THEIRISHTIMES

Tuesday, July 1, 2025 €2.60 (£1.90 Northern Ireland)



Inside today



44 Government policy is engineering a rise in numbers renting. Hundreds of thousands of households will become poorer, and a small cohort of landlords will becomealotwealthier

Lorcan Sirr

Opinion



CONOR McMANUS TO HARNESS LATENT POWER

Sports Tuesday

Home buyer asked for €25,000 to bypass Help to Buy cap

Sherry FitzGerald launches internal investigation into 'split' sale suggestion

Revenue takes attempts to understate a property's value 'extremely seriously'

NIAMH TOWEY

One of the largest estate agents in Ireland has launched an internal investigation after a homebuyer was offered a "split" sale for a new build home, in order for it to qualify for the Help to Buy (HTB) scheme.

The scheme is administered by Revenue and provides a refund on income tax cur again." of up to €30,000 to first-time buyers on new-build properties up to a value of €500,000.

ly to the contractor, who must be approved by Revenue.

The new-build, a show house in the Altidore estate in for the scheme. Newtownmountkennedy, Co Wicklow, was built by develop- ue exceeding €500,000 do er DRES Properties and was not qualify for the Help to Buy

The split is €500,000 for the house and €25,000 for the flooring

€25,000 above the HTB cap. In April, a prospective buyer contacted Sherry FitzGerald asking if the developer Buy scheme.

The agent responded to sav that it would not qualify for the scheme, "as it is priced over the cap'

When the same buyer conenquiring about the next erate the HTB scheme. phase of homes, the agent said the price of the showhouse had been split so that it qualified for HTB. "The split is €25,000 for the flooring. You cannot use your mortgage amount for the €25,000, this has to be part of your own funds," the agent said.

When the prospective buy-€25,000 on flooring did not seem reasonable, the agent said they would "offer the property to the next person on the list looking for HTB".

A spokeswoman for Sherry FitzGerald said the company "has launched an internal investigation".

"At this point, we believe that this is an isolated incident relating to a single property,' she said. "Our client is not privy to any negotiations with any prospective buyer. Following the conclusion of our investigation, we will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that such a situation cannot oc-

When asked about the "split deal" offer, Revenue said while it could not com-The tax refund is paid direct-ment on individual cases, what was outlined amounted to "artificially splitting" the sale price in order to qualify

"Properties with a final valon sale for €525,000, scheme. This threshold includes all payments made in whether made directly to builders, through staged instalments, or via separate agreements for upgrades, modifications or additions,'

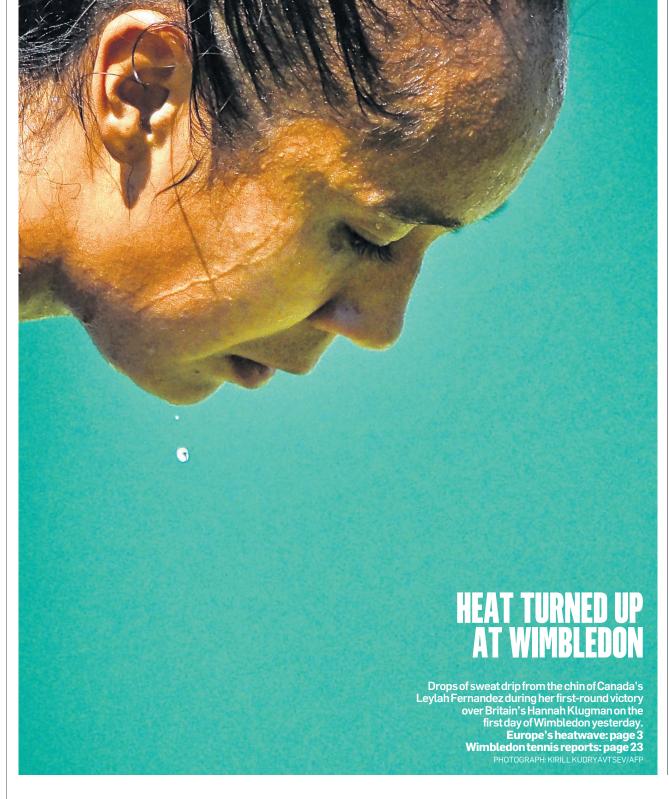
the statement said. Revenue said it takes "any attempt to bypass or understate the full value of a property extremely seriously. Splitting payments, omitting costs, would consider selling this or structuring arrangements house for €500,000 so it to artificially remain below would qualify for the Help to the threshold constitutes non-compliance"

It said if a developer fails to provide Revenue with the correct purchase value, they can be liable to a penalty of €3,000 and Revenue can retacted the agent again in June move their authorisation to op-

A developer or estate agent who "knowingly assists" someone making a false claim "may be guilty of an offence and lia-€500,000 for the house and ble to a fine of €5,000 and/or up to 12 months prison for a summary conviction, or a fine of €126,970 and/or up to 5 years prison on conviction on indictment".

