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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 14 Bealtaine 2024

Tuesday, 14 May 2024

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Fine Gael has been in government for 13 years and in that time the housing crisis has gone from bad to worse. It is not an accident. We now have a full-blown housing disaster because the Government has the wrong priorities and the wrong policies. As a result, many workers and families are simply unable to put a secure, affordable roof over their head. A defining feature of Fine Gael housing policy has been the enrichment of the private players - the big corporate landlords, the cuckoo funds and the vultures. I want to raise one area in which the Government's mismanagement and incompetence in housing looms large; that is its long-term leasing fiasco. Figures released to our housing spokesperson, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, revealed the extent of the scandal, and it is shocking. From the Government that brought us the most expensive hospital in the world, the yet undelivered children's hospital, we now know it has agreed 9,000 leasing deals with property funds for the provision of social housing. The cost is a whopping €3.24 billion and the leasing agreements are to last 25 years. These leases do not come cheap. Many are costing more than €2,500 a month, with the Government agreeing a 25-year lease on one Dublin property to the tune of €3,200 per month. These costs can only be adjusted upwards: they cannot come down. The leases on these properties are subject to upward-only rent reviews every three years and they are not limited by the 2% cap. It is a very sweet deal for the property funds.

The money forked out by the State on these 25-year deals is often more than the cost of buying the property outright. Here is the kicker: after handing over billions of euro in taxpayers' public money, when these deals end, the properties go back to the property funds. Wow; you could not make this up. This is a scandalous, short-sighted, negligent waste of taxpayers' money by a government. Instead of investing to boost State-owned social housing stock, it is paying out huge sums of taxpayers' money to big shot property funds for homes the State will not own. The incompetence here is off the charts. Once again under Fine Gael, the property funds are laughing all the way to the bank.

Tá polasaí lig ar léas fadtéarmach an Rialtais ag cur na mbilliún in airgead cáiníocóirí amú.

Léiríonn sé arís go bhfuil polasaithe tithíochta mícheart ar fad ag Fine Gael. In 2021, Government committed to the phasing-out of these long-term leasing deals for social housing by 2025; instead, it has performed a big and very expensive U-turn. It has locked the taxpayer into this madcap policy for the next two and a half decades. Far from phasing out this wasteful policy, it has turbo-charged it with bumper profits for property funds.

This puts up in lights that Fine Gael is never going to solve the housing crisis. The simple truth is it is not capable of it. Billions of taxpayers' money is spent on expensive leasing arrangements instead of ambitious investment to deliver public homes on public lands. We know 9,000 of these leasing deals have been made. Can the Taoiseach tell us today how many more are under negotiation? I challenge him to put a stop to them, stop wasting taxpayers' money and bring this bad policy to an end.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the question. She likes to talk about our party's time in government. When my party came into government in 2011, fewer than 7,000 homes were built that year. Despite a global pandemic and a construction sector having to be shut down on many occasions, more than 32,000 homes were constructed last year alone. Later this year we will be in a position to revise housing targets upwards for the years ahead. We live in a country where 500 individuals or couples buy their first home every week. In the 12 months to February of this year, just under 2,600 applications were received for the first homes scheme - a scheme the Deputy opposes. Work has commenced this year and continues every working day on 337 new homes across the country. Today, the Government decided to extend the operation of rent pressure zones for a further year until 31 December 2025. The Deputy likes to talk about failure but the statistics show significant progress being made for many homeowners.

On long-term leasing, let me be clear the phasing out of long-term leasing is well under way, with 3,500 social homes to be delivered through long-term leasing from 2022 to the end of 2025. Most of the target is already subscribed with proposals, tapering from 1,300 units in 2022 to just under 200 units in 2025. The managed phase-out of long-term leasing by the end of 2025 is under way. The annual leasing targets for local authorities are already reducing year on year because we are continuing to construct and bring about more social housing.

We have to approach this housing challenge using every lever at our disposal. Government should not and does not apologise for that. We need to use every possible avenue and pathway to deliver homes for our people, be they social homes, affordable homes or homes to buy. A variety of initiatives have been already put in place.

I assure the Deputy the Government's policy to end long-term leasing under Housing for All has not changed and long-term leasing will be ended by 31 December 2025. However, leasing enables a portion of social housing need to be addressed in the short run. Surely it is a good thing that every day every one of us works to maximise the housing supply and options available to people who I am sure the Deputy meets when she goes across the country, as I do. Housing supply is very much going in the right direction and that provides Government with many more options in relation to delivering for people. There are reasons now for people to be hopeful of being able to own their own homes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As I go across the country, I meet people who live with the consequences of the Taoiseach's housing policy. Here is what they experience: record rents they struggle to afford, record homelessness which leaves families and children in misery, a

collapse in home ownership and an entire generation locked out of any real expectation of ever owning a home. Consequential to that, so many, particularly of our young people, are choosing to simply pack their bags and leave. That is the reality of the Taoiseach's housing policy on the ground. There is nothing short term about a 25-year lease. There are 9,000 of these wasteful arrangements. I have asked the Taoiseach to tell us how many more are under negotiation. Far from winding down this policy, last year the Government had more leases than the previous year, so the data tell us it is moving in the wrong direction. These leases are costly, they are ineffective and they are, as I said earlier, glaring confirmation that Fine Gael and the Government will not solve this housing crisis; they will simply make it worse.

The Taoiseach: And your rhetoric certainly will not solve it either. Proposing to abolish all of the schemes that we put in place that help people to move out of the box room and into their own homes certainly will not make progress either.

I have answered the question very clearly in relation to long-term leasing and the Government's plan to end that by 31 December 2025. That is the Government position, it was the Government position and it remains the Government position.

Far from the Ireland that Deputy McDonald paints, here is the Ireland that many people looking to buy a home and looking to rent live in today. They live in an Ireland where their Government has just decided to extend the rent pressure zones for a further year. They live in an Ireland where there is a renters tax credit in place and a wish to do more on that to help meet the cost of rent and help people save for a deposit. They live in an Ireland where 500 people a week now buy their first home. They live in a country where 337 new homes are going to construction every single working day, which is around 29,000 homes so far this year. They live in a country where there is help-to-buy, an initiative giving some of their own money back, which Deputy McDonald opposes. They live in an Ireland where there are more social homes being built now than at any time since the 1970s.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is now more than three years since the then Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, gave a very clear commitment. In response to questions from my colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, he said he was opposed to the State entering long-term leasing deals for social homes. To quote him directly he said, "No local authority should be on the other side of this, engaging in a long lease with these institutional investors." He followed up that a few weeks later with a very clear statement, "Long-term leasing is bad value. That is my view and I continue to make that clear."

The practice would be phased out, we were told, except it was not. In the *Business Post* at the weekend, we learned that the State is continuing to enter into these deals and the rents being charged are through the roof. Deals with rents up to €3,200 per month have been agreed. That means that over the course of a 25-year lease, the State is spending more than €900,000 on a single social home. Having spent nearly €1 million to rent it, the State then hands the home back to the developer or the vulture fund. The State pays through the nose and is left with nothing except the bill - no asset, no home. In total, the State has agreed to almost 9,000 of these deals at a combined cost of nearly €3.2 billion. All of these deals come with upward-only rent reviews, which are not subject to caps in rent pressure zones.

You could not make it up. Quite literally, if we wanted to design a worse way to provide social housing, we could not. Every single aspect of the deal is bad for the State and investment funds are loving it. These sweetheart deals are a cash-cow for them. There is literally

no downside. They lock in sky-high rents, include upward-only rent reviews and ensure they retain ownership of the asset at the end.

The Taoiseach has spoken a lot recently about common sense. Do these long-term leases sound like common sense to him? Do they sound like value for money? Does he stand over them? Or, if we are honest, are they necessary only because of the failure of this and successive Governments – failure to tackle the housing disaster, failure to meet its social housing targets and failure to deliver on Government commitments? One of those commitments, let us remember, was a promise to phase out long-term leasing. When will the Government end long-term leasing of social homes and when will it actually meet its own new-build social housing targets?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Cairns for also raising this matter. First, context is important. While I have already outlined the Government's intention to end the use of long-term leasing by the end of 2025, I want anybody watching in at home to be aware that this is a very small part of our overall housing provision and a very small part of our social housing provision. If the Deputy will allow me a moment, last year we saw the highest annual output of social homes in decades. It is a statement of fact to say that we saw the highest level of new build social housing since 1975. Never in the Deputy's lifetime or my lifetime were more social homes provided than were provided last year. More than 4,000 affordable housing supports were also delivered last year through approved housing bodies, local authorities, the Land Development Agency, the first home scheme, the cost-rental tenant *in situ* scheme and the vacant property refurbishment grant. This represents a massive increase of 128% on the previous year as well. We now have over 1,600 cost-rental homes being delivered, and funding is in place to support the delivery of more than 4,000 affordable homes by 21 local authorities.

I say this for context because long-term leasing has been an element of housing provision given that in an emergency, you use every tool at your disposal. The Deputy asked what the State gets in return. It gets a roof over the head of some vulnerable citizens needing a house today. That is what it gets because housing policy cannot just be about ideology in an emergency. It has to be about using every single provision-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: It might be funny to laugh and joke over there-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Does value for money not count?

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we have the Taoiseach?

The Taoiseach: I would appreciate that because I doubt Deputy Cairns needs the assistance of Deputies. It might be funny to laugh and titter over there about this but there are real people living in these homes. There are real people with roofs over their heads and they are additional housing solutions that this Government has invested taxpayers' money in providing. When it comes to housing, we take a pragmatic view, unlike some Deputies who rule this and that out. We will use every tool at our disposal to maximise the availability of housing supply for our citizens. That is a good thing to do in an emergency.

However, let us be clear. The views of the Tánaiste are the views of myself as Taoiseach, and are the views of the three parties in this Government. We want to see an end to long-term leasing. We have been clear that the use of long-term leasing will end by the end of 2025. There are figures out there that I do not believe to be accurate. A figure of €3.25 billion has

been stated but that is based on the cost of all leasing over 25 years, and it is based on 8,900 operational units. These figures assume that all operational leased units have a remaining term of 25 years. That is not the case. We need to be very careful and accurate about the figures we put out there.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Tut-tut.

The Taoiseach: It is not, and I do not really know what tut-tutting does.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Taoiseach reeled off a whole load of figures to say that he wants to give context to the situation but he left out the very important figures that give further context to the situation, which is record homelessness, record house prices and a record number of people stuck in their childhood bedrooms. That context is pretty important as well.

He might be new to the job but Fine Gael certainly is not, and this Government is not. The Taoiseach's party has been in office for 13 years now. Clear commitments have been given, including a commitment to end long-term leasing. The practice of long-term leasing is actually just one of those broken promises. The Taoiseach is now promising that it will be phased out, just like when Deputy Micheál Martin was Taoiseach and he promised it would too, three taoisigh ago. The Taoiseach might understand why, to people out there, it feels like the personalities change but the broken promises remain the same. There is fundamental difference between the narrative he is putting out and what the Government is actually doing.

Even yesterday, I heard him on "The Pat Kenny Show" saying that we need at least 50,000 homes per year but the Government's set out target is 33,000, and the Minister for housing is saying that will not change, at least until next year. The Taoiseach is not in opposition. He is the leader of this Government. If he wants to change that, why does he not? Why is this promise to end long-term leasing any different from the last one? What is actually going to change?

The Taoiseach: I respect the Deputy but I ask her to please not misrepresent my position at all. I never, ever said anywhere that there would be 50,000 homes built this year. Let us not try to create a rift where one does not exist. What I said very clearly is that this country needs to build 250,000 new homes between 2025 and 2030. It does, by the way. The Construction Industry Federation, which has many members involved in building the houses, believes that is eminently doable. I have told the House this afternoon that we have seen 29,000 houses go to construction this year so far, and we have just started the month of May. There are reasons to be hopeful in relation to housing supply, and I absolutely stand by and double down that we will need to lift the scale of ambition in the second half of this decade. There is a very clear process that all three parties in government agree with. We will publish a draft national planning framework in the month of June that will set out indicative headline numbers. That will go out to consultation. A finalised breakdown and composition of those numbers will be published in the autumn. There is no broken promise in relation to the phasing out of long-term leasing. The exact commitment the Government has consistently given is that it will end by the end of 2025.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: At a cost of 3.2 billion.

The Taoiseach: That figure is not correct.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Reports in the media indicate - the Taoiseach can confirm this - that following the Cabinet meeting this morning, the Government intends to roll back labour market measures, including the further roll-out of a minimum wage to a median wage and the increase

in sick leave, which is to be staggered until 2026 to bring the entitlement of sick leave for every worker up to ten days. I get it that we are in a period where the Government wants to improve its vote in the local and European elections. I also get it that because a big part of the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael base is small- and medium-sized enterprises, those parties will want to do something for SMEs in the lead-up to an election. However, what is it doing to the 1.3 million workers who are employed in SMEs when it is talking about cutting back on commitments made on the minimum wage and sick pay? I remember when, during the austerity years, a Fine Gael Minister for Finance said the Government was picking the low-hanging fruit, and he meant it. It strikes me that if the Government is to bring in this measure, that is exactly what it will attempt to do - pick the low-hanging fruit to impress its base.

It is important to say that there are very serious problems for some of the small enterprises out there which are struggling, but not all of them are struggling. Some 1.3 million people are employed by SMEs, but not all of them are small or medium. A company has to have 250 employees or fewer to be described as an SME, so there is a wide spectrum within that. If the Government is going to target progressive labour measures that have been promised to some of the lowest paid and worst treated workers in the country, why is it not targeting those measures at those who need them, rather than giving a blank cheque to the entire SME sector, many of whose members' profits are going up? That is true of both hospitality and retail. Profits have gone up and the cost of living has not come down sufficiently. The Government is telling workers that although it made a commitment to bring up their standards of living, it is now pulling back on it. Can the Taoiseach justify that sort of policy in this day and age in one of the richest countries in Europe? The Government will now pick the low-hanging fruit and attack the people who are worst off in this country. Yes, give supports to the small businesses in local towns and communities that are struggling, but must that support include penalising the workers who are worst off? They have been given a promise by this Government that they will do better in terms of sick leave and a median wage over the next two years. Can the Taoiseach please answer those questions and confirm if this is the Cabinet's plan?

The Taoiseach: I always find it slightly amusing that when the Government says something, it must be about the local and European elections, but when the Opposition does something, it has nothing at all to do with them. I am sure Deputy Bríd Smith is hoping to get a few votes herself in the election, and I wish her well.

The Government had an important discussion today on a series of proposals for 15 actions around small and medium enterprises. Deputy Smith is correct that they are really feeling the pinch. She knows that from her constituency, as I know it from mine. Small businesses, café owners, restaurateurs, hairdressers, butchers and the businesses we all know on the main streets of towns and villages have seen a lot coming at them in a short space of time. They say to me that it may look very busy in their business, that it is hard to get a table or a seat but, when they do the books at the end of the week or month, the margin is tight. They have asked the Government to listen, and we have committed to doing that. We have listened and today we have acted. Tomorrow, the package will be announced.

Let me tell the Deputy what it will and will not do. It will look at initiatives we have had in place, such as the increased cost of business grants which have worked well for many businesses, and ask whether we can give another blast of that to some small and medium businesses and give more assistance through a direct cash injection. That is one of the things it will look at. Can we look at making sure that when the minimum wage is increased, as it was, there is a lower rate of employers' PRSI so that employers do not feel like they are being hit twice? Can

we look at things like the commitment in the programme for Government to apply an SME test? It is easy for us in here to come up with a great idea, but often we do not have to pay for it. It is the small and medium businesses that do and we need to factor that in. We do not want anyone to lose a job here because that is the most important protection you can give any worker.

I am extremely proud of this Government's record when it comes to workers and supporting hard-working people. We only have to look at the minimum wage, which is now €12.70, having been increased by €1.40 per hour just five months ago. That is a very large single increase, an increase of 12% when the inflation rate last year was around 5.3%.

We are the Government that introduced a sick pay scheme. No one is talking about rolling back on anything. We are talking about following the evidence and having the ESRI do research about what happens next. What has the impact been? How are SMEs coping with it? How is it working in practice? That sounds sensible. We are a government that introduced parental leave. We are a government that made progress on remote working. We are a government that has reduced the cost of childcare at least twice. We are a government that reduces tax for low- and middle-income workers. We are a government that established the Low Pay Commission.

The Deputy knows well the process the Low Pay Commission goes through. It has worker representatives and business representatives. It has an independent chair. It does its work over the summer and then it generally reports to Government. Therefore, I agree with the Deputy, if this is the point she is making, that we should not pit the needs of one against the needs of others. If the Deputy is not hearing this on the hustings, she is on very different hustings from me. We should be listening to people who are saying, "You come up with your bright ideas in here but you're not considering the impact it's having on my café, my butcher's shop, my small clothes shop." That is the balance we are trying to get right. I believe with the range of packages we have in place, the details of which will be announced tomorrow, we have got that balance correct.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I probably am not on the same types of hustings as the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: That is true; I have not met her on them yet anyway.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Some 8% of workers in this country are on the minimum wage and they are the people I meet. The postponement of an increase for them is cruel and unnecessary. Instead of tackling the businesses by getting them to pay different rates, the Government is attacking workers' rights again. Almost a year ago we brought a Bill before the House to get rid of the discrimination against young workers in the minimum wage legislation. The Government said, "Park it for a year and we'll come back to you." I am dying to hear what the Government has to say in the first week in June about that Bill which it parked for a year. Has the Government even looked at it? It is very clear to me that this is about picking the low-hanging fruit. The Taoiseach may want to support the businesses that he meets on the hustings - not all businesses are covered by this, by the way. Research by SIPTU and Maynooth University have proved that many of the businesses to which the Government is giving extra support are very profitable. The point is that it is not targeted at those who need it the most. In business terms, it is targeted at those who need the increase most in their wages.

The Taoiseach: That is either an unintentional or deliberate misunderstanding of the Government's increased cost of business scheme, which is targeted. I am sure Opposition Deputies

have often got queries into their constituency offices as to why someone over a certain threshold does not qualify. There are very clear thresholds showing that this is being targeted, as Deputy Smith knows. If any Member of Dáil Éireann does not believe we should pay another additional sum of the increased cost of business grants to retail or hospitality, they should let me know. They should let their constituents know and let the café owners know. I would have thought there is a consensus that the increased cost of business grant is the very least we should be doing to try to help businesses at this hard time. In advance of the budget, we are trying to see how we can be innovative within the resources we have available.

I do not buy into this idea of pitting one group of people against the others.

Deputy Bríd Smith: That is what you are doing.

The Taoiseach: That is what you wish we would do. That is what you would thrive on us doing. That is what you would like to tell people we do.

Deputy Bríd Smith: This is spin. You are-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption.

The Taoiseach: Every time I speak it is something. Every time you speak it is authoritative and every time I speak you try to degrade it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: That is because I am an authoritative-type person.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: That is because you know everything and fair play to you. I will tell you this. We cut taxes. We cut childcare costs. We increased the minimum wage. We introduced statutory sick pay. We support remote working. We are building more homes. We have the backs of workers in this country. We do not need any lectures from you on it.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ba mhaith liom an spotsolas a dhíriú ar chathair agus contae na Gaillimhe inniu. Mar is eol don Taoiseach, is cathair álainn í. Go teoiriciúil, is cathair dhátheangach í agus geata chuig an Ghaeltacht is mó sa tír. Tá an t-ádh dearg orainn go bhfuil lánfhostaíocht sa chathair ach tá fadhbanna tromchúiseacha ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta agus go háirid ó thaobh infreastruchtúr de. Tá easpa infreastruchtúr bunúsach atá fite fuaite leis an bhfadhb ó thaobh tithíochta de.

