

**The Tánaiste:** In respect of the budget I would make the point that the Government has



allocated something very similar to what the Sinn Féin Party proposed in its alternative budget.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** With respect, we allocated €2.5 billion. The Government allocated €800 million.

**The Tánaiste:** I do not think the Deputy is in a strong position.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Resume your seat.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I am not going to allow----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If the Deputy interrupts again I will suspend the House.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I am not going to allow the Tánaiste to mislead the Dáil on this issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Do not shout at me, Deputy, please. Do not attempt to further disrupt the House. If you do, I will suspend proceedings. Would the Tánaiste conclude, please?

**The Tánaiste:** I have concluded.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** On a point of order, the Tánaiste is misleading the Dáil deliberately on this issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There is no point of order. Resume your seat.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** On behalf of the Labour Party, I want to express my solidarity with the communities across Cork, notably east Cork, and west Waterford, today living with the utter destruction of yesterday's flooding from Storm Babet. I want to echo the sentiments of my colleagues, Deputy Sherlock and Councillors John Maher and Cathal Rasmussen, in paying tribute to all those who took such efforts to help people in the wake of those awful floods, including the statutory agencies, first responders and volunteers. This was no normal flood. It had a catastrophic effect on local homes and businesses. We are seeing shocking videos out of Castlemartyr, Midleton, Blackpool and Glanmire, just to name a few of the places affected. We know the Taoiseach is visiting today but communities need strong assurances. It is not good enough to blame otters and objectors for delays in the building of essential flood repair infrastructure. Communities affected need an assurance, not only of adequate help and support in rebuilding after yesterday but also that the Government will be offering significant supports to protect against the future floods likely because of climate change.

**The Tánaiste:** We are providing the funding for flood relief schemes. When the Deputy says it is not good enough, that is the reality of delay. People object, not just in the planning process but in the courts. Deputy Mick Barry was a classic example of it there. He came in advocating for flood relief protection schemes, he himself having supported alternatives and having gone against the OPW schemes as he still is. I have no problem with a barrier on the Lee. We need a flood relief scheme in Cork city, given its history. It is built on a marsh. It needs it. I am not against people making submissions and so on, but there is an urgency for householders and businesses - I remember being in Bandon seven or eight years ago as leader of the Opposition, twice going through flooded businesses. They said to me that if it happened a third time they were out of there. It is existential for some individuals and we just need balance and perspective in getting these things through.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The Ombudsman for Children today laid before the Dáil a special report on the safety and welfare of children in direct provision. This is the first time in their 20-year history that they have taken this action, which really illustrates the seriousness of these issues and of their concerns. They want this report to spur Government on to meet the commitments made in 2021. One of those commitments was in respect of a robust quality assurance mechanism for oversight in these centres. HIQA unfortunately only has oversight in respect of permanent centres whereas the majority of children are housed in emergency accommodation. Indeed there is one opening in my constituency of Wicklow which will house 950 Ukrainian refugees shortly. We are really at risk of repeating the dark mistakes of our past by outsourcing fundamental public services and not protecting our most vulnerable. Why will the Government not require HIQA to oversee these emergency accommodation centres?

**The Tánaiste:** I have not read the ombudsman's report yet but I will. My initial observation is that we need balance and perspective again here. When over 100,000 people come into the country in one year, we are not going to get a response that meets with conditions of normal times. A war has been waged on Ukraine. We have facilitated the arrival into the country of 73,000 Ukrainians. Sorry, we have housed 73,000. We did not have 73,000 houses.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The ombudsman's report is in relation to the 24 commitments.

**The Tánaiste:** We have responded to a lot of those commitments. I am just making a general point. There seems to be a view abroad that we can do everything at once. We did the right thing and Europe did the right thing to facilitate fleeing Ukrainians coming from war. We did the right thing. There are limitations to how well one can do it in such a short space of time. I will read the report. The Department has responded to a lot of the issues, I am informed.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** The Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use will meet for the final time this weekend. It has been going on for the last six months and was a much-needed debate. All indications from the assembly will point to a different approach. We have had an approach that has failed for the last six decades. Indications from the assembly are that they will call for decriminalisation and possibly regulation, which I fully support and others will support as well. We have had six decades of criminalising people and it simply has not worked. If the recommendations from the assembly are for a radical approach, what will the Government do?

**The Tánaiste:** I have not seen the report. The report has not been completed. The Deputy seems to be on the inside track.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I am.

**The Tánaiste:** We need to reflect on that, too. I am not so sure anybody should be on inside tracks or orchestrating a particular outcome from what should really be a very objective and open process. I will leave that with the House. I will read the report and am looking forward to receiving it. We will then consider it.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I convey my support to the people of east Cork and west Waterford who have been impacted by flooding. I thank the rescue services and council workers, particularly in Tallow, Lismore, Dungarvan and Clashmore. The Blackwater Valley will probably flood over the next couple of days. I ask that the Government give a clear signal to the local authorities that necessary funding will be provided.

I supported the motion yesterday on Palestine, which described the awful vista that is be-

ing visited upon the people there at the present time. I support the Government's position of showing solidarity with all those impacted and its commitment to provide further humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. Can the Government do more to support building peace in Gaza and opening the humanitarian corridors that are so desperately needed? Can Ireland be at the vanguard of a coalition of the willing in staying the hand of the Israeli Prime Minister?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Tánaiste can only answer one of those questions.

**The Tánaiste:** I will answer one question while noting the Deputy's concern about the potential flooding of the Blackwater Valley, which we will take steps to assess.

On Palestine, the Government is working with all the regional partners in the neighbourhood on restoring the humanitarian corridor and calling for an immediate ceasefire to enable humanitarian goods to get in. On the broader issue, we announced an extra €13 million in funding via the UN agencies last evening, on top of the €16 million of core funding we give. We support a lot of human rights organisations and those who are working on the ground for peace and reconciliation between Arab and Israeli people who live in mixed cities.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I, too, send my sympathy and support to the people and communities of west Waterford and east Cork following yesterday's devastating floods.

I raise the issue of dedicated hospice care beds. We used to have three lovely hospice suites in St. Brigid's District Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir, but they were closed unceremoniously with the hospital. We were then promised four beds for the town of Clonmel, which has 18,500 people and with another 10,000 to 15,000 in the hinterlands. Now we find we are getting one bed in the new 50-bed St. Anthony's unit and no designated room for the families. There is one room for families but the unit will hold 50 patients when it opens. We have been sold a pup. The wonderful people on the local committee and community group have fundraised. They are meeting again on Monday morning. They are devastated that the biggest inland town in Ireland has no dedicated hospice bed. We are getting one now without any dedicated family room or suite. While we have two in Clogheen and one in Tipperary town, Clonmel needs hospice beds for palliative care. I thank the nurses and palliative care teams for all the work they do.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Government is heavily invested in and strongly supportive of the palliative care movement and hospices right across the country. Hospice care is one of the best things that is happening in healthcare in Ireland. A new community nursing unit is being built in Clonmel and it will include dedicated palliative care beds. There will be more than one bed; so far, there are two. A draft national palliative care strategy has been developed. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I are working closely together to make sure palliative care beds are available not just in the Deputy's area, where they are, of course, needed, but right across the country.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** A number of constituents have contacted me about the shingles vaccine following the HSE's advertising campaign telling people over 50 that it is important to get the vaccine. One woman went to her GP, thinking she could get the vaccine there, but was told she needed a prescription to take to a chemist. At two different chemists, she was quoted €460 and €480, respectively, for the two vaccines doses needed. I have heard reports of up to €600 being charged for the two vaccines. My constituent was told there is no scheme to reimburse her costs. A charge of €460 to €600 is a lot of money for people, including pensioners, who do not have it. If pensioners need a vaccine, as recommended by the HSE, why is no scheme in

place to reimburse their costs?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am aware of the very high cost of vaccines. It was raised with me yesterday by visitors to Leinster House. The Covid and flu vaccines for the target groups are all now being provided free at the point of delivery. The shingles vaccine is something we can look at. The Deputy mentioned people going into the chemist with a prescription. We could look at including the vaccine under the drugs payment scheme, which would cap the monthly cost at €80. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am aware of it and it is something we are seeking to address within the broader move to reduce costs for patients.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** Two major parts of the solution to climate change are switching to rail transport and promoting it as much as possible and developing district heating systems in our towns and cities. Both solutions require appropriate development densities that are much higher than is the norm in this country. As well as being an important element of tackling climate, higher density, when done right, lends itself to healthier and more thriving communities and better supports business, schools and other public services. Does the Tánaiste acknowledge the importance of appropriate density to support rail development and district heating across our urban areas? Will he get back to me in writing, if he cannot answer now, on the progress of two important documents, namely, the sustainable and compact settlements guidelines and the guidance on transport-orientated development for major urban centres?

**The Tánaiste:** I accept that rail transport and district heating will make significant respective contributions to the climate change agenda. A bit more work is needed. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications recently brought a document to the Government on a policy framework for district heating. However, there is the size of the country and other factors to take into account. There is one development in Tallaght, Dublin, that has been successful. There could be another at Poolbeg but we need local actors to get their act together in terms of pipes and so forth. There is significant investment going into rail transport. Deputy Shanahan might close his ears to this but the Midleton-Cork-Mallow rail service was designed around density and to enhance further density in that corridor as part of the EU's recovery and resilience programme.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** Following yesterday's severe flooding in Midleton, Youghal and Waterford, it feels like Groundhog Day as I once again refer to the Enniscorthy flood defence scheme on the River Slaney. The scheme was rejected by the Minister for Finance but a partial phase was accepted and approved as a separate preliminary scheme, which consists of building a new bridge. This new bridge is essential to the development of the town and would relieve most of the flooding of Enniscorthy, which is mainly caused by the low elevation of the existing Seamus Rafter Bridge. Enniscorthy has suffered serious flooding many times, with an emerging pattern of flooding occurring almost every second year. It will more than likely happen again this winter. When will the people of Enniscorthy see construction of the new bridge start? Will the Tánaiste seek an answer on their behalf from the OPW?

**The Tánaiste:** I would have thought that answer was readily available. If the Deputy is saying the project is accepted, it probably is going ahead. A total of 95 projects are under way at the moment between design and construction. The various flood relief schemes are at different stages, with some in planning, some in design and some under construction. A total of 53 have been completed and there is approximately €1.3 billion for this purpose in the national development plan. However, I will check the matter out for the Deputy.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** Following on from Deputy Doherty's comments on the flooding in Midleton, will the Tánaiste give a commitment to think outside the box and provide an immediate financial package for the householders and businesspeople affected? A boil water notice is in operation again, which will affect 9,000 people in Whitegate, Killeagh, Ladysbridge, Mogeely and surrounding areas. Many shops are not open, which will place an extra burden on people. There has also been a lot of surface damage to roads. A massive package of assistance is required. I hope and pray the Government will think outside the box and offer something similar to the Covid payments. People do not have insurance and will not qualify for some of the humanitarian aid. We have to support everybody together.

**The Tánaiste:** As I said, we will examine the existing schemes to ensure they are fit for purpose in respect of the flooding event in Midleton, Glanmire, parts of Cork city and west Waterford. The Government will move on that. The Deputy outlined the broader issues, including the damage to road surfaces and so forth.

*1 o'clock*

Again, I pay tribute to all the local volunteers who did so much work to help people at a very distressing time.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** The spectacular absence of the voice of the child continues in family law discussions, debates and deliberations throughout this country, despite the Minister's correct intention and indication that reforms are promised at the end of this year or in early next year, and despite the fact the people of this country passed a referendum underwriting the rights of the child and the need for recognition in that regard. The Tánaiste has personally indicated concern in this area. Can some intervention be made to encourage those currently involved in those deliberations to move in the direction required in accordance with the result of the constitutional referendum?

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy has raised this issue previously in different ways and he has done it now in a way that has flummoxed me in terms of a response. I presume he is not asking me to interfere with the judicial arm of the State.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** The voice of the child is the dominant one in this situation.

**The Tánaiste:** It always has to be, in any execution of public policy. I accept the Deputy's points on that and I know the Ministers for Justice and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth are aware of his concerns. We will see what we can do and I will get back to the Deputy.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Tánaiste.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** In County Wexford, Acquired Brain Injury Ireland provides crucial services to brain injury survivors in the community, such as the home and community rehabilitation and assisted living services, alongside a clubhouse service in Wexford, which I have had the great pleasure of visiting and had a tour of. The clubhouse provides peer support and group rehabilitation.

This week, thousands of homes in Wexford are receiving an appeal form. Acquired Brain Injury Ireland is asking for financial supports by way of donation. The campaign is spearheaded by Wexford's own Karina Browne, a remarkable woman who has made an incredible journey of

brain injury rehabilitation. Karina is beautiful, funny and kind-hearted and is an inspiration to many in Wexford. Her journey of the past 17 years is one of strength and determination, aided by the incredible work of the acquired brain injury team.

Government funding for these crucial services is essential. Will the Tánaiste pledge increased direct funding supports to acquired brain injury services nationwide, including specific funding to the Wexford group?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and join her in recognising the extraordinary work done by Acquired Brain Injury Ireland. In our budget of last year for this year, as she will be aware, for the first time we funded a national network of neurorehabilitation nurses. I have met, for example, stroke clinicians who made the point that while our hospital-based stroke services have gone from strength to strength in terms of rapid response, with very quick and advanced technologies, when patients leave hospital the rehab for stroke and other acquired brain injuries is not where it needs to be. This year, therefore, as the Deputy will be aware, we are deploying our first-ever network of neurorehabilitation nurses, and in the budget this year for next year, I am delighted to say the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is funding an additional two teams, one of which relates to community healthcare organisation, CHO, 5.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Flooding in the past few days has left many parts of County Cork devastated. People's homes and businesses and roads have been destroyed. Areas such as Glandore, Rosscarbery, Clonakilty and Castletownbere have been badly hit once again. Areas such as Midleton, I was told this morning, are like a disaster zone, with a shortage of professional help from anyone, leaving locals having to do the clean-up themselves.

The underspend on the roads budget is coming home to roost, as rivers are blocked due to a lack of clearing. A lack of roadside workers due to funding restraints has left many drains blocked and roadside gulleys without clearing. Having this funding and workers will not prevent all flooding issues, I accept, but it will go a long way. The Taoiseach and Ministers are in Cork today. They should have been there three years ago, with works now completed, and not just there now, as always happens, for photoshoots after floods. In many tweets in the past few days, politicians have told people there is an humanitarian assistance scheme, which, I may add, is means tested, meaning many affected will not qualify. For communities who need immediate funds, will this emergency funding be made available this week?

**The Tánaiste:** One month's rain fell in a number of hours. That will have extraordinary impacts; there is no doubt about that. We do need flood relief schemes in place and they are at various stages. As the Deputy knows, the Bandon one has been especially effective. The Civil Defence, for example, is a volunteer organisation that was out yesterday and we should salute its response. It had pumping, sandbagging and transport for evacuees and it set up rest centres. It had general assistance for homeowners and businesses and has crews and equipment on the ground. It brought boat crews, vans with camp beds and sleeping bags and 4x4 vehicles. It was on the ground again this morning and it will continue to provide assistance. The Army was also on the ground this morning and provided personnel and two 4x4 vehicles for the emergency transport of nurses to and from Mercy hospital in Cork last night. The Defence Forces are engaging on an ongoing basis with the relevant local authorities and attended a cross-agency co-ordination meeting this morning. Likewise, the Garda is highly involved. I single out all those forces for the work they are doing.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I too thank all the people involved in providing back-up support yesterday, such as the city council, the county council, the fire services, the Civil Defence, the Army and the Garda. They did a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances and it is important we acknowledge them.

I raise the issue in Blackpool, which the Tánaiste referred to earlier. I know there are people who took a judicial review and, as a result, the development of flood relief in Blackpool has been delayed. My office is less than 20 yd from buildings that can be adversely affected when the river overflows. Can we now fast-track the process for dealing with the Blackpool flood relief scheme, get it back up and running and make sure the necessary infrastructure is put in place to deal with the threat that businesses face? As the Tánaiste knows, no investment is going to go into Blackpool until the flood relief issue is sorted out.

**The Tánaiste:** I would endorse everything the Deputy said, and it is an issue. When issues of this kind get to a judicial review, the community and society loses. We should be able to try to work out these issues. Blackpool has had a lot of flooding and the Deputy is correct in that it is undermining investment and the proper development of that community. It is a community with a great history and tradition in Cork. I endorse everything the Deputy said.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Nuair a bhí an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, mar Aire Stáit don Ghaeltacht, rinne sé go leor oibre ar réiteach agus ar phlean le haghaidh reachtaíocht a thabhairt isteach le haghaidh na toghcháin do bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta a thabhairt ar ais. D'fhoilsigh sé cinn an Bhille, pléadh iad ag Coiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge agus cuireadh tuarascáil ar fáil mí Iúil seo caite. Bhí dóchas ann ag an am go mbeadh reachtaíocht ar fáil agus é achtaithe sa dá Theach le go mbeadh sé ina dlí in am do na toghcháin áitiúla an bhliain seo chugainn le go bhféadfadh bord an údaráis a thogh ar an lá céanna leis na toghcháin áitiúla ar an 9 Meitheamh 2024. An bhféadfadh an Tánaiste a rá liom cén uair a fhoilseofar Bille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú) 2022 agus cén uair a bheidh deis againn é a phlé sa Teach seo le go gceadófar é?

**The Tánaiste:** Níl an t-eolas cruinn agam ó thaobh cén am a bheidh an Bille réidh. Tá siad ag obair ar an mBille agus déanfaidh mé fiosrú air sin. Tá a fhios agam cad atá á rá ag an Teachta. Ina thuairim bhí an dealramh ar an scéal go mbeadh na toghcháin ar siúl leis na toghcháin áitiúla agus go mbeadh an reachtaíocht réidh agus tríd na Tithe roimhe sin. Déanfaidh mé fiosrú air sin agus beidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** Workers at Tara Mines on the jobseeker's allowance are at risk of losing a day's pay due to the fact they are getting a €65 retainer from the company. At the time they were laid off, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, signed a statutory instrument to allow them to receive the €65 plus the full jobseeker's allowance. That statutory instrument had a 13-week limit and those 13 weeks are up but, of course, the workers are not back to work. Will the Tánaiste ensure the statutory instrument is extended in order that these workers and their families are not forced into even further hardship?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will discuss with the Minister for Social Protection the continuation of the statutory instrument.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** Applicants for adaptation grants for homes of people with a disability or a disability acquired as a result of an accident or progressive condition are waiting five or six months for Cavan County Council to even acknowledge the application. They are not

even assessed at that stage for priority. There is then limited availability of funding, so only a small number of grants are dealt with. People are being forced to remain in hospital, go into a nursing home, sleep on the sofa or put their bed and often a commode in the living room. That reduces their dignity and impacts the whole family. Can additional funding be made available for this important grant? Can the amount of the grant also be increased to reflect the increase in construction costs?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I thank the Deputy for her question. If there is a specific issue with Cavan County Council in terms of an applicant, we can follow up the particular case. We have encouraged local authorities to submit applications for supplementary funding this year. We have received 13 applications, of which we have approved ten, so we have another three. If Cavan County Council has applied for additional funding or wishes to do so, we can follow up on that.

The Department, under Housing for All, has carried out a review of three grants, namely, the housing adaptation grants for the elderly, the mobility aids grant and the disabled person's grant. I have reviewed the review and we have made a submission to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform looking across those areas in terms of enhanced grants. The submission is currently with that Department. If the Deputy has a specific query on a particular case, she should bring it to my attention and we can follow up with Cavan County Council.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fonraí ar 1.12 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.52 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 1.12 p.m. and resumed at 1.52 p.m.*

### **Investment in Healthcare: Statements**

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** As Deputies are aware, ensuring people are healthy and active and that they get the healthcare they need when they need it is a priority for this Government. These are not just empty words. Let the facts speak to the Government's commitment to ensuring that our health services are well funded. Over the past three years, the Government has delivered record investment in healthcare. The Government's €22.5 billion health budget for 2024 is the biggest ever and will facilitate the continued delivery and expansion of quality, affordable healthcare services. This funding equates to a spend of €4,000 for every man, woman and child in the State.

The emergency department action plan is fully funded, which means that anybody who arrives in an emergency department having suffered an accident or medical emergency will be seen and will get the treatment he or she needs. The waiting list action plan is also fully funded, which will reduce waiting times for life-altering treatment. Funding to maintain existing services has been provided to meet inflation and rising patient demand. Resources are in place to hire 2,000 staff additional to those already there. Provision has been made for the opening and staffing of six new surgical hubs across the country, including in my constituency in Galway.

We must be honest and say that, despite the great strides made in recent years, we need to do more in the coming years. We must also point to the fact we have an ageing population and pent-up demand for services has arisen as a result of Covid-19, so the demand for healthcare has



increased and continues to rise. It is clear, too, that, the HSE must deliver services in a more efficient manner, achieving cost savings where it can and ensuring taxpayer's money is spent as efficiently as possible. I have every confidence that the Department of Health and the HSE will ensure this happens in 2024 and future years.

I will turn to developments in the areas for which I am responsible as Minister with responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drugs strategy, outline some of the progress made in recent years and set out some exciting new initiatives under way. Among the best uses of public money in our health service is spending to avoid the onset of medical conditions through the promotion of healthy lifestyles. A key element of this preventative approach is our healthy Ireland framework, at the core of which is the healthy Ireland fund. Working with partners including Departments, agencies, NGOs, community organisations and the country's 31 local authorities, this fund focuses on health and well-being with programmes designed to counteract and prevent negative health outcomes as a result of smoking, alcohol, poor diet and physical inactivity, as well as addressing the wider social and environmental factors which impact on health and well-being. Established in 2017 with an initial annual budget of €5 million, we have gradually increased investment in the fund in the years since. Our budget for the fund in 2023 was just over €14 million and I was delighted to secure an additional €2.3 million for 2024, bringing the total to some €16.5 million. That represents an increase of 16%. That is new money and new investment in this important initiative.

Knowing the importance of good nutrition and the development of good eating habits, I secured an additional €300,000 to facilitate the recruitment of four community food and nutrition workers, which will bring the national complement to 19. These workers are a vital support to local communities in developing responses to food poverty and insecurity.

I am pleased to highlight the further development of outdoor exercise facilities. In 2024 we will build on the success of the GAA walking trails initiative that I announced earlier this year. The Government will also provide funding to develop facilities to support outdoor swimming.

*2 o'clock*

Some €1 million will be provided for these initiatives next year.

Our smoking rates continue to give cause for concern, given the huge impact they have not only on the individual in terms of poor health outcomes but also on the wider health system. Great strides have been made, with the percentage of the population who smoke falling from 23% in 2015 to 18% in 2022. Some 22,000 people are expected to engage with HSE anti-smoking services in 2024, of whom a quarter will require medical intervention and supports. A total of €1.82 million is being provided to assist these people in kicking the habit.

Moving to sexual health, the House will be aware that work continues on the development of a new national sexual health strategy and as part of this we will increase the budget for free home sexually transmitted infection, STI, testing by €700,000, allowing people to test in the privacy of their own homes. Some 91,000 testing kits were provided last year, and this valuable initiative will expand over the course of 2024. We will also increase funding for our national HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis programme, PrEP, to help fund additional staff and increase access to PrEP medication, helping to provide better access to HIV prevention for more people.

As part of our response to tackling gambling addiction, some €500,000 will be provided in 2024 to develop supports for the estimated 130,000 people with problems in this area. Since

my appointment to the Department of Health almost ten months ago, I have met many people who use drugs, some of whom are living with addiction, medical experts and people delivering addiction services on the ground. One key message that I have received has been that we need to change how we think about and tackle drug misuse and addiction.

At the heart of this is ensuring that core services are funded and in 2023, I provided an increase in core funding for our drug and alcohol task forces and section 39 organisations. Knowing the importance of education, I also provided €1.5 million in funding for a drug and alcohol education and awareness programme, the first time such funding has been provided. For 2024, we are going to deliver new groundbreaking services never before provided. They include dual diagnosis hubs, which will support the recovery of young people with drug dependency and mental health issues, and dedicated funding for services after people embark on their road to recovery to support their integration into everyday life through housing, employment, education and other supports. It is important to note that in the last two years alone, funding for our drug and alcohol services has increased by almost €10 million. I am keen that we continue to build on this so as to ensure the fantastic care that is provided from within the community is supported.

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to all the workers and professionals working across our healthcare system for their hard work and dedication, and to thank them for the care they provide to people who are often at their most vulnerable. These people are often forgotten in a politically-charged debate but it would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to their enormous contribution in helping to keep people healthy for longer.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am really pleased to have this opportunity to address the House on investment in healthcare. Before I do, I would like to add my voice to those condemning the bombing of the al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza. While there are claims and counter-claims about which side the bombs came from, the killing of hundreds of innocent patients, healthcare workers and families is outrageous. Our thoughts are with the families of all those who died and were injured.

At the same time, we must never take our eyes off the Russian murderers who have deliberately targeted healthcare workers, patients and health facilities in Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian health minister, Russian forces have destroyed around 180 hospitals and damaged more than 1,200 hospitals. They have shot up more than 350 ambulances. These deliberate attacks are utterly repugnant. They violate international law and the clear protections that should be in place for patients, healthcare workers and health facilities.

To turn to the debate in hand, for years we have invested in our health services at a lower rate than many other countries. Of the 15 western European countries, Ireland comes 11th in terms of the amount we invest in healthcare per person. Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, France, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg and Denmark spend more than we do per person on healthcare, when we adjust for local prices. Of the best comparator countries we have, we are in the bottom third. We need to bear that in mind when we have any discussion on future investment in healthcare.

The result of this was that when Covid arrived, and before that, we were not in a good place. We had fewer hospital and ICU beds and hospital consultants than many of these countries. We have not opened a new hospital in 25 years. Our digital health or ehealth service is rated as one of the poorest in the entire EU. We all know that this has led to higher waiting lists and too

many overcrowded emergency departments in too many hospitals.

There has been a response to this. The response has been an unprecedented increase in funding for healthcare. The previous Government, in its last three budgets, increased core funding for healthcare by 40%. In the first three budgets of this Government, that was increased by a further 18% increase. That is a huge increase in capacity, but capacity alone is not the only solution. Our health services were not designed to treat the greatest number of people for the money that is available. Until recently, too many people were being treated in hospitals rather than in the community, which is a better and less costly place to provide that care.

Our goal is high quality, affordable healthcare for everyone when they need it, that is, universal healthcare. We are all signed up to that via Sláintecare. To achieve this in the lifetime of this Government, we have been following a clear plan, namely, increase the capacity of our health service and fundamentally reform how and where patients are treated. I fully accept that there is still a long way to go. This will take years to do. However, thanks to the efforts of our healthcare workers, substantial and important progress is being made. Our focus, as colleagues will be aware, has been on reducing costs, improving services and speeding up access for patients. Inpatient hospital charges have been abolished, saving people up to €800 a year. Free contraception has been rolled out to women up to the age of 30. Half a million more men, women and children have access to State-funded GP care. We have just rolled out State-funded IVF for the first time. The most a household now has to pay for medicines in any month has been reduced to €80.

We have allocated unprecedented funding to our national clinical strategies. Our healthcare workers are in the middle of delivering a revolution in women's healthcare. This includes opening new menopause clinics, fertility hubs, perinatal mental health teams, specialist endometriosis centres, same day see-and-treat gynaecology clinics and lots more across the country. That is having a huge impact. New services are becoming available for the first time in areas like diabetes, stroke, dementia and obesity. Existing services are being expanded in cancer care, maternity, trauma, home care, cardiology, ambulance services and lots more. Last year, waiting lists fell for the first time since 2015. We all know there is a long way to go, but progress is being made. The total number of patients removed from waiting lists in the first eight months of this year is 150,000 more than was achieved last year. The number of patients being treated who have been on waiting lists is going up, thanks the work of our healthcare professionals and the unprecedented level of investment the Government is providing to them. We are absolutely determined to continue with that progress.

Waiting lists in the Republic are now half of what they are in Northern Ireland. For the most urgent cases, that is, people waiting more than a year for a hospital procedure, believe it or not waiting lists in Ireland are now one tenth what they are in Northern Ireland. Our healthcare workers deserve huge credit for bringing this about. Over the past three years, we have added 22,000 healthcare workers, comprising 6,700 extra nurses and midwives, 3,100 additional health and social care professionals and 2,500 doctors and dentists. We have increased our hospital bed capacity by over 1,000. We have significantly increased ICU capacity. We are going to keep going.

Critically, we are also improving productivity in our health services. A growing number of people are now getting the care they need when they need it and where they should be getting it, which is in their own community rather than having to go to hospital.

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This is better for patients and better for our health service because such care can be provided at a fraction of the cost of someone having to go to hospital. This is not happening by accident. It is happening because over the past two and a half years we have rolled out a completely new community care service, called enhanced community care. We have 180 new healthcare teams around the country doing this. There are 96 primary care teams, 30 chronic disease management teams, 30 older persons' teams and 30 community intervention teams.

We are working with our clinicians to have them provide care to patients to the fullest extent of their qualifications, which they want to do. Our GPs are playing a more central role. The new public-only consultant contract is phasing out the deeply distorting effect of private income on public hospitals. The safe staffing framework for nursing is being rolled out in every hospital, making Ireland one of the leading countries globally in making sure we have the right level of nursing care for a given level of patient need on any given day, on any given ward.