Developer DRES Properer said they felt spending ties did not respond to a request for comment.

> 'All the Help to Buy units were already reserved before the sale had even begun': page 2



Iranian firm sought help of Irish Embassy

Telecoms company linked to regime asked Irish diplomats to 'facilitate' deals

JACK POWER

A telecoms company with suspected ties to a key arm of the Iranian regime asked Irish diplomats for help setting up business deals in the Republic with Eir, Vodafone and Three, internal correspondence shows.

The Iranian company linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) requested the help of the Irish Embassy in Tehran at the start of this year to line up mobile roaming agreements with several Irish networks.

In a January 6th letter, seen by The Irish Times, the Mobile Company of Iran (MCI) said it wanted to expand its roaming coverage to Ireland, "considering the friendly relations" between the two countries.

MCI is one of the largest telecoms firms in Iran and is owned by a company believed to be under the control of the IRGC. The revolutionary guard is a military force, but also controls sections of many important economic industries in Iran. It oversees covert operations and plays a central role in aiding Middle East proxy militias, such as Hamas and Hizbullah.

"We would like to express our gratitude for the consistent efforts of the Embassy of Ireland in strengthening bilatlamic Republic of Iran and Ireland," the letter from MCI to pany of Iran itself was not.

the Irish Embassy said. The Iranian company claimed it had international roaming deals in place with nearly 200 operators across 110 countries, where local providers extend mobile phone coverage to customers travelling from foreign countries.

"We kindly request the esteemed Embassy of Ireland to facilitate and support the establishment of international roaming agreements with active operators in Ireland (Three, Vodafone, and Eir), the letter said. The Irish Ambassador to

Iran, Laoise Moore, did not respond to the letter, a copy of which was released to The Irish Times following a Freedom of Information Act re-

Vodafone previously had a roaming deal with MCI, but cut ties in the last year.

Three Ireland did not re-

spond to queries about whether it was involved in any discussions to sign a roaming deal with the Iranian company. An Eir spokeswoman said

its roaming agreements were "established in full compliance with existing international legal frameworks". Eir did not respond to specific questions about MCI. A Department of Foreign

Affairs spokesman said the eral relations between the Is- IRGC was subject to economic sanctions but the N

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newstalk

Aptitude test downgraded by medical schools over 'gaming'

CARL O'BRIEN Education Editor

Medical schools are planning to change entry requirements for studying medicine in Irish universities following concern that applicants are "gaming" tests aimed at determining their aptitude for working in the sector.

Applicants are required to combine their Leaving Certifi-cate results with the Hpat (Health Professions Admission Test), which was introduced in 2009 to assess skills deemed important for medicine, such as reasoning, problem-solving and interpersonal skills.

While the 2½-hour test was initially envisaged as one which candidates could not study for, there is now an extensive private tuition industry where students can spend up to €800 over 15 weeks to prepare for the assessment.

The deans of Irish medical extra subject.

schools met recently and agreed to significantly reduce the weighting attached to the test, according to well-placed

The planned changes, which will require sign-off by the academic councils of universities, would likely have a two-year lead-in time before they are implemented, according to informed sources.

Leaving Cert score

The Hpat is marked out of a total of 300 points, which is added to a candidate's Leaving Cert score. For example, a student who gets 500 points in the Leaving Cert and 200 points in the Hpat gets a combined score of 700 points.

Under revised plans, the Hpat would be reduced to 150 points. This, say sources, means the test would carry the equivalent weight of about one

About 3.000 students take the test each year, which is required to study undergraduate medicine at the University of Galway, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin, UCC and UCD. The University of Limerick also requires the Hpat for entry to its master's in occupational therapy and speech and language therapy.
The Hpat was introduced un-

der then minister for education Mary Hanafin, following concern that only those scoring very high Leaving Cert points were guaranteed entry to medicine. She said at the time that students would no longer need a "perfect Leaving Cert" to enter medicine.

However, university sources say students who are unable to afford extra support for their exams and Hpat tests are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to studying medicine.

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Weather

Today will be a mix of cloudy and sunny spells with a few showers. Highest temperatures 17-18 degrees.

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Economy: Overruns in day-to-day public spending are likely to top €2 billion this year, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council said. Page 2

Court of Appeal: Nikita Hand will be questioned today by Conor McGregor's lawyers as part of his civil rape trial appeal. Page 5

World News



killed at least 60 people across Gaza as residents of the enclave's north reported one of the heaviest bombardments strategic review, the in weeks. Page 6

Business+ **Your Money**

Employment: Almost 200 mandatory redundancies are expected this autumn at the Intel plant in Leixlip, Co Kildare. Page 14

Transport: Stena Line is to cancel its three-day Rosslare-Cherbourg service following a company said. Page 15

Sports Tuesday

Wimbledon: Irish-Australian James McCabe (21), whose father is from Dublin, will play in the opening round today after qualifying. Page 23

Rugby: Hugo Keenan, Jack Conan and Jamison Gibson-Park are to get their first Lions starts against Queensland Reds today. Page 21

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