I am putting the spotlight on Galway city and county today. While I could say many good things about it, I want to highlight the problem with housing, but from a different perspective - the absolute absence of basic infrastructure. The wastewater treatment plant on Mutton Island right beside where I live was upgraded a few years ago and is able to cope with a population equivalent of 170,000. However, the collection network is seriously deficient. It encompasses Oranmore, Barna and the city. We have two syphons under the River Corrib, which are inadequate and have been identified for a very long time. We have an inadequate situation in Oranmore and Merlin Park. An application for a storage area in Merlin Park was submitted by Uisce Éireann and subsequently withdrawn. I have one minute and a half to make a pitch for Galway city and want I want to do here is to highlight the actions of Uisce Éireann. I do not wish to demonise Uisce Éireann but I believe it should have stayed with the local authorities. The lo-

cal authorities submitted a comprehensive plan in 2012 and 2013, which was not approved by the Department because of the future birth of Uisce Éireann. What are we doing now in Galway city? We have no wastewater treatment plant on the east of the city, which is stymieing development. The Ardaun plan of 10,000 people cannot go ahead. Within the city, taking in Oranmore and Barna, we have a combined sewage and stormwater pipe which overflows all of the time. In one particular case, an Environmental Protection Agency site inspection to Oranmore found there had been 70 overflows of combined stormwater and sewage into Galway Bay, which has not been reported to the EPA. A compliance investigation has been open since 2008, although it could be since 2010, regarding the deficiencies in the system and constant overflows which should be confined to unusual weather conditions. In 2023 alone, 70 overflows were not reported to Uisce Éireann. What is my point? There cannot be development in Galway city in any sustainable way unless we face the infrastructure problems. There can be no balanced regional development if we do not have a sewage treatment plant in Carraroe. I will come back to the issue of transport in a minute.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Connolly for raising the question. I think she will understand and appreciate that I may have to come back to her on some of the specific issues she has highlighted in relation to her constituency, as is right and proper for her to do. On a broad level, when we look at the issue of housing and balanced regional development, I accept the importance of needing to look at in the round. I can sense the Deputy's frustration and, I am sure, that of her constituents, regarding investment in wastewater treatment plants and also connection issues in a number of the areas she outlined. We believe very much in balanced regional development. It is not just a nice thing to do but is absolutely essential if we are to create the country and the quality of life that people want and if we are to meet the housing needs of people and their wish to be able to continue to live in, raise a family and work in their community. On foot of the specific issues the Deputy raised, I will be happy to take a look at them, not just in relation to her constituency but, perhaps more broadly, in relation to the need for us to take a joined-up approach to anything we do in ensuring that housing supply can flourish in all parts of this country, including, of course, Galway city and county. I am very happy to come back to her and to receive specific details of the issues she has raised. I undertake to directly engage with her.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Perhaps I can use a little bit of the time the Taoiseach did not use, with the permission of the Ceann Comhairle, because this is really important. It should not be up to me to raise this issue with the Taoiseach. We have Uisce Éireann, which the body in charge, and the local authorities. We have plans and conditions have been set as part of a licence which are not being complied with. These are not my words. This is what the EPA has outlined in its open compliance investigation. Either Uisce Éireann does not know what it is doing, which is not my way, it does not have enough staff or the Government is not behind it. We cannot have a situation where basic infrastructure - the collection of sewage and stormwater - is inadequate. The network of collection has been inadequate for years, as identified by the local authorities, the EPA and Irish Water. Galway is one of the four cities outside of Dublin that is set to develop, with its population to increase to 120,000. It cannot do that, however, and nor can we have balanced regional development. I heard the Taoiseach set out his beliefs. I do not really want to hear about beliefs. What I want to see is action. I want to see what feedback is going from Irish Water to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, where the connection is between what is needed in Galway city and the regions and what is actually happening on the ground, and what we need to do.

Galway city is absolutely caught up with traffic. Back in 2018 or 2017, 24,000 people

signed a petition asking for a feasibility study on light rail. That is finally being done by a body that said it was not possible but is now looking at it. Similarly, on Friday, there will be a conference on the western rail corridor. This is all basic infrastructure in addition to what I just highlighted. Basic collection of wastewater is not adequate so no development can take place. As a result, the housing crisis is going to intensify and planning applications will be refused, as they have been for some years, because of inadequate infrastructure.

The Taoiseach: I do not have the figures in front of me - I will check - but I would imagine that housing commencements in Galway city are increasing-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: They cannot. They are being refused.

The Taoiseach: -----as they are across the country. I will check. I am not taking from the Deputy's point. Across the country, housing commencements are increasing.

I assure the Deputy that when State agencies like Uisce Éireann and others make investment decisions, they do so cognisant of the national planning framework and the national development plan. A new national planning framework will be published in draft form towards the end of June. There will be an opportunity at that stage for all agencies to contribute, and for the Deputy and her community to contribute in relation to the important needs of her community. I will specifically undertake to pursue some of the infrastructural issues the Deputy raised regarding Uisce Éireann with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, regarding this case. I am happy to come back to her if she wants to provide more details of where she believes there are particular blockages to development in Galway city or county.

I, too, am pleased with the work under way on the western rail corridor and light rail. Any fair objective analysis of the Government's time in office would see there has been a significant increase in public transport. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is to be commended on that.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Thirtieth Report of the Committee of Selection *(without debate)*

- Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024 (Second Stage) *(if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 5.30 p.m. or after 1 hr 41 mins, whichever is the later)*

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Dublin and Monaghan Bombings, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on Rota for Leaders' Questions *(without debate)*

- Statements on Delivering Universal Healthcare *(not to exceed 2 hrs 27 mins)*

- Future Ireland Fund and Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund Bill 2024 (Report and Final Stages) *(to commence no earlier than 4.30 p.m. and if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 7.30 p.m. or after 3 hrs 1 min, whichever is the later)*

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Road Safety and Maintenance, selected by the Labour Party.

Thursday's business shall be the resumed Second Stage, if not previously concluded, of Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024 (if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 4.30 p.m. or after 2 hrs 46 mins whichever is the later).

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Neighbour Disputes (Vegetation) Bill 2017.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that private members' business may be taken earlier than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of the proceedings on Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024, or where those proceedings conclude within the available time, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, oral Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, and topical issues, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Thirtieth Report of the Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate; and

3. the proceedings on Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 5.30 p.m. or after 1 hour and 41 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Tuesday.

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

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

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

(ii) the weekly division time may be taken earlier than 8.45 p.m., and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Future Ireland Fund and Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund Bill 2024, or where those proceedings conclude within the available time, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on Rota for Leaders' Questions shall be taken without debate;

3. the Statements on Delivering Universal Healthcare shall not exceed 2 hours and 27 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

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

(iii) members may share time; and

4. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Future Ireland Fund and Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund Bill 2024 shall commence no earlier than 4.30 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 7.30 p.m. or after 2 hours and 16 minutes 3 hours and 1 minute, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday.

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of any resumed proceedings on Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024, or where those proceedings conclude within the available time, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the Second Stage of the Neighbour Disputes (Vegetation) Bill 2017, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil: Provided that where Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024 concludes before Thursday, topical issues shall be taken on the conclusion of the SOS; and

2. any resumed proceedings on Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned at 4.30 p.m. or after 2 hours and 46 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Thursday.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not agreed. For the second week now, I ask that the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, present themselves and make a statement to the House on their handling of the immigration issue, particularly the situation as pertains today on the Grand Canal in Dublin, where there are now 40 tents with unfortunate, vulnerable people living in them at the side of the canal. If ever there were an image for the Government's abject failure in this area, it is that there is a situation where, on the one hand, the State pays money to distribute tents to these vulnerable people, and then, at the far end, commits money to have these tents removed, only for more to appear. This is utterly scandalous. It is causing huge unease, not just across the city of Dublin but far beyond. We need answers and accountability from the

Ministers, Deputies O'Gorman and McEntee, and from the Government.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I, too, would like to see an urgent debate this week on the Government's plan to provide sustainable accommodation for those who come here seeking international protection. I just came from the canal earlier. Along Baggot Street Bridge, there are now 48 tents. Last week, I welcomed the multi-agency operation. I was down there to observe it. It was inhumane and unsustainable to see so many people who were then camped along the canal at Wilton Place and Percy Place. I was glad to see the Government provide alternative accommodation. Over the few days since then, we have seen more people left in the same inhumane conditions. We have seen attacks on people sleeping in tents and on volunteers helping them. I commend the amazing volunteers. We have seen the State fence off large tracts of public space along the canal. This is not sustainable. We need to hear from the Taoiseach and Ministers as to how they plan to address the issue of accommodation for those seeking international protection as a matter of urgency. We cannot see this revolving door approach in which we see week-to-week solutions that are quick fixes that fix nothing for those forced to sleep in these inhumane and unsustainable conditions.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Has the Taoiseach taken a walk along the Grand Canal lately? I did earlier today and over the weekend. What is usually a public amenity for the citizens of Dublin, where you would see people on a day like today having a picnic or a jog along the canal, has seen fencing erected by this Government. The Taoiseach should not shake his head. He orchestrated a multi-agency task force. I argue strongly that rather than the tents, which are an equal failure, those hoardings are a reflection of the Government's failure. It is State-sponsored vandalism that is desecrating this city.

Deputy Neale Richmond: We want them removed.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Do we get the opportunity or does the Taoiseach have the good grace to tell us what exactly the plan is? Will the Government keep fencing off the city of Dublin? That we do not have statements or the Minister for Justice answering questions this week is a poor reflection of the Government's commitment to the citizens of Dublin and the vulnerable people in those tents. As a matter of urgency, I would like to be updated on the plan for my city.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach boasted earlier about the increased construction of housing under his Government. What he is not acknowledging is that the majority of what is being delivered is completely unaffordable. We get 10% social housing on private developments. The rest is unaffordable rents and unaffordable house prices and the result is record homelessness, particularly egregiously for families and children. If the Government was buying houses instead of leasing them and getting a higher proportion, as well as building the social and affordable housing we need, we might see an impact. I have been asking for weeks now, and got agreement in principle, that there would be statements from the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, giving an update on Housing for All. There was a commitment that there would be four progress reports per year about Housing for All. They disappeared from the agenda. That perhaps suits the Government. Let us now point the finger at migrants but not talk about the Government's record on delivering social and affordable housing. When will we have the statements as promised, by the Minister, on Housing for All and addressing the housing and homelessness crisis in this country?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am addressing the Taoiseach but I address my remarks to all of the party leaders, who have eventually and finally woken up. They were part and parcel of

the problem all along for the past 12 months by not allowing debate, not wanting debate and shutting down debate. They were name calling people looking for debate, like me and my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group. However, now that it has arrived in the leafy suburbs of Dublin 4, the Government is putting up tents and fencing to keep people out. When ordinary people in Roscrea, County Tipperary, Newtownmountkennedy, County Wicklow, and all over the country, including now in Clonmel, attempted to have a peaceful protest and put up small barricades - not barricades as such, like the power of the State has - they were demonised, blackguarded and condemned by everybody here and their mouthpieces in RTÉ and other places. Now they have it, they will not have a debate. I want the Minister for Justice in here. The Taoiseach can shake his head all he likes. It is a fact, and he has the support of all the parties here - every one of them. Now they are getting it in the face with the local and European elections and they do not want it. It is now a topic they have to deal with because it is hurting them. They would not deal with it all along. They would not even have a debate in this Chamber, so a plague on all their houses.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: There have been so many debates.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I support the call for a debate in this House. As of today, the figures for international protection applicants not offered accommodation is 1,780, which is 65 more than last Friday. I ask for that debate to take place because what is happening in our name is shocking. It is shocking for those living in tents, as has been described, and particularly dangerous for public discourse. I see posters going up in Galway that are absolutely shocking. I know the Taoiseach is nodding his head in agreement but I am afraid the Government has left a vacuum. It has let this happen by doing this. It was told direct provision was inadequate. It was told to change that and the narrative emanating at the moment from the Government and on the right is dangerous, appalling and against our international obligations. I see the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, is there. He was left on his own for a long time and there was no joined-up thinking from the Government on this. We are utterly failing in our obligations under international treaties and conventions and all of the time a horrible, horrible discourse is prevailing.

The Taoiseach: There are many legitimate requests for a debate on migration. What is not legitimate is when Members of this House say things that are completely offensive and Trumpian in fact such as things like "mouthpieces in the media" or that there has not been a debate. I am telling the Deputy that is untrue. The Ceann Comhairle can check the record of this House. There have been many, many debates. For the old social media clip, the Deputy stands up, slurs the media and calls them mouthpieces. That is kind of Trumpian and he will get a few likes and retweets in America.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach is very good at that himself.

The Taoiseach: He then says there have been no debates.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Seven spin doctors.

The Taoiseach: Many Members of the Opposition have asked for a debate on migration. I am happy for there to be a debate in the House on migration. It is a matter for the Business Committee to decide when best to schedule that. We have our business schedule this week. Sinn Féin has had many Private Members' Business motions. Are there three this week?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We made the request and you knocked us back.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin also has two Private Members' motions in this House this week. One is on a very important topic indeed. There are options for people in terms of how they wish to use their proportion of Dáil time. We are happy to have a debate on migration in this House and we are happy to engage with the Business Committee as to how best to go about that and the appropriate time for that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You knocked us back.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Two weeks ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: Let us also have a degree of context and fairness when we have that debate. The Government met today and considered ten actions on how we can look at a variety of ways to make our migration system more sustainable. This is not a question of abject failure. It is a question of looking at how the numbers have gone from about 3,500 people a year to one where we saw 106,000 people fleeing war in Ukraine since 2022 come to these shores and where we have seen international protection numbers rise significantly and we are having to build systems in real time to respond to that situation. I am very satisfied that a number of the actions we have taken today are very much that whole-of-government joined-up approach that we want.

I have no difficulty in having a debate on Housing for All being scheduled for the appropriate time. In fact the Government has an awful lot that it wishes to say on the progress being made on housing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It has been promised for weeks. Can we have it soon?

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 68; Níl, 53; Staon, 0.		
Tá	***Níl***	***Staon***
Brophy, Colm.	***Andrews, Chris.***	
Browne, James.	***Bacik, Ivana.***	
Bruton, Richard.	***Boyd Barrett, Richard.***	
Burke, Colm.	***Brady, John.***	
Burke, Peter.	***Browne, Martin.***	
Butler, Mary.	***Cairns, Holly.***	
Cahill, Jackie.	***Carthy, Matt.***	
Calleary, Dara.	***Clarke, Sorca.***	
Cannon, Ciarán.	***Collins, Joan.***	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	***Collins, Michael.***	
Chambers, Jack.	***Connolly, Catherine.***	
Collins, Niall.	***Conway-Walsh, Rose.***	
Costello, Patrick.	***Cronin, Réada.***	
Creed, Michael.	***Cullinane, David.***	
Crowe, Cathal.	***Daly, Pa.***	
Devlin, Cormac.	***Doherty, Pearse.***	
Dillon, Alan.	***Donnelly, Paul.***	

Donnelly, Stephen.	*Ellis, Dessie.*	
Donohoe, Paschal.	*Farrell, Mairéad.*	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	*Fitzpatrick, Peter.*	
Durkan, Bernard J.	*Funchion, Kathleen.*	
Farrell, Alan.	*Gannon, Gary.*	
Feighan, Frankie.	*Guirke, Johnny.*	
Flaherty, Joe.	*Howlin, Brendan.*	
Fleming, Sean.	*Kenny, Gino.*	
Foley, Norma.	*Kenny, Martin.*	
Harris, Simon.	*Kerrane, Claire.*	
Haughey, Seán.	*Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.*	
Heydon, Martin.	*McDonald, Mary Lou.*	
Higgins, Emer.	*McGrath, Mattie.*	
Humphreys, Heather.	*Mitchell, Denise.*	
Kehoe, Paul.	*Munster, Imelda.*	
Lahart, John.	*Murphy, Catherine.*	
Lawless, James.	*Murphy, Verona.*	
Leddin, Brian.	*Mythen, Johnny.*	
Madigan, Josepha.	*Nash, Ged.*	
Martin, Catherine.	*O'Callaghan, Cian.*	
Matthews, Steven.	*O'Reilly, Louise.*	
McAuliffe, Paul.	*O'Rourke, Darren.*	
McConalogue, Charlie.	*Ó Broin, Eoin.*	
McEntee, Helen.	*Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.*	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	*Ó Murchú, Ruairí.*	
Moynihan, Michael.	*Pringle, Thomas.*	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	*Ryan, Patricia.*	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	*Shanahan, Matt.*	
Noonan, Malcolm.	*Sherlock, Sean.*	
O'Brien, Darragh.	*Shortall, Róisín.*	
O'Brien, Joe.	*Smith, Duncan.*	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	*Stanley, Brian.*	
O'Connor, James.	*Tóibín, Peadar.*	
O'Dea, Willie.	*Tully, Pauline.*	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	*Ward, Mark.*	
O'Dowd, Fergus.	*Whitmore, Jennifer.*	
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.		
Ó Cuív, Éamon.		
Phelan, John Paul.		

Rabbitte, Anne.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Ring, Michael.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		
Varadkar, Leo.		

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

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Thirteen-year-old Liam Dennehy Quinn has rapidly deteriorating scoliosis. Liam has been hospital bound for the past five and a half weeks. His curvature was at 85o in November but has had no spinal review during his five weeks in hospital. Liam has been given a surgery date of 30 May but his mother Pamela says he is deteriorating by the day and running out of time. Liam has to use oxygen and has lost the ability to use his chair. His mother cannot understand him now when he speaks because his spine is pressing so hard against his lungs. Pamela says that 30 May may seem like it is just around the corner but it is too far away when you are in Liam's dire situation. She is on a knife-edge trying to keep Liam stable for surgery, fearing that he will pick up an infection that could prevent that surgery. Liam cannot wait any longer. Every day counts. He needs his emergency surgery now. I ask the Taoiseach, as Head of Government, to intervene.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the very important case of Liam. It is one with which I am very familiar because I have heard from many of Liam's family and friends. Many of them have written to me, as have many people in his community. Of course, it is a case that case has garnered, quite rightly, much public attention. While I am reluctant to talk too much about any individual patient on the record of the Dáil, I do know that Liam was admitted to hospital while he awaits spinal surgery. This course of action was recommended by the doctors and nurses who are caring for him and who are due to operate on him later this month. This is an extraordinarily anxious time for his parents, his family and for him and I wish them the very best. Liam had a consultation with his consultant in April and as the Deputy rightly said, his surgery is scheduled for two weeks' time. The spinal assistant director of nursing has been in contact with Liam's mum this month and has explained the preoperative pathway. I have been assured that the spinal team, comprising the doctors and nurses, will support Pam and Liam through the surgery. They continue to closely clinically monitor Liam's situation.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yesterday, the high court in Belfast made a ruling that parts of the

Tories' Rwanda Act cannot be applied in Northern Ireland as they undermine human rights protections under the post-Brexit Windsor Framework and, indeed, that some parts are also incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR. The judgment is under appeal but it confirms the concerns Deputy Ó Ríordáin and I in this House, and the British Labour Party MP, Stella Creasy, in Westminster, have been raising for some months. Our concerns were that the Rwanda Act would undermine the equivalence of human rights protections under the Good Friday Agreement. We have been repeatedly raising these issues.