We are training and hiring more advanced practitioners in nursing and midwifery and rolling this out for health and social care professionals. We are working with pharmacies to support them in providing a higher level of care in things like oral contraception, minor ailment clinics and more, which we are in discussions with them about.

The National Ambulance Service is going from strength to strength. It is providing more advanced care in the home or on scene, avoiding the need for patients to go to the emergency departments. We are investing in injury units and other initiatives to provide people with alternatives to emergency departments.

We are also rolling out a new productivity system in every public and voluntary hospital so that for the first time we will be able to see the extent of patient care being delivered by every hospital, every clinical speciality and every consultant. We have never had the ability to do this before. It is central to being able to ensure that patients are getting the best care possible, given the resources being provided to our healthcare professionals.

The budget for 2024 will continue a lot of this progress. The total budget allocation is €2 billion. Approximately half of that is recurring funding and the other half non-recurring funding. The waiting list action plan and urgent care plans are fully funded. Staffing is fully funded for 162 new acute beds, 22 new ICU beds, which is a very welcome increase, six new surgical hubs, which we are deploying around the country, and 70 new community beds. There is a lot more investment through HIQA in expanding the appropriateness and the quality of the existing community beds.

Full year costs for new measures such as 500,000 more GP cards and IVF are included. We are increasing the age for free contraception to age 31. I admit this is a modest increase. Colleagues will be aware that I wanted to go further but I was determined that we would not just stop at age 30. We have to keep the progress going. I am determined that we will see free contraception provided to all women. That is the policy objective we are committed to and that is why I made sure that we are make some progress. It is not the increase I would have liked but we will keep going with it.

Funding is also in place to continue with our Covid vaccine and testing and tracing programmes as well as supports for Ukrainians fleeing war who need access to our health services.

Between the budget and conversion of agency costs, we intend to hire 2,000 more healthcare workers. This includes the full completion of the roll-out of the safe staffing framework,

phases 1 and 2, in all public and voluntary hospitals. It includes more advanced practitioners, more training posts and more expertise for ehealth, which we are laggards on. I am determined to make big strides in this regard.

Some areas are not getting the same investment next year as they have over the past three years. This is due primarily to an increase in inflation and patient demand being well in excess of what was forecast last year. This requires approximately €1.1 billion of the €2 billion allocated for this year. More than €700 million in recurring funding is allocated for current service levels next year and an additional €400 million in one-off funding for the non-pay pressures being seen in the hospitals is allocated for next year. This includes the necessary increased spending on medicine, catering, cleaning and all the things required in our hospitals to deal with the increase patient demand.

There has been much discussion on whether the budget is sufficient. I note the position of the chief executive officer of the HSE. Echoing the Tánaiste, the CEO is completely within his rights to give his view publicly on what he sees as the challenges faced in running our health services next year. He has my full support in having made the comments that he made.

Like many other countries in Europe, we are experiencing unprecedented demand for services. I want to give colleagues a flavour of what we are dealing with. Over the past 12 months, there have been 3.5 million outpatient appointments and 1.8 million inpatient and day case attendances. Our hospitals also treated 1.7 million patients in emergency care. The number of people, so far this year, referred to a hospital consultant is up 16% on last year. That was not forecast. It is not normal. I, along with others, believe that it is part of a post-Covid surge in patients, possibly due to deferred care during Covid.

The number of people aged 75 and older presenting at emergency departments is up by more than 20% versus pre-Covid levels. These are enormous increases in demand. I give huge credit to the HSE because these increases are being met. Not only are the increases being met, targets are being exceeded in the number of outpatient appointments being provided to get people off the waiting lists.

After the budget last week, I indicated that a supplementary budget for next year is entirely possible. We simply do not know at this point what demand will be seen, and what rate of healthcare inflation we will have to cope with. These two factors will be the main drivers of any potential supplementary budget. For example, this year's supplementary budget is estimated at approximately €1.5 billion. I believe that two thirds of that is due to higher than forecast inflation and the huge post-Covid demand, which was not expected.

While we address these challenges, we are going to continue our work on increasing productivity and treating more patients with the resources available. I am also commissioning an in-depth report into the future costs of healthcare. We are all united in our ambition for healthcare for everyone in Ireland. We are agreed on where we need to go on this. We need to understand better exactly how much that will cost in a much more volatile world than when the report was written in 2016 and 2017 in terms of medical inflation, post-pandemic patient demand and wars in Europe. This report needs to include some of the more modern innovations such as personalised medicine, artificial intelligence, remote sensors, breakthrough medicines for conditions such as dementia, genetics advances and much more. This can provide us with a baseline that everyone can work to in order to get to the place we all want to get to.

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**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I am very pleased to comment on the investment in health by the Government. I will focus on the areas of older persons and mental health services.

Ensuring adequate and appropriate supports for older persons' health and well-being has been a priority for me since I took office. There should be no doubt that investment in social care older persons' services has been a major priority for this Government. The budget has risen from €1.97 billion in 2020 to just over €2.6 billion next year. According to the World Health Organization, WHO, Ireland had the highest life expectancy in the EU. It is also the first country in the world to secure age-friendly status.

Next year will see the largest allocation ever for older person services, representing an overall increase of approximately 32% since 2020. Every day, a wide range of core services continue to be provided for older people across the country. This includes home support, day care, community supports in partnership with voluntary groups, intermediate care, as well as long-stay residential care when remaining at home is no longer feasible. The nursing homes support scheme, or fair deal, was designed to protect and support vulnerable older people to ensure equal access to nursing home care based on what they could afford. This gives important certainty to older people and their families. In 2023, I secured a funding increase of €40 million for the scheme and for 2024, a further increase of €35.6 million. This funding will support nursing homes to maintain services and to manage inflationary increases.

I announced in budget 2024 the establishment of a dedicated new €10 million fund to support private and voluntary nursing homes with HIQA regulation and compliance measures. My officials are working on the details of the scheme which will be announced shortly. That is bringing investment to nursing homes to an additional €45.6 million for 2024.

This is in addition to the substantial support the Government has provided to the private and voluntary nursing home sector over the course of the pandemic. Over €151 million has been provided through the temporary assistance payment scheme. The Government continues to provide free PPE and oxygen to private nursing homes, costing approximately €77 million to date. A €10 million temporary inflation payment scheme was established last year. It was extended twice and a short-term extension to this scheme is currently under review.

Across the country, our HSE community nursing units play a vital role in the provision of long-term care. The Government is committed to continued investment in healthcare infrastructure which supports the highest quality care for our older population. This investment includes the community nursing unit programme, which was launched to ensure that up to 90 of our public community nursing units, CNU's, would be refurbished, rebuilt or replaced to ensure the best quality environments for our older people. On Monday, I was honoured to open the new Joe and Helen O'Toole CNU in Tuam along with the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. It was fantastic to see such a state-of-the-art facility.

The delivery of home care continues to increase each year. In 2020 some 17.5 million hours were delivered. In 2024 we expect to deliver 22 million hours of home support. This is more than has ever been delivered before. The Government has prioritised home support and provided over €228 million in additional funding since 2020. The budget for home support today stands at €723 million. I know people will point to the waiting lists, with approximately 3,000 people funded for home care but only receiving a partial package and about 3,000 people funded for home care but we do not have the carers to provide it. It is important to point out that

the budget is there to fund those 6,000 people. The HSE provides approximately 40% of home support hours directly. Of the posts funded in 2023 for home care, 55 are still outstanding and still being recruited. Recruitment also continues among private and voluntary providers who deliver approximately 60% of home support.

Dementia continues to be a priority for the Government. In budget 2024 I announced that a minimum of 18% of all new home support hours are now ring-fenced for people with dementia. I also announced €300,000 new funding for weekend activity clubs for people with young onset dementia - working with the Alzheimer Society of Ireland - which will provide social activity and peer support.

It is the Government's stated policy to support older people to age in place for as long as possible. We know that our community services play a vital role in helping to keep older people well, out of hospital and living in their own homes and communities for longer. Over many years, both day care and the meals on wheels services have proven to be important components of the community services offered to older people, particularly in rural communities.

We are continuing to build on recent investment to support the 323 HSE-funded day centre services, a further 316 funded meals-on-wheels services - last year almost 2.7 million meals were provided through this service - and, in collaboration with the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland, 49 dementia-specific day centres.

I will move on to mental health because my time is short. I was pleased to announce funding in budget 2024 of €1.68 million for our supported care homes. These are unique to the south-east community region and play an incredibly important role in enabling people to live independently for longer. Budget 2024 brings funding to mental health services to nearly €1.3 billion for next year. This year's budget focuses on further developing youth mental health. Specific funding has been provided for the recruitment of 68 posts associated with child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. The extra staff for CAMHS will support the implementation of the recommendations of key reports. I am delighted to have secured funding for an exciting new initiative, the youth mental health app. We know young people sometimes approach services differently and can be more likely to engage with digital or online supports. This app will help direct young people to the services they need.

Budget 2024 also provides funding for the development and provision of a new central referral mechanism for services for children, to be established on a pilot basis within the HSE. This referral mechanism will allow the HSE to appropriately triage referrals to specialist services, including CAMHS, to ensure that no child ends up on the wrong waiting list for the care that they need and deserve. This model, which is sometimes referred to as "No Wrong Door", is a key priority for me.

In line with this, I am pleased to confirm the continued roll-out of suicide bereavement liaison officers in budget 2024, as well as specific funding next year for the further national roll-out of the Traveller counselling service.

I look forward to delivering on the commitments of this budget and continuing to drive real and tangible improvements across our mental health and older person services.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** We were all hoping that we would hear more from the three Ministers today. Today, from my perspective, it is more about the Government trying to control the narrative, change the story and shift the blame but not fix the problem it created with the chronic

and very deliberate underfunding of our health service. In reality, we are now being told that we should stand logic on its head, that previous statements from the HSE, from the Department and from the Minister for Health should be set aside, and that black is white. That is what we are being told here today and I will explain why.

In her contribution, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, said funding to maintain existing services has been provided to meet inflation and rising patient demand for next year. That is simply not true. Some funding has been made available but not all of what is necessary. That is what the head of the HSE said on RTÉ this week. It is what the head of the Department said at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health a number of weeks ago. They spelled out what was needed to maintain existing levels of services just to stand still. That does not even deal with whatever recurring expenditure from this year's deficit will carry over to next year; it is just to stand still. Ministers have stated we have provided the funding for the health service to stand still for next year, but we have not. That is why the head of the HSE has clearly and publicly said that the health services are not properly and adequately funded.

The Minister for Health said we simply do not know at this point what level of demand will be seen and what level of health inflation we will have to cope with next year. He is correct in saying that, but in recent months we have been told by him, by departmental officials and by the HSE that there are three drivers for the deficit for 2023, which we know will be €1.5 billion. They are health inflation running at between 17% and 20%; an increase in demand because of an ageing demographic, population changes and illness circulating in the community - Covid and all those things have obviously increased demand; and an inability to deal with cost controls. However, two thirds of it are essentially outside the control of the head of the HSE.

When those individuals appeared before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health, they told us that the vast majority of the deficit for this year will transfer into next year. The Minister has provided no additional funding for that. He has provided some one-off funding but has not provided for any of that. Health inflation will certainly will not be zero and we will certainly not see a collapse in demand for health services. I do not have to tell the Minister; he knows in his heart that the health service has not been properly funded.

The best of all is commissioning an in-depth report into the future cost of healthcare. I welcome that because it is necessary for all the reasons the Minister has set out. However, in the context of what we are dealing with today, it is a fudge. It is an attempt to shift the responsibility and change the narrative to something that is not the case.

In the days since the budget, I have listened to many Government representatives talk about the issue of health spending. They are trying to blame all this on wasteful spending in the HSE. They claim that if we could rein in the wasteful spending and if the HSE did better, we would not have this big black hole in HSE finances. It plays well to a narrative - let us be honest - but it simply is not the case. As the Minister has conceded, the majority of the deficit is outside the control of the HSE. Even if we were to achieve savings in the areas where we can achieve them, it would not come within in ass's roar of dealing with the deficit for last year and next year.

I have argued for years with the Government and the Minister, as has my predecessor, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, and her predecessor, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, about way too much money being spent on outsourcing in healthcare, on agency and on management consultancy, and the lack of digital transformation, electronic patient records and a single integrated financial management system in the health service. We have long called for a single integrated waiting



list management system. If all that were in place, and if corrective measures had been taken a long time ago, we would be in a better position. We therefore do not have to be told by any Government backbencher or Minister about reforms in healthcare. We have spelled out chapter and verse what can be done to fix the problems in healthcare, make the health service work better and deliver greater efficiencies.

All of that, however, has now been used as an excuse by a Government that made an intentional decision not to properly fund our health services, and there is a responsibility on me and others in opposition to spell out the consequences of that. We know we have a recruitment embargo now in place. That has now reached into the front line to non-training junior doctors, some healthcare assistants, some home help workers and many other areas. Clerical grades are also needed to provide a lot of the healthcare infrastructure which will be needed. We know that 7,000 posts which were approved but not funded are now gone. I still do not know about these 1,500 beds the Minister announced a number of times or when we will see an announcement on them. Certainly, there was no additional capital funding or a mention of them in the budget. All of that will concern people. There is concern about all the clinical programmes and national strategies and access to new medicines. All those will be really important. I am concerned about the impact all this will have on patient care.

I will give the Minister a local example. We can all talk about the abstract and big figures running into billions. The quantum of money can bamboozle all of us. The stark reality is that this budget will have an impact on patient care next year. I have absolutely no doubt about it. I contacted the manager of University Hospital Waterford. The Minister has rightly praised management, as I have and as the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has done, for the work it has done to ensure we got to zero patients on trolleys in that hospital. One of the reasons the hospital achieved that is it was allowed to open a medical ward. It is medical ward 6, which has 35 beds. Almost all the staff who keep that ward open are from unfunded posts or agency staff, so the manager told me that, in reality, he should really be closing that ward. He certainly will not have the staff to keep it open. The consequence of that is 35 fewer beds, and in a hospital that achieved zero people on trolleys, it could now be back to people on trolleys again. However, the manager does not want to do that so he has been forced into an impossible position of having to take staff from elsewhere. One of the areas from which he can take staff is cardiac care and the operation of the two cath labs, including the second one that we worked so hard for, and there will be fewer planned procedures.

The Minister was in University Hospital Waterford some months ago opening the palliative care centre and he announced that the emergency cardiac services, which now run from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m., Monday to Friday, will become a seven-day-a-week service. I am sure he will know, because he would have been briefed, that that means we need more junior doctors, more doctors generally, support staff, administration staff, porters, nurses - a whole range of posts. Again, managers in the hospital have told me that some of the grades necessary to deliver that are now on the recruitment embargo list, so that can be forgot about until that is lifted. I have no doubt that if one goes through every single hospital in this State, there will be similar stories.

National strategies cannot be starved of funding. Cardiac, cancer care, diabetes and all those really important strategies need year-on-year, continuous funding. If we do not provide the additional funding, they simply stand still. I am on record as accepting the additional investment that has been put into healthcare in recent years. There are lots of things on which I have agreed with the Minister and the Government - public-only consulting contracts, the enhanced community care model and so on - which I know will serve the health services well.

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However, there has to come a time, when mistakes are made, that we are very clear, honest and forthright in our approach to what this Government has done as regards healthcare. There is no doubt that if it were a Sinn Féin Government sitting opposite and we made the decision this Government made to deliberately underfund the health service, with all the consequences - a recruitment embargo in place, beds which are needed and may now not be funded, no new medicines for new drugs - the current Minister would be making exactly the same speech I am making today because he knows that what I am saying is true.

It was really regrettable that some Government Members - not the Minister for Health - tried to throw the head of the HSE under the bus and made some misleading and inaccurate statements about briefings he has given me, which he has not given me. The only information I ever got from the head of the HSE was when I contacted him to seek clarity. I am sure the Minister will agree that it is important we have factual information and not misinformation. There lots of other things I have read over the past 24 hours which I do not believe are helpful. This person has come into the role, has been six months in the job and has a job to do. What has happened is part of this pushback and this shifting the narrative and trying to blame somebody else, rather than taking responsibility for the decisions that have been made.

Here is the point. There may well be a Revised Estimate - there has to be one before the end of the year - and we know now that the deficit for 2023 is €1.5 billion and that it will have to be paid for. If it is not all paid for in a Revised Estimate, some of it will carry over into next year. However, when the Minister says we do not know, that is not true. We may not know the full extent of it but we certainly know that the vast majority of it will be recurring. It has not been provided for, however. What the Government provided for in the budget was €707 million for existing levels of service, €100 million for new measures and then an expenditure line of non-core, one-off funding of €1.032 billion, which includes Ukraine money, waiting list money, money for Covid and then this resilience fund of €480 million. However, it is not core, does not go into the base and does not deal with the permanent funding the health service needs. If we had a big black hole in the health budget last year, we will have an even bigger black hole in the health budget next year. The Minister has left the head of the HSE, clinical leads across the healthcare system, hospital managers and those who are trying to deliver healthcare to the best of their ability, as well as all the front-line staff, in the lurch.

The final point I will make is this. The last message we needed to give out at this point in time, when we struggle to recruit staff, is the words “recruitment embargo” because that will resonate and will be felt and I think more people will leave. When I was in St. Luke’s hospital in Kilkenny this week, hospital management told me it was fighting to hang on to non-training junior doctors. The HSE is trying to poach them. Now they have been given a green light to go to the NHS and elsewhere because they are on the recruitment embargo list. For all those who are in training colleges and whom we want to come and work in the public system - and the Minister talked about increasing training places - the message they have now heard from budget 2024 is “recruitment embargo”. I know it is not across the system, but the very notion there is a recruitment embargo at a time of crisis in healthcare, with a million people on waiting lists and all the issues we have as regards emergency departments and so on, just beggars belief. I am very disappointed that no news or new information came from the Minister today. That is regrettable.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** The Government has thrown in the towel on health and disastrously chosen to underfund the health service in this year’s budget. Unfortunately, this will have a profound negative effect on patients, their families, workers and wider service provision, no

more so than for those looking to access vital mental health services. Access to mental health services was in crisis before this budget and it will be in crisis after this budget.

It was widely reported that the Minister was disappointed with the health allocation in budget 2024, but there was no mention of disappointment in his opening speech. Disappointment will be cold comfort for people who are waiting for vital mental health services.

It is welcome to see more resources going into CAMHS. That is badly needed but it does not go far enough. The highlight seems to be an app and a pilot project in one community healthcare organisation, CHO, area. To me it is just spin and an attempt to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The Minister can disagree with me all he wants but the facts do not lie. Some 6,400 children have presented to accident and emergency departments with mental health difficulties since he took office, including almost 1,000 children this year. Over 2,500 of these children have been hospitalised. This is a direct consequence of successive Governments failing to invest in early intervention. Waiting lists for CAMHS reached a record of over 4,500 children this year. The figure has more than doubled in the three years since the Minister took office. Some 735 of these children have been waiting for more than a year for an initial appointment. That is a 209% increase under the Minister's watch. Primary care psychology services have over 16,000 young people waiting for appointments. Jigsaw services have wait times of up to 15 weeks in some areas and children in CAMHS who are at a high risk of suicidal ideation or deliberate self-harm are having to wait up to 190 days for an assessment.

The Minister can feel free to stop me if he feels these facts are wrong. If he does not believe me, he should believe the damning report into CAMHS by the Mental Health Commission and the Maskey report under this Government's reign. He should also believe the Ombudsman for Children, who joined calls from parents and Opposition parties in response to the State's dereliction of its duty to children. The letter he wrote was shocking. The Ombudsman for Children did not receive an urgent, credible and serious response outlining how these unsustainable situations will be resolved. These issues will still not be resolved after the recent budget. This has all happened on the Government's watch. The Government may have inherited some problems from the previous Fine Gael Government but nothing it has done has addressed these problems.

The Government is out of ideas and it is running out of time. We need solutions to this emergency but every waiting list is going in the wrong direction; all of them are going up. Sinn Féin has solutions to the crisis in youth mental health. We have prioritised CAMHS inpatient capacity to fully resource all CAMHS teams in our alternative budget. This would provide a much-needed service to young people with moderate to severe mental health needs. We have also prioritised early intervention, with a move towards universal counselling, GP referral and expanding Jigsaw. Sinn Féin has solutions and the longer this Government is in place, the worse this emergency will get.

I spent the recess meeting a vast range of mental health organisations. They do a really good job, despite working in difficult circumstances. They all stress the need for multi-annual funding and early intervention. This budget will simply not address these issues. It is unforgivable that the Government has failed to invest in the development of national clinical programmes for mental health for the second year running. This means there will be no funding for self-harm and suicidal ideation. In the past three years, 23,000 people have presented to 25 hospitals with suicidal ideation. That is an average of 15 presentations per day.

Specialist eating disorder teams are life-saving and to find out there is no additional funding

again this year is concerning. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric diagnosis. The Government's failure to resource early intervention psychosis is a blatant disregard of its duty of care to those experiencing mental health difficulties. We also have no funding for adult ADHD, which means that more children will fall through the gaps when they transition from CAMHS into adult services. We need to fund these programmes. I am concerned about the year ahead and how people will access care.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. We are effectively having statements on the lack of investment in our healthcare service. Members are not discussing the investment in healthcare because, as we know, it is not even enough to stand still. We are discussing the lack of investment. Since the budget, we have had Ministers and others from the Department of Health expressing disappointment and frustration at the lack of additional funding for our health services. This is in conjunction with medical professionals, trade unions, service providers, pharmacists and primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare services expressing their extreme concern over the budget for health in 2024.

The health service is in a state of crisis but it will be made worse by this budget. One example is the doubt cast on the funding for the national stroke strategy. Failure to fund this strategy means that patients will spend longer in hospital due to insufficient funding for the supported discharge programme. Stroke units may have to close. The withdrawal of funding will cost lives but it will not save the Government a shilling. The fault for this crisis, and the others that will hit health because of what has been done, lies with the Government as a whole, in particular the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. The reports that the Minister arrived to negotiations with no clear plan do not surprise me in the slightest. Be under no illusions; the fault for this lies with the Government and the leaders of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party. They have made a deliberate decision to dramatically underfund our health services. Their actions will have consequences which will be felt widely across all of the health services and in every area.

In my area of Fingal, the consequences will be acute. North County Dublin already suffers in several areas and this will get worse in 2024. There are no dentists being added to the dental treatment service scheme for those with a medical card. I have had people in my advice clinics and offices in Swords and Balbriggan who are in pain and cannot access a dentist. I spoke to a man last week who was on his way to the credit union to get a loan he could not afford so that he will no longer be in pain as a result of not being able to get a dentist or a referral to the dental hospital.

We also have an issue with general practice. People cannot source a GP. I have constituents who have gone to Dundalk, Portlaoise and Dublin city centre just to access a GP. The situation for children is even worse. The Government has provided free GP care for more children but there are no GPs to deliver it. It was a miserly stroke to tell people they are entitled to something and then to ensure they cannot access their entitlement. Where is the Sláintecare commitment of 2017 for salaried GPs in areas where it is hard to attract them? We sat on that committee for a year, working for hours, hearing from experts and putting together a comprehensive plan and document, yet there is no sign of many of the elements in the plan. What is the point in having the debates and accepting a roadmap and then completely ignoring it?

Then we have the state of the children's disability network teams, CDNTs. The budget may have been transferred to another Department but we should be under no illusions - when people cannot access the services under the CDNT they will end up in the general health service and

in another queue. In Balbriggan, the CDNT is understaffed by 40%. The overpowering feeling of parents following budget 2024 is one of fear and anger. They feel as if they have been abandoned. They know their children are not getting seen now, they hear about underfunding and they know the possibility of getting the services their children need is moving further away from them.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, stated she is “delighted” with her “exciting new” app and said the “app will help direct young people to the services they need” when they need them. With the greatest of respect, I am sure the Minister of State is delighted and that it is very exciting, but if there are no services - and there are none in my area bar crisis intervention - what will the app direct them to? Will it direct them to another waiting list and tell them to wait until there is a crisis? What is the point of an app when there are no services to back it up? It is an exciting idea, and I am sure the Minister of State is delighted with it, but this app will only point people in the direction of services if they exist, and they do not. It is an insult and the Minister of State’s delight is somewhat misplaced.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Deputy Cullinane made a point that is worth repeating. The statements by the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, are fundamentally contradictory. The Minister of State indicated that funding “to maintain existing services has been provided to meet inflation and rising patient demand”, whereas, according to the Minister, “Some areas are not getting the same level of investment ... as they have [done] ... due primarily to an increase in inflation and patient demand being well in excess of what was forecast last year.” Those two fundamentally contradictory statements encapsulate just where we are with this health budget and why there has been so much rancour and righteous anger in the last nine days.

In summing up, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, also mentioned that the workers can sometimes be “forgotten in a politically-charged debate”. I mentioned the workers in the drugs sector earlier. Those workers were almost forgotten by this Government earlier this week in the section 39, section 10, and section 56, campaign, when it waited until the very last minute to go to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, at 3 a.m. on the day a near historic strike was due to take place in order to come to the table and reach an agreement. This provided much distress for those very workers and of course the service users and their family members who need those services. That is how the Government treats the workers and those who need the health service. The fact that we are here today talking about the damage this budget has done is indicative of just how tired and jaded this Government is and how mismanaged our health service has become. Yesterday again, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, noted how every Government agency and every Department he engages with at budget time, always makes the case for more funding. That is understandable and we appreciate that. However, it also shows the blatant disregard this Government has to how unique our healthcare service is. It is not like any other Department. A delay in funding for another Department, such as in transport, education, or any other Department, may have a hard impact and may be difficult for communities and for people to take if we are not getting new rail infrastructure or an extra building to a school. They are hardships but nothing suffers as much when it is underfunded than our health service. Our health service is a demand-led service. Nobody turns up at an accident and emergency unit, or a GP service, or gets on a waiting list because they are well. They do it because they are unwell; they are sick. For the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to lump health in with the other Departments and say that is what every Department does, is totally disingenuous of the needs of our health service.

We heard this week from HSE chief executive Bernard Gloster that harm would certainly be caused by the budget allocation to the HSE. It was a clear and concise message that this Government needs to make sure patients are properly protected. It is not good enough for the Tánaiste to say there is always a commentary on health budgets, as he said today. Has the Tánaiste stopped to think that may be because this commentary, as he calls it, or what we would call politically holding to account, is because of the chronic mishandling we have seen year after year in our health service? Where is the accountability from the heads of Government? The honesty in their approach to health is absolutely missing. It seems that the Government has given up on health. There is not only a lack of vision in the health budget, but on a more basic level, there is an absence of proper planning. That may be because we have two Ministers, in Deputies Donnelly and Donohoe, who seem to be wrestling for control of the health portfolio. Over the last few days, I have heard from many constituents who have expressed their anger and sadness over the lack of funding for new medicines next year. One such email I received was from a lady who suffers from a chronic heart condition, whose hope of accessing a new drug for treatment has been dashed by this frankly irresponsible health budget. This lady spoke of how her doctor advised her that access to treatment may only be possible by going up to the North of Ireland. That is a complete and utter failing for this Government. We had hoped the days of sending our citizens out of the State to receive basic medical care were long and truly over. Alas, once again, due to the decisions made by this Government, we have managed to somehow see that remain firmly as a choice our patients have to make.

Up to 4,000 people will be affected by this Government's decision not to secure funding for new developments in any of the clinical programmes in the health service and this will create real consequences for patients across a wide variety of areas, including cancer care, diabetes, sepsis, and critical care. The Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association estimates that 1,000 cancer patients will be impacted by the lack of funding. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, stated this week that spending our budget surplus all at once would be immoral. Will the Minister explain the morality behind denying people suffering from chronic illnesses, who rely on our clinical programmes, the chance to have better health and a better life? The Irish Cancer Society has clearly outlined in recent days that there is a real risk that cancer outcomes could decline in years ahead due to the Government's health budget. The society asked for only €20 million for a cancer strategy. I doubt there is a person in this House who has not had cancer impact on them directly or on someone close to them. How this Government could not find €20 million to invest in a strategy for such an important area that touches everybody's lives is quite frankly beyond me.

Almost 15,000 people contract sepsis in Ireland every year resulting in almost 3,000 deaths. According to the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, one report states that sepsis kills more people than heart attacks, and lung, colon and breast cancers combined. In some reports, 60% of all hospital deaths can in some way be related to sepsis. I note the HSE's own sepsis report indicates that 20.3% of deaths in our hospitals are related to sepsis. That is the 2021 figure, up from 19% in 2020. It is a frightening number for what is a frightening illness. This number will not improve with underfunding.