Now that the judgment has been handed down, how does the Taoiseach propose to deal with the issues it raises? The Minister for Finance said earlier that Ireland would address concerns at political and diplomatic level with the British Government. How does the Taoiseach propose to follow up on the matter? Has he received legal advice from the Attorney General on whether the Government, as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, can still designate the UK as a safe country?

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Where is the emergency legislation on this that was promised by the Minister for Justice two weeks ago?

The Taoiseach: The timeline for that legislation remains as was, namely, later this month. I thank the Bacik for raising this important matter. I note the judgment delivered by Mr. Justice Humphreys yesterday in the Northern Ireland High Court, which found that certain provisions of the UK's Illegal Migration Act 2023 are incompatible with the Windsor Framework and the ECHR. We are studying the judgment carefully. The Attorney General is studying it on behalf of the Government. The judgment disapplies the provisions of the 2023 Act in Northern Ireland. It is important to recall that the legislation that determines the status of the Windsor Framework in regard to other UK laws was voted on and accepted by the UK Houses of Parliament. I understand the UK Government is likely to appeal the decision and, therefore, it is not appropriate for me to comment further at this time. We are studying the judgment.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I raise the issue of services being rationed by the HSE. The executive will only provide one therapy at a time. Let us take, for example, a child who is neurodivergent and requires several therapies, such as occupational and speech and language therapies. That child will not get parallel services even if they are vital to his or her needs. If a child goes onto a children's disability network team, CDNT, list, the HSE takes that child off its list and he or she is denied services. The CDNTs currently have 16,500 children on waiting lists, with 10,500 on those lists for more than a year. Will the Taoiseach address the policy of rationing vital services, and the absence of services, with the CDNTs? It is impacting really seriously on children who need multiple services.

The Taoiseach: I certainly will take a look at the specific scenario the Deputy has outlined to the House. I had a meeting relating to CDNTs yesterday, with the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Naughton, and others, at the Cabinet committee on disability. I received some encouraging numbers on recruitment numbers into the teams. Certainly, the word "rationing", if that is what is happening, is not one I would like to stand over in any way. If the Deputy gives me the specific details of the case she raised, I will revert to her.

Deputy Gino Kenny: In March this year, the Joint Committee on Assisted Dying published its report. It included 38 key recommendations, the main one being a recommendation for

legislative change. Has the Taoiseach read the report? What is his personal view on assisted dying? Would he give his party colleagues a free vote if any legislation on the matter were to be submitted to the Dáil in the future?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is allowed one question on one matter.

The Taoiseach: I will do my best to give one helpful answer. I have read the report but, as Taoiseach, I wish to give it proper and thorough consideration and have the Government consider the matter. In general, my party's position has been for many years, and will continue under my leadership, to have a free vote on matters of conscience.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: A little ripple of excitement went through Waterford and the south east last weekend when the Taoiseach and Tánaiste visited. Expectations remain sky-high, mainly built up by the Taoiseach, that South East Technological University, SETU, will meet the need of the south-east region for a university by adding new capacity and programmes. The past three programmes for Government, in 2011, 2016 and 2020, specifically prioritised the development of higher education in the south east. It is troubling and surprising that no new teaching buildings have commenced construction in Waterford this millennium. As the Taoiseach knows, the planning permission for SETU's engineering building, which is in bundle 2, expires this summer. That will create obvious difficulties. This project, which was first announced in 2008, has been announced and re-announced periodically, not least by the Taoiseach. Is the engineering PPP going to go ahead this summer, and before the Government calls time, or is it dead in the water?

The Taoiseach: I assure the Deputy there is a while to go in this Government yet, so he should not get too excited. I believe the Tánaiste may have been in Waterford at a private function, possibly even a wedding. I was in Dungarvan.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Like the Taoiseach, he was canvassing.

The Taoiseach: No, I think he was at a private event. I was canvassing, and people were asking for the Deputy. I was also in Dungarvan. It was a beautiful day. The sun was out and we were talking about the launch of the traditional Irish music festival. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, knows about it. I was also in Tramore meeting young guys and girls in the surfing school there. I very much enjoyed my visit and I will be back shortly.

In regard to the PPP, it is my intention and that of the Government, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, Deputy Ó Cathasaigh, Senator Cummins, and all Waterford Deputies that it would go ahead. That was my commitment when I was Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and it remains my commitment as Taoiseach.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I acknowledge that in his previous portfolio as Minister before he became Taoiseach, he did some good work in the area of higher education and diverting people towards trades. The haulage and agriculture industries and many others, including the hospitality, are desperately crying out for staff and people to work in them. The whole situation with work visas is too slow and cumbersome. We also need to have more apprenticeship programmes for lorry drivers and machine operators in agriculture and industry because they are badly needed. We need a whole-of-government approach because people are crying out for help. They are trying to survive in business and when the weather is fine and they need to work they are under a lot of pressure but they cannot do it without staff. Most of us have very good staff but we need a dedicated chain of employees who would come into those industries and

make careers out of them. However, they need to be directed there from the schools, colleges and technological universities.

The Taoiseach: I fully agree. That is why when I was Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science - I thank the Deputy for his kind words - we set up a number of apprenticeships specifically in partnership with the haulage industry. We remain open for business in terms of doing more.

It is also why migrants are good in this country, because when we talk to the representatives of that sector, it very much relies on work permits and the like as well. It is about making sure we have a work permit system because immigrants bring positive benefits to so many sectors of the economy and society; I am sure Deputy McGrath would welcome that. It is also why we need an apprenticeship system that continues to work with industry.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Faraor géar, tá orm ospidéal an Chlocháin a ardú arís. Tá an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Butler, sa Teach. D'ardaigh mé an tseachtain seo caite é, ardeoidh mé an tseachtain seo chugainn é agus gach seachtain toisc nach féidir glacadh leis go bhfuil ospidéal an Chlocháin fós dúnta.

I just cannot accept that the hospital in Clifden remains closed. There is something really odd about this whole story. We have a hospital and the GPs have called for it to reopen. They have pointed out the essential nature of the services provided there. I just cannot accept that it still remains closed. On the previous occasion I asked the Taoiseach to take a personal interest. I put my hands up: I am happy for either the Taoiseach or the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to answer but could they please agree with me that it is an unacceptable situation for a hospital to be closed for this length of time?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): We need to put a little bit of context on it for people who might not understand what Clifden hospital is. There are two hospitals on the same site: one is a community nursing unit, CNU, where there are people under the fair deal scheme. The hospital also has a respite and rehab ward for six to seven people.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is a district hospital.

Deputy Mary Butler: I understand it is a district hospital. To be very clear, in case anyone thinks there are 20, 30 or 40 people in it - there is a ward for seven people. We were solely dependent on agency staff and we were not able to get them. I secured a derogation from the HSE to secure three full-time, permanent members of staff. Recruitment is currently under way for them. A panel is in place, but it takes time. Our full objective is to reopen the hospital. A respite-rehab ward is vital in the area. As the Deputy knows, when I was in Clifden last year I announced the building of a new CNU at a cost of €35 million to the State. A planning application has been submitted for it. I want those beds open and I will not stop until they are open.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Some years ago, Maynooth, County Kildare was scheduled to have a brand new swimming pool and various contributions were raised between the local authority, the local community and St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. Recently, I heard voices in the long grass to the extent that the proposal was not as warm as it had been in the past. The town has a population of 20,000 with approximately 20,000 students as well, and it is growing rapidly. I have been told that a swimming pool there would be in competition with Lucan, but Lucan is miles away and has its own catchment area and its own necessity for a swimming pool

because it also has a big population. Will the Taoiseach bear in mind and use his good offices to ensure that where there is a population of that nature and that importance in a vital, pivotal and growing area that it would receive favourable consideration?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy very much for raising the important issue of the need for a swimming pool in Maynooth. I will certainly raise the matter with the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and ask that he and I would revert directly to the Deputy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I want to raise the summer programme in schools. As the Taoiseach knows, there has been a reduction in capitation rates this year. I have been in contact with the Department of Education and other Departments in recent weeks. They told me the summer programme has significantly expanded over the past three years. The problem is that the capitation rate in mainstream schools, which was originally €45 per week in 2023, has now gone down to €30 per week for 2024 which is a reduction of €15. Loads of schools in County Carlow have been in touch with me in regard to that. They tell me the same as the Minister has told me. The full funding of €40 million, as in previous years, is available. I welcome that the priority is children with the most complex special educational needs but we must give the €45 per week. We cannot have a reduction of €15 per week this year compared to last year. I ask the Taoiseach to work with the Minister and to try to help me with this.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I thank the Deputy for her question. As she said, the summer programme has gone from strength to strength over the years. One of the key barriers to the participation of schools previously has been the availability of staff, particularly experienced staff already working in the schools. In 2023, to maximise the budget, teachers and SNAs working on the school-based programme were paid a higher personal rate of pay so that more schools would take part.

As the Deputy indicated, the capitation rate in mainstream schools was €45 per week in 2023 and the rate in 2024 is €30. We wanted to focus on those areas with the most complex needs. The capitation rate for special schools remains at €60 per week to reflect the unique circumstances of running the programme in those settings.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Government's current target for apprentices in 2025 is 10,000, but he has not even reached the 2020 target of 9,000. There is no specific target for craft apprentices, which is absolutely crucial because these are the people we want to build the homes we so desperately need. The Taoiseach constantly says that the apprenticeship system is employer-led and demand driven. However, he always seems to overlook the largest employer in the State, which is the public service. We can directly create apprenticeships through our local authorities, but the reality is that very few local authorities have been enabled to lead the delivery of craft apprenticeships. They can meet targets by increasing supply. This is despite housing maintenance being in an absolute state of crisis, between mould, dampness, cracked chimneys, damaged doors and broken windows. Will the Government finally set a target for new craft registrations and will it work with the local authorities to achieve it?

The Taoiseach: That is a sensible idea relating to craft apprenticeships and the composition of the 10,000 new registrations a year that will be in this space. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, about that.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: They are not all craft apprenticeships.

The Taoiseach: No. I agree with the Deputy's point about craft apprenticeships among the 10,000. There is a public sector target. The Deputy mentioned local authorities. It is to reach 750 apprenticeships a year by 2025.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: They are not craft apprenticeships.

The Taoiseach: The overall total of 750 apprenticeships are not craft apprenticeships, but it is the public sector target. I will come back to her specifically on the craft composition of the 10,000 target.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Minister for Health recently announced a HIQA inquiry into emergency care capacity in the mid-west but a lack of capacity would be a more accurate description. I ask for an assurance that the review will be time limited. We cannot allow this to drag on interminably. People are suffering. The trolley figures last week were again outrageous. In that regard, a year has elapsed since we got a commitment that the injury clinics in the three satellite hospitals, St. John's, Ennis and Nenagh, would be open on a 24-7 basis. That has not happened yet. When is it going to happen?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I will raise the opening times of the injury clinics with the Minister for Health and ask him to revert.

HIQA is now carrying out a review into urgent and emergency care capacity in the mid-west region to determine whether a second ED is required. Terms of reference will be finalised shortly. The Minister rightly wants to wait for the Mr. Justice Frank Clarke report to conclude, which is expected to happen this month. Smaller emergency departments in the region, as the Deputy knows, closed 15 years ago. This was based on clear clinical advice at the time but we do know there are significant pressures in the mid-west region. The actions the Minister has taken are correct. I will get a timeline for the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: At least 13 families in Dublin 15 have no school place for September for autistic children. Ellis, aged 5, has no school place. He has applied for 24 schools and received 24 refusals. What is required? His parents need to fill in the school application, give two proofs of address via bills, give his original birth cert and baptismal cert and give proof of his PPS number, along with all relevant reports, such as private speech and language assessment, full autism assessment, two private OTs and public autism assessment. All these reports add up to around 100 pages. That is 24 packs of 100 pages to get 24 refusals. The State should not be putting this and other families in this place. What commitment can the Taoiseach give that Ellis and the other children will have a school place for September in Dublin 15?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy for his question. I am aware many parents are concerned about where their children will be in September. To reassure the Deputy, the Department is spending one third of the education budget on special education. This September, we have 400 new special classes coming onstream. Of those, 300 are already allocated and a further 100 locations are being identified by the Department of Education, working closely with boards of management and schools. I appreciate the pressure parents are under. I am in constant contact with the Department and National Council for Special Education, NCSE. I would like to see a system where parents get advance notice and are not waiting so long. We are ramping up resources around the NCSE, putting special educational needs organisers, SENOs, on the ground, working directly with parents and schools and ensuring they are visible on the

ground. That is why we are increasing the number of SENOs from 70-odd to 120 and they will all be in place by the end of August.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Alexander is a ten-year-old boy in County Louth. He is autistic, non-verbal and he has an intellectual disability and development delays. His parents very much welcome the statement of the Taoiseach on bringing real and meaningful reform to services for people with disabilities. They believe him and I believe him too. It is the first time he has been made aware of this. The problem is this family sought respite first in 2022. It was discussed by the HSE in late November 2022 and approved by the board. 2022 and 2023 passed. It is now 2024. What is happening? They got a letter saying they are wait-listed for respite for mid- to late 2025. That is an appalling vista for the young child whose development is severely impacted by this. His parents are extremely worried they cannot get a weekend, day or hour of respite. I appreciate the Taoiseach's commitment to this issue but it is essential that this case be dealt with now. The parents cannot wait, nor can the child.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the case. I have a note I could read out but I do not want to insult the parents by reading it. It is clearly a very serious situation the family faces. I am aware of Mo Shaol, which provides services in Louth. I will take on board the case the Deputy has raised if he gives me the details and I will link with him directly.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I raise nicotine pouches. A nicotine pouch rests up against a person's gum. They are five times stronger than a cigarette. Children are using these in schools. Teachers do not know they have them under their gum. They are highly addictive. They are marketed to teens and come in mint or berry flavours. We currently do not regulate them. In January, I sent a parliamentary question to the Minister for Health. There is no regulation for them in Ireland. That needs to happen. The chair of the national association of principals has called for the HSE to issue guidance to enable schools to deal with the issue. We need to get ahead of nicotine companies and be proactive in regulating before the problem becomes too big.

Deputy Michael Collins: Horticulture is a vital industry and one with great potential. We import 90%-plus of the fruit and vegetables we consume in Ireland. In west Cork, we have a thriving organic sustainable food industry from dairy to vegetable and soft fruit growers. The industry depends on an educated workforce from further education, levels 4 to 6, and higher education, levels 7, 8 and above. It has come to my attention the horticulture course in Skibbereen at the west Cork education and training board campus level 5 is going to be shelved. Students cannot afford to travel to Kinsale or Cork city for two hours every day. It is also vital for a degree in Munster Technological University, MTU, that further education is supported. Will the Taoiseach explain why the course is being discontinued when numbers for the course are normally only finalised in September each year? To some who have spoken to me, it sounds like another hatchet job on west Cork, the same as NLN last week. People are up in arms and in disbelief. There are, I am told, at least 100 jobs for every graduate. Surely we should be expanding the sector, especially considering sustainability and low carbon footprint.

Deputy Michael McNamara: At the start of April, the Minister for Health announced the new nursing unit built in Nenagh to replace St. Conlon's would be instead used for step-down beds. Families were expecting to go in there from across north Tipperary and east Clare. At the same time, the Minister announced Cahercalla nursing home would take 20 step-down beds. When Cahercalla's representatives were asked about that, they said they knew nothing about it. It is almost as if there was no forward planning in the Department of Health by the previous health Minister, whoever that was; wait a minute, that was the Taoiseach. Is there forward

planning? Both units are being told this is a short-term measure for 18 months but what will happen in 18 months? Where are the plans to develop units people will go to in 18 months? The reality is these beds are being taken out of the community care sector. Where is the plan for our health service? What will replace St. Conlon's in 18 months? What will replace the beds in Cahercalla in 18 months?

Deputy Pa Daly: It makes no sense that where an existing court building is in need of updated facilities, every opportunity to refurbish it is not used. The plan in Tralee for years was to take the plans for Letterkenny courthouse, which cost €19 million, and use them in the Denny site which was gifted to Tralee town council ten years ago and on which nothing has happened. Now an opportunity has arisen. The An Post site is for sale. All along the excuse was the existing building was shoehorned in. There is an opportunity to purchase another site. Because no money is available for other court buildings for the next two or three years, why does the Taoiseach not use this opportunity to refurbish the existing building? If there is a report which says it would be cheaper to do otherwise, I would love to see it. I cannot see how it could be cheaper to go the other way with it. Will the Taoiseach commit to refurbishing the existing courthouse and not move it to another part of town?

The Taoiseach: I thank my colleague in Wicklow, Deputy Whitmore, for raising the important issue of nicotine pouches and bringing it to my attention. That sounds like an alarming and concerning situation for parents, teachers and principals. I undertake to speak with the Minister for Health on the matter and pass on the Deputy's serious concerns, which I share.

I will follow up with Deputy Collins on Skibbereen. I am pleased we have seen more of these courses made available and would be concerned to see their withdrawal. I am not familiar with the rationale behind it but I will get an answer and come back to the Deputy.

I assure Deputy McNamara there is plenty of forward planning but the mid-west region needs particular attention when it comes to health capacity and other issues relating to governance and management of health services. I will ask the Minister for Health to come back to him on the two issues he raised regarding step-down facilities.

Deputy Daly referred to Tralee courthouse. These decisions are made by the Courts Service, as distinct from the Department, but the point he made on value for money in refurbishment versus new building is one I will seek its view on and revert to him.

Family Law (Divorce) (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Deputy Patrick Costello: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Family Law (Divorce) Act 1996 to provide for swifter access to divorce proceedings.

This legislation will further modernise our laws around divorce. Divorce was prohibited in the State until the 1995 referendum, which allowed divorce where people had been separated for four of the previous five years. The introduction of divorce was an important modernisation of our Constitution and a progressive move. In 2019, the Government held a further referendum to amend that article. By a huge majority, the people choose to remove the waiting time to access divorce from the Constitution.

It is legislated for now under the Family Law Act 2019. That was a very welcome improvement to what was already progressive legislation and it is a very positive and important achievement to remove that tight timeline from the Constitution. The reason I am trying to introduce this Bill now is that the requirement currently set under the Family Law Act is to wait for two years for divorce proceedings. I believe this is unduly onerous. The legislation that I am bringing forward today is a simple fix to amend the period of separation from two years to six months.

I have dealt with numerous constituents who are in very difficult situations where their marriages are breaking down and they have found the current law a source of deep frustration and deep pain. It ties them to an ex-partner for significantly longer than is necessary. In cases where there is domestic violence or an abusive relationship, being tied to an ex-partner for longer than is necessary is draconian and unduly onerous. It holds people back and prevents them from starting a new chapter in their life. I am bringing forward this Bill to try to promote a more compassionate and human-focused approach to our divorce legislation. As I said, we have already made one amendment and this is another simple step forward.

When we pass legislation, it often comes with a built-in review of the operation of the particular Act, generally after three years. We can argue about whether that review period is followed to the letter, whether it is useful and whether reviews are done as fairly and independently as they should be. However, the Family Law Act had no built-in review mechanism and in reply to a parliamentary question, the Minister told me there are no plans to review this legislation. In the face of constituents who are dealing with deep frustration and unnecessary pain, with no review in prospect, I am bringing forward this legislation to try to introduce more humane divorce legislation into this country.

I know there are significant issues in the family courts at the moment, although I know reforms to the family courts are happening too. One of the issues that is frequently highlighted is the length of delays that take place within the family law system when it comes to decrees of divorce and judicial separation. We need a deep-rooted analysis of the whole family law system to ensure it is fair and is not contributing to the abuse of people in the way it operates, but also that it is not causing unnecessary pain and hardship. This legislation is very much aimed at trying to minimise unnecessary pain by reducing an unfair and onerous burden. As I said, we have that important achievement from 2019 when we removed the time period from the Constitution and left it in the hands of this Chamber by way of legislation. It is time to amend that legislation to reduce the time period from two years to six months.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Thirtieth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the Thirtieth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 34, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 10th May, 2024, and accordingly appoints members to the Special Committee on Drugs Use, and appoints members to Committees in substitution for members who have been appointed as Ministers of State automatically standing discharged, with effect from 15th May, 2024.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

European Council

1. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the special European Council on 17 and 18 April 2024. [18052/24]

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent special meeting of the European Council. [20459/24]

3. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent special meeting of the European Council. [20462/24]

4. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent special meeting of the European Council. [20465/24]

5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent special meeting of the European Council. [20873/24]

6. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the special European Council on 17 and 18 April 2024. [21522/24]

7. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent special meeting of the European Council. [21523/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, together.

I attended a special European Council meeting in Brussels on 17 and 18 April. On 17 April, we heard from the President of the European Parliament and from President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, the latter by video link. Over a working dinner, we discussed a range of international issues, including Ukraine, the Middle East and the EU's relations with Türkiye. On 18 April, we had a comprehensive discussion on Europe's competitiveness and the need to reinvigorate the Single Market.

On Ukraine, we reiterated our full and unwavering support for Ukraine, its people and its

territorial sovereignty. We condemned Russia's continued attacks against Ukrainian civilians and critical infrastructure, particularly the targeting of the energy sector. We discussed the current security situation, including the urgent need for air defence systems to protect Ukraine's cities and infrastructure and the need to accelerate the delivery of military, humanitarian and civil assistance. In my contribution, I pressed for accession negotiations with Ukraine to begin as soon as possible, ideally before the summer. This would send a strong message to Putin that Ukraine's future is within the European Union family.

On the Middle East, the European Council condemned Iran's attack on Israel, calling on Iran to completely cease all attacks. We urged all parties to exercise restraint and to avoid any escalation of conflict in the region. We also agreed to impose further sanctions on Iran. This work is being carried forward by the Foreign Affairs Council.

On Gaza, leaders reaffirmed our commitment to work with partners to end the crisis and to reach an immediate ceasefire, to secure the unconditional release of all hostages and to provide unhindered humanitarian aid. We reiterated our support for a two-state solution. In that context, I strongly set out Ireland's intention to recognise the state of Palestine.

As the House is aware, the situation in Lebanon remains very fragile. The European Council expressed its determination to support the most vulnerable in Lebanon and to assist in combating human trafficking and smuggling.

In our strategic debate on relations with Türkiye, we acknowledged that the EU has a strategic interest in maintaining a secure and stable environment in the eastern Mediterranean. We also emphasised the importance of progress on the Cyprus settlement talks within the United Nations framework.

On the second day of our meeting, the former Italian Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, presented his recent report on the future of the Single Market. Ireland is among a large number of member states that are like-minded on the need to deepen and strengthen the Single Market, including for services, and to work constantly to improve our competitiveness, to advance and open an ambitious trade agenda, and to ensure fair competition and a level playing field for countries and enterprises. At our meeting, we agreed on the need to reinvigorate the Single Market as the key driver of European competitiveness and asked for a new horizontal Single Market strategy to be prepared by June 2025. This should contain concrete steps to improve conditions for investment and entrepreneurship in the decades ahead, as well as reducing red tape and removing barriers.

Driving forward the green and digital transformations, as well as meeting our increased security needs in coming years, will require significant investment. Mobilising private finance, including in partnership with public funding, will be essential. We, therefore, agreed on the need to deepen capital markets union in the EU. On agriculture, leaders acknowledged the importance of the sector and its key role in food security and the EU's strategic autonomy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am struck by the extraordinary double standards that the European Union displays and the Taoiseach seems to go along with when we look at the contrast between the way in which the Ukrainian situation is presented and the way in which the Palestinian situation is presented. It may just be a symbolic thing but tomorrow is Nakba, the anniversary of the catastrophe, as it is known to the Palestinians, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were ethnically cleansed, using extreme violence, in 1948. Millions of them are

refugees and under international law are allowed back, but Israel has no intention of ever letting them back and has made that absolutely clear. We cannot even fly the Palestinian flag here in the Oireachtas, although we fly the Ukrainian flag.

At the European Council, we start with Ukraine, affirming absolute support for Ukraine against what is the brutal invasion by Putin, and then we come to Israel and Iran. There are immediate sanctions for Iran but, from what I hear, no mention of the attack by the Israelis on the Iranian consulate. I am not justifying bombing by anybody but just pointing to the double standards. There is no mention of sanctions against Israel for what the International Court of Justice says is a plausible genocide and most sentient people, looking at the horror that is now intensifying in Rafah and has gone on for the past seven months, would say is a genocide. It is happy to impose sanctions on Russia and Iran but there are no sanctions on Israel despite the fact that it is probably - definitely, in my opinion - committing a genocide against the Palestinian people.

Deputy Mick Barry: I understand that the special European Council had some discussion on economic matters, including the position of small business and supports for small business. I also understand that the Taoiseach is bringing forward a package tomorrow. There are a few points I wish to make about that. I will start by saying hands off the minimum wage and hands off workers' sick leave. I am open to the idea of supports for small business. I do not have any ideological opposition to that but I am utterly opposed to any attempt to attack workers' rights in the name of helping small business. High rents are not going to go on hold. High prices at the supermarkets are not going to go on hold and the Government cannot go putting minimum wage increases on hold or on slowdown.

Fine Gael has always been, in my view, an anti-worker party but in recent times it has invested considerable energy in trying to portray an image of being a more worker-friendly party. However, if it tries to rein in pay increases for our lowest paid workers or leave entitlements for workers who are ill, that image will be in smithereens. It will be in smithereens in the run-in to a local election, a European election and a general election too. The Taoiseach might want to have a think about that.

Deputy Seán Haughey: This was the Taoiseach's first European Council meeting. As we have heard, there were several items on the agenda, including the Middle East and Ukraine. On Israel's war on Gaza, the European Council finally agreed, for the first time, to call for an immediate ceasefire, thus discarding the previous and wholly inadequate call for a humanitarian pause. It was also able to agree on the need for unhindered access for humanitarian aid at scale for Palestine. It seems that the brutal reality of the situation on the ground in Gaza was finally recognised collectively by all the EU leaders.

The European Council also considered, as we have heard, how to secure the economic prosperity of the EU. According to the Government press release at the time, the Taoiseach would be arguing for "a deeper Single Market; a more ambitious trade agenda, reduced administrative burdens for businesses, including SMEs; greater access to private investment to help build European enterprises; and a competitive, sustainable and resilient agricultural sector." It is very important that Europe's economy remains resilient and competitive, having regard to current global economic challenges. How was his economic message, that being the message in his press release, received? Is he satisfied that the EU is taking the necessary next steps to ensure ongoing economic growth in Europe?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is fair to say that people see double standards. I am not taking away from the fact that Germany, the Czech Republic and other member states started with what was not necessarily a helpful outlook with regard to Israel, and that is the nicest way I can put it. We have seen that many in the European Union and its various bodies were overly supportive of Israel and provided cover that was not in any way helpful as Israel started its genocidal attack on the Palestinian people, continuing its long history of oppression and land grabs.

It is also fair to say that, in the context of the illegal invasion by Russia, the general solidarity and support for Ukraine, which are right, have been impacted, especially in the global south, by the failure of the western powers to show teeth when they should have with regard to Israel. America and some of our European partners, such as Germany, still provide Israel with weapons. While we have seen some action on that and we welcome that there the European Council is finally talking about a ceasefire and aid, we know we need a lot more. Is there any update on whether humanitarian conditions can be brought into play with respect to the EU-Israel association agreement? If not, it means there was obviously a mistake in how the conditions were put together. We have a genocidal slaughter at this point and there are no means of impacting unless agreement is reached across the European Union.

As I said to the Taoiseach before, this is an absolute disaster and we do not what will face the people of Rafah. This is also about what we can do, however. We welcome what is going to be done on recognition, on which we need a timeline. Then there are further moves on divestment. I would like to see our Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill and-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are running over time. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I thank colleagues for the range of questions. First, when it comes to Palestine, I very clearly outlined at the European Council this country's intention to recognise the state of Palestine. I believe we should do it this month, and that is what I am working towards with colleagues in Government, the three parties in Government and also with European counterparts, including the Prime Minister of Spain and other colleagues I have spoken with and will speak to in the hours ahead.

Regarding the issue of trade and the like, I very clearly - and I want Deputy Boyd Barrett to know this - voiced at the European Council again my position and, I believe, Ireland's position regarding the need to review the association agreement. We are only one of two countries, along with Spain, which signed a letter to the Commission President with regard to that. While I am extraordinarily pro-European in my outlook, I do believe that European credibility gets damaged globally when we take or, certainly in the eyes of many in the world, are seen to take a different stance regarding one humanitarian catastrophe versus the other. We should be using every single lever at our disposal to bring about an immediate ceasefire and a two-state solution. That is the approach I take when I attend the European Council. It is the approach I took at my first one, and the approach I will continue to take as well.

On Deputy Barry's point, we did not discuss the Government's SME package at the European Council but the Deputy raised an important issue, so allow me to deal with it. First, there is no proposal from the Government with regard to the minimum wage. I am very proud of the fact that we set up a Low Pay Commission. I am very proud of the way that structure operates with regard to workers' representatives and business representatives. It does its work and generally reports during the summer. It is true to say that the minimum wage increased by, I think, €1.40 an hour about five months ago. That was an increase of about 12% at a time when

inflation was just over 5%, so it was a real-term increase. The Low Pay Commission will continue to do its work. My party, and the Government of three parties I am proud to lead, remains firmly pro-worker and pro making sure people who go to work can make a decent wage and have money in their pockets, whether that is through reductions in childcare, the introduction of parental leave, which has been a real assistance to many, the introduction of a first statutory sick pay scheme, and increasing take-home pay through a combination of minimum wage increases and tax reductions on work for low and middle income workers.

We have to recognise - and I welcome the fact the Deputy is not opposed to this - the need to support small business. We should not pit one group against another. It was always the intention, when we brought in a statutory sick pay scheme, that there would be review of impact by the ESRI, in a piece of research. That will happen but nobody is talking about rolling back the scheme that is in place. It is a question of the pace at which that scheme accelerates and we will be led by the research and evidence on that. However, when the Deputy says "hands off the minimum wage", I can assure him our hands are firmly off the minimum wage because we believe in the minimum wage. This Government has presided over many increases to the minimum wage.

In response to Deputy Haughey, I was very pleased with the discussion we had. I was very pleased, first, by the work done by Enrico Letta, the former Italian Prime Minister who has done the European Union and all its member states some service in the report he produced on the Single Market. It is not for me to speak for Enrico Letta but I very much got the sense from his report and presentation that there is still a view that the Single Market is for some businesses, perhaps larger ones, but not for the small and medium enterprises, and for some citizens but not all of them. There is a real sense of how to have a Single Market for all. I very much welcome that we made a decision to have a new strategic direction and roadmap for the deepening of the Single Market by June 2025.

I also welcomed the fact that we had a recognition of the importance of the capital markets union. We agreed on a conclusion and some text in relation to that because we are seeing a massive outflow of investment from the European Union, including from Ireland, to other parts of the world. At a time when we need so much investment in so many key areas in Europe, it makes sense to try to harness and capture that investment within the EU. The capital markets union is essential for that.

I largely covered Deputy Ó Murchú's points. The Irish position on Palestine is clear and I think it is heard on the European stage. We have to recognise that there is a diversity of opinions among member states. The point Deputy Haughey made is significant. It is now the unanimous view of the European Council that there needs to be an immediate ceasefire, an immediate cessation of violence, in the Middle East. That is a reflection of what the Irish position has been since the start of this horrific humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

8. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with the Spanish Prime Minister. [17783/24]

9. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on his recent engagement with the Spanish Prime Minister, with specific regard to the recognition of

a Palestinian state. [20335/24]

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meetings with the Spanish Prime Minister. [21325/24]

11. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meetings with the Spanish Prime Minister. [21328/24]

12. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with the Spanish Prime Minister. [21359/24]

13. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on his recent engagement with the Spanish Prime Minister, with specific regard to the recognition of a Palestinian state. [21524/24]

14. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on his recent engagement with Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21560/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 14, inclusive, together.

I spoke by phone with Prime Minister Sánchez, most recently on Monday, 6 May, when we again discussed the situation in the Middle East, especially in Gaza, concerns about Rafah, and plans to recognise the state of Palestine. In particular, we shared a deep concern about the potential impacts of an Israeli military operation in Rafah, recalling that the international community has made it very clear that an Israeli military operation would inevitably lead to disastrous humanitarian consequences and the deaths of large numbers of innocent civilians. The protection of civilians is an obligation under international humanitarian law.

The situation in the Middle East was also the focus of our discussions when Prime Minister Sánchez visited me in Dublin on Friday, 12 April. In our meeting, we expressed our deep concern about the devastating humanitarian situation in the Middle East, particularly in Gaza. We agreed to continue working together to push for an immediate ceasefire, the unconditional and immediate release of all remaining hostages and a surge in humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza. We took stock of work under way in New York on a resolution on Palestine's membership of the UN. Ireland fully supports Palestinian membership of the United Nations. I welcome that the resolution on Palestinian membership was overwhelmingly agreed by members of the UN General Assembly on 10 May.

Prime Minister Sánchez and I also discussed our concern about the risk of escalation of the conflict into the wider region, including Lebanon, a country that is already very fragile and in which both Ireland and Spain have members of our Defence Forces serving with United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL. Spain and Ireland have long taken a special interest in the region. It is fair to say that both countries are strongly committed to the vision of a two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living in peace and security side by side.

We discussed our shared commitment to the recognition of the state of Palestine at an early date. Ireland and Spain, together with Malta and Slovenia, have previously said this is something we are ready to do when the conditions are right. When we take the step we would like to do so with others, if possible, as a positive contribution to the search for peace and as something we believe can have a positive impact on the situation on the ground. We agreed that it is our

shared assessment that the right moment is coming much closer and that we would continue to co-ordinate closely with each other and with other like-minded countries.

In our meeting in Dublin, we also discussed the strong bilateral relationship that exists between Ireland and Spain, with deep and growing economic and people-to-people links. I also met the Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez in Warsaw on Thursday, 11 April, when we discussed the EU's future strategic agenda at a dinner that was convened by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and hosted by the Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk. It is clear that the coming years will be pivotal for the EU in terms of our collective security in a more volatile environment and our ability to secure the prosperity and well-being of our people in a rapidly changing world.

The Spanish Prime Minister and I also attended a special European Council in Brussels on 17 and 18 April, the agenda of which included Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East and, as I already discussed, the future of the EU's Single Market. I thank the Spanish Prime Minister for the work he has done internationally. I have been very pleased to work with him on trying to build a coalition and momentum for the recognition of the state of Palestine. People ask why we should recognise the state of Palestine. The answer is extremely simple. If you believe in a two-state solution, it is important that you recognise the existence of both states. We must keep the two-state solution very much to the fore at this time when others are seeking to actively undermine it.

Deputy Seán Haughey: It seems the Taoiseach has had a number of meetings with the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez. I also welcome the outcome of the vote taken at the UN General Assembly last week regarding membership for Palestine. As the Taoiseach knows, Ireland co-sponsored the resolution which received 143 votes, representing approximately 80% of the votes. Ireland was the first EU state to endorse the idea of Palestinian statehood back in 1980. In 2014, the Dáil passed a motion on this issue. I encourage the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste to continue their efforts with like-minded EU states, including Spain, with regard to the recognition of the state of Palestine.

The Oslo Accords provide for recognition after a final agreement has been reached. Things have changed, though, and recognition now could actually help the process of bringing about a permanent and peaceful two-state solution based on the Arab peace plan. What other like-minded EU states are on board in this regard? The Taoiseach mentioned in his reply to the last set of questions that he hopes to have some communications in the hours ahead. He also mentioned that Malta and Slovenia are on board. At this stage, who else is on board? Is he likely to get more countries on board? He may be able to answer that question. What is the timescale for recognition? Does the Taoiseach have a date in mind at this stage? Again, in answer to the previous group of questions, the Taoiseach said he hoped to have it agreed this month. Is that still his target?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Having murdered 34,183 Palestinians, including more than 13,000 children, Israel is now turning the focus of its genocidal onslaught towards Rafah, the last remaining shelter to some 1.5 million Gazans. Israel's most heinous behaviour is not a new phenomenon for those sheltering in Rafah, the majority of whom will recall the previous onslaughts in the past decade or more. The majority of them were already refugees in Gaza and are now doubly refugees in Rafah.

We know from Israeli operations in Gaza City, Deir al-Balah and Khan Yunis exactly what

will unfold. Safe areas, humanitarian workers, civilians and children will be purposely targeted. This will be a massacre that will have been announced weeks in advance in plain view of a hypocritical and uncaring international political system. A groundswell of the vast majority of humanity has joined the call for a ceasefire now in Gaza. They have taken to the streets in their millions in cities and communities in every corner of the world. It is incumbent on those of us in political life to meet their calls with decisive action, utilising every diplomatic, economic and political measure at our disposal, not only to sanction Israel for its blatant, cruel and cowardly disregard for international law and the basic rules of humanity, but to recognise Palestine, Palestinians and their innate, unwavering, dauntless and indomitable dignity, aspirations and ambitions.

The UN General Assembly vote is positive, but it is long past time that this Government fulfilled the mandate given to it by this House by setting a date on which it will recognise the state of Palestine. We have heard mention of 21 May. The Tánaiste said this was a leak from the Slovenian side, but the Taoiseach will have to tell the House when this is going to happen. We need to make sure that there is a Palestinian-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We need to recognise a Palestinian state while there is still a Palestinian people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I still say we need to take action on those things that we can do-----

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

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----such as enacting the occupied territories Bill and the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, I need to move on.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Taoiseach and Tánaiste have spoken about greater involvement in relation to Palestine.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please. You had a full two minutes. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We should long ago have recognised the state of Palestine but the question is this. What state is the Taoiseach recognising? Is he simultaneously legitimising the ethnic cleansing of historic Palestine when he speaks of a two-state solution?

4 o'clock

I find it ironic that people who are for a united Ireland, who call themselves republicans, who would never dream of endorsing a two-state solution in Ireland are for endorsing a two-state solution in Palestine. They are for the partition of Palestine forever after the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in 1948. They are now being ethnically cleansed again by a state that has now shown itself capable of genocide. We have seen not only apartheid and ethnic cleansing but genocide and people still think this is some sort of normal state.