We know from what Bernard Gloster said the other day that he will try to protect access through our accident and emergency departments and will try to continue to bring waiting lists down. It will be difficult to do but if that is where the area of focus is going to be with this constrained budget, it will be our clinical programmes that will be impacted due to underfunding. All the big killers in our country, such as heart disease, sepsis, diabetes, and cancer

strategies, are the ones which will be impacted. We have to take a minute to think because we are all guilty - myself included - when we are having health debates of focusing on the day-to-day, week-to-week crises such as trolley numbers, waiting lists, the state of our accident and emergency departments. However, our national clinical programmes dealing with people with the most serious illnesses are the ones that will be impacted according to the chief executive of the HSE and these are the decisions this Government has made. If we take patients affected by diabetes, cystic fibrosis and stroke, a total of 316,000 people impacted by those and related illnesses, have instantly become more vulnerable in the last nine days since this budget was announced. I ask both Ministers, Deputies Donnelly and Donohoe, what they say to the people who have for the last week been panicking about the level of care on which they rely through our national clinical programmes; programmes which aim to improve quality, access and the value of healthcare. One thing we have all said is that the difficulty in our health service is access to the care but once you get in, the care is good if not very good. That is true for many of our national clinical programmes. However, if they are underfunded and a recruitment freeze is implemented on trained non-consultant hospital doctors, on healthcare assistants, and on the absolute bedrock of workers who are needed to require safe staffing, it will impact on these national clinical programmes and on these people who are so sick.

As Bernard Gloster has said, I acknowledge that funding issues have been driven by inflation and unforeseen demand but I have highlighted in the start of my contribution further confusion being laid by two of the three opening statements as regards how the Government is targeting both of those things. I acknowledge the Tánaiste stating today during Leader's Questions that we are now going to set up a forward-looking group to see what the future level of demand will be. This is so the demand will not be unforeseen and that we will be able to see it. However, we have reached 5.1 million people in this country, the highest population level since the 19th century. The fact that this has not been done up until this point, and that this is a knee-jerk emergency reaction to what is an abhorrent health budget, just goes to show again just how tired and jaded this Government is. I will say one more thing. The Minister spoke about community care. We are not seeing that in north County Dublin. We are still served by Beaumont Hospital. In 1986, one year before the founding of Beaumont Hospital, the population of Fingal was 138,000 people. It now stands at 330,000 people. We still do not have minor injury clinics or primary care centres in towns aside from Swords. We still rely on Beaumont Hospital for our acute needs. The community care system is not working there. It is not delivering in my constituency. I had a little bit more to say but I have run out of time and will leave it there.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome the opportunity to examine the Government's investment in healthcare today. This debate needs to be framed in the context of the unprecedented increase in funding for the health service, going from €19 billion in 2019 to over €24 billion today. Inflation has caused massive challenges across society and this is no different for the health sector. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Naughton, are all well aware of these challenges and they have made tremendous efforts to secure funding and to prioritise front-line healthcare. As chair of the all-party Oireachtas committee on diabetes, I would like to turn to the Government's investment in diabetes services.

*3 o'clock*

Under this Government, there has been a significant shift in both the quality and delivery of diabetes care throughout the country. More patients are being provided with care in the community and at an earlier stage, which is critical. Patients with diabetes who have a medical card or GP visit card have, under this Government, had access to the chronic disease management

programme in GP settings. Under this programme, patients with diabetes have four planned appointments with their GP or GP nurse over the course of a year to monitor their condition on an ongoing basis. These appointments are critical to monitoring patients and identifying any changes needed to the management of their condition. This policy empowers patients to take the lead in the management of their diabetes.

With the expansion of eligibility for GP care to an additional 500,000 people under budget 2023, the number of people who can access this programme has increased significantly. Where necessary, GPs can refer patients with diabetes to the enhanced community care chronic disease teams. These teams provide specialist services, including podiatry, dietary advice and, if necessary, access to consultant-level care in the community. Combined, these programmes mean that patients can access the care they need close to where they live, without needing to attend a hospital setting in the majority of cases. Research into the chronic disease management programme has shown that more than 90% of patients with chronic diseases, including diabetes, are now successfully managing their conditions in community settings. This is a stark contrast to where we were a number of years ago.

The Minister launched the diabetic retinal screening programme in June. The programme is for people in Ireland with diabetes and who are at risk of retinopathy. Diabetic retinal screening is available free of charge once a year to all patients over the age of 12 with diabetes, regardless of eligibility status. Screenings are offered annually for the first two years, and then every two years if no retinopathy is found. Screening is a way of detecting any changes to the small blood vessels in the lining at the back of the eye. Diabetic retinal screening allows patients early diagnosis of diabetic eye disease, which can reduce or prevent damage to sight.

Budget 2023 provided resources for all women, whether or not they are General Medical Services patients, who have suffered gestational diabetes or pre-eclampsia to have access to ongoing diabetes screening through the course of their lives. Access to this service is commencing this month and it will be delivered as part of the national chronic disease programme in general practice. This service will give women who need it access to an annual screening for diabetes, as the risk of developing diabetes is increased in women who suffered gestational diabetes or pre-eclampsia. Women who develop diabetes will have access to the full GP chronic disease management programme, which involves four planned visits per year as I outlined a few moments ago. These women will also have access to the enhanced community care chronic disease programme teams when required.

As chair of the Oireachtas committee on diabetes, I have been working closely with diabetes practitioners and specialists, including Diabetes Ireland. A key ask is the establishment of a national diabetes register. I have put on record previously, and it is very appropriate to do so again today, my appreciation of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, who has spearheaded this and has prioritised it over the past 12 months. He has been a very strong advocate and has taken a keen interest in supporting people with diabetes, while also championing preventive care. I was delighted he secured €500,000 in budget 2024 to fund the establishment of a new national diabetes register. This register is an important development in how we respond to and manage diabetes in Ireland. It will draw on quality real-life data to support the design and delivery of future services for diabetes. This will help to improve diabetes care for patients throughout the country and it is very welcome. I thank Ministers for their support.

I will turn to health service funding for a moment. It must be noted that healthcare funding is at record levels, with an increase of more than €5 billion since 2019. Just like any front-line



demand-led service there will always be calls for increased funding, and it must keep up with inflation and demographic changes. This is understood. I know from experience that the local CHOs do their best in difficult circumstances in certain areas. It is critical that they are supported in the services they provide. However, as Dr. Theresa Reidy noted recently, we must also ensure the funds allocated are spent properly to ensure effective services are provided. For example, we have seen significant increases in clerical and management grades that were unapproved. While they may be necessary, it is critical that the CEO of the HSE and senior management exercise proper budgetary control, particularly with the additional challenges of inflation. The HSE recently came before the Committee Of Public Accounts and this scrutiny will continue. I thank the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Naughton, for their efforts to secure additional funding and additional services, including at community level, to provide front-line services. It is greatly appreciated and their work is noted.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** As we speak, 74 people are on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick, UHL. This is the lowest number there has been for the whole month of October. The average is 100 people a day on trolleys. It is an absolute disgrace. The budget gives no comfort that the issue will be addressed. In the round, the budget lacked ambition and neglected the core issues of health and housing. It was a budget focused on short-term one-off measures, and these highlights tried and failed to give the Government cover in its failings in health and housing. Those in opposition have known this for some time and it now appears that Government colleagues do too. It is clearly demonstrated by the failure of the recent budget to invest properly in healthcare. It is a case of not wanting to throw good money after bad. It seems the Government has thrown in the towel when it comes to health. It has definitely abandoned the people of Limerick and the mid-west who need to use the emergency department at UHL.

I will focus my comments on UHL. It needs investment in capacity and staffing. It is consistently the hospital with the highest number of people treated on trolleys and in hallways. Last week in an article by Bernie English the *Limerick Post* reported that it had been doing a survey and UHL had spent 100 days as the hospital with the highest number of trolleys in the State. Elective procedures are cancelled regularly in order that the numbers presenting at the emergency department can be managed. Patients in the hospital are stacked cheek by jowl in corridors and on trolleys.

Recently I had the misfortune to be in the emergency department with a relative. I witnessed at first hand the chaos that goes on. Trolleys were bashing off each other. I saw a patient being injured. I saw complete overcrowding, with trolleys everywhere and medicine supplies in hallways. I saw elderly people abandoned in trolleys and left to languish for hours on end because the medical staff were too busy to check on them. There are simply not enough staff there.

With each passing year, the numbers treated on trolleys at UHL increases. Last year 18,012 people were treated on trolleys. This exceeded the 2021 figure. As of today we have had 17,271 people on trolleys in 2023 and we are only halfway through October. We will surpass last year's figure and probably will hit a figure of 20,000 people, which will be a disgrace. In September 2,174 people were on trolleys and it was the worst month ever but it looks as though October will, unfortunately, surpass it.

We can get lost in these figures and statistics but behind each one of the 2,174 patients on trolleys in September is a person with friends, families and loved ones who are deeply worried

about him or her when he or she attends a hospital. Attending hospital is daunting in its own right but to be placed on a trolley compounds the worry for the person and their family members. Being in a hallway offers no dignity or privacy to a patient. It is simply unfair and not safe for patients or staff. We know from figures that the longer someone is on a trolley and not in a bed, the higher the chance that person will pass away. Treating someone in such a space makes the job of our health professionals all the more difficult.

We know there is a need for investment in healthcare. There is a need to invest to ensure the delivery of new beds. It is also crucial to invest in the recruitment of additional staff as our nurses and other healthcare professionals are spread too thin. Yes, there is a commitment to deliver a 96-bed unit at UHL. As the Minister knows, in real terms this unit will deliver only 48 additional beds. It is welcome but it is far too little and will open far too late. Will we even be able to staff it, given the lack of staff we have at present?

The Government seems to have given up on health. We are in the unique position today that the Minister is here when I am speaking about UHL. He is not here when I raise it as a Topical Issue. The Government's approach to health has been haphazard and incomplete. The most recent budget made this abundantly clear. It is demonstrated by the reduction in moneys directed towards new measures. The 2024 budget committed €100 million to new measures, which is €150 million less than the previous year's budget. This year there was a surplus, some of which could and should have been used to invest properly in our health service. It is patients and healthcare professionals who will pay the price. The budget was an opportunity to make a difference to the lives of patients and healthcare professionals. It was an opportunity to announce new funding for the delivery of 1,500 promised hospital beds, of which we have seen nothing. It was an opportunity to accept and address the challenges facing those with mental health illnesses, yet no new funding was provided in this area. It was an opportunity to provide funding for new medicines and to help patients who struggle with the cost of their medicines, yet there was very little funding for this purpose. Even rudimentary measures, such as reducing parking fees in hospitals, were not considered or provided for. It is the patients, their families and hospital staff who suffer the impacts of failures in the budget.

The Minister does not have to take my word for this. Let us consider the pronouncements from the professionals in the field. The Irish Hospital Consultants Association, IHCA, stated that the budget allocation is insufficient to address the decades-long public hospital capacity deficits that are the root cause of the unacceptable public hospital waiting lists. The Irish Medical Organisation described the budget as a missed opportunity to meet demand, while the IHCA said that not enough capital funding had been provided to open previously promised beds and theatre capacity. I would love to go on, but I have run out of time.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I am not sure what the point is of having this session and these statements. There had not been a demand for statements. The Minister and the two Ministers of State have come in here with scripts to try to put the best gloss on things. They have Government, or rather Fianna Fáil, backbenchers coming in and trying to put the best spin on things. I would have thought that the least that could have been done if Government time was being made available for these statements would have been to agree to have questions and answers. I say this because coming in here and just reading out a script is not especially enlightening or helpful. What we, or certainly I, want to be able to do is to ask the Minister questions about the implications of what is a reduced health budget. I think that is also what the public wants to know.

Regarding cancer and stroke programmes, what are the implications of the budget for those? What are the implications then in respect of the existing waiting lists for children's mental health services, for example? We know these are fairly well threadbare. We have had representatives from the Mental Health Commission in with us at an Oireachtas committee. We wish to know what the implications are for the existing huge shortcomings in relation to the disability services, especially those for children. What are the implications for home care? In the middle of this year, the allocated hours were cut and this cut, I notice, goes into next year as well. What about the waiting lists and the demand that will arise towards the end of this year and into next year? What are those people who need home care going to do now if the allocation has been cut?

These are the kinds of questions that we want to hear answers to. The big concern, of course, is that the failure to secure adequate funding for our health service is going to result in a situation where patients will pay the price. This is inevitable. There will be major disappointment on the part of patients and staff because the momentum that had been achieved will, inevitably, slow down. The least we could have had, therefore, would have been questions and answers in a three-and-a-half-hour debate. I just do not know why the Minister did not agree to this and why there is this session. I asked yesterday-----

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I was not asked.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I asked yesterday.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I was not asked.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Okay. The Taoiseach was asked and he completely ignored this request. If we are to have accountability to the Dáil, which Ministers are provided to provide, then we need to have questions and answers. As I said, I do not know what the purpose of this session is.

The whole issue of the underfunding of health, of course, actually started last year. The allocation made in budget 2023 was not sufficient to maintain the existing level of service and to provide for new services. The whole question of a budget campaign for any Department is a key aspect of the activity of that Department, in terms of the Minister and the Secretary General. Quite clearly, that campaign on the part of the Department of Health was not sufficiently successful last year. This was spelt out very clearly. We know there was a three-month delay in approving the service plan. We also know that a senior member of the HSE board resigned over this because he was not prepared to go along with the pretence that it was possible to deliver that service plan when there was a black hole of €2 billion in the allocation.

I must say this does raise questions about the ability of the Minister's Department, and senior people in it, to make the case sufficiently and to secure sufficient funding for the health service. Additionally, in the early months of last year, we saw the acting head of the HSE at that point being very clear about the shortcomings in what was allocated. An attempt was made by the Minister's Department to silence the person and to get that person to go along with the pretence that the money would be fine. Of course, we know it is not and we are facing a significant deficit this year.

I wish to talk for a few moments about the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. I think that Department is a disgrace. It is by far the most conservative Department in this country. It does not seem to have any appreciation at all

of the fact that it has a role in relation to reform. I do not think it gets the reform programme that is under way, or that has been under way, within the Department of Health. When we look at the kind of spinning that the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform engaged in this time in respect of other Departments, it was telling them that they could not get their allocation because of what the Department of Health had done. It claimed that we spend more in this country on health than in any other OECD country. Both those things were lies being spread around by the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform.

Equally, some of the inherent and fundamental problems, the structural problems, in the HSE are largely down to the failure of the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform to understand what providing a decent health service is about. I refer to those things that are critical to ensuring value for money and a properly functioning system. I refer to the individual health identifiers, which is a key element in this context, the digital health strategy and the need to ensure multi-annual funding is provided. The Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform just does not get that at all.

I am not sure where these people come from. Do any of them actually depend on the public health service? Is it a case that they are okay because they have health insurance with VHI, Laya Healthcare or whatever? Do they get what a public health service is about? The other aspect, of course, is the failure to fund an integrated financial management system. This is why we cannot get to the bottom of the black hole of the funding of the HSE. We do not know where the funding is going and we do not have the data to measure what is going on.

I cannot help but comment on the fact that the Secretary General of the Department of Health came directly from what was then the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Is there a mindset there that does not understand about what a public health service is and does not understand that we have an agreed, all-party strategy for health that is about creating a single-tier, universal health service, comparable to what is available in every other country in Europe and most other developed and advanced countries? Do those people not get that? What is wrong with that mindset there that it is so shortsighted and unappreciative of the shortcomings in our health service?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am genuinely loath to interrupt. I am just asking for some advice, and I do not mean to criticise. The Deputy is referring to an identifiable person, who is my Secretary General.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Excuse me, sorry, I did mention a person. I am talking about a mindset that has been in the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, and has continued to be there for some time.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I just wonder if the Deputy might withdraw those comments. It is very unfair and he cannot defend himself. They are not true.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Okay. I will just say that a key element of the responsibility of a Secretary General is to secure adequate funding for what his or her Department requires. I am saying that there is a mindset in the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, which has been there and continues to be there, that does not understand the principle of fully-funded public services, especially a key service like that of health.

Nor does that Department understand the political decisions that have been made in recent years in terms of everybody signing up to providing a public health service, as I said, like every other European or developed country has. That needs to be dealt with. I also wonder about the commitment of some elements of government to the Sláintecare programme. We have a situation now where it is easy to point the finger at the Minister for Health. I understand the Minister's disappointment. It is quite obvious irrespective of the speech he read out. I share that disappointment but, more than anything, the public shares the disappointment in the Government's failure to adequately fund our health service. As a result of the decisions that were taken in the underfunding of the health service for this year and the underfunding that will be inevitable next year, patients all over the country will pay a price. There is an attitude that public services are just for the poor and people who cannot afford to go private. This is quite evident in some elements of this Government and at senior levels in some of our Government Departments. Until that mindset changes, until we understand that we will have a better country, a more inclusive country and a more successful country by having a universal single-tier health service, and until we are prepared to fully fund that and stop the galloping outsourcing and the galloping privatisation going on in our health service, we are not going to be a fully developed modern country. I have to wonder is that actually the agenda at play here. Is it a question of protecting those interests that are making a packet out of private healthcare?

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I am delighted we are having these statements because it gives us all the opportunity to put on record what we believe should be done in health or our views on the various aspects of the policies of health. I am sure there is nobody else in this House who will appreciate more than the Minister himself that what gets counted gets done. Is that what we are doing? I have been here at various budgets and I have seen the health budget increased year on year with substantial amounts of money. How is that money being managed? In her contribution to this debate, Deputy Shortall is correct that we have to go back to how reform is treated in this country by this Government and by successive Governments. When we examine it we will see there is little or no reform around the management of taxpayers' money in most Departments and particularly in health.

For years we have debated the integrated finance system and the integrated management system for patients and nothing has happened. We have seen very senior people from the commercial world resign from boards of the HSE or from activities within the HSE because they say they met with huge resistance to change. The *status quo* in the Department of Health and the HSE cannot continue. It cannot continue because regardless of how much money we put in we are not just funding the services in the HSE and the delivery it is responsible for, we are also funding the huge waste that went on the previous year, the year before, the year before that. If we do not correct that we will be in the same difficulties next year and the year after regardless of which Minister is in place.

I welcome the fact the CEO of the HSE is briefing people. It is a great idea. I do not see anything wrong with it. He does not work for the Government and he does not work for a political party. He works for the HSE and he should be telling it as it is just as Ministers should be brave enough to put their names to the statements we are reading in the papers about what they think of the Minister or the allocation. They are showing total irresponsibility. They are irresponsible in their statements. They do not have any regard for the impact of those statements on people who are working within the HSE or those receiving services from the HSE. They certainly do not have respect for the patients, absolutely not. They are showing an awful lot of weakness in their own characters. If we are to have budgets and if we are to have a well-run

organisation to deliver on those budgets then we must start telling the truth. Somebody in the HSE or in the Department of Health has to tell the truth about what is happening. Did anyone hold an exit interview with those people who resigned from the organisation? Did anyone take up the recommendations of Dr. Eddie Molloy, for example, who in the AV room many years ago told us we can have as much reform as we like but if we do not have the change managers in place to implement the reforms - I am referring to the bureaucracy of the HSE - then we will never have real reform?

One of the ways we get information from the HSE is through parliamentary questions. A parliamentary question was sent to the HSE in relation to the section 44 report, which is all about money owed to people who are now retired or a cohort of people still working in the HSE. I asked if the €42 million was set aside to meet and cover that expenditure. I was told that the question could not be answered and yet the information was released to some other individual under a freedom of information request, not a Member of the House. There is a need for fundamental change in our attitude towards transparency and accountability within the HSE. We are not getting it. Until we get that then we will continue to preside over all sorts of misspending, inefficiency in spending and poor planning. Change and reform is not only about money and how we spend it: it is about planning for the loss of jobs and people leaving positions; it is about having the correct number of GPs; it is about having the correct number of consultants; and it is about ensuring that Government policy is put in place.

I have heard a lot about Sláintecare. We hear a lot about it and then we do not actually do anything about it and we ignore it. Either the HSE management is wrong or the Department of Health is wrong. It is, however, the responsibility of the Minister and Ministers of State to give leadership in the Department to make sure the reform happens and to make sure the services are delivered. There is a political obligation on all of them to take steps to make sure this happens. The people I represent will judge that reform on the delivery of services. For example, people who are on various medications that come through the medical card system and are collected from their pharmacy cannot now get that medication because of the lack of product on the shelves at the chemist. What do they do? They are paying for it now from their own pockets. The Minister needs to correct that immediately and ensure that they get paid for whatever replacement product is there and that it is covered by the HSE and covered by the medical card.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, was very good with regard to the spend for community homes but that money had to be dragged out of the Department if the truth were told. Why should that happen? A policy decision was made and the money was given but we all had to kick up a stink in this place in order to get it paid. Not only should that money be paid there should be a plan in place by a group within the HSE to ensure that whatever money is needed for this year and next year is paid in advance or at least on time. Commercial contractors are owed a considerable amount of money. These are contractors to hospitals doing various tasks and delivering services and they are not being paid on time. The HSE is actually putting at risk commercial entities throughout the country by simply blaggarding them by not paying. That is not good enough. I want to mention CAMHS. Last weekend, a young child aged nine had an exceptional meltdown, according to her parents. I know the case quite well. There were no services available for that child - none, zero. I was told to come back on Monday. The parents were not even contacted on Monday but they were told on Tuesday that they would be considered at some meeting this week. How in the name of God can we explain to the parents of that child that these are the services we are standing over? Money needs to go directly to where it is most needed. We need to employ the people there and we need to ensure that the staff are

provided. We, therefore, need the planners to do their job. If they do not do it, let them get a job somewhere else. That is what needs to be done here. Drastic action needs to be taken because there are no services and there is no real effort that I can see to fill the vacancies and get people attended to.

I have raised SOS funding in Kilkenny umpteen times. The individuals are referred to now as business cases; they are not. They are individuals who need specialised care. They are families who are in distress. Managers within the system are in distress because they are being ignored, not just this year but going back over the past five years. Respite care is not being delivered. Somebody has to step in and give leadership in all of these areas. The mental health system is not just broken; it is in a shambles all over the country. It is no comparison to the private services being delivered. We should be delivering to that level. Telling a patient who is suicidal and in real difficulty to give us a shout back on Monday and we will try to fix it up is just farcical.

I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, because she has visited the facility. Teac Tom is running into serious financial difficulties. We are meeting HSE officials on Friday. If they tell me they are going to do a report or that we will see about funding for the future, and it jeopardised the continued services being given by that voluntary organisation, I will be in this House demanding that the Minister of State meet with Teac Tom and the HSE to secure the funding. Likewise with the cancer services, voluntary organisations are filling the gap where the HSE should be, yet they are not being acknowledged by the HSE or the Department. They are having to fight for every cent to keep their services going. I am aware of them all over the country. We had them here yesterday in the Dáil lobbying. I am aware of the services in Kilkenny such as Cois Nore. I am giving the Minister that example. He should immediately set out a pathway to fund all these services. These services are filling in where the HSE has failed. Yvonne - not her name - went through the services in Waterford University Hospital. Her family fought for the services that were needed. They fought for respite care and asked that she be sent to Thomastown to be looked after. She died. She had not been washed for 16 days. She had the same clothes on her for 16 days. I cannot stand over that health service.

All the Ministers today would give the impression that everything was okay. They are all constituency operators. They are all elected and work in the same way as we do. They know damn well the system is not working. They know the money is not going directly to the different areas that I have just mentioned. There is an awful lot more. The other example is Covid recognition payments. The Ministers know from the letters they are getting that these payments have not been made to people who are on the front line or who left their jobs to go to the front line. They have not been paid. I am asking that the Ministers take note of what is being said in this House. They should not take it as a personal criticism but as constructive criticism. Going back to Deputy Shortall's point, maybe the Minister is not here to answer questions. That was the way it was arranged. There is nothing to stop officials from going back over the contributions that are made, writing back to the Deputies and giving them the answers. That would be a start as far as transparency goes.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The budget and the huge underfunding in the HSE affects us all in every constituency around the country. The previous speaker mentioned that all of us are constituency Deputies. We all work with communities that are struggling, trying to survive and trying to manage. The head of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, recently made it plain that they simply cannot be expected to deliver an effective and efficient service on the funding that is in place at present. Across the western seaboard, particularly in the north west and Sligo hospital, we

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have massive waiting times for people to get operations or to be seen. We also have continued overcrowding in the hospital services there. That is the same across the whole country.

The cap on staffing is one of the serious issues that is affecting people everywhere. My daughter is doing nursing at the moment and like many of her colleagues, they work with an agency at the weekends. Friends of hers do the same. A friend from Limerick who is in college with her in Sligo worked in a hospital in Limerick recently. She was there on a 12-hour shift and she was the only nurse. There was no senior nurse with her, and she was looking after 16 patients. That is the kind of situation she was in. She said to the others that she would not be able to take those people out of bed. They said, "That is fine; leave them in the bed." That is the kind of health service we are going to have if we do not put the resources in place and remove these ridiculous caps and ensure we have services in place for people.

There is a specific issue regarding ambulance services that I want to raise. I received an email in respect of my own area in County Leitrim, which stated:

I feel I must highlight to you the absolute abandonment of ambulance services in the area of Carrick-on-Shannon in recent times. Carrick-on-Shannon base is our closest resource and unfortunately for the entire of south Leitrim, one ambulance per shift is allocated to work. I must put this in context. This one ambulance is consistently being utilised by the Cavan-Monaghan and Longford-Mullingar area as well as our own south Leitrim area. Basically at any time during a 12-hour shift, this ambulance is certainly not in Carrick-on-Shannon or surrounds but unfortunately this has become the norm. This is a lack of resource and, to be honest, a lack of uptake in overtime for staff due to burnout and morale being at an all-time low.

He goes into detail in regard to a particular case, which I will not raise. He then states that Carrick-on-Shannon needs another ambulance per shift, if not two, and needs to have a proper, functioning ambulance base to accommodate ambulances to ensure that we have a proper service. There have been tragic road traffic accidents in recent times. An ambulance is called and it takes anything from half an hour to three quarters of an hour, and sometimes up to an hour, for that ambulance to arrive. It is because of this policy of dynamic deployment. The ambulance that is supposed to be in a particular area could be practically anywhere in the country. That is what happens. Then the crew is told they have to go over to Mayo or up to Donegal. When they are three quarters of the way there, they are told it is all right, someone else is covering that, and they are sent back again. This thing is going on all over the country in every constituency. Every Deputy or Senator the Minister talks to in here will tell him the same stories of staff who work in the ambulance services being absolutely at their wits' end because of what is going on.

I also want to raise home help services and resources. There are loads of people in my constituency trying to get home help services but who cannot get them. Hours are being cut and the staff are being pushed and squeezed all the time. They are told they can get a person up and give them a shower but not to dare bring them in a few sods of turf to put on the fire - do not dare organise anything for them, things that they need. It is called home help for a reason. They absolutely need.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** It is not----

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** If they do not have a family to do it, what are they going to do? Should they sit in the cold? That is what the Minister of State is telling people; to sit in the cold



if they cannot light a fire because nobody going to do it for them. It is absolutely ridiculous. That is the reality for people I know. A man in his nineties was told that if he could not light the fire, that was too bad. The person who is going to help him get out of bed and get dressed in the morning cannot take an extra five minutes to come in and light the fire for him. That is not allowed. That is a ridiculous service and the Minister of State needs to recognise that.

I also want to raise disability services, which are in dire need throughout the country. There are difficulties with CAMHS and difficulties with intellectual disability services. I dealt with a young person who was going through CAMHS until it was decided that was not the right service and there should be a transfer to the intellectual disability team. There is no intellectual disability team in the area but that is where the family was told to go. I understand there are only four intellectual disability teams in all the CHO areas in the country. When the family asked whether the child could be transferred to a team in one of the other areas, the answer was that this was not allowed. The answer to this ten-year-old, who recovered from cancer when still a baby, was, "Sorry, you cannot get a service." "Sorry" is not good enough. We have the head of the HSE telling us the resources are not in place because it does not have the money to provide them. There must be a recognition that the notion we have a functioning health service is simply not correct. It reminds me of when Maggie Thatcher was asked about bus services many years ago, to which she replied that successful people do not use buses.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are way over time, Deputy.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The attitude of the Government seems to be that successful people do not need a health service. It is simply not good enough.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I acknowledge the really good work all our healthcare workers do on the front line of the health service. We rely on them so much for our care and everybody else's care. I am very critical of the inequalities in our health system but, as I have said many times, once people get into the public system, it is a very good system. They are treated very well and their experience is the best it can be in that environment. That is something of which this country can be very proud. However, there are historical inequalities in accessing that care, with waiting lists and so on. The job of successive Governments has been to address that but there remain gross inequalities in access. The funding shortfalls in the budget will have consequences for those who rely on services. The embargo on the recruitment of certain professions will have consequences across the board.

I will focus on one issue in the budget. I spoke to the Minister informally about this serious matter, on which I hope he can throw some light. It relates to access to life-saving medicines. There is normally a budget for these medications and treatments but for next year, that budget has, in effect, been cancelled. Many patients rely on certain medications and treatments. There are 1,000 cancer patients who may not get access to 23 new medicines. Will the Minister provide clarification in this regard? Being able to get treatment is a life-and-death issue. Like all other Deputies, I received an email concerning one of these patients, who was told there would not be access to the new drug and it would require leaving the jurisdiction to access it. That is not good enough. People are reliant on these drugs as part of their medical intervention. Even Bernard Gloster has said there will be a significant slowdown as a result of the lack of additional funding for clinical programmes. This is quite serious, to say the least. I would be grateful if the Minister could offer some clarity on the funding shortfalls, particularly for new drugs and treatments. There are more than 1,000 people waiting for these new drugs and treatments; in fact, there are 4,000-plus. I hope he can provide clarity in this regard.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I very much welcome the work the Minister has done over the past two to three years. There are challenges in healthcare provision and a supplementary budget will be needed to deal with the expenditure of an additional €1.5 billion this year. There are issues we need to look at in dealing with healthcare. It was interesting to hear the Sinn Féin spokesperson on health acknowledging that the health service in this country had contributed to the increase of 11 years in life expectancy, from 71 to 82, in the past 50 years. In the past 20 years, in particular, the way in which healthcare has been provided has had a major influence on life expectancy.