Would we have been in favour of two-state solution in apartheid South Africa? No. Would we have been in favour of two-state solution in occupied Vietnam? No. Would we have been in favour of a two-state solution in occupied Algeria? No. Are we in favour of a two-state solution in Ireland? No. However, we are in favour of a two-state solution in Palestine which legitimises ethnic cleansing. What about the Palestinian right to return under international law? Most of the people in Gaza who are currently being massacred have the right under international law to return to what is now called Israel. What will happen to them under the so-called two-state solution? In any event Israel has said it has no interest in a two-state solution. Everything the Israelis have done has shown that was a smokescreen; it is a deception. It is institutionalising apartheid. I would like to hear people say that we are for the dismantlement of apartheid, the dismantlement of illegal occupation, the right of Palestinians to return and for a free and independent Palestine where Jew, Christian and Muslim can live together as equals.

Deputy Mick Barry: I congratulate the students at Trinity College who have forced their college to begin divesting from Israel. They have achieved more from their actions than has been achieved by the Government. I note that students at UCD have followed their example. I also congratulate the dozens of staff and students at UCC who have now formed the UCC BDS to organise action with the aim of forcing UCC into full divestment, cutting all financial ties to companies profiting from the occupation. I wish them well and we should watch that space closely.

Tamar Nejem is a 25-year-old Palestinian student. She left Gaza in September and came to Ireland. She is currently studying at Mary Immaculate Teacher Training College in Limerick. She is campaigning for her family to be allowed to come to Ireland. She has a mother, a father, four brothers and a sister in Gaza. In the last seven months her family's house has been bombed. The family have been forced to flee four times. Her father has suffered a heart attack and her sister a stroke. I fully support her campaign at the moment.

The recognition of a Palestinian state is to be welcomed, but it must be more than a symbolic gesture. It must go hand in hand with the granting of rights, including the right of millions of Palestinians forced to leave their homeland to return and have full rights. That is an important point. This must not be just a symbolic gesture and must be linked to the question of rights for people.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Taoiseach for his response. I commend him both personally and politically on the speed with which he found common ground with Pedro Sánchez and others. I very much look forward to progress being made on that matter. We need to be honest with ourselves, hearing on a daily basis the rhetoric coming from the Israeli Government. The reality of recognising the state of Palestine and pushing towards the two-state solution is that the international community will enforce that. That means the United Nations would enforce that. The current government in Israel in my view is the tip of the sword. I believe the next government could be even harder because of the repercussions of the actions of the Israelis since 7 October.

All of us, of course, condemn terrorism but state-sponsored terrorism must be also condemned. The persecution and isolation of the Palestinian people, in particular in Rafah, is horrifying. It is very clear to all of us in this House, including I am sure the Taoiseach, that the Israelis have no intention of pulling back or stopping until such time as they are made to do so. That is why I believe this State in recognising a Palestinian state, which is a very welcome endeavour, must work with the international community for the express purposes of guaran-

teeing, dare I say it, what Deputy Barry had to say, the personal rights and freedoms of those individuals in their statehood. The major issue I have with recognising the Palestinian state and pushing for a two-state solution is that if the Israelis are not on board, the whole endeavour is pointless in terms of saving lives. That is the most fundamentally important aspect of this entire discussion.

The Taoiseach: I thank colleagues for their contributions. I join Deputy Haughey and others in very much welcoming the overwhelming vote at the UN General Assembly on ensuring that Palestine can and should be a member of the United Nations. I also take this opportunity to commend our own diplomats at the United Nations led by our ambassador, Fergal Mythen, on the incredible work they do in speaking up for Ireland but also in speaking up for human rights and speaking up for the rule of international law. They did us proud this week.

I assure everybody that the Tánaiste and I continue our efforts to recognise the state of Palestine because I believe that recognition now can help. Four countries, Slovenia, Malta, Ireland and Spain, have publicly said in various forums that they wish to recognise the state of Palestine. I am very conscious that each country has its own processes to go through. Therefore, the sequencing of that is a matter for each country to consider. I am confident that there are a number of countries, including the ones I have named, that have publicly stated their wish to do this. I spoke to the Slovenian Prime Minister this week. I hope to speak to Maltese Prime Minister this week. I hope to speak to the Norwegian Prime Minister in the coming days. I will speak to the king of Jordan tomorrow. The Tánaiste and I along with our teams are continuing our diplomatic efforts on this recognition. I would like to see us recognise the state of Palestine this month. I want us to be as co-ordinated as we can be.

In response to Deputies Ó Murchú and Farrell, I am extremely concerned over what we are seeing in Rafah. I am extremely concerned that Israel has now begun very large-scale military strikes. The protection of civilians is an obligation under international humanitarian law. Approximately 1.5 million people are sheltering in Rafah in desperate conditions. Notwithstanding the evacuation orders from the Israeli military, the reality is there is nowhere safe for these people to go. The international community has made it very clear that an Israeli military attack operation, we can call it what we wish, in Rafah will inevitably lead to devastating humanitarian consequences and to the deaths of a very large number of innocent civilians. Again, this country today urges Israel to cease its operations in Rafah immediately. That is what we continue to say at all international forums and in working with international partners. There needs to be an avoidance of any further escalation. Israel must facilitate safe unimpeded access of humanitarian aid to the civilian population of Gaza including through the Rafah crossing.

I agree on the rights of people and where we get to in a two-state solution. However, I believe we can arrive at a two-state solution through a political peace process. Countries like Ireland recognising the state of Palestine is a very important marker in being very clear to the world, as Deputy Farrell points out, that the international community will see a two-state solution as the only acceptable outcome. There are people in the Israeli Government seeking to walk away from and undermining - these are massive understatements - that commitment to the two-state solution.

In all our discourse we should differentiate between the Netanyahu administration and the Israeli people. There are many people in Israel and in the Middle East who want to live side by side in peace, security and prosperity with a state of Israel and a state of Palestine. We should not allow Netanyahu to become the embodiment of the Israeli people.

15. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent meeting with the President of the European Commission. [21330/24]

16. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent meeting with the President of the European Commission. [21746/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 15 and 16 together.

I met the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in Brussels on 11 April. Ireland's membership of the European Union is of great importance to our national prosperity, well-being, and indeed, to our sense of identity and I undertook an early visit to Brussels as a signal of my commitment to continuing our excellent and co-operative relations with all of its institutions. My meeting with President von der Leyen took place on the same day I met the President of the European Council and the President of the European Parliament, that is, the three presidents of European institutions. The meeting with President von der Leyen covered many of the significant issues that are currently on the EU's agenda. We discussed the very worrying situation in Ukraine and the country's urgent need for continuing financial support. I conveyed the same message to President von der Leyen as I did to President Zelenskyy when I spoke to him, that is, the Irish Government remains steadfast in our support for Ukraine and will continue to assist in whatever way we can, consistent with our policy of military neutrality. Ukraine is fighting not just for its own territorial integrity and sovereignty, but for the shared fundamental European values of democracy and freedom. President von der Leyen and I agreed that Ukraine's future lies within the European Union. I expressed my thanks for the work the Commission is doing in that regard and I expressed my hope that formal negotiations with Ukraine can begin under the Belgian Presidency of the European Council.

On the Middle East and on Gaza, I again expressed my very strong wish, and that of the Irish people, to see an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and a massive and sustained surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza. I acknowledged and thanked her for her role in ensuring that the EU aid to UNRWA remained in place. In such a desperate situation, the role UNRWA plays in Gaza, as well as in the West Bank and elsewhere in the region, is indispensable.

We also discussed the Single Market and the need to ensure the EU's competitiveness. Without economic prosperity, Europe will not be able to fund its policy ambitions into the future. Ensuring a deep and strong Single Market, built on a level playing field for citizens and enterprises, coupled with an ambitious, rules-based trade agenda, is therefore essential. A vibrant and sustainable farming sector is also a vital part of the EU's future economic and food security. I expressed my view that we need to do more to support the farming and agricultural sector, which is currently facing significant pressures. I welcomed the conversation we had about not deciding whether you are on the side of climate or on the side of farmers but the need to have both food security and to recognise that there is a climate emergency. The EU is working quickly to address the concerns of Europe's farmers and to implement measures that will allow that greater flexibility while also ensuring our environment is protected. President von der Leyen and I also agreed that it is in the EU's strategic interests to ensure a strong and mutually beneficial relationship between the EU and the UK. President von der Leyen and I also met at the special meeting of the European Council on 17 and 18 April.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I offer my thoughts and wishes to the family of Pat Muckian who died last night following an attack in Dundalk on 3 May. Pat was very respected and was a member of a hugely respected family in Dundalk that has been through a huge tragedy. I wish to put that on record.

Regarding the European Commission and the rules on tendering, we all know we need to see accountability and transparency and need to ensure there is due diligence. However, we have seen the issues related to lowest cost tenders and it is absolutely vital we have an emphasis on the ability to deliver. I imagine the Taoiseach cannot be happy about how the news of the contract being awarded for the Narrow Water Bridge made its way into the public domain via the X account of Construction Information Services NI. Councillor Antóin Watters and I are obviously very supportive of this project but we were in correspondence with Louth County Council, which stated it did not put the information out there as the lead. The county council also stated that the contract figure is not necessarily correct. We all support this project and we all need to see it continue. It is an absolutely fabulous cross-Border project that will be brilliant for my part of the world, both North and South. It is about making sure we have absolute follow-through and due diligence is done regarding the contract, the price and the time of delivering the project. We need to make sure there are no more hiccups or obstacles.

Deputy Seán Haughey: In his discussions with President Ursula von der Leyen, did the Taoiseach discuss the nature restoration law? In his view, is she still committed to the European Green Deal to tackle climate change? With the European Parliament elections coming up, there is a view that the European People's Party is becoming less committed to climate change and to taking the appropriate measures. Did the Taoiseach get any sense of a pulling-back from the green deal by Ursula von der Leyen?

The second question, having regard to a previous question, refers to relations between the EU and the Republic of Türkiye. It is clear that Türkiye is not about to join the European Union any time soon. I have no doubt President Erdoğan has something to do with that. Is Türkiye open to the prospects for closer co-operation with the EU? Are concrete and practical steps being taken for this closer co-operation, which, as the Taoiseach said earlier, will help to bring peace and stability to the region?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Ursula von der Leyen embodies the shocking and blatant double standards that have been displayed by the European Union. On the one hand, she is the most gung ho for arming, supporting, or whatever is necessary in terms of Ukraine being faced with a brutal and illegal invasion. She then stands beside Netanyahu as he embarks on what we can now see is a genocidal murderous massacre against the Palestinian people, the blood of whom she has on her hands for the position she took. She continues to defend the indefensible in the unwavering support for Israel and its so-called security when it is massacring people. When she visited here, I pointed out that this was the Ursula von der Leyen who had, as German defence minister, done arms deals no problem with Saudi Arabia. It is a brutal dictatorship; sell it arms. I honestly ask, given the disrepute into which she has brought the European Union regarding these things, should we not be saying publicly that she is not the person who should be leading the European condition and the European Union? She has brought the EU into disrepute, embodies those double standards and she should be removed from office and certainly not get another term.

The Taoiseach: I join with Deputy Ó Murchú in extending my sympathies to the family of Pat from Dundalk and I associate myself with the Deputy's remarks. I also welcome the

Deputy's commitment to the Narrow Water Bridge, which President von der Leyen and I did not discuss directly. Having said that, I know the importance of the bridge to this country, to the Deputy's region and the constituency he represents. I also take seriously the points about timelines and delivery of that project. I am very happy to ask the relevant line Ministers to keep the Deputy up to date on this as well.

On Deputy Haughey's question, President von der Leyen and I discussed the importance of climate, the European Green Deal and addressing the farmers. At a European level, we have a more magnified example of what can sometimes happen in this country where people are asked to chose wrongly, bizarrely, sometimes by the commentariat, sometimes in this House, sometimes for people's own narrow political interests, if they are on the side of the climate emergency or on the side of the farmers. Actually, Government public policy has to be able to do more than one thing at a time. We have a climate emergency, we have a green deal at European level, and we have the nature restoration law for which the Deputy's own MEP colleagues and mine voted as well. That was the right call and history will judge that to be the right call. I believe President von der Leyen remains committed to the green deal. However, there is also a recognition at a European level that is now also at an Irish level, that there is a need to bring people with you by showing people the transition, how you can continue to have an agrifood sector and encourage young people to get involved in farming in a way that is environmentally sustainable. We had a good conversation on this.

I was pleased - and I can send the Deputy a note on this - that language was agreed regarding Türkiye and engagement. While the Deputy may well be right, and I think he is, regarding timelines for any future enlargement of the European Union in respect of Türkiye, it is important to the region and the stability of the European Union to have good relations. I was pleased that there were EU Council conclusions in April in relation to that.

Anybody's tenure in any role has to be viewed in the round. At the start, the European Commission's position regarding Israel and the Middle East was not where it needed to be, to put it mildly. It is also important to remember that the European Council, European foreign ministers and others are those that provide the mandate in respect of these comments. There is an obligation on us all as European leaders to continue to advocate for an immediate cessation of violence in the Middle East.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2024: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am very pleased to introduce the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No.2) Bill 2024 to the Dáil. The legislation has two main aims. First, through amendments to the Health Act 2007, it will strengthen the regulatory framework for residential care services regulated under the Act. This includes residential centres for older persons, people with disabilities and children in need of care and protection. The ultimate objective of these proposals is to drive improvements for people living in these centres. These are some of the most vulnerable people and it is vital that we have a robust system of regulation to ensure they are receiving safe, quality care. Second, through amendments to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009, it will widen the definition of those eligible to be considered as a family successor to a family farm or productive business assets under the nursing homes support scheme, or, as many people know it, fair deal.

I will begin by focusing on amendments to the Health Act 2007. The Health Act 2007 established the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, and the Office of the Chief Inspector of Social Services. It also provides for a scheme of registration and inspection of the aforementioned residential services and for the making of regulations and the setting of standards on safety and quality in respect of these residential services. The Chief Inspector of Social Services, the regulator of these services, monitors compliance with these regulations and standards. There are three substantive provisions in the Bill to enhance the regulator's enforcement powers and, consequently, to provide greater safeguards for residents. It is important to state at the outset that in general, there is a good standard of care across our residential services and good levels of compliance with regulations. However, as we all know, this is not always the case. We can see that in the inspection reports published on a regular basis by the chief inspector. In a recent annual overview report of monitoring and regulation of older persons' services in 2022, the chief inspector noted that although there was good overall compliance in 2022, "there are regulations with consistently higher levels of non-compliance over a prolonged period". For these instances, it is essential that effective enforcement mechanisms are in place.

The first of these enhancements will provide the chief inspector with a new power to issue compliance notices, which are an enforcement tool common across other regulated sectors. At present, the chief inspector's enforcement powers centre on placing restrictions known as conditions on a registration or, in extreme cases, cancelling a registration. The chief inspector has described these as blunt instruments. Compliance notices will provide for a more timely and proportionate intervention where there is a breach of the regulations, focused on bringing a provider into compliance and driving service improvement. Non-compliance with a compliance notice will be an offence under these new provisions and may be subject to prosecution. It is important to state that this amendment is not introducing new requirements or increased regulation on service providers. It is simply providing the chief inspector with a further mechanism to ensure that the current protections for residents, as required under regulations, are adhered to and upheld.

The second enforcement provision relates to the power to enter and inspect premises. The chief inspector currently has the power to enter and inspect premises that are registered or are in the process of registering as designated centres. It is an offence to operate as a designated centre without being registered by the chief inspector. However, there is no explicit power for the chief inspector to enter premises which he or she suspects are operating as designated centres to establish if, in fact, this offence is being committed. To address this, the Bill provides for an amendment to the Health Act to provide a clear and unambiguous power for the chief inspector in this regard and will ensure the protections afforded to residents of registered centres are extended to those in centres operating outside the registration and regulatory system.

The third change being made to enhance enforcement arrangements concerns the timelines for current enforcement processes in the Act. At present, service providers have 28 days to make representations in relation to a proposed decision by the chief inspector to place a condition on registration or to cancel a registration and to appeal a decision of the chief inspector to the District Court. I want to make these processes quicker in order that the chief inspector can take timely action to safeguard residents. The amendment will reduce these timeframes from 28 days to 14 days. I believe that this is a proportionate measure and takes account of the fact that there is generally significant engagement between the chief inspector and the provider in advance of any proposed enforcement decision. The new timeframe also aligns with timeframes for other District Court appeal processes. The Bill also introduces new provisions

in relation to the collection of key data from nursing homes. These provisions relate to nursing homes only. The majority of nursing homes are in private ownership and we currently do not have any centralised powers for the systematic collection of key data across the sector on a regular basis. This issue came to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic. Access to good-quality, collated data on a sectoral basis is crucial to supporting effective national policymaking and service planning. These provisions are to address this gap. The amendments will provide a new obligation on nursing home providers to provide a defined data set to the chief inspector and will provide the chief inspector with new functions to collect, share and publish this data. The categories of data are defined in the Bill and broadly encompass information on the centre itself and the profile of residents and staff. This is the type of data available across other areas of the health service. It is worth emphasising that data will not be collected at the individual level, that is, the resident or staff member but will be in relation to the overall profile of residents and staff in the facility. Safeguards have also been included in the legislation to ensure that any data that identifies an individual will not be shared or published by the chief inspector. There is a small number of further minor amendments to the 2007 Act, which I will mention briefly later.

I will now outline the changes proposed to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009. The nursing home support scheme, commonly known as the fair deal scheme, is a system of financial support for those requiring long-term nursing home care. Participants contribute to the cost of their care according to their means, while the State pays the balance of the cost. As Deputies will be aware, I introduced an amendment to the scheme through the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Act 2021, which extended the three-year cap that applies to the applicant's principal private residence to family farms and business assets, where a family successor is appointed. This family successor must continue to run the farm or business for at least a period of six years and have at least consistently applied to running the family asset for at least three of the last five years. This was a really important change to safeguard and protect the viability of family farms and businesses and it ensures that more family farms and businesses are handed down to the next generation. Since the introduction of the amendment, which came into operation in October 2022, there have been 301 applications, with 96 being successful. Since introducing these amendments, it has become clear that a small group of individuals with no close relatives have sought to benefit from this relief but cannot because they do not have a person who meets the eligibility criteria for a family successor, as currently provided for in the legislation. These proposed amendments to the fair deal scheme will ensure that the safeguards for family farms and businesses apply to the extended family, including cousins, great-nieces, great-nephews and great-grandchildren, further protecting the viability and sustainability of these businesses into the future. This is a really important change for individuals who do not have immediate relatives. There are also a number of technical amendments to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act in the Bill, which I will mention briefly later.

I will now provide a brief explanation of the sections of this Bill. The Bill is divided into three parts, with 35 sections. Part 1 is for the preliminary and general provisions of the Bill and contains only one section. Section 1 contains standard provisions in relation to the Short Title and commencement arrangements. Part 2 provides for amendments to the Health Act 2007 and contains sections 2 to 19, inclusive.

Section 2 is the standard interpretation section and provides that the principal Act refers to the Health Act 2007.

Section 3 sets out amendments to section 41 of the 2007 Act to provide for new functions for the chief inspector to collect key data relating to designated centres for older people - nursing

homes - and to inspect premises where he or she suspects the business of a designated centre is being carried out while unregistered.

Section 4 sets out amendments to section 49 of the 2007 Act to provide that any details of any fines or penalties imposed under the Act will be entered on the register of designated centres maintained by the chief inspector. This will enhance transparency.

Section 5 inserts a new section 51A into the 2007 Act to provide an express statutory power for the chief inspector to remove a condition attached to a designated centre's registration without the need for an application by the registered provider as currently required. This will remove an unnecessary burden on the provider and speed up the process.

Section 6 is a consequential amendment arising from Section 5 and amends section 53 of the 2007 Act to provide that the chief inspector must notify the provider of the decision to remove a condition.

Section 7 sets out amendments to section 54 of the 2007 Act to reduce the timeframe in which a registered provider may make representations to the chief inspector in respect of a proposed decision regarding registration from 28 days to 14 days.

Section 8 provides for two amendments to section 55 of the 2007 Act. The first is another consequential amendment arising from section 5 to provide that the chief inspector must give notice to the provider of a decision to remove a condition, and the second a reduction in the timeframe from 28 to 14 days.

Section 9 amends section 57 of the 2007 Act to reduce the timeframe in which a registered provider may appeal a decision of the chief inspector regarding a registration to the District Court from 28 to 14 days.

Section 10 sets out amendments to section 65 of the Act in respect of the submission of information to the chief inspector by registered providers. It states that the chief inspector can request information necessary for the undertaking of her functions and that the provider is obliged to provide the information, and in the manner and form, the chief inspector considers necessary.

Section 11 inserts new section 65A into the 2007 Act to provide for the collection, sharing and publication of key data from designated centres for older people. It states that no data that can identify an individual can be shared or published. The section also inserts a new section 65B to provide that a registered provider shall not submit false or misleading information to the chief inspector, and it will be an offence under section 73 of the Act to do so.

Section 12 provides for transitional provisions relating to the reduction of the time limits from 28 to 14 days.

Section 13 inserts new sections 73A and 73B into the 2007 Act to provide that the chief inspector may enter to inspect a premises where he or she believes the business of a designated centre is being carried out, but which is not registered. It sets out the actions that the chief inspector may take and the circumstances in which the District Court may issue a warrant authorising entry to a premises.

Sections 14 and 15 are consequential amendments arising from section 13. Section 14 amends section 76 of the 2007 Act to extend the circumstances where the chief inspector may be accompanied by a member of An Garda Síochána to include inspections of unregistered cen-

tres. Section 15 inserts new section 77B into the 2007 Act, which mirrors section 77 to provide that a person shall not refuse entry, obstruct or impede an inspection or give false or misleading information in the context of such an inspection.

Section 16 inserts a new section 78A into the 2007 Act to provide for the serving of compliance notices on registered providers. It states that the chief inspector may issue such notices to the registered provider of a designated centre for older people or people with disabilities. It also states that the compliance notice will identify the area of non-compliance and a timeframe within which this should be remedied. It also provides that the registered providers will have the right to make an appeal to the District Court within 14 days. It finally sets out that a registered provider who does not comply with the notice within the specified date is guilty of an offence and liable to prosecution. Fines and penalties for prosecution mirror those currently in the Act. Details of any fine or penalties incurred by the registered provider under this new provision shall be entered on a non-compliance list maintained by the chief inspector, which may be published. This measure will apply to designated centres for older persons and designated centres for people with a disability.

Section 17 sets out amendments to section 79 of the 2007 Act to introduce the offence of providing false or misleading information under the new provisions in section 65A or under section 77B to refuse or obstruct entry to a person carrying out an inspection under section 73A

Section 18 sets out amendments to section 101(3) of the 2007 Act to ensure that there is a clear legal basis for the Minister to prescribe in regulations required elements of a complaints process for designated centres.

Section 19 inserts a new section 101B into the 2007 Act to provide the Minister for Health with regulation-making powers to prescribe the collection, sharing and publication of data relating to designated centres for older persons. Regulations will determine the type of data to be collected, shared and published and the frequency of the submission and sharing of the information as provided for by the new section 65A as described already. Part 3 provides for amendments to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009 and contains sections 20 to 33, inclusive.

Section 20 is the standard interpretation section, which provides that the Act of 2009 means the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009.

Section 21 sets out amendments to section 14A to extend the categories of persons eligible to be appointed as family successors to a family farm or business, to include first cousins, great-nephews, great-nieces and great-grandchildren.

Section 22 provides for technical amendments to section 14C to clarify the circumstances in the appointment of a family successor in section 14C(4)(f).

Section 23 sets out technical amendments to section 14D with regard to a determination of a family successor in the case of members of a couple.

Section 24 amends section 14F to extend the categories of persons eligible to be appointed as family successors to a family farm or business to include first cousins, great-nephews, great-nieces and great-grandchildren.

Section 25 provides for technical amendments to section 14G relating to the death or change

in circumstances of a family successor provisions to extend the categories of persons eligible to be appointed as family successors.

Section 26 provides for technical amendments to section 14H in respect of a change in family successor following the transfer of a particular family asset provisions and to extend the categories of persons eligible to be appointed as family successors, similar to those amendments in section 25.

Section 27 provides for technical amendments to section 141 relating to the repayment of an increase in State support provisions.

Section 28 provides for technical amendments to section 14K in the application by a partner of a family successor provisions.

Section 29 sets out technical amendments to section 14L in the application by a partner of a deceased person for the appointment of a family successor provisions and to extend the categories of persons eligible to be appointed as family successors.

Section 30 sets out technical amendments to section 14M in respect of a determination as to farm or business relief where a family successor fulfils an undertaking and the second person in a couple is entering nursing home care after the family successor has fulfilled the undertaking in regard to the first partner. Section 30(1)(d)(*iii*) currently sets out that this section is to apply where the partner has received three years of nursing home care after the expiry of the period of the undertaking. However, the requirement relating to three years of nursing home care is provided for by way of section 14M(4). For this reason, section 14M(1)(d)(*iii*) is deleted.

Section 31 sets out technical amendments to section 24A regarding notification of material change in the circumstances of a family successor provisions.

Section 32 sets out technical amendments to section 27A relating to the discharge of orders made under section 14B provisions.

Section 33 provides for technical amendments to section 32 regarding appeals against certain decisions of the HSE provisions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State deserves a medal. I call Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: We support reform of HIQA's enforcement powers. HIQA's current enforcement powers are blunt and we have been saying that for some time. We will support the Bill but the Government has been far too limited in its approach. I met HIQA officials on a number of occasions in recent years on many of these matters. The Bill provides for compliance notices for the Chief Inspector of Social Services at the authority. This is something I called for in a policy document I launched two and a half years ago. It provides for compliance notices to be issued to designated centres for older persons and people with disabilities and improvements to the enforcement system. The Bill also provides for improved data collection on nursing homes and to widen the definition of those eligible to be considered as a family successor to a family farm or productive business assets under the nursing home support scheme, which again we support.

HIQA published comprehensive proposals on improving its governing legislation and enforcement powers in 2013 and more recently in 2017 and 2021. The authority has been calling

for these for a long time and it has taken far too long for the Government to act on them. HIQA has flagged that existing definitions fall short of legal clarity and that there are no specific clinical governance links, which resulted in confusion, resistance and adverse outcomes during the Covid-19 pandemic. None of this is addressed in the Bill. HIQA sought improved compliance notices but it also sought a more flexible enforcement system, which included failure to comply with notices and the ability to more robustly attach, enforce and direct implementation of conditions attached to operating licences. The ability to initiate and conduct investigations must also be addressed. Whether this legislation meets the authority's needs will need to be examined further ahead of Committee Stage. It has also called for a comprehensive social care policy and comprehensive social care services regulation. The Government continues to regulate home care, long-term residential care and other types of care separately. HIQA is clearly of the view that supported and-or assisted living and sheltered housing, personal assistance, day services, home sharing, hospice and living services are not covered adequately and should be included in a comprehensive regulatory framework along with nursing homes and home care.

I will make a number of points on the review of the regulatory framework and adult safeguarding legislation. The Government has not progressed an adult safeguarding Act, despite a comprehensive Bill presented by former Senator Colette Kelleher in the previous Seanad, which was reintroduced by Senator Frances Black. Safeguarding teams are a HSE function but they are managed differently across community healthcare organisation, CHO, areas, are often under resourced and do not have access or right to access private facilities. They must be invited by homes, which otherwise investigate themselves. This is unacceptable and has been for too long. Safeguarding teams and social workers need a legal right of entry. Again, this is something we proposed in our policy document some years ago.

We fully support adult safeguarding legislation. The Government's term has been a missed opportunity because it has not progressed such legislation. Not only do we need safeguarding legislation but we also need a safeguarding authority. Furthermore, we need to look at safeguarding beyond health and through a much wider lens across a range of areas to protect our most vulnerable people. People at risk of neglect, coercion and abuse deserve a comprehensive legal framework for safeguarding in place to protect adults at risk of neglect, abuse, isolation or coercion. There are much broader safeguarding risks in society outside of healthcare settings that it could also address but the Government has ignored this whole area of vulnerable adults. The Covid committee, on which I sat, made a very important recommendation for a full review of the regulatory framework. The Law Reform Commission undertook similar work starting in 2020, which was published last month. I read their proposals last night. They have also published draft Bills in this area as well. This should have been undertaken much earlier as this has been an issue for the past decade. The Minister must expedite adult safeguarding legislation. There can be no excuses. We have to move in the area. Unfortunately it has been one of many areas in which the Minister and the Government have dragged their feet and not delivered.

The Bill provides for a legal right of entry where the chief inspector believes an unregistered centre is operating, but it does not provide a legal right of entry for social workers, safeguarding teams, or family or care partners. If it does, I would ask the Minister of State to point to where that is the case.

On care partners, during the pandemic, families were sounding the alarm of neglect and isolation but were not listened to by the Government. I met many of them over the past year and a half. By contrast, in the North, a care partner scheme was provided for, which ensured two family members could assist in the care and supervision of care of their loved one. The Gov-

ernment in the South has refused to entertain any such scheme, despite its success in the North, which is recognised by families and the Executive and was called for by bereaved families in the South.

The area of home care is possibly one of the Government's biggest failures. There are currently no quality standards for the provision of home care. Current standards are not enforceable. The Government has not progressed legislation to regulate home care or provide a statutory home care scheme. It has started a pilot project that falls far short of what was committed to in the programme for Government. It took the Government several years to set up the commission on care. Many people who are experts in this area are very concerned about the model of the commission of care which the Minister of State has established.

With regard to the privatisation and consolidation of ownership in the nursing home sector, 80% of nursing home beds are now private; 38% of beds are operated by just 15 operators, of which 14 are funded by private equity firms. All of this has happened under the watch of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, which have made this an unfortunate reality. Private nursing homes are independent and self-governing. This has continually been identified as a clinical governance concern but ignored by the Minister of State and her Government. The Government has failed to invest in public nursing home capacity and reverse this trend, and where it has opened nursing homes beds, these are being poached in some areas for step-down beds for hospitals, such as in Nenagh. Many nursing home beds across the State are now operating as step-down beds to support hospitals. There may be logic to that but it is all due to the Government's lack of funding for these step-down beds in the first place.

HIQA has no legal powers to investigate individual complaints. The way the regulation is designed is that the authority looks at totality of the service. The provider has to do investigation themselves and provide findings to the HIQA. The authority has advocated change in this area. If not HIQA, which is a systems regulator, adult safeguarding teams should be responsible and resourced to investigate individual complaints in public and private nursing homes. Private nursing homes should not be investigating themselves.

I have long called for a comprehensive social care policy. The Department of Health should be called the Department of health and social care because social care has been left behind by successive Governments. The Department of Health does not have a comprehensive, integrated social care policy that considers social care in its totality alongside Sláintecare.

Disability services are inadequately regulated, as we have seen from HIQA's proposals. Decongregation has taken a back seat under the Government, which has not substantially progressed decongregation of intellectual disability services.

There are many elements of the Bill I support. Any advance is an advance but when considering all the lessons that should have been learned from Covid, all the reports that have been done by HIQA and all the expert reports from working groups established by the Government, we all know much more needs to be done to put in place proper regulatory systems, proper adult safeguarding legislation, proper enforcement bodies, an independent safeguarding authority and much more to make sure the most vulnerable citizens of our State are protected, and these are areas the Government has completely failed in.

With regard to nursing homes, unfortunately the Minister of State has presided over a system where more and more private capacity is coming in. Very little public capacity has come

from this Government. It has been something the Government has ignored and it has allowed the private sector to dominate the nursing home sector. It promised us a commission on care. It took far too long for it to be set up and it will probably be the next Government that will have to look at the implications of that. Were I in the Minister of State's position, I would change the terms of reference for the commission, as has been advocated by Sage Advocacy and many more groups. I met them today on this issue. The Government's statutory home care scheme was much promised and a big part of the programme for Government. I suspect it took a back seat because the political will was not there to deal with it and because the resources were just not going to be committed to it. That is the legacy of this Government.

Deputy Mary Butler: And of Covid

Deputy David Cullinane: Covid should actually have been the battle cry or the rallying cry to this Government to actually deal with these issues. The Minister of State is actually making the argument for me. Covid was the big disrupter that said to the State that we need to do more about adult safeguarding legislation, homecare and a statutory homecare but the Minister of State did not deliver and she has to accept her own responsibility for those failings.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: As Sinn Féin's spokesperson for older people, Sinn Féin and I give cautious support to this Bill that seeks to reform HIQA's enforcement powers. Yes, it provides for compliance notices and better collection of nursing home data but it does not go anywhere close to addressing the huge concerns around safeguarding and regulations.

The issues with HIQA have been ongoing since at least 2013 and the Minister of State has been in government for all of this time and still no real action has been taken. The Bill falls short on so many levels such as poorly defined terms, lack of legal clarity and no specific clinical governance. Calls from HIQA to strengthen its governing legislation have fallen on deaf ears. All of these ended ultimately in the tragic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Where was the safeguarding then? There is not even a hint of any plan for a comprehensive social care policy or regulation. There is no joined-up thinking by the Government. Should the likes of supported assisted living, day services or sheltered housing not also come under the same umbrella of regulation as nursing homes? My view is that they should. After all, these services also care for our vulnerable and elderly citizens.

These vulnerable persons and all users of these services need to feel safe in the knowledge their safety and well-being will be absolutely assured. How can this be when the Government has failed yet again to move forward with the adult safeguarding legislation despite many opportunities to do so. Even the HSE safeguarding teams have no legal right to enter private facilities, which my colleague has mentioned. They must be invited in, meaning that private nursing home are effectively self-regulating. I find it very concerning that 80% of our nursing homes are private and almost half of these are operated by private equity firms. We cannot have a fox minding the henhouse situation with little or no regulation. We all know what happened when that happened with the banks. That cannot continue and it has to be sorted out.

The Government's abject failure to progress vital safeguarding legislation is yet another target it has missed. It has missed targets in housing, health and the list goes on. The Government has failed these vulnerable people again and again and they need and deserve to have a comprehensive legal framework in place that they can rely on for their protection. We do not have to go far back to find proof of these failures. Let us remember the Covid-19 pandemic - the Minister of State mentioned it and gave us an opportunity to discuss it - when nursing home

residents died alone and without loved ones and front-line care workers struggled to cope, burnt out physically and mentally and often with defective, or worse, no PPE. Where was the safeguarding then? Where was the care partner scheme such as in the North? Why do we not have the same system here? It is badly needed and should be applied here. More importantly, where is the date for the Covid-19 inquiry? There is still no date set for it despite multiple requests. I asked the Minister of State for one last week and I have asked about the Covid inquiry four times this year already. No answers have been forthcoming.

We need clearer legislation; a statutory right of entry for safeguarding and social care teams; a comprehensive social care policy as set out by Sinn Féin's in our priorities for change in our health and social care document; safeguarding teams to be fully resourced and operating from the same page across all CHOs; and to tackle the clinical governance issues to end the practice of private nursing homes effectively self-regulating. What we need at this point is a change of government and a Sinn Féin government will do all of that.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We too in the Labour Party welcome this Bill. Transparency in healthcare is vital so that we as legislators know the areas that need improvement and can take action more swiftly, when needed. Amending the Health Act 2007 to give the Chief Inspector of Social Services new powers and to make amendments to existing provisions relating to enforcement, and the collection, sharing and publication of key data on nursing homes and complaint processes will provide the transparency we need to make informed decisions. It is particularly important in the context of our ageing population.

Safeguarding our older persons is an important responsibility. The new powers provided to the chief inspector in the Bill, which include issuing compliance notices as a complement to other important powers of the Act, the ability to enter and inspect a premises that is unregistered if there are reasonable grounds to believe the business of a designated centre is being carried on in line with the existing provisions in the Act for the entry and inspection of registered centres and a reduction in timelines for existing important provisions initiated under section 51 of the Act to expedite enforcement actions, are all significant steps in the right direction for safeguarding. The new functions provided by the Bill for the chief inspector to collect key data on nursing homes, the sharing of the data with the Minister, HIQA and the HSE as appropriate, and the publication of this data at aggregate level can be an important push towards change in how the nursing home sector can be managed and resourced. The Bill also introduces new regulation-making powers for the Minister for Health to prescribe the arrangements for the collection, sharing and publication of the data. This creates the ability for the Minister and his Department to take part in the type of long-term planning the sector desperately needs. I hope the Minister will utilise this mechanism to its utmost.

I have broader concerns, however, that the Government has been found lacking in its support for our older citizens and that an agenda for divestment over investment in long-term care, which has been prevalent since it took office, has been extremely damaging. Older people deserve proper care, support and the ability to live a happy and fulfilled life. We absolutely need to ensure nursing homes our citizens go to are of a standard we would expect for ourselves, for any of our family members and indeed for any citizen. This is vital. However, in doing so we cannot ignore the huge public appetite for people to want to age in their own homes as has been revealed in numerous surveys and is apparent in Government policy. Along with this type of legislation, we also need the Government to improve and resource our home care policies and home care resources.

I am deeply concerned following the ESRI report released earlier this year that found that 15 large private groups now control 39% of the almost 32,000 nursing home beds in the country. Caring for our older citizens should not be a profit-driven machine. The ESRI report concluded that it is vital as the needs of an ageing populations grow and evolve that policies harmonise financial incentives for nursing home operators with resident's needs. It is really as simple as that

The Bill is important in that the powers given to the Chief Inspector of Social Services point in the right direction. These types of measures are aimed at protecting residents and, of course, staff in nursing homes.

There is a huge problem with the number of nursing homes that have been coalesced into these large private groups. I have spoken about this many times, including on national media. The industry will say it that does not matter what the name is above the door but for me it does. The outsourcing and privatisation of our nursing home sector is not something that should expand. We need to see it rolled back and see greater State ownership and involvement. While I welcome the provisions of this Bill to improve regulation we need to see greater steps in the provision of new nursing home beds and nursing home care from the State. The State has the responsibility to prioritise the well-being of our older people. These individuals have contributed their entire lives to our society and deserve proper care. That is why we need to invest rather than divest, not only in nursing homes but also in our home care workers.

There are concrete steps to be taken alongside this legislation to ensure our older citizens are being looked after such as making working in a nursing home a more attractive job prospect for young people and young workers, ensuring better pay, conditions and clear career progression. The Labour Party is also calling for the appointment and resourcing of a commissioner for older people and ageing to address the urgent needs of our older citizens.

I have touched more generally on what has happened with regard to the privatisation of the sector more widely. It has led to increased problems with no continuity of care or indeed continuity of home care. We also have yet to see the delivery of a statutory right to care, which the Government promised. This is extremely important. The Bill relates to nursing homes but we have situations in the home care sector where an individual will have to have providers changed on them and the previous provider will provide list of things that will be done in terms of care in the home but when that individual gets a new provider, the list changes because there is not a statutory right to care and it is ultimately down to providers to state what element of care they will provide. It is quite frankly something that cannot continue.

I previously welcomed that the commission on care has finally commenced, which is important, but there are issues right now.