Part of the challenge in providing healthcare arises from the increase in population. CSO figures show there were 3.85 million people in the country in 2000. There are now more than 5.2 million, which is an increase of 1.5 million, or 40%. In real terms, there should have been a 40% increase in healthcare provision. There has been such an increase in a large number of areas but there are challenges in some areas, which we must work to resolve. Over the past seven years, the number of staff in the HSE has increased from 103,000 whole-time equivalents in December 2014 to more than 142,000 now. There are approximately 162,000 staff in real terms but when the number is converted into whole-time equivalents, it amounts to 142,000, which is an increase of 40% in that period. Every one of those staff is required, no matter what area they are in.

The question is whether more efficiencies can be created. An area of concern is that a huge number of organisations deliver healthcare services. The health budget is €22.5 billion for this year but more than €6 billion of that will go to 2,500 organisations that receive their funding from the HSE or the Department but are not under the remit of either. They provide really good services but there is a question as to whether we could do better in achieving efficiencies in some areas. Are different organisations providing the same service? We might be able to do more in looking at that issue. At the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts this morning, I asked whether there are enough checks and balances in this area. Some of the organisations I am talking about are voluntary hospitals and others are organisations such as COPE that provide a superb service, including rehabilitation services, right across the country. Those services were developed because there was a gap in provision by the healthcare sector. The organisations have filled that gap very well for a number of years but we need to examine how more efficiencies can be created.

To give an example of a lack of efficiency, I was talking recently to a consultant who has worked in the United States where there was access to an operating theatre two days a week. This person is now back in Ireland and has access to an operating theatre for only half a day a week. The problem is that the half-day slot is after lunch but the consultant has been advised that no patient can be admitted into theatre after 4 p.m. I am not blaming staff, who want to leave at 5 p.m. because they have children to collect and look after or there are other demands such as caring for elderly parents. Surely, however, it should be possible to have an arrangement whereby one lot of staff work from 6 a.m. until 2 p.m., say, and another lot cover 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. This would make better use of the facilities. In the private hospitals, many of the theatres are operational until 8 p.m. because that is the way the rota is done. The question is whether a more efficient service can be created with what we have. A lot of people are calling for more consultants to be appointed, which I fully support. It is fine to appoint consultants, but we also have to make sure they have access to what they require, whether that be theatre space or treatment rooms. When we have built the new children's hospital, that will not be a problem there, but not having access to facilities is a problem in an awful lot of other hospitals

in the country. While we must employ more consultants and get the best people in here, it is important that when we do so, we use them effectively and efficiently. That is something we need to look at.

This goes back to the issue of management. There was a big call last year to get in consultants on Saturdays and Sundays to discharge patients from hospital. That is all fine if we want to discharge someone, but if it is the case the person being discharged cannot go home because they are not well enough to do so, even though they are well enough to be discharged, and if they need to go to a step-down facility, will enough administrators be in place to arrange that step-down facility, or what forward planning has been put in place? That is where we can create efficiencies.

I acknowledge the HSE will say something like 500 people who are in hospital on any one day are ready to be discharged but, unfortunately, cannot be discharged either because there is not adequate support at home or because there is no step-down facility arranged for them. We need to prioritise step-down facilities and the issue of contracted beds. For example, I was recently dealing with a patient in Cork University Hospital, CUH, who had Huntington's disease. One nursing home already had 12 contracted beds with the HSE and one of the people it had been looking after was a person with Huntington's disease. It was quite prepared to take the second person because it now had expertise for dealing with a patient with Huntington's disease, but the HSE would not engage with it because all 12 contracted beds were in use. We need to start thinking outside the box in regard to such issues in order that we can create more efficiencies.

I was recently in an emergency department, not, thank God, as a patient but to help the family of someone with an intellectual disability who was a patient there. It was at a weekend. Staff in emergency departments face significant challenges. First, they need to assess the patient, and if he or she then needs to be admitted, it is about getting a bed. In a lot of cases, people there did not need to be in an emergency department. If proper structures were in place at weekends, they would not have to go to emergency departments. We need to look at how we can put in place a proper GP system for weekends. A very successful unit in Cork, for instance, is the minor injuries unit. Rather than having to go to the emergency department of CUH in Cork city, people can go to the minor injuries unit at St. Mary's Health Campus. It deals with a huge number of people because it is just for minor injuries, and it has a team of nurses and doctors who can deal with minor injuries every day of the week. We need to develop that to get it in place more widely.

I acknowledge the Minister has been working on the issue whereby a nursing home gets concerned about a person and needs to have them admitted to hospital. A system was set up during Covid, which I think St. Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin spearheaded, to get a team to come out from the hospital to the nursing home to assess the patient and then to give guidance to the nursing home as regards how they were to be managed. The Minister has encouraged this to be developed but it is important we develop it in every part of the country in order that we can keep people where the same level of care can be provided for them in the nursing home as can be provided in a hospital. In that way, we will not have to look for a vacant bed in a hospital and people from nursing homes will not have to wait in emergency departments for a number of days before a bed becomes free when, in fact, they could have been looked after just as well in a nursing home. We need to look at these issues with a view to creating efficiencies while, at the same time, giving a good quality of care.

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It is important to acknowledge the commitment and dedication of the staff in all our hospitals and care facilities, whether they are people who are dealing with disabilities or others. We should recognise the work they have done, not least during the very challenging time of Covid. One area that now presents a challenge relates to home care, and the Minister has done a great deal of work to try to develop that area and improve access to home care. The big challenge he faces, however, concerns the lack of availability of people who are prepared to take on that role. We need to see how we can further entice people who were previously involved in those roles back into them while also getting new people into them. The Cork-Kerry region had 1,800 really dedicated people providing a very good service of home care but, unfortunately, 400 of them decided to opt out of the system, and the HSE in the south and south-west area has found it challenging to recruit additional people.

There are now more than 805,000 people in this country over the age of 66 and there has been a huge increase in the number of people who are over the age of 80 and even over 90, and that trend is going to continue. The more home care we can provide, therefore, and the more people we can keep out of nursing homes and out of hospital, the better. We need to look at how we can advance the recruitment and make it attractive. If we spend some more money on that, given the service home care providers give, we will get a much better return on the money spent. It is a challenge, however, and I fully accept that, with full employment, it is going to be a challenge to get people into areas where both people with disabilities and elderly people who require care and support in their home have to be catered for.

Overall, we need to be positive about the healthcare system. While we need more money, we also need to create efficiencies, and I have no doubt the Minister will deliver comprehensively in all areas of healthcare over the next 12 months.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy Burke and call Deputy Ó Snodaigh, who is sharing time with Deputy Paul Donnelly.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Gabhaim buíochas. Ar dtús báire, leanfaidh mé leis an téama a bhí á lua ag an Teachta Burke, is é sin ag gabháil buíochas leo siúd atá ag obair go dian dícheallach sa chóras sláinte, ag tabhairt cúram d'othair agus dóibh siúd a bhíonn go minic in ísle brí nuair a shroicheann siad an córas sláinte, cibé in ospidéal, ag an dochtúir, nó ag freastal ar dhuine de ba daoine eile atá ag déileáil leo go gairmiúil lá i ndiaidh lae.

Ar ndóigh, tá aithne agamsa, cosúil le gach duine eile sa Seomra seo, ar a lán acu toisc gnáthshaol na bpáistí atá againn nó baill na clainne a bhímid ag déanamh idirbheartaíochta ar a son nó ag bualadh isteach san ospidéal anois is arís. Tá aithne agam orthu agus, den chuid is mó, nó b'fhéidir iad ar fad, tá obair iontach á déanamh leo sin.

Chomh maith leis sin tá aithne agam orthu toisc go bhfuil mise, cosúil le gach uile Teachta Dála eile, ag déileáil leis an gcóras sláinte agus leo siúd atá ag obair ann lá i ndiaidh lae chun cuidiú a thabhairt dóibh a thagann chuig na hoifigí atá againn ag lorg cúnaimh nó faoisimh éigin nó ag lorg go mbeidís in ann teacht timpeall ar na scuainí feithimh atá ann. Is é sin an phríomhfhadhb atá againn nach bhfuil an infheistíocht ag déileáil leis na scuainí feithimh, nó na scuainí feithimh atá anuas ar na scuainí feithimh. Níl na leapacha, níl na lianna nó níl na haltraí ann sa chóras. Tá an córas ag obair ar bharr a chumais nó níos mó ná sin, áit nár chóir a bheith ann. Níor chóir go mbeadh aon eagraíocht sláinte ag obair 100% nó 120% sa chóras. Ba chóir go mbeadh sé in ann a bheith ag obair ar bhonn réasúnta.

Ag casadh ar rudaí áitiúla, tá fadhbanna bunúsacha ann. Ó thaobh pleanála de, tá an t-ospidéal nua leanaí sa cheantar agus níl aon phlean ann nuair a chríochnaíonn siadsan atá an tógáil, chun an tógáil a dhéanamh ar an ngá maidir le hOspidéal San Séamas nó chun Ospidéal Ollscoile an Choim do Mhná agus do Naíonáin a bhogadh go dtí an suíomh sin go fóill.

*4 o'clock*

Níl cead pleanála ann so stopadh an tógáil agus ansin tosóidh sé arís ag am éigin eile. Cuirfidh sé sin as do gach duine a bheidh ag úsáid an tsuímh sin, an gnáthphobal sa cheantar ag an áit chéana.

I appeal to the Minister to please sort out the problems in the CDNTs. It is crazy that there are vacancies upon vacancies in some of them. CDNT 3 in particular has to be addressed, as otherwise people will move to other CDNTs and place an additional burden on those areas.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Sometimes we get bogged down and lost in numbers, statistics and figures. We hear of millions and billions. I listened earlier to a report from Zara King on Virgin Media. It frightened me to my core and angered me. Many of us have elderly parents who could be in the position she described. Ms King wanted to illustrate that a particular lady was active and how healthy she was when she got a tummy bug and got sick. She was sick with her stomach. She went into the hospital on 3.30 p.m. on a Monday and was left sitting on a chair for two days. On Wednesday afternoon, she was finally allocated a bed. The lady died on Thursday morning at 6 a.m. after taking a turn overnight. The family do not know how she died. They do not know what happened to her and they are stunned. This lady died in the first week in October, only two weeks ago. The family are asking how their mum went from being a vibrant and healthy 78-year-old living her life, to be gone with no explanation. The only thing they know for sure is that she was sitting on a chair for two days in an emergency department. While she was there, her family were with her and witnessed multiple instances of older people on lines of trolleys through the hospital. They told the story of one man who needed help to go to the bathroom. He did not get the help he needed and because of bad health ended up in an undignified situation in front of a lot of other people. How can we stand over this? How can we stand over a health service that is in crisis?

I will raise another important issue. This week we met the hugely impressive Stuttering Awareness Mental Wellbeing group, which is supported by Deputy Mark Ward who was in the Chamber earlier. Members of the group spoke about the devastating effects of stuttering on children and young people until they received help and support. They said one thing that would make a massive difference to children who stutter and struggle is early intervention. Speech and language is the one thing that would transform their lives. Those are not my words. Those are words from a book, of which I am sure the Minister of State will receive a copy.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I met the group.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** She has a copy. She should read that book. The stories are heart-breaking, but also inspiring.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** The Department of Health is already facing an overspend of around €1.5 billion this year and €1 billion next year, which is an overrun that will require a Supplementary Estimate allocation. However, only €22.5 billion - current and capital - was allocated for the public health system as part of budget 2024. Despite this being an increase of €1.1 billion in current expenditure on last year's budget, the budget 2024 allocation has been

roundly criticised as insufficient to meet rising demands in the health sector. Notwithstanding this, the question of a bailout for the Department of Health will only be considered later in the year. This seems paradoxical considering the official policy of the Government is to expand access to healthcare under the Sláintecare programme.

When Sláintecare was published in 2017, demand projections were based on population projections to 2026 and carried out within the health service capacity review. However, the projected population for 2026 was surpassed last year. We are therefore working from out-of-date projections. As in all other sectors, medical inflation is resulting in price increases for contemporary, effective drugs and devices. Bernard Gloster, who runs the HSE, is in a difficult position. The HSE must either put forward a service plan that has an inbuilt deficit or make a series of cuts that are undoable.

The current recruitment freeze is an inevitable consequence of underfunding. Last Friday, Mr. Gloster extended the recruitment freeze beyond clerical and management grades to include patient and client care roles. Many plans in place to improve services were in the process of recruiting. Mr. Gloster also announced an immediate pause on 7,000 posts, previously approved in principle, which cannot now be funded.

Let us assume the cost of the existing level of health service, which means keeping the health service running with no expansion, is €2 billion for the current year. If it receives less than €1 billion investment, the health service is on track for a deficit that does not account for demographic expansion or medical inflation, let alone any increase in services. The Government is calling this deficit an overspend. Many in the healthcare field are calling it lack of funding. Regardless of opinion, when it comes to healthcare, we need to focus on meeting the needs of our growing and ageing population. According to a former director general of the HSE, Tony O'Brien, "dodgy maths and dark politics are putting Irish patients in danger." The Government is putting surplus moneys into the creation of two new funds, which are needed. However, health services are demand led and will only increase in the coming year.

If the Government wants to avoid a healthcare disaster, especially considering the common winter crisis, the only way to do that is to properly fund the health service. If it does not invest now, this will have consequences, including a negative impact on patient safety. Services across healthcare, from disability and mental health services to hospital and primary and community care services will be affected. We need to invest in beds, personnel, innovation and medication. Not a single euro was invested in new medications in this budget. We are going to fall behind because of lack of funding.

There is also a growing sense of apprehension about the future of mental health funding. Mental Health Reform estimated that an additional €115 million to mental health funding in budget 2024 was essential to improve access to timely and effective mental health care. What percentage of the health budget will go to mental health?

Supplementary funding needs to be recurring in next year's budget, but also needs to address the problem that not enough funding has been allocated for this year. However, the details of Supplementary Estimates will not be considered until more financial information is available towards the end of the year. Reactive governing, a lack of foresight and funding and an absence of negotiation will affect every service going forward. We need to act now.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I do not want to come into this Chamber and suggest that our

health service provision is a mess, but clearly some things are not working and need to be changed. I acknowledge the many people in the service who are doing extraordinary work. I also commend the ongoing development of our community and primary health sectors. These are fundamental to relieving pressure on our acute hospital systems. On community sector developments, I congratulate all those in my local area, CHO 5, on the work they do. I acknowledge the work done by the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in the area of mental health services and older people. I acknowledge the announcement made by the Minister this morning of a new neurology team for CHO 5. It is very welcome. It is also important to acknowledge the Government's engagement with section 39 health workers, and the Minister of State's work on children's referral, in particular to CAMHS, and the No Wrong Door strategy. These are all to be welcomed.

On the drug strategy the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, spoke about, I point out the important work done in the area of addiction. I highlight Gerry Carroll and Aiséirí in Waterford who do terrific work. There are, however, significant funding problems for organisations like this. I ask the Minister of State, as part of her budget, to provide funding for therapy services, addiction therapy counselling in particular.

The health debate can be divided into a number of major areas but it boils down to a number of issues. Those are cost versus efficiency, service planning and recruitment, training and retention of staff, capital delivery and the future-proofing and embedding of technology in our service practices. What is not measured cannot be managed, as we have seen. Unfortunately, a large number of our problems in budgeting are because we are not properly monitoring or looking at the best in class and trying to get others to emulate what they are doing. That is what would be done in private business but that seems to be anathema to the public service. We have stellar exemplars and we let them do what they do. The Ministers know what work has been done in University Hospital Waterford on emergency department management, in particular when the Wexford emergency department was closed. How were all those patients managed? How were the acute beds managed? Why did we not have patients on trolleys during all that time in the model 4 hospital with the lowest level of funding in the country and the smallest number of healthcare staff? Nobody has looked at that case and asked why it happened. I have written to the senior Minister on an issue I raised recently concerning the number of interns at Beaumont Hospital versus UHW. There are 92 in Beaumont and only 25 in UHW, despite UHW having a higher rate of outpatient procedures. The question was "Why?" When I wrote to the Minister what I got back was that it was basically the colleges who provide medical education and look after placement. This has to be sorted out. A budget has not yet been provided to open the second cath lab seven days per week. The commitment is there to do that by Christmas. I understand that, despite moneys being promised by the HSE to support the activities of UHW during the Wexford emergency department closure, nothing extra has been given to the budget of UHW.

The diabetes unit in Waterford has no insulin pump therapy or adult insulin pump programme. It is the only model 4 in the country without that. I ask the Ministers of State to look at that.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I would be the first person to say efficiencies can be made not just in health but in all Departments and county councils across the country. However, this discussion concerns investment in healthcare. The health budget has been cut and the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform has given no indication as to where the savings can be made. I ask the line Minister and all Ministers to ask that

Department to provide a line-by-line account of where the spending must be cut and to tell us where it wants the cuts and savings and which parts of the service it considers oversubscribed and undersubscribed.

Bernard Gloster appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts a number of weeks ago and was very upfront. Leaving cuts aside, he has a mammoth task ahead of him. He has to deal with the ineffectiveness and inept management of his predecessor and has to address why Martin Curley left the HSE. Martin Curley made a statement when he resigned from the HSE which resonated with me today. He blamed it on a lack of “will and skill” in HSE management and constant blockages of innovation. He said he no longer believed it was possible to fix the system from the inside. I and the public would like to know if there has been any investigation into that statement. Where have the lessons been learned from someone who was headhunted by the Department and left just one year later? That warrants a serious investigation. We need to know the answers.

By cutting a budget and bringing someone like Bernard Gloster in, he will be operating with one hand tied behind his back. It is fundamental to any business and, as my colleague, Deputy Shanahan, said, to how efficiencies are managed. If we do not have something that is digitally efficient in the times we live in, it will be difficult for anyone to obtain efficiencies anywhere. I ask the Ministers of State to address that in closing statements, please.

Unfortunately, I can outline where moneys have been set out in budgets for years. This is my third, if not fourth, budget and I can see moneys are not being spent because services are not being delivered. This is not to admonish any Minister but the reality is we are failing our children in the services we are providing; as a matter of fact, it is the service we are not providing that is failing the children.

I appreciate the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will open a third CAMHS unit in Wexford. It is pointless. We need a fully staffed CAMHS unit among those that exist. We do not have it, either north or south. It is a bit like having a third car with no driver. We need to look after the first two. It would be better to provide transport for anyone to whom the third service would be available to bring them to a fully staffed unit. That would create efficiencies and remove the waiting list.

I also ask that a serious look be taken at why one CAMHS in Wexford has a referral rate that is half the other. It is not staffing levels. We have GPs who are tearing their hair out and failing families who tell me they are afraid they will lose their children if this continues. If the referral is not accepted they have nowhere to go. That is what I call investment. If we catch and treat mental illnesses at the appropriate time, we can save an adult and family from years of misery. Unfortunately, we are not doing that at this point.

I could go on about CDNTs. It is a similar statement. They are not fully resourced. We need to look at whether to disband them and move to a service we can resource with the staffing levels we have. There is no point in providing half a service. If this discussion is about investment in healthcare, they are primary to what we need to do and Bernard Gloster must be assisted in that.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** In discussing health and the health budget 2024, it is important we stand back from the media spin and the claims of the Opposition. Spin has never cured a patient and will not aid any recovery. The reality is we have seen unprecedented investment in health.



The budget for 2024 will be €22 billion, up 80% on the €13.2 billion in 2015. It is an extraordinary increase by any reckoning and indicative of this Government's determination to get to grips with the many challenges facing health. I hypothesise that if we had given the additional €2 billion to health, the same Opposition would clamour and claim we are simply throwing taxpayers' money at the problem.

Throughout the Covid era we dedicated enormous resources and money to addressing the structural issues in our healthcare system. I have listened to the Tánaiste speak on the issue a number of times since the budget. He is a former Minister for Health and probably better understands the workings and failings of the system, and specifically the HSE, than anybody else in this House. He correctly pointed out we need a deeper analysis of how we spend money in health in the context of analysing demographics and taking account of fuel and food inflation. I have also heard several health economists in recent days speak on this issue. They see a balance in the argument. They see the Government's position but also see the challenges facing the health sector.

Much has been made of claims the HSE will not be able to recruit in 2024 but the reality is throughout recent years, when the system was awash with money and record investment by the Government, the HSE still could not recruit to fill home care roles and disability sector posts because of inherent flaws in its processes. Giving it the money will not address those issues but will further line the pockets of agencies which are creaming the health service at the moment.

Every Member of this House has listened for hours to families struggling to get therapies for children and desperately trying to get home care for their parents. We feel for staff on the front line trying to deal with these beleaguered parents and families daily. These staff have pointed to the issues and shortcomings and have lamented the inability and unwillingness of senior management to address these glaring inadequacies. It is time to challenge the HSE. The Government should not and will not allow the health system to suffer. Equally, it should not fling money at a sector racked by shortcomings and inefficiencies. It is time for the HSE to step up, work with the Government and finally deliver a world-class healthcare system befitting a €22.5 billion budget.

We need to start seeing accountability. If we, as in the past, allocate €20 million for the treatment of scoliosis, it needs to be spent on just that and alleviating the pain and discomfort for so many young people. If we provide funding for an additional 200 therapists in the disability sector, we need to see those roles appointed. If we provide funding for additional home care staff, these people need to be appointed on HSE terms and conditions, not outsourced from agencies where profit is king and patients are ancillary.

What is not and has not been acceptable is the failure of the HSE to follow through on this Government's actions rather than appointing more administrators and outsourcing agency staff at enormous cost to the HSE, the State and, consequently, taxpayers. If funding is the challenge in 2024 for the health service, this Government will not be found wanting. Equally, it is time for the HSE to embrace the concept of accountability and to play its part in delivering the service we expect and people would and should expect from a €22.5 billion allocation.

I want to acknowledge the role of Bernard Gloster. The Opposition has made much of him addressing the threat of an overrun in 2024 in a weekend interview. We need the head of our health service to be a strong voice for the service. We need to hear his views and concerns. The Government will work with him for the betterment of the service and the well-being of patients.

I want to address a couple of specific points. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, in particular, and her colleagues in the Department of Health on the progress we made on section 39 pay in recent days. We still have a fundamental problem with section 39 organisations. They are out of kilter with their colleagues and contemporaries in the HSE and other sister organisations throughout the country. It is something I would like to see grappled with within the lifetime of the Government. Notwithstanding the recent pay increases that have been agreed in the order of 8%, they will still be some way off their colleagues in HSE posts. I refer specifically to the staff of St. Christopher's Services, Longford, who are still due back pay in terms of increments and the €1,000 pandemic bonus which was not paid to them even though they worked throughout pandemic. That is disappointing. It is a significant sum of money for a lot of people and something they had planned to use for children going to college or to do something around the house. It is important that this be addressed and I would like to see it addressed. It is embarrassing at this point as a Government Member that I have to come, three and a half years into the life cycle of the Government, and speak to something that I consider as minor. By the same token, however, something as important as that should have been resolved.

While I am on the pandemic bonus, I also want to address the issue of registry offices in CHO 8. It was the only CHO in the country where staff in the registry office did not get the pandemic bonus. It speaks to the folly of the HSE that those staff are taking a case to the WRC, which will result in additional expense for the HSE. I ask that the Minister contact CHO 8, and tell it to stop this folly and pay the €1,000 due to the handful of people there. It is quite ridiculous. If this happened in the private sector, someone would be answerable and held to account.

Last week I mentioned a nurse in St. Christopher's Special School, Longford. There is a bizarre situation whereby a school with 14 children with complex and advanced medical needs, many of whom are PEG fed and require hoists to be lifted in and out of school, only has a nurse on site for 14 hours a week. The school could not keep a nurse; the last one was appointed only in March and left in recent weeks. The school has made the business case for a nurse to be appointed for 32 hours per week and interviews for the post concluded yesterday. I understand the school will recommend an appointment to the HSE. I hope to see that appointment followed through on and that a nurse will be *in situ* in the school as soon as possible. It is a crisis situation and there is a real risk that children and parents have to be notified that the school cannot accept children.

In the time I have left I want to raise a case with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who has been very supportive of me. The case involves a young boy and family with whom I am familiar. The boy is currently in a general hospital and has complex care needs, including autism, mental health issues, bulimia and anorexia. He is at a crisis point at 13 years of age. His family are at their wits' end. In fairness, the team from Linn Dara visited the general hospital this day last week and assessed him. The hope and expectation was that we would get the young boy to Linn Dara as soon as possible. We have heard many people in the House address issues with CAMHS during this debate. Over the past week, I have lived that experience to some extent. The boy's aunts and older sister have phoned me. I am extremely fortunate to be in a position whereby I am not living this experience directly, but I feel their pain and empathise with them. It has to be frustrating for them to know there is a facility that can deliver care and give this young man a fighting chance. We all remember when we were 13 years of age and had the best of ambitions and the greatest of plans for life. To see a young boy in a general hospital with security guards on his door and the hospital having no recourse other than to try to force-feed him when 80 miles up the road, there is a facility that can deliver the state-of-the-art car he needs is

difficult. The Minister of State is aware of the case and has engaged with me and been hugely supportive of the family. It is very much a plea from the heart. I am in a privileged position to be able to make this plea on behalf of the young boy and parents, aunts, siblings and extended family. I appeal to the Minister of State to ensure we get him to Linn Dara without delay.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We have all been shocked by underfunding in the health service. We went straight from the budget into what seemed like a near disaster. We have all been very worried about the moratorium on recruitment because we are constantly talking about the number of positions left unfilled. The Government promised many more beds - 1,500 or so - but none were allocated in the budget.

We are worried about hospital waiting lists. We are also worried about the nurses we train and who work in the medical sphere. Everyone, including speech and language and occupational therapists, have to live in the real world and the problem is they are dealing with the cost-of-living and accommodation crises. Some of those who work directly for the HSE in hospitals are dealing with a crisis therein. We know the issues that pertain in respect of working conditions. If we are now saying there is insufficient money to deliver an existing level of service, I dread to think what will happen with the gaps we are not filling and which we have not dealt with to this point. That is something that needs to be dealt with as soon as possible.

As has been said by others, we are all very glad that, by the skin of our teeth, the strike that was threatened for Tuesday by section 39 and section 56 workers has not happened and we have seen some sort of resolution. There are outstanding issues regarding disparity of pay. We all found it very strange that something has to go to absolute calamity and disaster before it is resolved. I do not think that makes sense to everybody. We all know the vital work the Irish Wheelchair Association and others do and I am very glad the constituents who have contacted me and others were not put out. We welcome that the strike was averted, but we need to look at how we resolve issues. We should not need the plates to fall on the floor before we lift them and keep them spinning. I do not think that is good enough in any way, shape or form.

I refer to what Deputy Paul Donnelly said. I also met the Stuttering Awareness Mental Well-being Ireland organisation. This is an issue that crisscrosses into the remit of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, but it is the same scenario whether we are talking about autism or disability services, CDNTs or primary care. We all know what should happen. We all talk about early intervention and multiagency approaches. I do not always see a lot of that. I accept that even if we set out today to do absolutely everything perfectly in regard to making sure we have enough occupational and speech and language therapists and psychologists, they are not necessarily in place. Workforce planning needs to happen. Beyond that, we need to ensure we get the best bang for buck. We are very good in this State at carrying out pilot schemes and we hear about the school inclusion model. A lot of people understand that we take the services to where the need is and the children are. That is absolutely necessary.

I would like to think there would be engagement with those organisations, and through the HSE and others, which represent occupational and speech and language therapists regarding what we can do until we can fill the spaces that need to be filled. That is also using technology and whatever else can be done to facilitate and make this a much better process. We often talk about these types of solutions but they do not happen.

I brought up the issue of Dealgan House with the Minister for State, Deputy Naughton. It has been almost three years since the Minister met the families. I acknowledge there is an in-

quiry in relation to Covid but I still maintain they need to be provided with the mechanism the Minister had promised previously.

Finally, I want to bring up an issue from a constituent about Louth County Hospital. A large number of teenagers who are waiting for braces and other urgent treatments are categorised as 5A priority, which is the highest. Some in category 4 are getting the benefit of treatment in the Beacon Hospital, which is being paid for by the HSE. Why is this the case when the waiting time for 5As, who are clinically more urgent, we are being told is too long? This needs to be looked at and dealt with. It is quite strange that those who seem to be in a worse category are not being dealt with. I welcome the fact that we are dealing with the category 4s. This is not the first time I have brought up the wider issue of dental care for those with medical cards.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I am glad to have an opportunity to contribute to this very important debate on the issue of investment in healthcare. There are many facets to it and many demands because it is demand-driven. I have raised this issue on numerous occasions. Every year after the budget, the question has always been to ask the Minister for Health to indicate whether the budget allocation for his Department is sufficient to meet the requirements for the next 12 months. It is a simple, straightforward question and the answer is always “Yes”. However, as we come to the end of the year, the answer becomes a little bit faded and not as clear as it was before. Suddenly we hear condemnation of the Government, that it has not done things according to the plan, that it has fallen down on the job and is to blame and so on and so forth. This is despite the fact that a considerable investment is being made on annual basis here, comparable to that made in any other country in Europe. In fact it is considerably more than in many countries.

It now falls to us to ask the simple question. We need to put our ducks in a row. We need to find out exactly where the cost increases are coming from. That requires a certain person, when drawing up the Estimates, to be able to identify the potentials in every area and to be able to put that into a package that is readily available to the Minister when the allocations are being agreed upon. Without that we will always have the same problem of running after the cart, as it were, and all the time trying to catch up from a position of being behind the curve. This simply does not work. In private industry, if somebody is given the job of projecting the cost for the next 12 months or the next two years or more and they do not do it in accordance with the request they have to find a job elsewhere.

We have to admit that we need a correct assessment of the costs at the time of the budget. That includes everything. There are prime cost sums in every other sector of life that are provided for and priorities are determined. The sooner we get to that stage and rely on it, the better for everybody concerned. This would eliminate the continual harangue about how bad the services are and how everybody is under pressure as a result and how no one gets the level of care they need. We either cost it properly and effectively and we then deliver on that or we continue this same circuit on an annual basis. It does not work.

I remember, as will the Ceann Comhairle, when the old mental health facilities were closed down. Everybody said that it was a great idea, which it was. It was essential that it happened. There were people in some places who had spent up to 20 years in the same room upstairs and had never seen the light of day in all that time. However, the problem was that when the facilities were closed down, we did not make alternative provision. As a result of that, we have a greater number of people living on the streets and a greater number of people who are incapable of functioning in today’s challenging society. That is in respect of child and adult mental health

services and indeed general health services. The list goes on forever and we have all dealt with it on a daily and a monthly basis and it keeps coming back up again.

Some years ago we also discussed the need for more home care. This is an absolutely wonderful idea. Some of us had experience of the daycare services in County Kildare. They worked extremely well. Of course it meant that the patient had to go to daycare service, which they wanted to do, anyway. They wanted to mix with other people and be part and parcel of society and get the same care that they would get there as if they went to a hospital. It still works very well in County Kildare but it is limited.

The problem was that other people sold the story that care would be better in the home. Of course it would be but it cost an awful lot more and nobody ever said that. The Ceann Comhairle and I pointed this out on numerous occasions. It is logical that it would cost more. The most important element here is that it does not matter how many carers we have. With an increasing population and an increasing demand, it takes time to travel between point A and point B. With the increase in traffic on the roads and the increase in population, it takes longer to travel between point A and point B, so it is more expensive, as we anticipated it would be. We need to address this issue. We either want it one way or the other way but we need to provide the service. We have to think about the most appropriate way to deliver the service and we have to do it soon.

There is an increasing demand for child mental health services for all the reasons we all have talked about. It is wrong that children who have mental health problems are put on the long finger in terms of attending to their needs. This has been going on for years. I am not blaming any Minister, it is just a fact of life. We need to get the show up and running and to deal with the issue. This applies to all counties. It requires an accurate costing at the outset and it requires putting the show on the road and into operation. I think that can be done but we have to first identify the costs. If we do not, we are going to be disappointed because there will be overruns.

I am tired and sick to my back teeth of hearing about cost overruns in the health service. It is a question of identifying what the real costs are in the first place and then delivering on them. It will be an improvement to the health service because the providers are under the cosh, as it were, all of the time. They are under the microscope and they face continuous criticism that despite more money and more staff the service is not as good as it should be. Whatever the other issues are, we need to deal with that as a matter of urgency. A couple of years ago, I read a report by an official who had the temerity to put on paper her observations of mental health issues and the number of cases referred to hospital over a two-year period. What shocked me at the time was that children as young as eight were being referred to hospital for self-harming and attempting to commit suicide. That is a sad situation that should not be allowed. In our constituency clinics we can observe the children who come in with their parents. Without being an expert at all, it is easy to notice the child who is in difficulty. If it is that obvious, the child should have been attended to long before it becomes obvious to a passer-by. We need to concentrate our efforts on this.

The children's hospital is notorious for being one of the largest cost overruns ever. Many people say that it is the greatest waste of money ever. I say that it is not. That is what is required in today's competitive society. For many years, we have been working with old fashioned systems that are no longer applicable in the present demanding world. If we can deal with this, we can silence the constant criticism and ease the pressure on the people who are trying to provide

the service and are doing the best they can in the circumstances but we also have to commit ourselves to the actual identification of the spend. The oldest trick in the book as we know - I used to do it when I was in opposition, strange as it may seem - is to predict an overspend by allegedly identifying an actual cost in the beginning. If that is pitched low enough, it can be adjusted as needed and as meets the demand in order to exaggerate what is needed to provide a reasonable service. I think we have sufficient funding in the system and it is consistently sufficient to be able to do the job to a far greater extent than we are doing it, but it needs considerable operational review.

I have spoken in the House before about the layout of accident and emergency departments. I spoke previously in the House about delivering a patient to an accident and emergency department. The accident and emergency department was crowded with people who had alcohol and drug addictions. They are correctly entitled to their treatment and should get it. That is the appropriate place in the whatever room is available in that particular institution. However, they should not have to sit on the seats that are around, two at a time with a blanket thrown over them waiting, and the people behind them who are in pain and obviously in need of attention, have to wait until these are all cleared. I can understand people having to wait for somebody ahead of them. However, they should be in the area where the specialty is available to deal with the situation; that is good organisation.

On this occasion, I was told I could not park in various locations. My obvious question was, "Where do you park, if you bring your person who is not ambulant into the reception area?" The answer was nothing - just blank silence and that should not be. We have to make the comparison with a private hospital because there should always be a certain amount of competition between the two. We need to have the two, one to take the overflow from the other as necessary. We need to have good solid reliable services. In the private system, people can go to the set-down area right outside the reception area, drop the patient off, go into the reception area, find a seat, come back out, take the vehicle away down into the car park directly underneath and go back up in the lift to reception again. The patient does not need to drag themselves or to be dragged by somebody else from one place to another and be told, "That's not really the place you're supposed to be." We need better organisation and delivery by a long shot.

I know the Ministers have made unannounced visits to hospitals, which is a good thing. As they will know, in the old days we were all on hospital visiting committees. We had a very difficult job to do; nobody liked to see us arriving on the scene. We did some things that needed to be done at the time without any fuss and without waiting for any report. It was never a question of asking for a report on something and then six or ten months later we might see some action on it. It was done the next day, within 24 hours. That is another lesson.

I could go on forever and I am sure the Ceann Comhairle could go on for at least as long, but I do not intend to do so. I ask the Ministers not to lose sight of the objectives and not to take criticism too seriously because there will always be criticism. However, one issue needs to be determined and that is the amount of money required to run the hospital services, the community care services and all the services for a year. Giving it a year at a time would make a huge improvement in the delivery of services.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy Durkan for those words of wisdom.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** It was interesting listening to Government Members before I came into the House and hearing their take on what is happening with the health services. In the

same breath we hear that they have got extra money - a record amount of money - and then we hear about all the problems. There should not be any problems because they have this record amount of money. The reality is that the record amount of money is not enough. If the Government and Government Members were to recognise that, we might get somewhere with solving the issue in the first place.

In 2000 there were 3.8 million people in the Twenty-six Counties and today there are over 5 million, which is 1.2 million extra people in need of healthcare and everything else. There are fewer beds in the system today than there were in 2000. How can the system work? It cannot. It is not possible for it to work. Regardless of what needs to be done and whether the system can get working, we will need to carry a lot of extra money at the initial stage to get a system that is working and then we can start to pare back. It is only by getting the system to work in the first place, that we can then start look to make savings.

We hear an awful lot about the need for huge savings because of maladministration. I would love somebody to point out where it is happening and how much could be saved by addressing that. Much as I would like to feel that it would be very easily solved - that getting rid of the administrators would solve the maladministration problem and we would have a load of extra money to deal with issues - unfortunately, I do not think that is there.

One of the Deputies said the Tánaiste said we need a full look at what the HSE is doing. If only he was in government and could actually do that. That would be really powerful. Imagine if we had a government that would do those things. These are coming from the fecking Government Members in the House. It is nonsensical.

Is anyone else listed to speak along with me? I do not think so, which means I have a bit more time than I thought I would have, the Ceann Comhairle will be glad to hear. I will go on a bit more about that.

Our healthcare system is on its knees, and one area that is suffering particularly badly is children's disability services and the CDNTs mentioned by one other Member. I could talk about many areas of the health service that are suffering at the moment. Earlier, I raised the issue of services in Letterkenny University Hospital, as well as elderly services in Donegal. A huge number of areas could be addressed and there would not be time to address them all in today's debate.

There are serious recruitment issues within children's disability services in my constituency and throughout the country. Children's disability network teams are experiencing very high vacancy and turnover rates. At the beginning of September, the overall national vacancy rate was at 34%. In Donegal the vacancy rate was over 40% in the CDNT areas of Donegal north, Inishowen and Donegal east, and Sligo-south Donegal. There is no doubt that recruitment is a major issue, however, the newly founded special needs parents network in Donegal has stated that employee retention, staff morale, workload and job design are also critical issues that need to be addressed by the HSE.

Despite only being established last month, the new parents network in Donegal has carried out significant research into the experiences of parents of children with disabilities and their findings are very troubling. In a survey of over 300 parents in Inishowen and Donegal east, Donegal north, Donegal south west, Donegal south-Sligo, 87% of respondents stated that their children's needs were not being met by CDNTs. That is a sad and shocking reflection. I know

the CDNTs were supposed to represent the way forward, but like everything else in the health service, they are suffering and getting off to a bad start because they do not have the staff to function properly.

The special needs parents network in Donegal outlined the huge financial burden from the lack of service provision from the CDNTs, with parents, especially parents of children with complex disabilities, feeling they have no option but to access private treatment. It is absolutely essential that children get the therapy they need, as those who do not can experience significant regression and pain. No parent or child should be forced to experience this.

However, we are forcing them into this situation because the HSE will not allocate funding for children availing of private services. This means that services are only available to those who can afford it, which is very unfair on disabled people. The HSE, recognising that it cannot get the staff to get the CDNTs working, should support families in sourcing private solutions. I know that is not, and should not be, the solution, given the replacement of public services by private services should never be the solution, but something has to happen in the meantime because children are being left behind and failed. If children are unable to avail of public services, they have to be facilitated in availing of private services. Services for children with disabilities, especially complex disabilities, are not optional. Some 86% of parents in Donegal feel that support to access private therapy would be helpful to them, and families in the region have reported paying up to €400 a month on private therapy. Such services should not be available only to those who can afford them. Even those families paying that amount cannot afford it because they lose out on other stuff, but they are forced into that situation because they have to help their children. That is completely unacceptable and raises serious questions of inequality. It is in direct contradiction to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was created to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all disabled persons.

Addressing issues of recruitment will, as I mentioned earlier, require thinking outside the box. What we are doing clearly is not working, and a better way needs to be found. One of the ways these issues could be addressed is by ensuring that graduate doctors in the North of Ireland are facilitated in registering in the South. That is a massive obstacle for northern graduates and forces many overseas. The reality is that, because of a timing issue, graduates from the North cannot complete their training in the South. Basically, their results do not come out on time for registration in the South, which is shocking. It means that they all go over to England to complete their training and then are lost to us and the Irish system.

In addition, 83% of parents in Donegal felt that it would be helpful to extend the cross-Border health initiative to incorporate disability services. For counties such as Donegal and those along the Border, that would make a difference and would not require much thinking on behalf of the HSE. It would make the cross-Border initiative available to those parents in order that they could in many instances get services based in Derry, Enniskillen or somewhere like that and that their children could benefit from them. Again, that could be done as a temporary solution. It is a solution that would last only a short period, one would hope, in order that recruitment could take place.

The solutions are there but the Government is failing to implement them and, in turn, failing disabled people in this country. The HSE is trying to recruit locally rather than relying on national recruitment and is trying additional stuff all the time, including advertising on Facebook and so on, to ensure that this can go ahead. It should, however, be able to do that across



the board. That might go some way towards alleviating some of the problems. It could ignore the national recruitment processes and work on local recruitment, trying to identify people who could come forward as healthcare services staff right across the board.

The families of children who have additional needs and who are working on the CDNTs were putting forward solutions and want solutions. They got the solutions from the health service and suggestions as to what could be done. Another meeting is coming up in six to eight weeks or so, when actual progress will be shown as to what is happening. I hope that progress will be made there because that will be vital. Perhaps that should be a model in showing how things could work across the country, whereby the people are working together with the families that need the services but they are also accountable in allowing themselves to come forward and come back to another meeting to show whether or not they are making progress and what is going on.

There is no doubt that we could talk in this debate about other services in the HSE that are also suffering from a lack of funding and service difficulties. One of the main issues is the recruitment and the retention of staff. That is the reality and that needs to be sorted out. That needs to be done across the board. If that could be resolved, we could go a long way towards looking after our health service. The reality, however, is that the budget that has been allocated for next year will not solve that problem because a recruitment embargo is ongoing in the HSE. How will the HSE recruit staff during a recruitment embargo? The Minister might address that in his summing up, but that is the reality and, therefore, Government Members need to come to terms with that. There may be a record budget allocated for the health services and the HSE but it is a record that will be broken because it has to be broken and because we need more money and more staff to make things happen and to make things work properly. The Government needs to come to terms with that and make things happen.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I thank colleagues for taking the time to contribute to the debate. I listened very carefully to the debate and there are some common themes. In spite of the fact that there are differences of views, there is actually an awful lot on which we are broadly in agreement, if not on all the detail then certainly on the main themes. One of the most important is what our collective ambition is for healthcare in our country. We are united on that. We are agreed that we are looking to provide universal healthcare in our country, a public health service whereby people get the care they need when they need it. It is very important and very useful that we are all united as to where we need to go.

The other theme we are united on, broadly, is how we need to get there. There was broad agreement that we need to continue to invest in community-based care, be it mental health services, disability services, primary care services, general practice or whatever else. There was broad agreement that we need to continue to invest in our hospital sector. Nobody questioned moving to a regional model. Nobody questioned our move to joined-up care for the patient from his or her home to his or her GP, to primary care services and to hospital services.

Critically, then, unlike in many other parts of our country and our society, we are pretty well in agreement on where we are trying to go and, broadly, how we get there. We all know we need to have much better digital services and e-health services. We are agreed that we need more hospital consultants. We are agreed on nursing levels based on safe staffing frameworks. That is a very positive thing, and that is what will bind us together from government to government in getting to this place that we are all fiercely determined to get to on behalf of everybody.

While there might be differences of opinion as to how much progress has been made, I have heard broad acknowledgment that, while there are very significant challenges in various areas that we must address - they might be in individual services, in an individual hospital or in a part of an individual hospital - a lot of progress is being made, not by me, not by the Ministers of State here, not by the Government and not by us in the Oireachtas, but by the doctors, nurses, health and social care professionals, hospital managers, porters, cleaners, care assistants and all our healthcare professionals. They are working so hard, and they really are making a difference for patients.

Let me take our cancer services. Our screening services are far more advanced than they were even ten years ago. We are identifying cancer earlier and earlier. The rapid access clinics are fantastic. They were not in that place ten years ago. We are consolidating services. Tomorrow I will launch a new state-of-the-art radiation oncology service in Galway University Hospital. We have psycho-oncology services. We have access to better treatments, be it radiation oncology, chemo or cancer medicines, than we have ever had before. For those who unfortunately do not make it through, we have palliative care services that we did not have. They did not look anything like they look like today even ten years ago. There is broad agreement that, in spite of the many challenges to come, our healthcare workers, not us, are making things better for patients. Services are getting better. The women's health services that are being rolled out, including see-and-treat gynaecology centres, menopause, endometriosis, perinatal mental health, maternity services, eating disorder teams and so much more, are getting better and better. We can emphasise different amounts but we are broadly agreed that that is the case.

We are also agreed that there are real challenges that we must still overcome in youth mental health services. We have huge opportunities that we need to seize as regards health and well-being. More needs to be done as regards addiction services, treatment and rehab. We know that our clinical services need to go further. We know we need more neurorehabilitation. We know we need to invest in new medicines and I am acutely aware that there is no new development funding for medicines.

*5 o'clock*

I have explicitly told the HSE and the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics that any savings that can be found next year can be reinvested into new medicines. To give colleagues a sense of that, our medicines budget is at about €3.2 billion. A 0.5% saving would give us €16 million next year for new drugs. The new drugs budget for this year was €18 million. Therefore, a 0.5% saving gets us to broadly what the new drugs budget was for this year. I am having conversations with the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics about individual high-cost drugs that are coming off patent next year, for which we want to immediately move to generics and biosimilars where that is clinically appropriate, to accelerate savings. We can find that money, although it remains to be seen how much, and we will ring-fence it for new medicines. The biggest challenge is access. The budget funds the waiting list action plan, which is working, and it funds the emergency department plan as well. We will keep driving on with taking people off the waiting lists by getting them the treatment for which they have been waiting for too long, and important progress is being made.

I heard from a lot of Deputies, both in Opposition and Government, that we need to focus on productivity and I agree. Over the last three years we have put a lot of these measures in place and we have put a lot of structural productivity measures in place, including moving patients out of hospitals and into the community. That is better for the patient and it is also much

cheaper to treat the patient. We are investing in advanced practice. For example, we have advance practice nurses seeing a lot of patients who would have previously had to wait to see a consultant. The patient is getting much quicker access and we are getting expert care to that patient at a fraction of the cost of them having to see a consultant.

I hear colleagues say that we have a long way to go and we do. We will never have a really productive health service until we have proper ehealth. We just will not have it. I hear colleagues say that we need to accelerate the financial management system and we do. I have put an additional €40 million into the budget this year to accelerate the roll-out of that so that we can get proper line of sight of spending right across the service. It is worth saying that when we talk about the service and a culture of cost control within it, I do not accept the view I have heard expressed in some quarters that there is no respect for money or a culture of cost containment in the HSE. That is not true. When we look at the HSE, community services, mental health services, older persons services and primary care services are on budget. A lot of parts of the HSE are on budget. The one part of the HSE that is spending beyond what it is funded to is our hospitals and that is because they are not going to turn away the patients who are coming in. There is more we can do in productivity and we will do that.

It is clear from listening to the contributions from Dáil Éireann this evening that we need an agreed baseline for how much money it will cost us to get where we all want to go. We all want to get to healthcare for everybody and we all broadly agree with the steps we have to take to get there. What we have not had so far is an agreed and independent assessment of how much that costs, including this existing levels of service, ELS, funding we all refer to, which is just the amount of money needed from year to year to keep the current services going. How much does that cost? This is a world where we have, as Deputy Pringle said, a level of population growth that was not forecast. It is beyond what the statisticians forecast. We have a large number of people coming into the country fleeing war who we must and will always help and provide health services to. We have huge healthcare inflation, driven partly by the war in Ukraine and partly by Covid. We have an unprecedented and unforecast wave of patient need because of Covid, driven partly from unmet need or deferred care during Covid.

I am setting up this study and report to give us that so that we can have an agreed baseline for how much money it will cost, and then we will have a simple conversation before us. We know where we want to go and if we can get an agreed view on how much money it will cost to get there then we can agree that we will fund that, and it is more expensive than is broadly understood by all of us. It is an expensive journey but a worthwhile one. Alternatively, we can decide that we do not have that funding and we can say we will do it more slowly, for example. I think we should move there as quickly as we possibly can. That is one of the things I will take away from the last few weeks and from the Dáil debate this evening, namely, the sense that we need to get that work under way so we can all have an independent assessment of how much it will cost us. If we achieve this, and we will do so together as we are all signed up to universal healthcare and Sláintecare, as a nation we will have achieved one of the cornerstones of a decent society and of our Republic, that is, to make sure that everyone can get access to great healthcare when they need it.

## Capital Support for Sports Facilities: Statements

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Fáiltím roimh an deis an t-eolas is déanaí a thabhairt don Teach faoinár bpleananna forbartha um chaipiteal spóirt agus táim ag tnúth le tuairimí na dTeachtaí a chloisteáil. Ba mhaith liom a rá ar dtús gur mhór an onóir dom gur ceapadh mé i m'Áire Stáit le freagracht as an spórt agus as an gcorpoideachas. Ó a ceapadh mé, chuaigh tiomantas, paisean agus fis na n-eagraíochtaí spóirt ar fud na tíre go mór i bhfeidhm orm agus iad ag iarraidh a n-áiseanna spóirt a fhorbairt.

Boosting participation in sport is at the heart of my approach as Minister of State with responsibility for sport. As a Government, we are committed to having 60% of our adult population regularly participating in sport by 2027. While this target is ambitious, it is critical that we do everything we can to achieve it. Participation in sport plays a significant role in improving people's health and well-being. Research shows that by getting more people to participate in sport we can help reduce the incidences of strokes, cancer and depression, resulting in higher productivity and lower healthcare costs. On children, the WHO regards childhood obesity as one of the most serious global public health challenges for the 21st century. Childhood obesity has become such a problem, in part due to sedentary lifestyles. Accordingly, if we are to compete with these other distractions we must have good quality, safe and adequate sports facilities.

At the high-performance level of sport, we know that sporting success has the ability to lift the spirits of communities, counties and the whole nation. I would like to take this opportunity to commend Andy Farrell, Johnny Sexton and all of the Irish players, together with the back-room team behind them, on their Rugby World Cup campaign. The Irish team never gave up. They put up an incredible fight, right up until the last minute of the campaign. These exceptional ambassadors lifted the whole country and I have no doubt inspired many young rugby stars of the future. High-level success is never achieved overnight and I know that by investing in facilities at grassroots level we can best nurture our future sporting talents.

The Government's commitment to investment in sport is not only confined to capital spending. In the first half of the ten-year lifespan of the national sports policy there has been clear progress made in sports funding. Our national sports policy set out an aim to double the level of Exchequer funding for sport by 2027. It is my firm belief that money spent on sport is an investment and not a cost. In 2018, when the national sports policy was launched, the budget for sport was €111 million. Last week, I announced an overall budget allocation of €183.3 million for sport. This is an increase of €8 million compared with last year's budget. We are certainly on track to achieve our target of doubling the level of Exchequer funding for sport by 2027, therefore. I am pleased to say to Deputies that since 2018, the sports budget has increased by 65%. The Government resources which are secured for sport next year will allow Sport Ireland to continue to support the sport sector, which continues to recover from the challenges of the pandemic and faces difficulties around rising energy costs and cost-of-living increases. Recently, I announced the reopening of the application process for the sports energy support scheme and extended the eligibility period to the end of July. I take this opportunity to urge all eligible sports organisations, clubs and facility providers to engage with their respective national governing body or local sports partnership to ensure they avail of their full entitlements under the sports energy support scheme. Applications under this scheme will be closing soon on 25 October 2023, so I urge all those eligible to apply to do so. I ask Deputies to pass that message out to local clubs because, quite frankly, the level of take-up of that scheme is not what

we expected. We have made a lot of efforts to get that message out there but I would appreciate help on this. I visited clubs during the year whose members said the club did not get any help with energy and I told them there was a scheme there for them. We have gone all out to try to get the word out on this and to expand that scheme as much as possible. I refer to the sports energy support scheme.

The 2024 budget allocation will deliver an increase of almost €7.4 million to Sport Ireland. This allows Sport Ireland to increase its support in a number of very important areas, including core funding for national governing bodies of sport and the Women in Sport funding. In line with the High Performance Strategy 2021-2032 and the national sports policy, the Government is providing an additional €1 million in this budget for high performance sport. This increased funding will support Team Ireland in their preparations for the Olympic and Paralympic Games next year and it will continue to develop the coaching and pathways support envisaged in our national high performance strategy.

Before talking specifically about the capital assistance we provide for sports projects, I wish to pay tribute to volunteers in sport. I know the House will join me in this. Today's statements relate to the need for continued investment in sports infrastructure but the reality is that most of our sports and sport developments would never happen without the volunteers at community level who have the vision and drive to deliver them. We owe volunteers in sport a debt that can never be fully repaid. The investments under our sports capital programmes would have little or potentially no effect without the work of volunteers who organise, coach and encourage people to participate and perform in their chosen sports. Ireland has a great tradition of volunteerism and volunteers are the very backbone of Irish sport. Without volunteers, there would be fewer sports activities and those activities would be more expensive. Volunteers play a major role in sustaining the high level of sporting activity in Ireland with all the associated health and social benefits. Be it our women's national football team that qualified for this year's World Cup for the first time, of whom we were all very proud, our recent successful Ryder and Solheim Cup heroes, or indeed the Irish rugby team, as I mentioned already, all of these benefited at different stages of their sporting journeys from volunteer help which has helped to achieve their subsequent success. This has done a huge amount to enhance the international prestige, not only of Irish sport but of Ireland herself, and provides role models for the country's youth in particular.

I turn now to the two specific capital schemes that my Department administers. The first is the sports capital and equipment programme. I think all Deputies are aware generally of how the sports capital and equipment programme operates. I will briefly provide the House with some background and outline some of the recent changes to the programme. This programme is the main channel of Government support for developing sports facilities and purchasing sports equipment for sports clubs and organisations. More than 13,000 projects have benefited from sports capital funding since 1998 and the total allocations are in excess of €1.15 billion. Grants under the programme have directly improved sports facilities in every village, town and city in the country. I am very familiar with the sports facilities in my own constituency but I have been fortunate to see many of these facilities outside my own constituency since my appointment. The programme for Government commits to continuing the programme and to prioritising investment in disadvantaged areas.

I will speak briefly about recent reforms that I introduced under the most recent round of the programme. I should say, I introduced reforms this year but there were other reforms introduced just before that as well. These reforms previously made were to ensure the system of applying for grants would be as user-friendly as possible and to ensure the methodology for

allocating funding is fully transparent and fair. A previous criticism of the programme, which I made myself at the time, was the number of applications deemed invalid at assessment stage. This gave rise to understandable frustration from applicants who had invested significant time and effort in compiling their applications. Measures introduced to address these concerns included a significantly simplified application form, more online validation of applications, and the availability of an online guide showing how to complete the form. Importantly, applicants who submit incorrect documentation are now also given the opportunity to correct their application during the assessment phase, and this will apply to the current round as well as the officials do that work. This work will probably take place some time in the coming months. It is not going to happen in the coming weeks. Some of these measures delay the overall timeframe of the assessment process, and when people ask why it takes so long, this is one of the reasons. However, in general this is very well received by applicants and indeed by Deputies as well.

The measures to reduce the invalid rate of applications submitted have been overwhelmingly successful. For some older rounds of the programme, the invalid rate was over 40%; in the 2020 round it was just 6%. A further improvement made was the introduction of an appeals system, and it is only right that unsuccessful applicants have an opportunity to make appeals. Indeed, I helped some clubs myself in previous rounds with such appeals. Regarding individual grant amounts, historically, there was no clear documentation showing how individual grants were decided. Under the last three rounds, however, the full scoring system and assessment process was published in advance of assessment work commencing. Every application was then scored using the published criteria and the exact amount allocated to each project was based on a formula combining the assessment score, the amount of funding sought and the funding available for that county. I am highlighting this information to the House to show how far the programme has come in terms of transparency. Applicants can now be fully confident that all allocations are made entirely on merit, in line with the published criteria.

In terms of actual outcomes for the 2020 round of the programme, almost 2,900 different projects received a grant offer, with more than €166.6 million allocated. While the main field sports such as GAA, soccer and rugby again did very well, any fair analysis will acknowledge the diversity and spread of grants awarded under the 2020 round. In excess of 50 different sports benefited, including boxing, taekwondo, rowing and wheelchair sport, to name just a few. Every pitch drained, every sports hall refurbished and every piece of equipment bought using these grants allows more people to participate in sport, which is what we are trying to achieve.

I will talk now about the 2023 round of the programme. This round opened for applications on 17 July and closed on 8 September. On the basis of the analysis carried out to date, it is clear that the programme has again generated a very large number of applications. It is likely that the total number will exceed the previous record of 3,106 applications submitted under the 2020 round. I introduced a number of changes to this round after we published the review of the previous round. The review identified new areas for focus, including an increase in thresholds for both local and regional grants, specifically rewarding projects which included adaptations for persons with disabilities, and prioritising applications from areas witnessing significant population growth where that demands new facilities. All of these recommendations have been agreed to. Furthermore, the programme has been expanded to include applications for upgrades to swimming pools, and there is a focus on sustainability, which the Minister, Deputy Martin, highlights in her opening remarks. At short notice, the Minister could not be here this evening and I discussed this with her this morning at question time.