5 o'clock

More importantly, they have been evident in the current model of care for a long time. There is an opportunity to make real progress in the sector, with a Government that is willing to make not only the right decisions, but also decisive ones. If we get statutory home care right and remove the policies of divestment and instead invest all across our care sector, including in nursing homes, together with a number of smaller facilities, we can bring more balance to the healthcare system. By doing so, we would take pressure off the hospitals that are beyond tipping point at this stage.

The Bill amends the Nursing Home Support Scheme Act 2009, which established the nurs-

ing support scheme under which financial support is provided to those availing of long-term residential care needs. The Bill changes the definition of those eligible to be considered as a family successor to a family farm or productive business assets to include cousins, great-nephews and great-nieces and great-grandchildren. This is something we need to examine further, in terms of the implications of these provisions. There are positive steps in the Bill and I hope better transparency and accountability will stem from it. The Government needs to do better more broadly regarding care for our older citizens.

Deputy Pauline Tully: While we will support the Bill, it is very limited and does not go far enough to protect people at risk of neglect or coercion and abuse. Currently, disability services are inadequately regulated. In 2019, a HIQA report on the first five years of the regulation of designated residential centres for adults and children with disabilities in Ireland found that significant challenges remain regarding the management and oversight of services addressing infrastructural deficits and safeguarding vulnerable people.

HIQA published three comprehensive proposals on improving its governing legislation and enforcement powers, the first in 2013, another in 2017 and the third in 2021. It has taken far too long to act on these proposals. In them, HIQA sought improved compliance notices, which I welcome and are included in the Bill. However, it also sought a more flexible enforcement system, which included failure to comply notices and the ability to move robustly to attach, enforce and direct the implementation of conditions attached to operating licences. The ability to initiate and conduct investigations must also be addressed. It is not clear if the Bill meets these needs and this must be examined further.

HIQA also called for a comprehensive social care policy and services regulation. While the Government continues to regulate home care, long-term residential care and other types of care separately, HIQA is clearly of the view that supported and-or assisted living and sheltered housing, personal assistance, day services, home sharing, hospice and living services are not covered adequately and should be included in a comprehensive regulatory framework, along with nursing homes and home care.

It is almost 13 years since the publication of the Time to Move On from Congregated Settings report in 2011, yet decongregation is still nowhere near complete. This has resulted in a number of service models being in operation. HIQA has highlighted that it is in something of a grey area and has stated that, in many cases, service providers can legitimately argue that they are not designated centres because the service users are not availing of care in the traditional sense. It has also highlighted the need to reconsider how services for people with disabilities are regulated, given the evolving models of care and support.

Disability advocates have expressed concern that HIQA inspections are predominantly focused on monitoring facilities in the absence of powers to investigate and decide on individual cases and complaints. There are long-standing calls for adult safeguarding legislation to be introduced, yet the Government has not progressed an adult safeguarding Act despite a comprehensive Bill presented by former Senator Colette Kelleher in the previous Seanad, which was reintroduced by Senator Frances Black. We fully support safeguarding legislation and the Government's term has been a missed opportunity in this regard.

People at risk of neglect, coercion and abuse deserve a comprehensive legal framework for safeguarding to be put in place. As I said, while I will support the Bill, it is severely limited in a number of areas and these need to be addressed. I hope the Government will take these con-

cerns on board and consider proposals put forward which aim to strengthen the Bill.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome this long-awaited Bill to progress recommendations 14.4 and 14.6 of the Covid-19 nursing homes expert panel, which the Social Democrats will support. However, it is deeply regrettable that it has taken this long for the Minister to produce the necessary Bill. While these reforms are welcome, the Bill will not deliver fully on the regulatory reform recommendations from the expert panel published almost four years ago.

I appreciate that a consultation process was necessary, but that was completed in 2021. Why did it take another year for the heads of the Bill to be published? The Minister had the support of the Opposition and HIQA, which had called for greater powers for a number of years. When the general scheme of the Bill came before the health committee, we recognised its importance and the need to progress it quickly. That is why, following a briefing by the Department and having considered written submissions, the committee completed its pre-legislative scrutiny in one week. In a letter sent to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, on 30 November 2022, the committee stated clearly that it considered this to be very important legislation, in light of issues that arose during the pandemic, and it had no recommendations to make.

That was a year and a half ago. What has delayed the Minister of State in progressing the proposal? Where are the blockages? It is very hard to understand why such important legislation has taken so long. We would have to ask whether this was because of lobbyists as it was certainly not because of the Oireachtas or regulator. The expert panel suggested a six-month timeframe for implementation of these reforms. It took the Minister just shy of four years, an incredible delay. This is only the beginning, of course.

The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, approved a two-stage approach to reform. The first phase, which is being progressed by this Bill, is only an interim solution to enhance governance and oversight of nursing homes. The second phase, we are told, will include a wider root-and-branch review of the regulatory model. It is this second phase that I am particularly interested in. Unfortunately, I do not think the Government shares that interest.

According to the fourth and final progress report on the implementation of the expert panel's recommendations, published in June 2022, an international evidence review of nursing home regulatory models had been commissioned to inform the second phase. When I raised this issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in November 2022, she said the review was nearing completion and would be published in due course. It is now May 2024, and we still have not seen that report. HIQA sent it to the Department in December 2022, but I do not think the Minister of State ever published it. I would like to think she did so, but I am not aware that she did. I ask her to indicate whether that has been published.

I would also appreciate it if the Minister of State could indicate whether the commission on care is the means by which she is progressing phase two. One would assume so, but we hear very little about this more ambitious phase. Where exactly are we at regarding this? If that is the case, the Minister of State is again way behind schedule, given that she told me, in November 2022 in reply to a parliamentary question, that stakeholder engagement around wider reform would begin in early 2023, which is more than a year ago.

The commission on care only held its first meeting in March. I outline these timelines not to be pedantic in any way, but because of the urgency with which this issue should have been

treated and addressed. Overall, we must not forget the context in which these recommendations were made. In September 2020, HIQA appeared before the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response and called for more powers and regulatory reform, a plea that the regulator had been making since 2013. As the deaths in nursing homes mounted, the need for reform could no longer be denied but it should never have taken this devastating loss of life for the Government to finally act. According to CSO data, between March 2020 and April 2022, almost 30% of Covid deaths occurred in nursing homes. An ESRI study, which examined the first three waves of the pandemic, from March 2020 to March 2021, found that 66% of all Covid deaths during that one-year period were related to nursing home outbreaks. Internationally, this placed Ireland second only to Australia, at 75%, in terms of the percentage of Covid deaths linked to nursing homes. One would imagine that there would have been a sense of urgency about that but a huge amount of time has been lost. This study into the deadliest period of the pandemic also found that larger, long-term residential care homes were three times more likely to have an outbreak than smaller homes.

Those shocking figures should have set off alarm bells in the Department of Health but in reality very little has changed. In public utterances Ministers and even the Taoiseach accepted that we need a new model of care but where is the model to match? Where is that policy we were promised by the current Taoiseach, the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and other Ministers? More and more small, independently-owned nursing homes are closing their doors while large operators, financed by international private equity, dominate the market. That is not acceptable and it is not in the interests of older people. The ESRI found that between February 2020 and December 2022, one in five smaller private nursing homes shut its doors, with rural areas hardest hit. A 2021 value-for-money review of the fair deal scheme rightly pointed out that the more the State becomes dependent on large chains, the less it is able to control costs, terminate contracts, remove residents from poorly performing nursing homes and ensure that standards are maintained. A 2021 HIQA paper, entitled "The Need for Regulatory Reform", also highlighted the risks involved in concentrating care within a small number of large providers. The variety of options along a continuum include supported housing and co-housing communities, of which there is a chronic undersupply. There are lots of other models that could be used for which older people are crying out. The whole spectrum of care needs to be considered, rather than the kind of approach the Government is taking in facilitating people who are more interested in ensuring a return on investment than what is in the best interest of older people. We should be moving towards a situation where long-term residential care is considered only when all other options along the continuum have been exhausted but we are a far cry from that reality. This Government seems, instead, to be focused on cementing the current over-institutionalised model of care by facilitating, even encouraging, its monetisation. All the while, we are told that Government policy is to provide a new model through home care but, again, the facts would say otherwise.

A statutory right to home care has been in development since 2018, after the Sláintecare report recommended ending the "over-reliance on market mechanisms to deliver new health care services by the expansion of public nursing homes and home care". The statutory scheme was supposed to be delivered in 2021. Then it was pushed out to 2023 but now, in 2024, we still do not even have the heads of this long-promised Bill. It is not even listed for priority publication in this Dáil term.

Deputy Mary Butler: The heads were approved today in Cabinet.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am glad to hear that because we have been waiting for a very

long time.

While home care hours and funding have been increased since 2020, waiting lists remain stubbornly high. In February, there were over 5,500 people approved for a home care package but no carer was available. These staffing challenges have only been made worse by the regressive HSE recruitment freeze. That freeze is holding up so much delivery in terms of major healthcare. February's progress report on the implementation of the report of the strategic workforce advisory group showed that three of the 16 recommendations are on hold due to the recruitment freeze. This includes recommendation 11, that there be "a significant increase in the proportion of home support hours and packages provided directly by the HSE". This is just another example of this Government's short-sighted thinking leading to rampant outsourcing. The Minister has been promising the aforementioned significant increase for a very long time and it is really shocking that we have not seen movement in relation to that. Promises are being made but there does not seem to be any timescale in terms of what needs to be done in the best interests of older people.

Privatisation is now the cornerstone of this Government's elder care policy but it was not always this way. In 2006, funding to private home care providers stood at just €3 million. By 2019, the figure had risen to €107 million, while in the nursing home sector over the past 30 years, we have gone from a predominantly State-led service to one where approximately 80% of nursing homes are private. Undoubtedly, tax incentives in the early 2000s and the introduction of the fair deal scheme, which increased financial security for the sector, attracted more and more operators into the sector, especially from outside Ireland. This model, whereby the State is so heavily reliant on private nursing homes, is deeply flawed. In fact, it has become untenable. The pandemic has exposed severely lacking clinical oversight of these facilities and significant gaps in communication channels with the HSE. In May 2020, the then CEO of HIQA, Mr. Phelim Quinn, appeared before the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. During the hearing he said that "the HSE did not know this sector" and that "private residential care for older persons has no formal clinical governance links with the HSE". That is a damning assessment of what the HSE was doing in respect of older people. As a result, there was no national clinical oversight of the care being delivered to some of our most vulnerable citizens during the spread of a deadly virus that was ravaging the places that so many of those vulnerable people called home. It is unforgivable that the Government has taken so long to bring forward these interim measures.

Section 10 provides for mandatory reporting of key operational data to the chief inspector by registered providers, as recommended by the expert panel. Section 11 provides for the sharing of this data with the Minister and public bodies, including HIQA and the HSE. The publication of the data will be in aggregate form. In the course of the health committee's meeting with Department officials during pre-legislative scrutiny, many of us were shocked to learn of the complete absence of data collection. There is no national database of even the most basic information, such as staffing levels, bed occupancy or dependency levels. This type of data is extremely important in terms of regulatory oversight, service planning, demand projection and ensuring prospective residents and their families have enough information when choosing a nursing home. That certainly is not the case at the moment. It is bizarre that this is only now being provided for in legislation. There can be no excuse for the delay in progressing this most rudimentary measure.

Section 13, which provides a clear legal basis for the chief inspector to enter a premises that is not registered, is welcome. During pre-legislative scrutiny, Department officials confirmed

this does not come up much in the nursing home sector but was brought up by HIQA in the context of disability centres, especially in respect of emergency placements. An explicit provision is needed for the avoidance of doubt should such a situation arise.

In terms of enforcement, the options available to the chief inspector have been repeatedly characterised as blunt instruments. Currently, the chief inspector can either place restrictive conditions on a centre, such as limiting the number of admissions, or cancel its registration, meaning it would have to cease operations or be taken over by an alternative service provider. This does not allow for positive action to be taken to rectify the situation. Prosecution should be the last resort. That is why the chief inspector has called for a more graduated suite of powers. Section 16 provides for that through the introduction of a new system of compliance notices. This will provide the chief inspector with a more efficient and proportionate set of tools to bring registered providers into compliance.

Another issue is HIQA's inability to investigate individual complaints. I accept that the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023 gives the chief inspector new powers to investigate serious incidents. However, that legislation has not even been commenced a year after it was signed into law. I received a reply to a parliamentary question today on this matter. All the Minister could say was that he intends to commence the Act at the earliest possible date.

Clearly, there is still much to be done. I do not doubt the Minister of State's intentions but there are serious questions over her delivery on these matters. This Bill is low-hanging fruit but the Government still managed to drag it out over most of its term. Older people deserve so much better than this. They deserve choice and a system that views care as a right, not a commodity. Much more needs to be done.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Fianna Fáil supports this Bill, which it is of utmost importance. It provides for the amendment of two Acts, namely, the Health Act 2007 and the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009. The Bill gives new enforcement powers to the Chief Inspector of Social Services, including the power to issue compliance notices to enhance compliance with regulation in residential care homes and further protect residents. That is very important. The Bill is about further protecting residents.

The new amendments to the Health Act 2007 are a response to several key recommendations in the report of the Covid-19 nursing home expert panel. The report called for the enhancement and modernisation of powers and requirements within the regulatory framework governing nursing homes and the establishment of mandatory reporting to HIQA of key operational data by nursing homes to support service planning and policy development. The amendments to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act, which covers the fair deal scheme, will widen the definition of those eligible to be considered a family successor, particularly to family farm or productive business assets, to include cousins, great-nephews, great-nieces and great-grandchildren. That is really important. Lots of people have come to me about this. Under the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Act 2021, contributions from farm and business assets can be capped after three years in care as long as the family successor who is appointed will continue to run the assets for a period.

Having already introduced amendments to the fair deal scheme to safeguard family farms and businesses, it became clear there was a small group of farmers with no close relatives who were, as the Minister of State said to me, unintentionally excluded from the legislation. I re-

ally welcome their inclusion. The proposed amendments to the fair deal scheme will enhance the safeguards for family farms and businesses by allowing them to apply to extended family members, including cousins, great-nephews, great-nieces and great-grandchildren, thereby protecting the viability and sustainability of those businesses into the future. This is a really important change for individuals who do not have immediate relatives. I am knocking on doors at the moment, as is the Minister of State, and these are the issues that are raised with us daily. They often come up when I am talking to farmers and business owners. This Bill will drive improvements in the quality and safety of care for the benefit of residents, their families and the sector as a whole. In addition, the new powers in regard to data collection will enable more integrated national planning across the nursing home sector and improve overall transparency for current and future residents.

The Minister of State knows I cannot finish without mentioning County Carlow. That could not happen. She was down in Carlow recently to open a new dementia café. It is absolutely excellent. In the case of all the nursing homes and different care homes she is working with, she has been 100% supportive. Her home town in County Waterford is a dementia-friendly town. Now Carlow is the same. We are all working together to achieve it and I am on the committee. The work the Minister of State has done on this is really good. I knock on her door every day and she always listens to me. I really welcome that. These issues are ones people bring to me daily. I welcome the Bill. The Minister of State is welcome to Carlow at any time. Work like this is critical as we move forward.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next speaker is Deputy Conway-Walsh. She will have to say a few things about Mayo.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Absolutely. Mayo for Sam. As the Minister of State knows, I have repeatedly called on the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, to ensure there is accountability and proper oversight in respect of all care centres that HIQA deems likely to be designated care centres. For-profit organisations that care for vulnerable people in our society have been able to avoid accountability and proper oversight and governance for years. I welcome the progress that has been made in this legislation. It is a step in the right direction but only a very small step. It is vital that the Bill passes as quickly as possible through the Houses.

We had issues in Mayo in regard to individuals living alone in what were known as individualised services. We absolutely need a comprehensive social care policy. A loophole in the legislation was potentially used to avoid HIQA having oversight of care centres for years. I have been calling for a number of years for legislation to be reformed to close that loophole. It is a crazy situation where we have the organisations saying that they can designate this or that, but it has to come completely off the table. There must be somebody in charge here. There must be accountability and governance. Every time we come in here and ask about people with disabilities or vulnerable people, we are told millions and billions are being spent. We need oversight, governance and accountability and we need it now.

I would also like to know how many claims that have been paid were because of substandard care in centres that were left outside the remit of HIQA. I hope this is only the beginning of a process whereby we give powers to HIQA. We need a lot more. Of course we need the resources to go with it to maintain standards in order that people in communities and those across County Mayo can have absolute confidence that the most vulnerable people in our county are looked after to a high standard.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I wish to share time with Deputy Tóibín.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: In the main, no one doubts the Minister of State's bona fides in regard to the work she is doing here. I welcome the arrival of this Bill. The preamble of the Bill refers to its purpose in regard to two existing legislative measures. It amends the Health Act 2007 to give new enforcement powers to the Chief Inspector of Social Services in HIQA, which consequently will provide for greater safeguards of residents of residential care centres. That is obviously to be welcomed.

In addition, the proposed collection, sharing and publication of data is very important from the point of view of residents and their care plans. It is also intended to widen the definition of those eligible to be considered as the family successor to a family farm or productive business assets. That is something that has been highlighted in the fair deal scheme for some time. In the main, that is all good work and not to be faulted.

It is interesting that the background of the Bill suggests that it was the Covid-19 nursing homes panel that recommended the regulatory frameworks should be adjusted and that they needed modernising, and it called for the additional enhancement of the powers of the regulator. Many nursing homes did quite badly during Covid and some in the sector are still struggling to deal with the losses they suffered at that time, in particular private nursing homes. I note that the Bill will also give increased enforcement powers to the HIQA inspectorate to visit non-registered nursing homes. Again, nobody could argue with any of that.

Other speakers referred to the length of time it has taken the legislation to come before the House. As we all know, it is not easy to get legislation passed and through the Houses. Given that the Bill relates to the care of the elderly and disabled people, we should not delay it.

I welcome the Bill but I question whether it recognises the disparity between the private and public sector in terms of residential care settings. The Minister of State is no stranger to the issues of concern to the private nursing home sector. She is well aware in our city of Waterford of two high profile nursing homes that closed in the past two years, simply because of where the costs are going in the business. The operators state that the State is not providing enough funding to cover their costs. There is a very significant disparity between what a public nursing home is paid in capitation and what a private nursing home is paid. I am not sure why that is the case when the preponderance of beds is provided by the private sector. It seems to me that Government policy has created a rush to consolidation whereby large providers are able to make arrangements with the Department on the money they can get, unlike the small guys who cannot.

Another issue we have seen before that affects small nursing home operators is that it is unlikely that they can pay the remuneration offered in public nursing homes, ergo, when they change their staff they are then poached by the HSE. We saw that happen throughout Covid when it was a significant problem. One of the points we must recognise within all of the regulation, which of itself is not always a good thing, is that we need to have standards and compliance with them but the private nursing home sector calls for greater supports in addition to increased regulatory oversight. It will put up with unannounced inspections and all the rest of it but it asks for greater support and understanding of the challenges it faces. The Minister of State knows from our own constituency that there are small nursing homes in rural areas that

provide a very beneficial service to their catchment area. It is great that the HSE can come in and say where nursing homes are not compliant and that it needs them to take on a few more staff or do X amount of capital works or whatever else. Everybody feels good when that happens. Staff have gone in and told those guys to tidy up and get going but what we find is that they cannot do it or they choose not to do it because of the costs involved and then we lose those beds. St. Brigid's in Carrick-on-Suir is a case in point. People who were previously able to visit relatives as they were very close are no longer able to do that and they have ended up having to do a circuitous round trip that could be ten or 20 miles. In Kerry, the distances involved could be 30 miles or 40 miles, or perhaps more depending on where a bed becomes available.