Of particular importance to me is the fact that the guide to making an application makes

it clear that ensuring the relevant national governing body of the applicant concerned has met the 40% gender balance target by the end of 2023 is crucially important. I wish to be clear, as I made this point this morning and may not have been as clear, that we cannot apply this retrospectively. It applies to the 2023 round. However, effectively this means if the national governing body of the applicant does not have 40% gender balance on the board, from a sports capital point of view, the applicants will only be entitled to draw down 50% of what they have been awarded. I am not trying to punish people with this but what I am trying to do is get the message up the ranks that the lads, and I mean lads, need to get this sorted out. To be fair, the governing bodies that have not sorted this 40% quota, and we see this in the newspapers, are all taking steps to do this. It is urgent and it is reasonable. It has been there for quite a number of years and we decided this year that we had to do something about it and make sure it happens. The guide also states that under no circumstances will capital funding be provided unless the applicant confirms in writing that it is in compliance with the provisions of the Equal Status Act, and it is a new requirement that projects need to accommodate male and female users on similar terms. This is a new criterion we brought in this year because of a small number of cases which were highlighted to me where this simply was not the case on a very unfair basis.

Work is now under way on finalising the scoring assessment manual for the 2023 round and I hope to publish the new manual shortly. I will also publish on the website the full list of applicants to the programme. Once these documents are published, the detailed assessment work will begin. In this regard, it is planned to assess the equipment-only applications first, with a view to announcing these grants in the coming months. Work will then commence on the assessment of the capital applications, with the allocations likely to be announced later in 2024. I am conscious of the significant interest in the allocations. I assure the House that I will work hard to ensure as much funding as possible is made available and that the assessment process is completed as quickly as possible.

The other capital funding scheme is the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, provided for by the national sports policy of 2018. The aim of the fund is to provide an open and transparent system for applying for grant assistance where the amount sought is greater than that available under the sports capital programme. The first call for proposals under the LSSIF closed in 2019 with applications confined to local authorities and national governing bodies. All applications were assessed in accordance with the published evaluation procedures and guidelines and the allocations were made in January 2020. To date, approximately €86.4 million has been awarded to 33 different proposals.

The first LSSIF allocations were announced just prior to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic gave rise to significant financial challenges for all grantees, with many of them having to reprioritise their own expenditure plans. In more recent times, the high level of construction inflation has also presented considerable challenges. In view of these issues, it was timely to review progress on all projects, and meetings with all grantees have taken place. It is encouraging that, based on these discussions, a majority of the 33 projects should be in a position to draw down funding in the next 12 months. However, the discussions we had also confirmed that some projects may not proceed.

Following engagement with the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, and his officials, and in recognition of the challenges faced by some grantees, officials in the Department with responsibility for sport wrote to all LSSIF grantees inviting them to apply for additional support by 4 August 2023. Further clarification was sought from some grantees but all of this information has now been received.

Accordingly, I hope to be in a position to announce further allocations to grantees in due course, with a view to ensuring that all existing LSSIF projects can be completed. With regard to a possible new round of the LSSIF, I will continue to engage with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, on the funding required to underpin it.

Mar a dúradh cheana, tugann mo ról mar Aire Stáit an deis dom cinnte a dhéanamh de go gcuirtear an-spéis in infheistíocht leanúnach sna háiseanna spóirt. Tuigim freisin go raibh na blianta beaga anuas an-dúshlánach ó thaobh an spóirt de. Uaireanta is nuair a bhíonn rud éigin imithe go mbíimid fíor-bhuíoch as agus creidim go láidir gur léirigh Covid-19 cé chomh tábhachtach is atá spórt dúinn go léir. Dá réir sin, táim ag tnúth le cuidiú le go leor tionscadal thábhachtacha spóirt le dul chun cinn a dhéanamh sna míonna amach romhainn trí leithdháiltí nua faoin scéim um chaipiteal agus trealamh spóirt agus faoin gciste infreastruchtúr spóirt ar mhórsála. Is féidir liom a chinntiú don Teach go leanfaidh mé ag troid go dian ar son na n-acmhainní riachtanacha chun a chinntiú gur féidir linn i bhfad níos mó áiseanna spóirt ar gach scála a fhorbairt sna blianta amach romhainn agus táim ag tnúth le tuairimí na dTeachtaí a chloisteáil inniu.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** I acknowledge, as did the Minister of State, the contribution and the performances of the Irish rugby team in the World Cup. They were absolutely fantastic. They brought us happiness and joy and, ultimately, heartbreak. I have no doubt they will rise again. I wish Johnny Sexton, who has been an amazing servant for Irish rugby, the very best in his future journey.

I welcome the time allocated in the Dáil to the speak on Government's capital support for sports facilities. We are speaking on statements on the importance of continued and enhanced capital support for sports facilities. I feel that statements on the continued underinvestment in sport facilities by the Government would have been more fitting title.

Ireland, as the Minister of State said, is a sports-mad country. Sport is in every single corner of the country in communities throughout the State. We have seen record League of Ireland attendances, with stadiums selling out days in advance. What we also see at the vast majority of League of Ireland venues is the legacy of decades of neglect by successive Governments. In many cases, stadiums are in an appalling state. There is an ongoing issue with the lack of facilities for female players at grassroots level. Facilities are simply not fit for purpose. As a result, League of Ireland football is struggling to reach its full potential. There is massive potential for the League of Ireland and we have to invest in it and support it.

I must ask where is the enhanced capital support for League of Ireland facilities. There is not one mention of the great work of the League of Ireland in this year's budget. The FAI put together a compelling case for the need to invest in sport. It highlighted the immense potential that Irish football has. Despite the best efforts of League of Ireland clubs and the FAI, this potential has barely been tapped into. As I have said, there is massive potential. They are operating with one hand tied behind their back due to the lack of support from the Government.

Last week we heard the exciting news that Ireland would co-host the 2028 European Championships. This is a great achievement and it will be a great showcase for Ireland. It will be brilliant to see games hosted here in Dublin and in Casement Park in Belfast. Last week we also had the announcement of a legacy fund for the European Championships in 2028. It is essential that when the tournament is over there is a genuine legacy left behind to support the grassroots and League of Ireland football. If I am to be honest, the figure cited last week of €6.2 million



is concerning. When we look at the costs associated with the development of Dalymount Park, €6.2 million seems like a drop in the ocean in the needs of Irish football. The cost associated with this one-off tournament is an amount of money that the League of Ireland or the grassroots of Irish football could only dream of.

A national sports facility strategy at the heart of capital spending on sport facilities would ensure the most effective delivery of sports facilities in terms of costs and need. While successive Governments have spoken about a national sports facility strategy, none has ever gone as far as developing and delivering such a strategy. Over the past two decades, more than €1 billion has been invested in sport facilities. That is welcome. It has been done through programmes such as the sports capital local authority swimming pool programme and the large-scale sports infrastructure fund. Despite the large volume of money invested in sport, there remains no national strategy on the delivery and expansion of sports facilities. All are *ad hoc* projects depending greatly on the interests of the Minister or Government of the day.

The national sports policy gave a commitment to publish a full audit of all sports facilities throughout the State by 2020. It is three years overdue and there is still no sign of it. Perhaps the Minister of State will update it.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I will.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** I have heard that it might be coming-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** It is.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** -----but so is Christmas.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** It will be here before Christmas. I guarantee that.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** That is good to hear. Then we will have to act on it, albeit three years late.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I made it happen.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** How can we effectively invest and plan for the development of sports facilities if we do not even have a clear account of what we have or what is the condition of our existing stock of facilities?

The Minister of State engages with national governing bodies, as do I. They clearly show the massive demand that exists for increased sports facilities. Many of these national governing bodies have brilliant plans already in place. The missing elements are capital and core support from the Government. These national governing bodies have plans that would keep young people active in sport and help to develop the next generation of sporting heroes and role models. Their plans will help build a healthier society and increase participation in sport. At present the Government's approach clearly is not working. Participation rates are moving at a snail's pace and are a long way off the Government's targets.

In our alternative budget, Sinn Féin provided for increased capital funding to reopen the large-scale sport infrastructure fund for a fresh round. The national governing bodies are urgently calling for this. We have made it clear that Sinn Féin would increase capital funding for sports facilities, providing the sports sector and local communities with the modern sports facilities that they urgently need. The sports capital and equipment programme has been the

State's primary vehicle for supporting the development of local sports facilities and equipment for the past two decades. The programme has done great work. It has probably touched every parish in the State. While it has benefited a large number of clubs, many in the sports community have been calling for reform to the programme to improve it and make its impact in communities stronger.

There is an issue with how the grants are paid, which I have raised previously with the Minister of State. The grants are paid after the work or equipment has been paid for and, of course, this causes problems. I referred to a club in Ringsend. It is in a working-class community that does not have the resources upfront to pay for capital works. The sports capital grant is the only grant available to sports clubs for which it is necessary to pay upfront. All other grants can be paid in advance. Smaller clubs in particular do not have the cash flows and cash reserves to pay for work. This is a clear barrier that needs to be addressed.

The Minister of State mentioned the LSSIF and said additional clubs had applied. He might clarify how many clubs have done so. I ask this because I understand that only four groups have drawn down their funding from that scheme. How many groups have applied for additional funding?

**Deputy Mark Ward:** South Dublin County Council, SDCC, received sports capital funding to supply a pavilion, dressing rooms and parks throughout the county in 2019. It was very welcome. Included in this funding were dressing rooms, showers and meeting rooms in Collinstown Park. Collinstown FC, which plays in the park, is a well-run, family-orientated football team in north Clondalkin. At present, the club has 24 teams, with 400 players, ranging from nursery level right up to adult. The club is at the heart of my community.

The club is reliant on the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, DDLETB, to have enough staff available to open the sports hall in the local school for matches. This has led to times recently when matches could have been called off. It has also led to boys and girls having no changing rooms or toilet facilities.

The way the capital sports grants are structured has meant that not one shovel has been turned on the new dressing rooms in Collinstown Park. The grants are structured in such a way that SDCC must spend the previous sports capital grants prior to starting to undertake the new projects on its agenda. This delay has led to spiralling costs. Originally, SDCC received funding for a pavilion in Collinstown in the amount of €225,000. This would have been sufficient in 2019. However, because of the increase in costs during the delay, it was necessary to apply for a further grant. This application was successful. The amount provided was a further €230,000, which was on top of the funding received in 2019. This is welcome, but nothing has happened. I fear the delay will mean that this sum is again not going to be sufficient and that the costs are going to continue to rise. I urge the Minister of State to consider changing these rules or to engage with SDCC. I say this because, ultimately, it is costing the public money and delaying much-needed community infrastructure.

There is also no all-weather public pitch planned in north Clondalkin for clubs like Collinstown to use. SDCC has a sports pitch strategy and plans for future needs. The council has made recommendations regarding pitch demand and capacity and future requirements up to 2035. This is a welcome initiative, but it must cover the whole county. There are major omissions in the council's plans. Palmerstown FC is another fantastic community soccer club in my area. It currently has 180 players, from all ages, playing for 16 teams. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin

and I recently had representatives from the club come into the Houses of the Oireachtas for a meeting. They told us that the council has plans to place five all-weather pitches throughout the county but not in Palmerstown. The response I received from the council was disappointing. There are no proposals at present for an all-weather pitch to be located in Palmerstown and the resources provided for the provision of the all-weather pitches are already fully allocated. Palmerstown is a smaller and unique area, separate from its bigger neighbours like Clondalkin and Lucan in my area. It tends to be forgotten about when it comes to public sporting facilities. Again, then, I have another request. I ask that the Minister of State engage with SDCC and consider whether additional funding can be provided so that all areas in Dublin Mid-West can avail of public sports facilities.

In 2005, SDCC, which I am referring to frequently, provided land and funding for an all-weather pitch and clubhouse for the South Dublin Football League, SDFL. In the 2005 lease, the permitted use was stated to be for a clubhouse and an all-weather pitch for a non-profit community and sporting purpose. It is my understanding that in September 2019 the SDFL merged into the Dublin District Schoolboy League and ceased to be an organisation. However, the SDFL committee still exists in Ballyowen in Lucan, where it has its headquarters. The rooms and pitches are still being out under the aegis of the SDFL. Money is paid into bank accounts that have the name of the SDFL. The facilities in question were originally leased to the SDFL by the SDCC on a not-for-profit basis, but the information I have received is that the SDFL, which no longer exists, is charging local clubs and groups high commercial rates for the use of its facilities. Clubs are being charged almost €300 to play a match. The clubhouse has also been rented out for profit. Will the Minister of State look into how public funding was used to build a public facility on public land and then leased to an organisation that the longer exists? This facility was leased to the SDFL, which is no longer in operation. My community is deriving no benefit from the publicly funded facility on public land. There is a commercial operation at this facility, so I would like to know where this money is going. This situation really has a smell of the old, underhanded dealings that were going on in the FAI. I have been able to get no clarity whatsoever from SDCC on why this lease is continuing when the organisation no longer exists.

My colleague, Deputy Thomas Gould, has asked me to raise an issue in respect of Ballincollig AFC, which I am happy to do. Deputy Gould has told me there is a farcical situation happening and that it warrants urgent attention from the Minister of State's Department and Cork City Council. More than 20 years ago, land was transferred to Cork County Council, where Ballincollig was then based, when the Army's old Murphy Barracks in the village closed. This land was intended to be assigned to the council, with the express intention that it would be assigned onwards to the club. Bizarrely, this has never happened, despite repeated requests to and repeated meetings with Cork County Council and now Cork City Council over this period.

The lack of title to this land has meant that the club cannot apply for grants from the sports capital grants, which we are discussing today, lottery grants or FAI grants. The club members and volunteers have kept it going over the years. They deserve to be treated with respect and not to have to continue to deal with this farcical situation. I urge the Minister of State and the Department to do anything that may be possible to resolve the situation and to give Ballincollig AFC the same rights and opportunities that other sports clubs in the village and across this State have.

We had a briefing in the audiovisual room yesterday hosted by my colleague, Deputy Andrews, with representatives from the Gaelic Players Association, GPA. Those players had one

simple request. They are asking for parity for the female players in the association so they would have the same rights and resources as their male counterparts. It is 2023, and I think this should happen. Anything the Department can do to lend its support to this endeavour would be really welcome.

I wish my local football team, St. Patrick's Athletic, all the very best in next month's FAI cup final. Hopefully, we will beat Bohemians like we did two years ago.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I want to absolutely reject that final aspiration anyway.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe):** As the chair, I should remain independent, but I will call on Deputy Ó Ríordáin to conclude.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I thank the Minister of State and very much appreciate this opportunity to discuss this important topic of sport, which is sometimes relegated. When we think of the lives we all live and of our communities, it is sports clubs and involvement in sport that lift so many communities, families and individuals, and even the entire country. Reference has been made to our international teams and how they have brought success. It gives everybody a great lift.

Historically, though, we have underinvested in sport. On an EU basis, as a percentage of overall spending in this regard, I think we are one of the lowest in the EU. We have, therefore, a great deal of catching up to do. I have listened intently to the contributions of the Minister of State in this area since his appointment and I have been impressed with some of the comments he has made. We have had a long-standing issue with the betting levy. It goes towards one fund, namely, the Horse and Greyhound Fund. The betting levy could probably be increased to support other sporting endeavours. This is something the Minister of State has an interest in pursuing. I have heard his Government colleagues making similar calls and I think this is something we have to do. It is a lopsided situation, in my view, to have €100 million annually going to the Horse and Greyhound Fund when we have such a deficit in terms of sporting infrastructure.

The Minister of State and his predecessor in the portfolio, the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, commented on the need for an overhaul of how we undertake the sports capital funding allocation. It is imbalanced. If one is in a club that has any amount of professionals on the committee, that club can produce a very well put together application and it is going to get the funding. If a club happens to have a more working-class background or it is a more working-class sport that does not have the same level of expertise, it can be imbalanced. Again, my colleague Senator Wall and I believe the local authority at a local level probably needs to be driving this process. It could do an audit of any given community in any given area and could give an indication to the Government on what needs to be funded, rather than the individual clubs doing it. I also believe that we must change the mindset of every club demanding something just for themselves and which they will not share. If we look at the European model, there are playing facilities that any amount of codes can benefit from. That is the way forward because it is simply not sustainable for a local authority, the Government or any State agency to be funding individual playing facilities from which only one club can benefit. We need to move away from that.

Mention was made of the League of Ireland. We are missing a fantastic opportunity really. Now there is a lot more positivity about the League of Ireland. I went to matches 30 years ago

- I acknowledge the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, did too - where all the talk is about the past and the glory days of the past but the infrastructure was very poor. It has not really improved since then. Now the talk is all about the future and about investment and the potential of Dalymount Park, Tolka Park and Richmond Park to improve, as well as of grounds around the country including Finn Park in Donegal, the grounds in Sligo and various stadiums. That investment is needed. There is potential for our League of Ireland clubs to advance and become regular participants in the group stages of European competitions that could bring big name clubs to this country on a regular basis. Playing those games here is within our vision and not having to hang our hat on such projects as Euro 2028, which we are quite sceptical about. We are sceptical that there always seems to be some sort of big castle on the hill-type project we should be excited about, rather than the basic fundamentals. For example, the FAI report said that one third of Irish clubs effectively cannot host an under-14s girls' game. If that is the reality on the ground then we need to seriously address that.

I will focus heavily on football in my contribution. The Minister of State made the point about gender equality. When we consider the pathway a young girl has in football in Ireland, why must we always assume that she will go to England or the UK to fulfil her dreams? We have lost another young player, Abbie Larkin, who we all cheered on during the World Cup in the summer. She has gone to Glasgow to fulfil her ambition. It is really draining the potential here for a robust vibrant League of Ireland when our international players are all playing abroad. Another player, Áine O'Gorman, only retired recently. Twelve years ago, 70% of the women's team were based here in domestic clubs and now they effectively are all playing in the UK, many of them on rolling one-year contracts and not for big money. With a bit more vision, we could have a domestic league that our young people could attend and see these international players playing here. It could be one of the best in Europe and certainly could rival what Scotland has to offer.

We certainly need to look at the investment level and how we can improve that. We need to ensure that clubs at a local level, regardless of what code they are involved in, understand the necessity to share and to have a communal vision for their own individual areas. I talk regularly to football clubs in my own area. I want to mention Ayrfield United and Kilmore Celtic, which are doing fantastic work with underage sections that are bursting at the seams. Again, however, it is the basic provision of infrastructure that could really help them to go to the next level.

While I am at it, I wish my own GAA club, Scoil Uí Chonaill, the best of luck in the championship final at the weekend even though they are playing against Parnells, which is a bit of a constituency rivalry there. I wish all the best to Scoil Uí Chonaill on Saturday.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** When we talk about the heart and the soul of a community, what comes to mind? For many people it is their local sports club. Sports are not just games that we play or watch, they are the lifeblood of communities drawing together from all walks of life. They teach us resilience, teamwork and discipline. Most importantly, sports provide a platform for personal, social and community growth. Here is the thing, however. For sports to truly shine, for them to play the role they are meant to, to bring families together, to develop confidence in young people and to create lifelong bonds, they need the right support. This means proper facilities, proper equipment and an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all. This is why I fully back enhancing Government capital sports funding for sports facilities.

This year the sports capital and equipment programme has also been scaled up. Its grant thresholds for local and regional projects have been increased, which I really welcome. For

example, local projects that once had a cap of €150,000 can now get €200,000 and projects with regional significance have gone from €300,000 to a ground breaking €500,000.

As the Fine Gael spokesperson for equality, I am also delighted to see our commitment as a Government to gender equality through this grant. No longer will we allow the sidelining of any gender. For a project to be considered it must ensure equal access for both men and women, boys and girls. I am very encouraged to see a trend away from outdated practices like women playing club finals on boys' practice pitches but we need to move forward even more and towards full equality. I can see the power and the impact of supporting local facilities in my own constituency Dublin Mid-West. Since 2012 Dublin Mid-West has received €4.5 million in investment through the sports capital funds. That does not include the €1.5 million given to our council to develop pitches, pavilions and public spaces. Some of our soccer clubs that have been beneficiaries in the sports capital grant include Peamount United, St. Francis FC, Rathcoole FC and Esker Celtic. GAA clubs that have benefited include Round Tower, Lucan Sarsfields, Commercial's, St. Patrick's, St. Finian's, and St. Mary's; and golf clubs that have benefited include Slade Valley, Lucan, and Beech Park. We also have had the Celbridge kayak club grow through this fund and Lucan Harriers Athletics Club was able to develop a fantastic running track in Lucan through this fund. We have also seen the growth of Lucan Pitch and Putt Club and Weston Hockey Club. Clondalkin Rugby Football Club also received funding through this fund and is currently embarking on really exciting story: a state-of-the-art, brand-new clubhouse and pitches at a new relocation site. Community centres, local parks, local schools and services have all profited from the growth of groups like this, including the Stewarts and Rathcoole community centres and many organisations in my community. We do have issues with clubs like Collinstown FC and Lucan United that have approved projects in the pipeline but are dependent on South Dublin County Council to progress their plans and utilise their funding.

I welcome the additional money that was approved under the community recognition fund for sports clubs in my area and I congratulate in particular Councillor Kenneth Egan, who worked really hard to secure funding for an AstroTurf pitch in Knockmitten. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, has visited Coláiste Bríde, Clondalkin, and was really impressed by the students there and their proposals for a walking track in the school. I hope the Minister of State will look favourably on their application if it made it through to grant

We have seen clubs grow in size and in engagement in our community. This is because the sports capital grant has made a genuine difference for many families and for many dedicated sportspeople. We can see it in the upgraded facilities and in community events. I have spoken to many people and clubs in my constituencies and the feedback is absolutely unanimous. Those who have benefited from these grants cannot stress enough just how game changing this funding has been for them. It is more than money and it is more than opportunities: it is a deeper sense of community pride. I have encouraged my local clubs to apply for the latest round of funding for sports capital grants and I hope they will be successful. This is why I fully endorse the Government support for supporting our sports clubs because they are the heartbeat of so many of our communities.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I begin by responding to a really useful point made by Deputy Ó Ríordáin. I welcome the changes that have been made to promote gender equality and how sports capital funding might be aligned to that goal by using real tools within the process.

Deputy Ó Ríordáin also referred to the idea of sports clubs coming together. We all know

that any groups coming together will have different agendas and so on. There should be a premium payable within the sports capital system to clubs that come together. There also should be a premium for clubs that work with the local authorities, which often can be an independent facilitator of those types of agreements. While every local sports club will want to achieve the best for its own agenda, there are examples of clubs and other organisations coming together, as Whitehall Colmcille GAA, Kevins GAA Club and St. Aidan's CBS in my area did, to realise a sports capital project. That comes about because of the huge personal commitment of individuals within those clubs. It can often be to their detriment when they have to go back and answer to their own committees about why certain things were done. We should be encouraging groups to do that. There should be a premium payable where multiple clubs are involved and we should encourage local authorities to act as facilitators.

There was huge investment in my area under the previous round of the sports capital grant. I apologise in advance for plaguing the Minister of State regarding the many applications that will be made under the next round. I will speak about two projects. One is more of a regional project and the other is not the subject of a current sports capital application but I hope it will be in the future. Regarding the first project, I am giving the Minister of State an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The Futsal Arena in Ballymun has had several names, including the Umbro Futsal Arena, the FAI Futsal arena and the BRL Arena. It is a tragedy that it has lain idle for ten years. Public money went into it but there are structural problems with the arena. It is built on school grounds and, to complicate things, the school in question is owned directly by the Department of Education rather than a patron body. That school and the Irish Olympic Handball Association have come together to put in a regional sports application that would make Ballymun the home of Olympic handball and give all the beneficial elements that flow from that to the school and the local community. The arena is a public facility that is lying idle. It is a strong application and I believe the Irish Olympic Handball Association will be a strong partner to the school.

My fear, however, is that the Department of Education will have its own requirements, which often can delay a project. I have made representations on this matter to the Minister for Education. I ask that the Minister of State work with her, as I have no doubt he will, to ensure that if the project is successful in its sports capital application, which I am taking for granted it will be, they will both do everything they possibly can to ensure bureaucracy, paperwork, issues around governance and so on, which are important, do not get in the way of developing this huge facility. It has several hundred seats and a fantastic brand-new surface. Futsal is an indoor five-a-side soccer sport but the arena could be used for many other activities. There are two great partners involved. Fran Neary, the school principal, and Paddy O'Reilly, one of the directors of Trinity Dome, which is another name for the project, do not take "No" for an answer. They will not allow me to say "No" and I hope neither Department will say "No" to them.

The second project involves my local GAA club, Ballymun Kickhams. Dublin City Council has been in negotiations with the club for some time and has confirmed to me that it is very close to signing an agreement regarding what is called site 31, which would allow Ballymun Kickhams GAA Club to take ownership of a significant piece of land close to Ikea. The land is right on the metro line and can accommodate two senior pitches and a clubhouse, with the possibility of encompassing an adjoining third pitch that is currently managed by Setanta GAA Club. A larger project could be facilitated there. The project is not yet at application stage. It would have been too early for us to take it to the Minister of State. I am a real believer in ensuring projects are ready before an application is made. However, the Minister of State might

come out to us, meet the people involved and assist and advise us on how we might go forward. It is a regional sports project. Although it will be controlled by Ballymun Kickhams GAA Club, it has a regional benefit. It is right on the M50 and the metro line. It could be a very good substitute for Parnell Park but I would not do that to the Dublin county board. It is a fantastic location.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The chairperson of the club is well known in County Meath.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** In his report to the Dublin county board, the outgoing secretary cited the lack of facilities in the city. This site is 15 minutes from the city and right in the heart of the local community. It would be fantastic for Ballymun Kickhams GAA Club to be located back in the community we represent instead of being out near the airport in Páirc Ciceam, even though that is a great facility.

Lots of clubs in our area have received sports capital funding, including Home Farm FC, St. Kevin's Boys Club, CLG Na Fianna and Setanta GAA Club. There were lots of Dublin City Council projects, including at Glasnevin Lawn Tennis Club and Riversdale Tennis Club. More clubs will apply in the next round, including Tolka Rovers AFC, Home Farm FC and Erin's Isle GAA Club, which have been very successful previously. The money we put into sport complements the money we put into youth work and youth development projects. It complements the money we are putting into the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, to try to tackle poverty. The more we can do and the more money the Minister of State can get out of the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, the better. I wish him the best of luck.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I add my voice to what has been said about the spectacular entertainment provided by the Irish rugby team. We wish all the players well into the future. Johnny Sexton, in particular, epitomised their never-say-die spirit. People might say I am a great man for jumping on a bandwagon.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** That never happens here.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It would be a first for this place, all right.

I was at an event the other day by Turas Counselling at the Downtown Hub in Dundalk to launch its new gambling counselling service. Oisín McConville was there for the launch and he gave a powerful speech on what he said was his favourite subject, himself, that lasted for 35 minutes. He got into the ins and outs of the impact of gambling. That particular service is now available in Dundalk. There may be issues regarding a dual diagnosis pilot project in which Turas Counselling is participating. I need to revisit that with the Ministers of State who were here earlier. However, that is for another day.

I am glad to see Deputy Fitzpatrick is here. I hope he is going to tell us that everything is still very positive in terms of the GAA stadium in Dundalk. I am perfectly situated in the town, within walking distance of the stadium. There is huge support for that project and I know Deputy Fitzpatrick, the Louth county board and many others have put their shoulders to the wheel to progress it. We hope Croke Park and whoever else is necessary to deliver it will agree to do so.

A considerable number of speakers have mentioned the particular issues that can pertain to the sports capital grant. We all know about the successes. Everybody wants to see that funding coming in but, as Deputy Andrews said, there is an issue with the payment timescale that can



put some projects under pressure. I agree with previous speakers that we need to see that addressed. It is also about ensuring local authorities have the facilities to deal with this. We need some sort of macro piece of work to be done between them and the local sports partnerships that would look at doing a needs analysis and then helping clubs where necessary. Not all organisations have the capacity to do that.

I was contacted by Newtown Blues GFC regarding a sports capital application it has submitted. The people there probably think I have more sway than I do.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** They were on to me as well.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The club is closer to the Minister of State's part of the world. I would like to think he has some power in this matter. I have no doubt it is a very good application. There are other applications in the locality, including from Na Píarsaigh-Blackrock CLG, which is very close to my house. This is very localised politics. There is also Clann Naofa Boxing Club.

*6 o'clock*

Again, I am talking about outfits that do a great deal of work.

Turning to soccer, I spoke about this earlier to the Minister of State. I am going to put it straight. Among local clubs, Woodview Celtic FC does not currently have a pitch and would like to have what the likes of Quay Celtic FC and Muirhevna Mór FC have. I accept that sometimes we have to look at this from a municipal point of view and perhaps it must involve an element of sharing. Louth County Council is looking at certain pieces of ground that may become available in the near future, but we need to look at the council playing a leading part. While the investment that may happen in Drogheda United FC is dependent, as the Minister of State said, on council members, the League of Ireland need stadiums to be sustainable.

Dundalk FC has submitted a sports capital project that is supported by the council and the FAI. It is one of those regional applications and it relates to delivering a new pitch and lighting. We are talking about a pitch that looks the same as it did when I was playing on it as a kid in the 1980s, so it definitely needs to be rectified. A development group is working on it and, in fairness, Dundalk FC would say that the way the GAA was always ahead was in the sense that it had a plan, whereas soccer sometimes lacked that. We need to look at the LSSIF in respect of this. I accept the Minister of State has to look at outside investment and the development group is working on a plan, which will be about developments within Oriel Park. I would like to think the Minister of State and the Department will be supportive of this because it is absolutely necessary across the board.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe):** I thank the Deputy. I think that by the end of the debate, we will have named every sports club in Ireland.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I was very good. I named only a small number. I had a lot more of them on my page.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe):** I invite Deputy Gannon to continue the trend.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I will certainly endeavour to mention every sports club in Dublin Central and the incredible work they do. As we talk about the sports capital grant, we should

begin by acknowledging that the Minister of State is a very accessible one in terms of making himself available to local sports teams, so I thank him for that.

In respect of facilities, a lot of our grassroots clubs, and in particular football clubs, a sport close to my own heart, play on pitches in public parks, as they have done for decades. Many of these parks lack the basic infrastructure needed for these clubs to become effective and, more important, inclusive organisations. Many have no changing facilities, no parking facilities, limited access points to the park and no disability infrastructure. All of that combined with almost unplayable surfaces for best part of the year makes it hard for clubs to survive.

Three clubs in my constituency - here we go, a Chathaoirligh Gníomhach - namely, Belvedere FC, Sheriff YC and East Wall Bessborough FC, play their home games both in Fairview Park and in the Alfie Byrne Road public park facilities. The latter, in particular, has been the home of East Wall Bessborough FC but that comes with massive struggles for the club, a matter I have raised a number of times, although there has been some progress. It has very limited entry points and a dearth of disability access points, which are hazardous and potentially harmful to those who try to access the facilities. The club's elderly members, parents and members of the community find it difficult just to get in to watch a game on occasion. There are no dressing rooms, the changing areas in both pitches and the walkways are by the sea, and it has always been a hotspot for antisocial behaviour. All of that, grouped with an almost unplayable surface, has forced the club to stop certain age groups playing in the park, leading to the exclusion of various age groups at least biweekly. Since the turn of 2023, there have been three separate occasions when the pitches in Fairview Park have been destroyed by scrambler motorbikes or stolen cars, an issue I know the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach has been raising since we were both members of Dublin City Council.

We cannot talk about sporting facilities without talking about the safety of them and the link-up we need between local authorities and the Garda Síochána. Sheriff YC and Belvedere FC have had to call off games such was the extent of damage to the pitches. Most weekends, the coaches and the parents must sweep the pitches for broken glass bottles and syringes before any training or matches can commence. It has become more of an issue and is getting to the point where the pitches have become completely unplayable. Most recently, on the weekend of 12 and 13 August, all the games had to be called off because of damage to the pitches that stemmed from stolen vehicles. In one of the darkest days for grassroots football in the inner city of Dublin, East Wall Bessborough FC had to call off an under-nines game ten minutes before kick-off because a club member with physical disabilities who is a wheelchair user could not access the pitches. Other clubs in the vicinity, such as Marino AFC, which has 400 members and does incredible work in Dublin 3, have had to deal with many of the same issues, such as a lack of facilities, young people having to get changed on the corner of pitches and antisocial behaviour surrounding them.

Belvedere FC, one of the most historic clubs in Dublin, with close to 500 members, most of whom are from the north inner city or at least the north side of Dublin, was founded in 1971 and was initially formed to provide football for children who were not involved in Belvedere Youth Club, the longest running youth club in the country, founded soon after independence to give young people who had previously been newsboys an outlet. The founding fathers of Belvedere FC, Vincent Butler and the late Fergus McCabe, have changed the trajectory of so many people from Dublin's lives. The club has produced 239 international players, 16 of whom became full international players, with numerous league and cup triumphs, but the members will agree Belvedere FC's greatest success has been in providing a structure for young people to express

themselves in a safe, supportive and positive environment. It does incredible work but, in the absence of a facility, its future is genuinely at risk.

A couple of previous speakers talked about clubs working together. Belvedere FC, East Wall Bessborough FC and, I believe, Sheriff YC are coming together to outline an especially ambitious plan for the Alfie Byrne Road site and they are getting a lot of support from public representatives. I have raised this previously with the Minister of State and there has been some progress in that regard. That is important and is another example of football clubs working together.

Separately, although it is an aligned issue, a local community safety partnership a couple of weeks ago highlighted how we could develop safety in the north inner city of Dublin. It claimed to have engaged with all the community stakeholders in a 52-page multifaceted document, but that document and endeavour did not in any way engage with the local sporting infrastructure, such as the local boxing clubs in the inner city, of which there are several, as well as the football clubs I mentioned and, indeed, the Gaelic clubs such as Scoil Uí Chonail CLG, which are doing great work in providing outlets for hard-to-reach young people, not least young teenage boys who are at risk of getting involved in all sorts of antisocial behaviour. They are the first bulwark against that and, as we look to enhance community facilities and give young people an outlet that provides discipline, structure and routine, sporting clubs have to be seen as essential. The document was lacking that. As I mentioned earlier, the Minister of State is an incredibly accessible one and is always open to ideas, so linking that community safety infrastructure with the sporting ambition is going to be important. I hope we can do that.

Another issue relates to the cost of pitches, especially pitches that are being funded by public money. One game on the Clontarf Dublin City Council pitch costs €140. At the new Technological University, TU, Dublin in Grangegorman, the cost is up to €190. If we think of a kid from the north inner city of Dublin or from any part of Dublin whose family might be experiencing any sort of hardship, that is going to require about €200 or €250 in registration fees alone for the year, which makes football pretty inaccessible. Anybody who is receiving publicly funded capital grants really needs to look at themselves if they are charging that kind of money. It is an issue that will have a lasting impression.

I thank the Minister of State and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I hope I named every football team in Dublin Central.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe):** Every club deserves a mention. That is the least we can do in here.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Maybe I will continue the trend of listing out clubs. It is important we discuss the continued Government investment in sports facilities throughout Ireland. Before I do, however, I want to put on record my appreciation for the Irish rugby team and their efforts in the Rugby World Cup. Obviously, we all wish they had succeeded further and they do too but I thank, in particular, the captain, Johnny Sexton, for his sterling career and his contribution over the years. We wish him well.

Over the past few 20 years, Ireland's sports infrastructure at a local, regional and national level has been transformed with Government support. Nationally, one can point to the large-scale projects such as Croke Park and the Aviva Stadium, but there has also been extensive investment at local level. In my area, for example, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, as the Minister

of State will be aware, we have seen the development of new facilities or the upgrading of facilities in Cherrywood, Loughlinstown, Sallynoggin, Ballyogan, Blackrock, Shankill, Mounttown and Ballybrack, to name but a few. These new high-quality facilities have transformed the experience of a generation of children getting involved in sport. Given the current macro-economic situation and the significant budget surplus forecast, it is critical we use this window to continue to transform sports and community infrastructure across the country. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and its sports partnership team has done amazing work partnering with local clubs to secure grants and develop facilities. Credit must go to Barry Dempsey and Shane McArdle of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown sports development and sports partnership for their efforts in this regard.

However, the message from clubs, volunteers and people working in the sector is clear. They need more funding and less red tape. The additional funding in budget 2024 is welcome. More than €183 million has been allocated to sports and recreation. The increased funding is designed to boost participation in sport at all levels of ability and across all sporting activities. It is great to see a doubling of funding for women in sport from €2 million to €4 million, and prioritising of applications that improve facilities for women and people with disabilities. Sport has multiple benefits - from the pride we feel when witnessing our high-performance athletes on the world stage, to witnessing our own kids playing sports, to the positive impact on our society's physical health and mental well-being. Sport is fantastic for mental health, well-being and confidence. It is a great leveller and I ask that the Minister of State continues to support local clubs in disadvantaged areas. I heard him speak about the criteria and his ambition for women's sports in particular. That is welcome, but so is prioritising and targeting disadvantage because sport is a great leveller.

I think of clubs in my own area. Clubs like Monkstown and Ballybrack boxing clubs do amazing work in the community with relatively little support. Athletes from Monkstown boxing club have enjoyed worldwide success and great credit is due to all the volunteers in that club. It is also important to support lifelong participation in sport. As we earlier discussed investment in healthcare, many chronic illnesses can be avoided where people continue to remain active and participate in sport. I welcome the Sport for All approach, aimed at ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to partake equally in sport and physical activity with an emphasis on accessibility, diversity and inclusion.

I will turn to the Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund. I understand only €3 million of the €86.4 million allocated in 2020 to 33 projects has been drawn down. Even allowing for delays caused by Covid, this is disappointing. However, I am encouraged by reports that about half of the 33 projects should be in a position to draw down funds by the end of this year. This is something that needs to be monitored closely, and flexibility sought from the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform if necessary. We have seen that issues with inflation costs can be overcome, such as with the school building programme. Where there is political will and a practical approach is taken, results are achieved. It would be a great shame if we missed this once in a generation window to expand our national sporting infrastructure. I finally want to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, for his efforts and commitment in his role, including taking the time to visit constituencies and meet with sporting organisations and council officials to see facilities for himself. The Minister of State will be aware that we went out to visit a number of clubs in my own constituency including my own club, Cuala. It is welcome and I thank him for his time. I look forward to continuing to work with him and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, over the coming months.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** The opportunity to speak on this matter is important. I thank the Minister of State for his contribution. I will start by talking about the importance of role models. Of course, we have had lots of mention of the Irish rugby team. There was mention earlier of the women's football team for their heroics during the summer. We also talked about Johnny Sexton in particular, and all that is due to him. However, I do not want to leave out Keith Earls because he is the second most prolific try scorer in the history of rugby in Ireland. That record will take some beating and I want to make sure he is given the due regard he deserves.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** It is not just him. All of them are role models through the performance they put on for us, for boys and girls, and men and women up and down the country over the course of the summer in both tournaments. We could talk about Abbie and her exploits. We could talk about Kellie and her exploits. We could talk about Gavin Bazunu, Matt Doherty and Shane Duffy. Chiedozie Ogbene in particular is a role model for young black Irish children. Of course, Evan Ferguson is also coming through. There are so many. The Minister of State and I come from a generation who are probably more likely to talk about Roy, Robbie, Frank and people like that. At the same time we can appreciate talent when we see it. Those role models and their important impact on young boys and girls across this country in terms of participation in sport cannot be understated. Without those role models, without seeing young men and women excelling at their chosen sport, whatever it might be, they cannot emulate it. They do not want to emulate it. Seeing it and wanting to be it are so important. That is the significant contribution the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme provides to this country.

I was pleased to hear the Minister of State talk about the progression of transparency within the scheme. It is really important for us to emphasise that in 2023, in something of a departure from the past, the system is now not only transparent but it is easy for a club to recognise where it has come within that process by filling out the forms appropriately, and making sure they tick all the boxes individually or with their local authority if the land is under management agreement. That is a really welcome and important step in this process. If I am honest, and this is not a remark with any intent behind it, the days of some Deputy or Minister deciding what a club should get based on their patronage to that individual politician are gone. I am glad to see they are gone. It is probably not befitting of 2023. That transparency drive the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, and others have run is important.

I will also talk for a moment about the importance of the governing bodies and the skill-set they should be bringing. I have emphasised this with governing bodies when I have met them. There are unfortunately sporting clubs and organisation around the country that do not have the skill-set to fill out these forms. That is why there are traditionally successful sporting codes versus those that are not. That is why I have emphasised to sporting governing bodies that they need to help. The Government needs to help them too, to recognise there are certain sporting codes that require additional assistance to make sure they get a fair crack of the whip. I want to make sure that is said and on the record.

I will talk about the sports capital and equipment programme in my own constituency. I was pleased to see €3.5 million allocated in the last round, and I am sure we will exceed that in this coming round. I have seen first hand the value of the investment we have put in up and down the constituency and the country. I will not name the clubs, because I think pretty much every club that has applied in Fingal in the past 12 years has gotten a sports capital grant. For those that have not been successful we will be working to ensure they are successful on this occasion.

I compliment the Minister of State on his comments on the 50% grant being withheld if women are not properly represented on governing boards. That is to be welcomed.

I want to spend a moment talking about League of Ireland. I tried to talk to the Minister of State about it during Question Time this morning, but we unfortunately ran out of time. The impact Euro 2028 will have on this country is measurable. The Minister of State has measured it in his response and I thank him for that. However, the investment profile that will come with ten games potentially being played on the island will, I hope, have an impact on training facilities for the nations hosted on the island of Ireland. Many Members have spoken about League of Ireland. Many Members have talked about crumbling stadia. Only one Member has mentioned the recent takeover of a club, but a number of takeovers have taken place in recent years. That indicates there is money in League of Ireland. If there is money in League of Ireland, there is an onus on them to invest in those stadia. However, not all of them are owned by those would-be purchasers. The State is the owner. I cannot stress enough that we cannot just look to Dalymount. We have to look at Tolka Park. I put my hand up as a season ticket holder, and I have been for many years. What troubles me most is that there is not a stadium in the League of Ireland at the moment, outside of Tallaght, that is not in awful condition. I wish we could rely on the clubs and local authorities to invest in them but they have clearly failed, miserably, over generations. It is time we upped our game and improved the facilities available so the next round of Gavin Bazunus, Matt Dohertys and Shane Duffys are homegrown. Can the Minister of State remember the last time a League of Ireland player started for the Republic of Ireland? I can. It was Glen Crowe, about 15 years ago. We need to make sure that changes so that more players are bred and reared here and want to stay here because they have the opportunity to play in decent facilities at fantastic grounds up and down the country. I would like to think the catalyst for that expenditure plan by clubs and by the State will be the preparation we do for Euro 2028.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paul McAuliffe):** I thank Deputy Farrell and I thank him for his assistance in temporarily taking the Chair while I needed to speak as well.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Táimid anseo ag caint ar spórt agus an gá infheistiú a dhéanamh ann. Bhí sé i gceist agam clár fichille a thabhairt isteach liom le meabhrú do dhaoine gur spórt é ficheall. Is ceann de na seanspórt ársa é. Déanann daoine dearmad go minic agus deireann siad nach spórt ceart atá ann toisc go bhfuil gach imreoir ina suí. Ach tá an inchinn ag obair agus dár le roinnt daoine, is í an inchinn an matán is mó inár gcorp.

Caithfidimid smaoineamh air sin uaireanta nuair atáimid ag caint faoin spórt. Baineann an fáth go bhfuilim ag ardú an cheist seo le rince. Dancing is an art form but people often forget that it is also a sport. Next year the Paris Olympics will recognise dancing, or a form of dancing. Breakdancing will be part of it. An issue there is while we have breakdancers in Ireland, there has not been proper funding for them, though there is recognition and dancing got €10,000 altogether from the Olympic Federation of Ireland. We compete at dance events around the world. Last month, Kai and Lily-Rose were crowned European under-12 Latin champions. That was organised by the World Dance Organisation. Praise needs to go to young people like that who are competing on a world stage, whether Irish dancers or under-12 Latin champions, as in this case. I congratulate them.

We need to look at our current funding arrangements in terms of those little champions and make sure the likes of the dance sport federation are properly funded so that, in the event of an Irish team qualifying for the breakdance next year, the funding is there. There are a number of

groups in Limerick, some in the city. There are some very good young breakdancers. Brisrince, a thugtar air i nGaeilge measaim. Donegal is one of the places where there are a number of very good dancers. They could be our Olympians, as well as people in other more recognised sports. There is a need for much more funding.

Táimid ag ullmhú do na Cluichí Oilimpeacha an bhliain seo chugainn agus ba chóir i bhfad Éireann níos mó airgid a bheith curtha i leataobh ag an stad seo chun cuidiú leo. Aithním an t-airgead breise atá curtha ar fáil. Aithním go bhfuil an Stát seo ina lán bealaí, ag caitheamh le spóirt i bhfad Éireann níos fearr ná mar a rinne Stáit roimhe ach tá i bhfad níos mó ag teastáil. Is tír bheag muid agus tá aitheantas den scoth ag Éirinn thar lear de bharr an spóirt. Ní gá dúinn ach smaoiniamh ar daoine atá luaite cheana féin cosúil le Keith Earls, Johnny Sexton agus Katie Taylor agus daoine eile atá amuigh ansin ag iompar brat na hÉireann agus ag seasamh le bród ar son na hÉireann. Tagann meas as sin. Nuair a dhéanann siadsan é sin ar stáitse idirnáisiúnta, caithfidh gach polaiteoir seasamh le chéile agus infheistíocht ceart a dhéanamh sa spóirt. Ní féidir linn gach iarratas a shásamh láithreach ach ba chóir go mbeimid ag déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an tacaíocht ag na clubanna beaga ach go háirithe le gur féidir leo tús a chur le saoil lucht an spóirt, idir fir agus mhná agus páistí ach go háirithe. Is cóir go dtacóimid leo an bealach ar fad suas.

Tagraím do leithéidí Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch agus Cumann Báire Setanta a d'eascair as. Níl a fhios agam an raibh deis ag an Aire dul agus breathnú ar an gclub atá acu agus an plean mór a bhí acu. Is club beag a bhí ann ar chrosbhóthar cosúil lena lán clubanna CLG timpeall na tíre agus tá sé tar éis éacht a dhéanamh. B'fhiú féachaint ar an gclub ó thaobh na Gaeilge de agus gach rud eile mar eiseamláir. Tá clubanna eile i ngach uile contae agus ceantar. Tá clubanna beaga i mo cheantar féin. Ní leo an talamh. Is leis an bardas nó an comhairle cathrach é. Is cóir dúinn cuidiú leis na comhairlí cathrach agus na comhairlí contae chun infheistíocht ceart a dhéanamh sna páirceanna peile atá ag na clubanna seo chun cinnte a dhéanamh de go bhfuil rugbaí, peil Gaelach, camógaíocht agus iomáint ar fáil do gach uile duine atá ag iarraidh imirt agus go bhfuil áiseanna den scoth acu.

Is cóir dúinn féachaint ar an airgead a thagann isteach ón horse and greyhound racing fund. Toisc gur airgead ó gheallghlacadóirí é, níl an t-airgead atá á chur ar gheallta ag dul i dtreo na gcapall nó ar na madraí. Tá sé ag dul i dtreo sacair agus gach uile rud eile. B'fhéidir gur chóir dúinn sciar níos mó den airgead seo a chur ar leataobh chun cuidiú le spóirt agus leis na daoine óga atá ag glacadh páirt sna spóirt ar fad. Tréaslaím leo siúd atá ag cuidiú leo siúd. A lán acu, níl siad á dhéanamh go gairmiúil; tá siad á dhéanamh ar son na cúise.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** A passion for sport is in the blood of every Irish person. We are born with it and take it with us wherever we go. Our native hurling is one of the oldest and greatest field sports in the world. Our love of football has seen it become the number one participation sport in the country. We left an indelible mark at the Olympics, including the Special Olympics, where our athletes poured their hearts and souls into competing. Our ladies' team blazed a mighty trail at the FIFA Women's World Cup and our rugby heroes brought the country to a standstill. The country is currently awash with local team colours as county finals at all levels take place. Whether we are cheering for horse racing, applauding for golf or yelling on a sideline, there is nothing like sport to get Irish hearts pounding.

Our Irish sportsmen and women give us plenty of reasons to cheer. We are justifiably proud of our country's sporting reputation, whether it be local, national, or international. None of this happens by accident. It takes years to reach the standard our top athletes and teams have

attained. They all started out on the bottom rung of the ladder, filled with determination to climb and succeed. They have proved beyond doubt that success is possible and the door to achievement is open if they get the support they need. Key to this support is investment in the provision of proper facilities from the bottom up. Funding for sport at any level and for any purpose is always money well spent. It is not a once-off spend but an investment that can yield a myriad of returns. Without the capital support for sports facilities, particularly at grassroots level, Ireland would struggle to maintain its hard-fought place on the international stage. We cannot expect to build sporting success if we do not provide the facilities and means to nurture our existing and future talent.

The overall budget for sport in 2024 stands at €183 million, which includes a welcome €2 million in additional funding for women's sport. Funding is always welcome. Investment and emphasis on sport gives a positive return and a yield for the country. Spending on sport gives a huge boost to local economies in a wide range of ways, which in turn boosts the Exchequer. Among the greatest paybacks from investing in sport are the health benefits. Indirectly, funding for sports facilities which encourage people to become fitter and more active helps and encourages participation in activities which lead to better long-term physical and mental health. Participation in sport also yields benefits in education that can lay positive foundations for children throughout their lives. Sport nurtures a sense of discipline and fosters teamwork and togetherness. It provides the physical and mental stimulation that is crucial to young children and teenagers. Sports boost local economies. Even a local club match will generate spending in small businesses. Restaurants, shops, pubs and garages see an increase in spending when a sporting event is held locally. On a much larger scale, national sporting events promote our country in ways that advertising could never achieve. The spin off from hosting any major sporting event is incalculable. Yet, without investment in sports facilities at the grassroots, we risk losing all those potential benefits. If we fail to make it possible for local clubs to thrive and develop and invest in and improve facilities, our aspiring sports heroes of the future will walk away. Unlike times past, our young people now have a range of options when it comes to choosing activities. If we fail to invest sufficiently in sports facilities we risk losing future generations of Irish sporting heroes. As the Minister of State is aware, I have already advanced and promoted several applications for sports capital grants from a range of clubs and voluntary organisations across Tipperary and my new found friends in Kilkenny. I hope the Minister of State and his officials will give favourable consideration to these worthy applications.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** We all know 1.58 million people in Ireland participate in sports. Based on current population projections, an additional 1 million people will need to participate in sport on a regular basis in order to achieve the 2027 target set by the national sports policy 2018-2027. Sports clubs not only provide improvements in physical and mental health well-being, they also provide a social and recreational space for people and improve integration into communities. Sport also fosters tolerance and empathy through shared experiences and helps to bring people together.

I will acknowledge the efforts to increase female participation in sports are promising, alongside the announcement from the Minister for Finance that he plans to review the tax system to help national sporting bodies invest in facilities. This is welcome, especially for Meath and Louth. The sporting capital and equipment programme is the Government's primary vehicle for supporting the development of sports facilities. While the programme has made a difference to many communities, the impact of construction inflation on sporting clubs and community groups needs to be considered. I welcome the plan from the Minister for Finance to review the



tax system.

As is public knowledge, I am the chairman of the Louth county board. We are planning to build our new stadium in a joint venture with Croke Park and help from funds through the Government's IIP initiative, along with three-year seat sales and a double house draw. I would like people to realise Louth is alive and kicking and it is to be hoped work on the stadium will start very soon. There are a lot of rising costs and financial issues. It is important to us that the entire project goes ahead. All the help we can get from sports capital funding would be much appreciated. It will help to build our facilities to a very high standard and encourage other people to participate. As I said, we need the full support of sports capital grants.

I agree that over the past number of years, a lot of money has been spent on Sporting Ireland, but it is disappointing to see that Ireland has the lowest level of investment in sports across the EU. We spend 0.4% of GDP on sport, which is half the average and a quarter of what is spent in Nordic countries. As a result, improving the levels of participation in sports is either stagnant or moving at a snail's pace. This was clear to see in the FAI 15-year plan, which starkly lays out the lack of investment in sport and substandard facilities which generations of players and volunteers have had to endure. Comparing our often heightened expectations for Irish success on an European and international level, the FAI audit should force a realignment of the requirement for infrastructure improvements and rebuilding from the grassroots, especially considering that we have been confirmed as the co-hosts of the UEFA Euro 2038 Championship.

Take, for example, Dundalk FC, my home soccer team. It has an ageing artificial playing surface, resulting in unwarranted injuries and also affects performance and potential European funding. On top of this, there is an ongoing lack of capacity as regards facilities, which is clearly strangling growth. Yet, even just to qualify for a grant a club must own its facilities or have at least 15 years remaining on a lease, which excludes hundreds of clubs from eligibility for the sports capital grant programme. We need to increase capital funding for sports facilities and provide communities with the modern sports facilities they urgently need. By investing in our grassroots, we are investing in our sporting future. Given the growth in sports of all kinds and the changing demographics, the demand for better facilities will get bigger and bigger.

As I said, with so many women getting involved in sport, it is important that we invest in facilities. We all seem to forget the amount of good work done by volunteers, whether that is in soccer, Gaelic football or athletics. It is unreal. I ask the Minister of State to invest in sports. He has done a lot of travelling around the country and has seen a lot of clubs and everything else. From being involved in sport, I realise it has a major impact on families, homes and everything else. It is an outlet for people to go out and enjoy themselves and get away from the pressure of financial strains and everything else. We all seem to come together with sport. A lot of money has been spent, but a lot more money can be spent.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister of State wants to look after the neighbour's child.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** The new stadium-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Are you talking about Kildare or Louth?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** You are talking about Louth, of course.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** We will invite you to the opening day.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I invite the Minister to respond.

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media(Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I thank everybody who took part in the debate. The programme generates enormous interest and the Government is doing a lot for sport, as has generally been acknowledged in the Chamber. As people are wishing their local teams well, I have to mention some of my own because there are a number of Leinster games this weekend. Interestingly, Kilbride is playing Amsterdam in the junior Leinster championship. That is probably not a first, but it is certainly unusual and indicates how widespread the GAA is becoming. When I was in Paris recently, I met European GAA representatives and it was amazing to see how GAA is spreading throughout Europe. Rathkenny, the intermediate Meath champions, is playing Naomh Éanna and Dunshaughlin Royal Gales and the ladies are playing Kilmacud Crokes. I wish them all the best this weekend and I hope to be at some of those games.

There is a huge amount of talk at the moment that we are not investing in football. Football clubs can apply for sports capital grants and LSSIF. I spent a huge amount of time going around football clubs and talking to FAI officials, local leagues and all of that. In some cases, I begged them to apply for sports capital funding because I know the narrative that goes out that they do not apply. That has been true. I have visited football clubs with fabulous facilities which never got a penny from sports capital; they got it from other sources over the years.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** The FAI has been good this year.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** It has been really good. We have worked with it to make sure that happens. I pay tribute to it. That was not always the case with the FAI. I am not saying it is all its fault, but it is not all the fault of the Government either.

I do not know how many football clubs applied for the LSSIF scheme. Finn Harps FC was granted €3.99 million. I want to give that money to it and for the stadium to be built. In line with the standard procedures for grants, we are waiting for correspondence from the FAI in terms of co-funding. We are awaiting some documentation. There is also an LSSIF top-up process in place and I want Finn Harps FC to succeed in that. Officials are assessing that at the moment, but I understand it has submitted an application. We want to provide the grant and build the stadium.

Bohemians got funding for the design of its stadium and I hope there will be another round soon for Dalymount Park. It will be able to apply for funding. Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned Dundalk FC applied through the sports capital programme. I do not know which bodies have applied for that funding, but the information will be published on the website very soon. I wonder how many League of Ireland clubs will apply for sports capital funding; I hope some have because it is there and available to them.

Over the past number of years, under the memorandum of understanding with the FAI there has been a total of €62 million provided to the FAI by Sport Ireland through the Government, for 2019 to 2022, inclusive. That is a huge amount of funding. Part of that funding was stadium funding. About €2.5 million goes into the Aviva, through the FAI, every year from the Government. It is a recoupable amount of money that has to be paid back in due course. That was the deal that was done a long time ago. Huge support is being given to football.

Like a number of Deputies here, I regularly go to see Drogheda United play. I know the facilities are basically the same as they were when I was a child. However, it is a matter for the

club. The private investment it has been seeking is a matter for the members, and the club is going through that process. As Deputy Farrell said, there is private investment in the League of Ireland. The story is not just about the Government; it is also about the opportunities for private investment. It is important to mention that. In general that is welcome, and there should be an acknowledgement that it is not entirely a matter for the Government, in particular where there are private investors.

Deputy Andrews mentioned the digital database of sport. That is on track to be launched very shortly, I would say in the coming weeks. We are sorting out diaries in relation to that. I am sure the sports spokespersons will be invited to attend. That is a very important moment. I have seen the digital database in operation. On the front end, it is a website to guide the public and tourists on the location of sports facilities, trails and leisure facilities in their area. If a person wants to know where there is a GAA pitch, a walking trail or a tennis club in their area, they can look it up. It is all in there. On the back end, it is a database for the State and for those of us in sports capital to see where the deficits, problems and gaps are. We can look at that at a general level. It also allows us to identify where there opportunities are. For example, there are hundreds of tennis courts around the country that are not attached to any club. Tennis Ireland is working on how to activate these, improve them and show the public they can use them. There are lots of different ideas there, so this is a fantastic resource.

Before we start getting the criticism, this database will not be perfect on day one. It is dependent on the data that local authorities have provided to us. I think that not all local authorities have provided all the data yet. We are going to launch at about 70% and there will be mistakes. I spotted one already when I was looking at it. This is a work in progress. It is fantastic. It will be great and comprehensive but it will need a bit of time.

Deputy Devlin mentioned the issue of disadvantage. I would like to remind everybody that the most important criterion in sports capital assessment is that of addressing disadvantage. Deputy Andrews mentioned clubs that cannot raise the funds to draw down the funds. There are avenues for that and we are happy to discuss them. It is possible to draw down in stages. It does not have to be all done at once. There are also charitable or social enterprises like Clann Credo that provide funding to clubs.

Deputy Ward raised some very serious issues that we will be happy to look into in more detail if he wishes to discuss them with us. He raised a specific issue about a particular football league. He also raised the issue of Collinstown Pavilion. As Deputy Ward outlined, in relation to Collinstown and the football pitches in his constituency, we award the money. However, South Dublin County Council is the body that has decided to do the work. If it is not doing it, having received grants of, I think, more than €400,000 - I do not have the figure to hand but that is the figure he outlined - there is a problem with South Dublin County Council. That is not one of these clubs that cannot get the money together or that is a group of volunteers. This is a local authority we are talking about. We are willing to work with the Deputy to make sure that this will succeed and get off the ground.

Deputy Higgins mentioned the school project that I visited with her. I was glad to go there. It was an excellent project in an excellent school. I hope that it is successful. Deputy McAuliffe mentioned the issue of Ballymun to me on a number of occasions. I am in the Department of Education as well and one of the objectives there is that we can bring heads together, which we are doing, to make sure we can use school facilities where appropriate for the community. On the other side, it is also about trying to get schools to use community facilities. This is chal-

lenging as well for some of the reasons Deputy Gannon mentioned, such as the cost of facilities, including those on State-owned land.

Ní féidir liom gealltanais a thabhairt don Teachta Ó Snodaigh go mbeidh ficheall ar an gclár le hairgead a fháil ach b'fhéidir go mbeadh seans ag an mbrisdamhsa mar a thug an Teachta air, go háirithe má tá sé sna Cluichí Oilimpeacha. Tá mé sásta dul i dteagmháil le Spórt Éireann maidir le sin.

I think I have dealt with most of the issues raised. Deputy Gannon raised one other point about community safety and sports, which is very important. In fact, this Saturday I am addressing a conference in Drogheda under the auspices of the Drogheda implementation board. Perhaps Deputy O'Murchú has been invited to that as well. The conference is about how sport plays a role in the Drogheda implementation plan. That is very important and there may be lessons from that and the discussions that are happening in the Drogheda and east Meath area on how sport can play a role in community safety.

I thank everybody for participating in the debate. I suspect that I will have a long meeting with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in respect of all the requests made to ensure we have all the funding necessary to fulfil these. We want to fund every sport and to make sure everybody has the opportunity to participate.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Are the LSSIF grants going to be reactivated?

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Of the 33 LSSIF grants that were awarded in January 2020, two or three of them are open at this stage. It is a few. We looked at the issues there. The pandemic and construction inflation were the issues. We opened up a top-up process to those already been awarded grants.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** How many applied for it?

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Almost all, 28 or 29, applied for it. In the coming weeks, I hope to be announcing the top-ups. I have to engage with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, on this but I hope to open a new round of the LSSIF as well. When the top-ups are announced, people will say they did not get the chance, and they did not because they did not make an application originally. However, I want to be able to open that process up again but that is going to require a lot of work for the people who want to apply and for the national governing bodies as well.

Regarding football, we have funded Finn Harps and Bohemians. We have also funded a facility in Glanmire. When we went to engage with all the national governing body about these projects around the country and how they got off the ground, the FAI decided it was not going to proceed. There is some talk of proceeding elsewhere in Cork with that particular football facility but we have not heard much in the last few months about that and we are very keen to fund. The Government has a role but it is not always about the Government.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ag 8.46 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ag 8.49 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 8.46 p.m. and resumed at 8.49 p.m.*

## **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

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

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss historic allegations of abuse by members of staff in the Probation Service.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss scrambler and quad bike misuse in urban settings and the delays in implementing legislation.

Deputy Alan Dillon - To discuss Ireland's indigenous gas supply and energy security.

Deputy Alan Farrell - To discuss the implementation of increases to the foster care allowance.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss deteriorating public bus services in County Meath.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the removal of two bus stops on the North Strand Road, Dublin 3.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - To discuss obligations on production companies in order to obtain a cultural certificate for section 481 relief.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the immediate devastation caused by flooding in east Cork.

Deputy Chris Andrews - To discuss Dublin City Council's failure to tackle the build up of alleged algae along the shoreline.

Deputy Bernard Durkan - To discuss the ongoing impasse regarding vehicular access to Castletown House, Celbridge, County Kildare.

The matters raised by Deputies Pat Buckley, Paul McAuliffe, Alan Farrell and Bernard Durkan have been selected for discussion.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Weather Events**

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating me in raising this issue. Midleton was described as a disaster zone or a swamp on media this morning, but it is not alone when it comes to this disaster. Killeagh, Whitegate, Lady's Bridge, Mogeely, Youghal, Inch and many other single dwellings dotted around east Cork have been affected by this flooding. Roads have been ripped up. In addition, more than 9,000 people in the same area are now on boil water notices. When shops in the hardest-hit areas are struggling to open, never mind stock up on essentials, how can we support those directly affected? Our local welfare offices have been decimated - Midleton recently lost its one - so where do people go when they are reaching out for help?

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When communities are torn apart, the one thing that Irish communities will always do, is rally around each other and I have been witnessing this over the last few days. I thank everyone who has been involved in this massive clean-up operation, our volunteers, Civil Defence, our emergency services, the Garda, the RNLI and so on. In 2016, when all stakeholders came together following another major flooding incident, the local council and Cork County Council gave the people of Midleton every support they could have. That has been replicated once again with the support of the Government.

I have a number of questions to put to the Minister of State in order that I can go back to my constituents with solid answers. I do not expect him to be able to answer them all, but I want to put them on the record and I hope there is follow-up on them. Why was the national flood forecasting and warning service not used? Was there any prior knowledge of this disaster? Carlow Weather acknowledged the possibility of flooding and forecast 100 mm of rain in the days before this event.

What immediate emergency funding - be it be Government funding, European funding or humanitarian funding - can be drawn down as soon as possible? What happens to businesses and householders that have already drawn down the humanitarian aid funding in the past? Are they allowed to apply for it again? Do they need to have their house or business insured? Will there be a dedicated email for public representatives and Deputies? Many householders and businesses in east Cork do not have insurance because they were not afforded it after four major flooding incidents that have occurred since 2015 or January 2016.

What happens to all those vehicles that were destroyed in this flood? How can people replace them? Is there a special insurance fund that covers these events? Can the Minister of State guarantee that the Government will leave no stone unturned and will do everything to assist the people of Midleton and east Cork and that it will also remove any barriers that stand in the way of householders and businesses in order that they can get on with their lives as soon as possible?

I know there is a lot in that. I appeared in the media today and I spoke frankly about this matter. I said I am not one to go down, stand in front of the cameras, put on lovely white boots, pull a sandbag and say I have my job done. There is a job to do up here as well. I appreciate that some Ministers have today gone down to Midleton and surrounding areas.

Again, I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I am raising this because I need to go back and be in Midleton and east Cork tomorrow morning. I want to be able to assure people that they will be able to access stuff. If there is going to be an issue with previous flooding and people are not insured, what can they do? I am definitely very interested in the issue of car insurance. People had gone to work and were not parked outside their homes. These are necessities and they have lost all of them. Is there a special insurance fund in that regard? I am trying to get that information.

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I thank Deputy Buckley. I acknowledge what his constituents are going through today. He is doing his job on behalf of his constituents here. I also spoke to Deputies O'Connor and Pádraig O'Sullivan, Billy Kelleher MEP and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael McGrath, about various aspects of this matter. I thank all the public representatives for the information they are getting. I will try to give as much information as I have here, but, as the Deputy has acknowledged he has placed questions on the record and it is

important to get answers to every one of them.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is designated as lead Department for co-ordinating the response at national level to severe weather and flooding. The National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management, NDFEM, within the Department is tasked with co-ordinating the response to these emergencies working closely with Met Éireann, local authorities, who are the lead agency for the response to severe weather, Departments and other agencies following the procedures developed over the years and set out in the Strategic Emergency Management - National Framework.

Storm Babet was named by the UK Met Office on Monday, 16 October. The NDFEM has been liaising with Met Éireann which is monitoring the heavy rain associated with Storm Babet that has affected the south of the country. A status orange rainfall warning was issued for Cork, Kerry and Waterford on Monday, 16 October for spells of heavy rain likely to bring localised flooding, difficult driving conditions and possible wave overtopping at high tide with an expected onset of 6 a.m. on Tuesday, 17 October until 1 p.m. on Wednesday, 18 October.

In preparation for the arrival of heavy rain, the NDFEM crisis management team issued a severe weather notice to all local authority severe weather assessment teams and principal response agencies on Tuesday, 17 October. A European Flood Awareness System flash-flood notification, issued to local authorities on Monday, 16 October, also highlighted the possibility of significant flooding in the south west. On foot of those warnings, local authorities, activated their crisis management teams, and local co-ordination groups and flood defences were put in place.

Heavy and persistent rain over southern counties on Tuesday and Wednesday combined with already saturated soils, extremely high river levels and high tides caused rivers to break their banks resulting in significant flood events particularly around east Cork, with Deputy Buckley's constituency at the centre of it. The flooding led to widespread rolling road closures that severely disrupted the road networks in County Cork, which hampered afternoon and evening commutes on Wednesday.

Cork City Council is aware of flooded properties, particularly in the areas of Blackpool and Glanmire, where council workers worked to defend properties with sandbags and pumping operations. Cork County Council is aware of the flooding of properties in Youghal, Whitegate, Rathcormac, Glandore, Ringaskiddy Carrigaline, Raffeen, Halfway and Castletownbere. In Midleton, the Owenacurra river rose at an unprecedented rate and broke its banks at two locations causing significant flood damage to the town with more than 100 properties flooded. We all saw the flood waters on television and how frightening they were at a depth of approximately 1 m.

A co-ordination centre was established at Midleton fire station to house the interagency team that co-ordinated the local response and evacuation of people trapped by the extreme floodwaters. People displaced by the floodwaters were given shelter at a local hotel and temporary rest centres in Midleton. Much of Midleton experienced power outages during the afternoon and evening on Wednesday and ESB crews worked overnight to restore power to those areas. A section to the rear of Midleton Community Hospital was flooded and some patients were evacuated to Heather House at the Mercy Hospital in Cork city. Thankfully, floodwaters have now receded and local authority workers have mobilised to clear debris from affected roads and premises.

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**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. As I said, it is not a competition and I do not expect all questions to be answered. I acknowledge that the flood defence mechanisms that were put in place, such as in Mallow and Fermoy, actually worked. There should be an emphasis on that. Nobody could have predicted it affecting such a large area. In Middleton where the two rivers meet at the estuary with a high tide, one could say there was a problem there. However, given what happened in Killeagh, Youghal and Glanmire, there is a bigger picture.

On other days we could talk about flood defences, catchment flood risk assessment and management studies and stuff, but this is about making sure that we can get the information to the people who need it. We need to make it as simple as possible. We should acknowledge that the last time we were in trouble when a proper co-ordinated plan was put in place with the local stakeholders, the volunteers, the fire service, An Garda Síochána, the local authority, it worked extremely well. I thank them for that and I hope we will see such co-operation again in future. I want to reach out to everybody.

A while ago I came off the phone from talking to a teenage girl, who rang me up to tell me that she and a friend spent €40 on bottles of water and just walked around the town, handing them out. That is the community spirit we need. It is all about communication which is the most important thing here. I hope that by working together we can get this right for everybody in east Cork.

*7 o'clock*

Then we can truly, genuinely start addressing where we went wrong, and it is to be hoped this will never, ever happen again.

I thank the Minister of State for his time.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I acknowledge the community response. People tend to look after one another in a situation such as this. Politicians work together. The public certainly want to feel that people are there responding to the immediate need. The community has done that. I know that Sarsfields GAA club in Glanmire, for example, prevented further flooding from happening.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** Yes. That was a massive gesture.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** To be fair to Cork County Council, on foot of the warnings, work was done in anticipation of the flooding and I am sure that protected some people as well.

As regards the Department of Social Protection, community welfare officers have been on the ground in the Deputy's constituency, in Middleton and Youghal, today. I am sure he has been touch with them and with other people all day. I can only imagine-----

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** If I can find the community welfare officers. The local one is retired.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The information I have is that people are on the ground. There is a humanitarian assistance scheme in place. There is a €10 million fund in place for that.

Separately, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is ready to activate the flooding support scheme for small businesses and sports clubs that are unable to secure flood insurance and are affected by the flooding. There are details in the written reply as to how those



measures can be availed of. We will certainly look at sports clubs as well if there are particular issues in that regard that need to be addressed. That has happened in the past and we are certainly willing to look at that again, as I said to Deputy O'Connor and Deputy O'Sullivan today.

### **Probation and Welfare Service**

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is unable to take this issue but I thank the Minister of State for being here to facilitate the matter being raised. Over several months I have raised, by way of parliamentary question, the issue of historical sexual abuse in the Probation Service. In May, in a written reply from the Minister, she confirmed that two allegations of child sexual abuse had been made in regard to the Probation Service. In the Minister's words, they related to a deceased member of the Probation Service. This matter has also been the topic of media coverage. "RTÉ Investigates" carried out the programme "Scouting Dishonour", in which it referred to the then chief scout Joe Lawlor, and allegations in regard to him and his service in the Probation Service. I know Joe Duffy on RTÉ Radio has also discussed this case.

I appreciate it is an incredibly sensitive issue, but, unfortunately, a victim who has come forward to me has said that he feels there is a cul-de-sac now in terms of justice. He feels that, like many other institutions where sexual abuse took place, there is always a stigma in victims coming forward and articulating the allegation. In this case, however, there is almost a double stigma because many of these people were the subject of the Probation Service, and in order to reveal that they had been the subject of sexual abuse, they also had to reveal that they were the subject of the Probation Service.

I have asked the Minister on several occasions if she will consider carrying out a review of the file within the Department of Justice or an investigation or some form of inquiry which would relieve these victims. I believe there are others out there who have not yet come forward because of the nature of the circumstances I have outlined. We should actively facilitate them. It is accepted now that abuse took place at the hands of this gentleman in other organisations. We want to find out what the Department of Justice and the Probation Service know about that activity over that time.

There has been a lot of discussion in regard to Scouting Ireland and changes within that organisation. Ian Elliott's report refers to particular individuals. If, however, there are cases of sexual abuse in the Probation Service, in my view, the Minister should take those allegations incredibly seriously and we as a State should relieve the victims of the burden of having to go to the media and having to go out there and raise these issues. We should carry out an inquiry based on the allegations we have received and review the documentation to see what was known. My understanding - again, these matters have been reported in the media - is that complaints were made to the Probation Service as far back as 2000, and other reports have said that they were made as far back as the 1970s.

As I said, and within the limits of what I can say in this House, I ask that the Minister carry out an inquiry and review whatever documentation is on file to see if victims can be brought together and, instead of forcing people down the process of legal action, which delivers justice for very few, put in place a process whereby people who are impacted in this way can receive justice and can be dealt with sensitively.

19 October 2023

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I apologise for the absence of the Minister, Deputy McEntee. I understand she is at a Justice Council meeting in Luxembourg at the moment. I sincerely apologise that she is not here to answer this.

Deputy McAuliffe will be aware from previous responses to parliamentary questions submitted to the Minister that records indicate that two allegations of child sexual abuse have been made in respect of the Probation Service. Both relate to alleged incidents in the 1970s by a former staff member who is now deceased.

As the Minister has also previously advised the Deputy, the Minister is informed that when the first allegation came to the attention of the Probation Service, An Garda Síochána and relevant services were notified and a criminal investigation was initiated.

As the Deputy will be aware, in general terms, criminal investigations can be carried out only by An Garda Síochána, which then, as appropriate, submits a report to the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP. The DPP, which operates independently, then decides whether or not somebody should be prosecuted and for what crime on the basis of the Garda findings viewed against the background of common law or statute law. The Minister for Justice, as a matter of law, cannot intervene in this independent process.

The Probation Service later became aware of a second allegation against the same former staff member, who by that time was deceased. This matter is the subject of a legal claim which is being managed by the State Claims Agency on behalf of the Department of Justice. As I am sure the Deputy will appreciate, I am not in a position to comment further as the matter is ongoing.

I and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, encourage anybody who has been a victim of any kind of sexual assault to reach out for help and support and to report the matter to An Garda Síochána. There are in every Garda division specialist Garda members trained to ensure that any victim presenting to gardaí are met with a consistently high standard of specialist, sensitive, professional and expert help. There is also a range of victim support services available, and many are listed on the Victims Charter website at [www.victimscharter.ie](http://www.victimscharter.ie). Rape crisis centres throughout the country also offer advice and support services to victims of rape and sexual assault and operate a national 24-hour helpline which can be contacted at 1800 77 88 88. The HSE also has a national counselling service, the details of which are on the HSE website.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I welcome the Minister of State's putting those points on the record. I join him in encouraging anybody who was the victim of sexual abuse, in a historical context or otherwise, in the Probation Service to come forward. A probation officer has a sense of huge trust. The reports which came to me involved not the person themselves being the subject of probation but actually a family member. The threat was used that if this sexual abuse were disclosed, that family member - I say "family member"; it was another child - would be subjected to the Probation Service and the power it has. Probation officers occupy an incredibly important position in society and do incredible work. Like all those trusted important positions, however, people who are willing to commit abuse against children use those positions.

We have learned so much in the past that victims should not have to fight every inch. I will say at this very early stage, and it would appear that there are very small numbers, that we should try to look for a mechanism that would avoid a legal route being the only route to justice. I am sure more seasoned Deputies - I see, I think, the longest-serving Member of the House

here, Deputy Bernard Durkan - although I think there is a dispute between him and Deputy Richard Bruton in that regard - have seen more times than anybody else how victims are forced to use the legal process as the only way they can secure justice. Surely we can step back from this and put in place a process. The option of having a criminal investigation is not open when the person is deceased. It is right that people ask what the State knew, when it knew it and if it should have acted. Everything may have been above board but it is right that people ask those questions. I ask again that the files be reviewed and a mechanism put in place to help victims who have been through an immense torture.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I reiterate what the Deputy and I have both said about reporting any crimes. It is important to always say that. Such reports will be treated seriously and sensitively. I will pass on the points the Deputy made to the Minister.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy for raising a profoundly serious matter.

### **Children in Care**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Alan Farrell wishes to discuss the implementation of increases to the foster care allowance. This is a matter that has been the topic of much discussion in recent times. It is very topical.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter and providing me with an opportunity to raise it in the House. I thank the Minister of State for his presence. There is no doubt that the change to foster care payments detailed in budget 2024 is to be welcomed as a positive step. It is the first time the allowance has been increased since 2009. We should be more ambitious in our delivery. There are a number of measures outlined in the budget, all of which are extremely welcome, particularly for foster families. These include a double payment of the foster care allowance, which will be made before the end of the year, and an increase of €25 per week in the statutory foster care allowance rate from January. In November 2024, the allowance for children under 12 will increase to €400 per week and the foster care allowance for children aged 12 and over will increase to €495 per week.

Foster carers provide an extraordinary service and the payment of the foster care allowance should recognise the role foster families play in our country. In 2022, 556 children entered foster care and approximately 5,184 children are cared for daily. In that context, we can and should expedite the increase planned for November 2024. As I mentioned, these families have been waiting since 2009 for an increase and recognition of the invaluable work they do. I can think of no greater gift a family or individual could offer the State than to care for a child who is not their own. It is in that context that this recognition should be expedited.

Like many Members, including, I am sure, the Minister of State, I have received correspondence from foster families on this matter. They have expressed their frustration with the gap between the announcement of these measures and their implementation. I received a good few emails and after responding to one, I got a justifiably irate reply from a family who are caring not for one child but for multiple children. There are increases in payments for all households during the cost-of-living crisis but we need to give particular recognition to those who are offering a home and safe environment to a child. As the Minister of State will know, many children in the foster care system have complex needs, the cost of which often falls directly on the families who care for them. This underscores the need for timely support. I assure the Minister

of State that these families are not in it for a financial benefit and are not asking to be rewarded. Rather, they are asking to be given sufficient support so that they can care for the vulnerable child in their care to the best of their ability.

The changes to the foster care allowances in budget 2024, as I mentioned, are the first since 2009. The Minister and his Cabinet colleagues should be commended on taking that step in the right direction. We are fortunate that we have the financial prowess and resources to invest in facilities, State services and people. I can think of no greater investment to ensure these vulnerable children who often have complex needs are supported in an appropriate and timely way. That is what I ask.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. He speaks for all of us when he praises foster parents and families for all the work they do. Foster care is the preferred model for the care of children in care who cannot live with their families of origin. In recognition of the importance of foster care in contributing to positive and improved outcomes for children in care, the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, made it a priority to secure a meaningful increase to the foster care allowance in this year’s budget to support that vital role the Deputy discussed.

As outlined in the budget, from January next the rates of the foster care allowance will increase by €25 per week to €350 per week for children aged under 12 and €377 per week for those aged over 12. The foster care allowance will be further increased in November 2024 to €400 per week for children aged under 12 and €425 per week for those aged over 12. These increases mean that foster carers will receive over €1,700 additional funding per child over the course of 2024, amounting to an extra €300 per month by the end of 2024 for each child placed with them, when compared with the current allowance. In addition, the Deputy may also be aware that a double week of the foster care allowance will be paid at the existing rates to foster carers before the end of 2023. Foster carers will also benefit from a double child benefit payment in respect of each qualifying foster child, which is due to be paid before the end of the year.

The Minister has acknowledged the disappointment, which the Deputy has outlined, among foster carers that the full increase will not come into effect until November 2024. However, given the many competing demands on the limited funds of the State, including from across the Tusla budget and from other responsibilities within the remit of the Department, including disabilities, necessary compromises had to be made. In this context, it was decided that it was necessary to introduce the increases to the foster care allowance on a phased basis over next year. It was the Minister’s priority to secure a significant increase to the allowance, albeit it has been at the cost of a phased implementation. It is hoped the supports contained in the budget will, over time, ease financial burdens on foster carers.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Minister of State for his response on behalf of the Minister. I completely understand the matter of competing demands. I had the privilege of chairing the Committee on Children and Youth Affairs for a number of years in the previous Dáil and I fully appreciate the budgetary constraints in Tusla and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. One only has to look at the childcare demands the Government has added to the Department to understand the level of investment being made. I fully appreciate the Minister of State’s point. I ask that further consideration be given to bringing the date back from November. Perhaps the Minister will be in a position to review the matter in his budget before the end of the year or in early 2024 to see whether it is possible to support

these families sooner.

I recognise the significant sacrifice and extraordinary gesture made by foster carers in showing what I consider to be love towards children who are not their own and in caring for, nurturing and educating them and giving them a safe environment in which to thrive. All of us in this House support that. I want to give them the recognition they are due because I know that over many years it has been a struggle for Tusla to encourage families to serve the State by offering their homes to children. I commend Tusla on the work it does in supporting these families. I thank the Minister of State for his response.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I acknowledge what the Deputy has said. I also acknowledge that what the Minister has done has been significant, although it is not exactly what everyone wants. However, he is committed to working with everybody, including Government partners, stakeholders and Tusla to continue to improve the supports for foster carers.

### **Heritage Sites**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The fourth item I have selected comes from Deputy Durkan, who wishes to discuss the ongoing impasse regarding vehicular access to Castletown House, Celbridge, County Kildare. It is a very hot local issue, and a national issue as well.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** It is. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this particularly sensitive and important issue in the House at this time. I am aware a meeting took place this evening at about 5 p.m. but unfortunately we could not be in the two places; bilocation is not one of our achievements just yet. However, a continued discussion took place at that meeting between the Office of Public Works, OPW, and local residents with a view to facilitating the works that remain to be undertaken to safeguard the roof and ensure the building of Castletown House is maintained in a proper order. I hope some arrangement was reached. I also must again point out the anxiety of the residents. They are not unreasonable people and have put forward various suggestions over the past six months. The area through which the OPW was allowed to gain access to the lands and house at Castletown House is no longer available to it and efforts have been made to facilitate an alternative. Unfortunately, that alternative so far is not something that can receive the support of local residents, in that the traffic from Castletown would go to and from the house through the main old front gates. The point has been made by the residents and by all of the public representatives that traffic plans and volumes have changed considerably since the front gates of Castletown House and the house itself was built because now there is intense traffic congestion on the main street in Celbridge and its environs. A solution has to be found whereby the needs of both sides can be achieved without in any way creating an issue that we may have to deal with in the future.

The issue still continues and we have suggested to the OPW that it should try to get a legal counsel's opinion on the possibility of restoring the access that was previously available while negotiations take place, without in any way impinging on the entitlements of the adjoining landholder across whose property access was gained for the last 15 years, albeit on licence. It is important to reassure the residents and all concerned in the country at large that access to the house is guaranteed in the future in a way that is acceptable and in line with the requirements of traffic and of the State in maintaining its property in a way it sees fit. The State, through the OPW owns 230 acres in the Castletown estate and the house itself. The fact that negotiations were taking place regarding a larger area of land adjacent to Castletown House is fine. We all

accept and support that. However, what is really important at this stage is to reassure the residents that if proceedings are allowed to go ahead as they are, access to and from Castletown House via the front gate onto Main Street will become the only access that becomes available in the future, which would be a traffic management disaster. I hope the meeting that took place this evening was a fruitful one and that the Minister of State has the information emanating from it. If not, we must go back to the drawing board once again. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House this evening and I strongly urge that every effort be made and continued to restore access to the premises.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I will set out the position here. To be clear, I do not have the latest update from a meeting that took place at 5 p.m. I have been in the Chamber since then myself. The OPW is responsible for Castletown House. In 2008, it reassembled 227 acres of the original estate. The OPW attempted to purchase the lands from Janus Securities on several occasions, including in 2022 but it was outbid. In May 2023, the OPW engaged in negotiations for a licence agreement with the new landowners but could not agree on terms. Access to the M4 road and car park was allowed until 15 September 2023. The OPW entered into negotiations with the new landowners on a licence agreement in May 2023. While the OPW was prepared to pay the significant uplift in the licence fee the landowners were seeking, it could not agree to the unreasonable terms of the licence agreement. The landowners then allowed use of the M4 access road and carpark until 15 September. However, the OPW has a responsibility to ensure public access to Castletown House and estate and is funded by the Oireachtas to do so. To ensure public access, the OPW explored creating a temporary car park within State-owned lands but this plan was abandoned after community feedback. With only the Avenue, Celbridge, as vehicular access, a community protest group has blocked access for OPW staff and contractors since 30 September, leading to difficulties in site maintenance and operations.

The OPW has continually sought to find a solution to these challenges within the community. Following intensive dialogue, and with the help of an independent facilitator, the OPW secured the agreement of three out of four local community groups to allow for limited access to Castletown House and estate for OPW staff, as well as essential suppliers and contractors. This access is crucial in order to ensure the house and its collections remain safe and secure. It is also critical that contractors are allowed unimpeded access to the demesne, both to confirm that the site is safe for visitors and to carry out maintenance and conservation works. Despite the protocol being set to operate from yesterday, 18 October, local community protesters continued to block access, prompting the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, to convene a meeting with various representatives to address the situation including all elected representatives, community representatives, representatives of Kildare County Council and from An Garda Síochána, and the union representing staff employed at Castletown House and estate. The impact of the protest on the health, safety, and welfare of OPW staff is a concern, and vehicular access through the Celbridge gate and Lime Avenue is necessary. Similar protocols have been safely implemented at heritage sites across Ireland. The OPW has continued to engage with the landowners. While the M4 access is an important amenity, in particular for local recreational users of the estate, the OPW can only agree to reasonable and feasible terms in any negotiation to ensure value for money for all taxpayers in Ireland. As these are confidential commercial negotiations, it is not appropriate to discuss these matters.

The OPW faces challenges in ensuring access to Castletown House and estate, with community protests affecting staff safety and its maintenance. It seeks support for a protocol that allows vehicular access and remains committed to expanding the historic estate when that is

possible.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister of State for the update. I recognise that we were all here all evening and that it was not possible to get the updated position otherwise. The situation is simply this. The local residents who have not agreed to the protocol at this stage are really concerned. They are concerned about Castletown House itself and they want to ensure the works to restore it and that its operation and the way it was available for tourism, educational and amenity purposes will continue in the future. They are equally anxious to get some kind of guarantee that the process now in hand does not prevent or exclude the return to the use of the M4 route into Castletown House. We know this has been the subject of negotiations. It would be helpful, however, if it were possible to get counsel's opinion as to whether it was possible to go back over the course and negotiate with the owner of the adjoining lands to achieve precisely the route that was previously enjoyed. If this does not happen, and the only route available is the one through the main Castletown gate into Celbridge, this is going to cause a lot of difficulty, angst and concern. I emphasise again that the local residents, local people, have an interest in the historical value of Castletown House and an equal interest in ensuring its restoration continues. The OPW has spent a considerable amount of money on it annually over several years, and hopefully will continue to do. Lastly, I again emphasise the extent to which the residents can be given some indication that the access through the main gates by way of Lime Avenue is not going to become a permanent one, because it simply will not work. I ask the OPW to engage on this particular issue in a very serious way and the rest of the problems can be resolved.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I thank Deputy Durkan for his long-time commitment to Castletown House and estate. Everybody recognises the efforts of the OPW and the State in the care and preservation of Castletown House. I will say that the OPW wants to continue to welcome visitors to Castletown House. However, the impact of the protest is that the refuse cannot be collected, staff are working without heating, the essential systems in the house cannot be maintained and serviced, and essential works to the outdoor areas of the estate cannot be done to ensure the site is safe for staff and visitors. It is now critical that all elected and community representatives enable the OPW to undertake these essential works. The points I have already made about the negotiations stand and I wish them a successful conclusion.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.31 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 24 Deireadh Fómhair 2023.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.31 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 October 2023.