In the round, anybody would obviously support the positive developments in the Bill but we have still not addressed issues in the residential nursing home setting, and probably in the disability setting as well, namely, the difficulties involved for those who provide a private service. At times, there is a culture within the public system to label every private for-profit operation as being somehow malevolent and that it is only about profit and nothing else. The Minister of State and I both know private nursing homes where that could not be further from the truth. They have an excellent standard of care. They have directors of nursing and nurse managers who go above and beyond the call of duty to make sure that residents are properly looked after. They do not skimp but at the same time they are not getting the same amount of support from the State. That is a fact. It is not just the private nursing homes saying it. It is a question of why that disparity exists and why we are not trying to address it. I have not read all of the briefing documents but I am not sure it is included in this Bill. That is something we must address in the future because we cannot have a private sector providing 80% of the beds that we do not support, but we support the 20% of beds in the public sector to the hilt. I question why we are surprised at times when we lose private beds.

I will support the legislation as there is good work in it but we must do more. We must stop vilifying the private sector. I hear from time to time in this House when private residential care is being discussed the references to the "monopoly" and the private aspect of it and it is said that it is all for profit. If there is not a profit there, the business cannot operate. Therefore, the residents cannot be cared for in that setting unless the State is going to step in. We do not want it to do that because it often costs twice or three times as much – that is a fact of life – and if that was not the case, the State would have taken over the sector years ago. There is a place for both parties. We need regulation and enforcement but we must also recognise that greater support is needed for the private nursing home sector. That is what I am calling for.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Mary Bartley-Meehan lost her son and husband to Covid-19 in Kilbrew Nursing Home within just six weeks of each other. Ultan had dementia. He had carcinoma cancer, which resulted in tumorous wounds on his face and head. He had been a resident in the nursing home since 2019. Mary was shown a video of her husband before he died and it was quite horrific. The side of Ultan's face was discoloured with black, congealed blood. His nails were long and had become black as he had, unknown to himself, been picking at his facial tumours. As a result, these facial tumours became infected. Shockingly, his face had become infested with maggots. Shortly after these horrors happened to that man, he died in the nursing home. Months later, Mary went to the Department of Health, HIQA and the HSE to seek an investigation and justice for her husband and her son. She said that all of those groups refused to properly investigate what happened to her husband. It is now four years since Mary's husband died. It is four years ago today since she last saw him before he died. I spoke to her today and she said, shockingly, every second night she has nightmares about that infestation. She told me

she hoped she would not die before they say sorry. It is a horrific situation for anybody to have to deal with. She has gone through loved ones being poorly looked after in a nursing home at a significant cost during a very difficult time. She was prevented from being with them, protecting them, holding their hand and supporting them through their final days. Then the State basically washed its hands of it and said it was not able to help. It is astounding that this happened. I would like to know if the Bill starts to move towards allowing a situation like that to be investigated in future. Will the Minister of State address that in her closing remarks?

I spoke to personnel in the Ombudsman's office during that time. I asked if they would investigate what happened to Mary's husband. They said they could not and that they had no power under the law or ability to investigate it. That is incredible because we see the Ombudsman as the last port of call for citizens to investigate delivery of public services. The Ombudsman stated that unless there is a change to the Ombudsman's legislation, it will not be able to investigate something like this. While we are changing legislation, such as the two Acts being amended by this Bill, we should also look to change the Ombudsman's legislation to ensure the Ombudsman's office can investigate that. What happened to Mary Bartley-Meehan, her husband and son is absolutely wrong and it is absolutely wrong there has been no investigation and no apology in relation to what happened. I implore the Minister of State to see if anything can be done to achieve justice and to make sure Mary Bartley-Meehan does not pass away without receiving so much as a sorry from the State for what happened.

Deputy Mary Butler: Sorry to interrupt, but I did meet Ms Bartley-Meehan.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I appreciate that but I ask the Minister of State to meet her again to give that apology to her. It is important for her that that happens.

The whole situation around the Covid-19 crisis and nursing homes was incredible: 2,323 people died and 27% of all deaths during Covid happened in the nursing homes. They were the ground zero of Covid. The Government moved thousands of people from hospitals into nursing homes, many of whom were not tested for Covid. It had the effect of seeding Covid throughout the nursing home sector, which inevitably led to significant numbers of deaths in those nursing homes.

Staffing in nursing homes was chaotic. Nursing homes reported to me they were being abandoned in terms of staffing. A nursing home in Galway had all but two staff test positive for Covid during an outbreak in which it saw five residents die. I remember the manager of that nursing home being on RTÉ radio in tears, crying that he could not get the necessary staff. The HSE said to him it had no staff available. I remember other people getting phone calls from nursing homes asking them to come in and feed their loved ones. Other nursing homes put up Facebook posts asking if anyone could come in and help them. I also remember a freedom of information request which showed the then CEO, Paul Reid, did not respond to the Minister of State's request to deal with the lack of staffing for about a month, which was incredible. He also did not respond to Phelim Quinn of HIQA for at least a month in relation to that. Nursing Homes Ireland sought a meeting with the then Minister for Health, Simon Harris, but had no luck whatsoever. The then Minister for Health, who is now the Taoiseach, created a big press statement of a response, Be on Call for Ireland, where 77,000 people were asked to come and help this massive fight to staff our hospitals and nursing homes and only 400 were employed out of that.

I give credit to Majella Beatty and Care Champions for the hard work they have done in

trying to get an investigation into this and to ensure families are able to accompany and support their loved ones in nursing homes in the future. That needs to be a basic right for anyone in a nursing home and their loved ones and family members. They are currently fighting in order that residents in Cherry Orchard Hospital will not be coerced into transferring to other locations. I ask the Minister of State to intervene in that situation if possible.

I understand about 50 families are suing the State through the State Claims Agency for wrongs done to them during the Covid time. It is incredible there is still no State investigation into nursing homes during Covid. I met the former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, in Government Buildings along with other political parties to discuss plans for a review into this, that is, a review that would not be able to compel people or papers and that would not look to speak to the former Chief Medical Officer or the head of the HSE. How you could not include those people in an investigation into what happened in Covid, I do not know. All the political parties here, to the left and right of me, agreed with the Government's plans until we piped up and said there must be compellability of people and papers. Only then did some of those parties ride in to support that objective. There must be an investigation. I honestly believe this Government does not want an investigation into what happened during the Covid crisis. It will do everything it can to stop it. I do not believe we will see one in the lifetime of this Government. The Government would like to cover up many of its actions in relation to nursing homes and hospitals during that crisis.

In the North of Ireland today, the British State is involved in an investigation into the Covid crisis. Most other European countries have involved themselves in such an investigation. We do not even have the terms of reference yet from the Government. We have no plans for an investigation. It is a major injustice to the 2,300 people who lost their lives in nursing homes at that time. Second, it means the State has learned nothing on how to deal with such a crisis if it happened again. That is the purpose of a State properly investigating what happened: it can learn from the mistakes it made and put in place new policies and procedures to make sure those mistakes do not happen again. We need a commitment to a full public investigation with the power to compel people and papers. That would send a clear message that the Government means business. I ask that the terms of reference be published before the end of this Government. Were the Minister of State to commit to that today, it would be an important step for the families.

I welcome that legislation is proposed that seeks to increase oversight of what happens in nursing homes. It has to be far stronger. We will table amendments to strengthen it in the future.

Nursing homes are in a state of chaos in this country. That is a fair statement to make because we have seen 50 nursing homes close in the past four years. The bed capacity in the State is not sufficient for its population and our demographic trajectory necessitates a trend, not of closing nursing home beds but of opening significantly more of them.

I agree with Deputy Shanahan on this point. I believe the bird will only fly on two wings. It will need public delivery of nursing home beds but will also need a private sector delivering into the system. People prefer to debate the ideology of this issue than the practical elements. It is like saying "I want to climb to the top of Mount Everest" but they do not even talk about the base camps that need to be achieved before that. The extra provision of nursing home beds, whether public or private, is necessary now. I appeal to the Government to make sure that the provision of those services is feasible in terms of the funding that is available for those services,

and that the staff in those services get paid a proper income. We hear too often that staff cannot be obtained for the services. The first thing to do if we want staff is to make sure they get proper pay and conditions, and then they will come.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have had much failure over many years in regard to the provision of the care of the elderly and we have not necessarily put in place those pieces that we should have. Everybody welcomes the greater level of enforcement powers for HIQA and the necessary reforms, and we will support this Bill. However, I do not think it goes quite where it needs to go. Of course, it provides for compliance notices for the Chief Inspector of Social Services and improved data collection, which is necessary so we have a notion of the needs and wants. However, HIQA has sought a lot more. It put in requests in 2013, 2017 and again in 2021 and made comprehensive proposals in regard to the powers that it needs. We need to see that.

As much as we need to see improved compliance notices, we also need a more flexible enforcement system. That will include failure-to-comply notices and the ability to more robustly attach, enforce and direct the implementation of conditions that relate to operating licences. We know the issues in regard to making sure HIQA has the powers in all the settings where it needs to be able to investigate, keep an eye on issues and make sure we are looking after our older people. We know everything that is needed with regard to safeguarding and there has been a failure concerning the legislative requirements in that area. This Bill is a start but there is a lot more to do. It goes without saying that we have had considerable conversations as to where the weaknesses are, not only in regard to elder care in residential settings but also in regard to home care. There is no shortage of proposals and no shortage of requirements to follow through on them.

I will also raise the issue of Dealgan House, where at least 22 people died from March to the middle of May 2020. The Minister of State met the families and is aware of the huge work they have done, sometimes facilitated by politicians. They put in a huge amount of work in regard to freedom of information requests, FOIs, and have engaged with every element of the HSE and with every official who deigned to talk to them, yet they still do not have the full information on what happened to their loved ones. We are still hopeful. We would like to see more information on the Covid-19 inquiry and whether we will be looking at a module in regard to nursing homes. Will we have something that can substantially provide what the Minister would have called a mechanism to provide these families with the answers that are required? We need to deal with any failures there have been and how we can improve things into the future. It is necessary that we look at everything and provide them with the best means to reach a point where justice meets closure.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too am glad to speak on the Bill. The aspects of the Bill include mandatory information provision. It mandates that registered providers of nursing homes and residential services, excluding those for people with disabilities, must regularly supply key operational data to HIQA, as drafted in the Bill. I have often spoken to HIQA. I do not have a lot of faith in HIQA, as the Minister of State is aware, and I have good reason for that. The whole saga of what went on in the nursing homes during Covid was diabolical. I am not blaming the nursing homes in most cases. The HSE literally abandoned them and hospitals sent patients with Covid into nursing homes without even telling them. Such carry-on was not bordering on criminal; in my opinion, it was completely criminal. It then denied them oxygen and the oxygen for those nursing homes was diverted and taken away from them. The HSE literally procured it without any legal basis. It just took it away from them and let them do without it.

The Minister of State is aware of a case that I wish to raise with the permission of the Ceann Comhairle. It refers to St. Conlon's nursing home in Nenagh. I do not know it that well but having contacted many people, I understand there is a huge saga going on at St. Conlon's. HIQA had condemned it but then gave it a licence for one year, and one year only, because it was waiting to get the new state-of-the-art St. Conlon's nursing home built. That is now built and it is a model of state-of-the-art provision. The families, the patients, their advocates, the staff of St. Conlon's and the community were looking forward to moving to this state-of-the-art premises. Everything was fine but, hey presto, because of the pressure on University Hospital Limerick, HIQA and everybody else decided that it was okay to take over the new building at St. Conlon's as a step-down emergency department to try to put a sticking plaster over the fundamental problems at University Hospital Limerick, and they would override the licence issued, which was only in place for one year.

Sandra Broderick of the HSE said not to mind HIQA, she would tell it what to do. Imagine that. What power or what teeth does the Government have? How can the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, preside over an organisation when such a senior HSE official will say to not mind HIQA and she would tell it what to do? She said HIQA will do as she tells it. That is scandalous and outrageous. We have bodies and then more bodies set up for everything. They have an office with plush furniture, a CEO, a deputy CEO and God knows who else, and a brass plate on the wall telling the country who they are and that they are registered. Then, they are toothless, useless and fruitless. That is what they are if a department official or a senior nursing manager can say to not mind HIQA and that she would tell it what to do.

I know of many nursing homes that were closed down by stealth in the last 15 years, including a lovely one in Carrick-on-Suir. HIQA kept visiting them and visiting them, and then punishing them. The way it punished them was by cutting out so many beds, which restricted their turnover and they could not do the work they were asked to do because they could not get funding from the banks due to the limited capacity for financial return. HIQA closed that down in the time of the former Minister, James Reilly, and I have raised the issue before in the House.

At this point, I am talking about St. Conlon's. HIQA had an order to close it down because it was not fit for purpose, so a new one was built, costing €50 million, which is not small money, and it was ready to go into operation. Now, because someone decided it would be taken over, the licence in place prior to the condemning of the old St. Conlon's has now been issued again and it can carry on. HIQA will do what the management in the mid-western area want it to do because, in their own words, it will do what it is told to do. What kind of a body is that? What kind of a joke is this legislation that we are bringing in when we know what went on in nursing homes throughout Covid and at other times?

We have continuous daily and weekly lobbying by the private nursing homes, rightly so, against what the Government is paying the public nursing homes. It is scandalously unfair. It is discrimination. It cannot be legal that the Government can give so much per week for a patient in a public nursing home but give 30% or 40% less to the private providers. That is unjust and unfair in any walk of life. How are the private providers going to continue? They do not have the money to pay the staff properly and the staff are leaving to go into the public sector. It is discrimination.

Deputy Michael Collins raised in the House the case of a nursing home in west Cork that closed down. It is now being offered as an IPAS centre. Follow the money. If Government

does not give fair play and a level playing field and does not ensure Departments pay private nursing homes the same rate as the public ones, there is an unjust imbalance. What is going on in Nenagh beats Banagher, and Nenagh is not too far from Banagher.

6 o'clock

It beats Banagher to me that a place was condemned, a new building built and everything ready with patients, their families and staff so looking forward to going into it, and then because there is a problem in Limerick, HIQA can be instructed to turn a blind eye and say the old St. Conlon's is fine and the patients can be left there, even though it was under orders to close. Where do we go with that or how more clear could it be that it is so inadequate, not independent and can be manipulated? What confidence does that give to any of the families taking cases now against the HSE for the loss of lives and the degrading treatment of their loved ones?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín raised one case. I think the Minister of State said she is aware of it. It is so shocking that it happened but that happened in many cases, and not because in many cases the nursing homes wanted that to happen. It was because the HSE starved them of everything, seconded the oxygen, and seconded the different materials, PPE gear and everything else away from them. This was by order of the HSE, and it left them to fend for themselves. Then loved ones could not get in to visit them. It was the most cruel situation that ever existed and now the Government does not want it investigated. I attended a meeting here with other colleagues and the former Taoiseach about the Covid inquiry. There was a kind of laugh around the room. It was said that we cannot have an inquiry as Ireland is too small a place and everybody knows everyone. That is why I said all the time that we need an independent inquiry from without this country, and people who have no contacts with Ireland, who could come in and do a proper inquiry and investigation but, no ,too much might be found out then, and we might get to the bottom of something.

While there is a merry-go-round of cover-up and the Department's and HSE's mishandling, the buck stops at the Minister of State's table, especially with regard to elderly people, and indeed with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly and the Secretary General of the Department of Health.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I ask him to adjourn. When we come back, the Deputy's group will have 12 minutes remaining.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle.

Debate adjourned.

Dublin and Monaghan Bombings: Motion [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Which Minister is taking this?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Tánaiste is coming. He was here a minute ago. We will wait.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As we are waiting, I am sure the Ceann Comhairle would like, on behalf of the House, to extend a welcome to the families from Justice for the Forgotten,

who are joining us.

An Ceann Comhairle: Absolutely, they are all most welcome.

Members applauded.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recalling the motion it adopted unanimously on 10th July, 2008 which:

— noted "the interim and final reports of the sub-Committee of the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights on the report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin-Monaghan Bombings and the three related Barron Reports, including the Inquiry into the Bombing of Kay's Tavern, Dundalk, and commends the sub-Committee for its work";

— urged "the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents held by the British Government relating to the atrocities that occurred in this jurisdiction and which were inquired into by Judge Barron, for the purposes of assessing said documents with the aim of assisting in the resolution of these crimes"; and

— directed "the Clerk of the Dáil to communicate the text of this Resolution, together with copies of the aforementioned reports, to the House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with a request that the matter be considered by the House of Commons";

recalling the motion it adopted unanimously on Wednesday, 18th May, 2011 which:

— noted "that the question of obtaining access to information held by the British Government on the bombings has been pursued for many years";

— requested "the Government to continue to raise the matter with the British Government and to press it to comply with the request of Dáil Éireann and reaffirms the support of Members on all sides of this House"; and

— acknowledged "that the cooperation being sought is taking place in the context of transformed relationships on this island and between Ireland and Britain based on mutual respect, on partnership and on friendship";

recalling the all party motion it adopted unanimously on 25th May, 2016 which:

— noted "that Tuesday, 17th May, 2016 marked the 42nd Anniversary of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings"; and

— called on the Government to pursue the implementation of the 2008 and 2011 all party motions and to urgently raise the matter with the British Government;

notes that:

— the 50th Anniversary of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings will take place on

17th May and, with the passage of such time, the growing need to provide all information necessary to assist families; and

— Operation Denton is tasked with carrying out an overarching, thematic analysis of the Glenanne Gang and the extent of any state collusion, which includes reviewing the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and other bombings and killings that have been attributed to the Glenanne Gang;

calls on the Government to continue to ensure that all requests for material and assistance from Operation Denton to authorities in this jurisdiction are dealt with as a matter of priority;

further calls on the Government to urge the British Government to ensure that material relevant to the work of Operation Denton is provided to their investigators; and

requests the Government to continue to raise this important matter directly with the British Government, and directs the Ceann Comhairle, the Clerk, and the Cathaoirligh of relevant Committees to do likewise with their respective British counterparts, in order to actively pursue the implementation of the 2008, 2011 and 2016 all party motions.

This week marks the 50th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. Friday, 17 May 1974 remains a date marked deep in the psyche of our nation, etched in unimaginable pain and loss and prolonged by a searing injustice. At 5.30 on that early summer's evening, three no-warning car bombs ripped through the centre of Dublin on Talbot Street, Pearse Street and the junction of Nassau Street and South Leinster Street. At approximately 7 p.m., 84 miles away in Monaghan town, a fourth car bomb exploded, and 33 people and an unborn baby were killed. In August, baby Martha O'Neill was stillborn at full term.

It was the most people killed in any one day of the conflict. Their names were: Patrick Askin, aged 44, County Monaghan; Josie Bradley, aged 21, County Offaly; Marie Butler, 21, County Waterford; Anne Byrne, aged 35, Dublin; Thomas Campbell, aged 52, County Monaghan; Simone Chetrit, aged 30, France; Thomas Croarkin, aged 36, County Monaghan; John Dargle, aged 80, Dublin; Concepta Dempsey, aged 65, County Louth; Colette Doherty, aged 21, Dublin; baby Doherty, full-term unborn, Dublin; Patrick Fay, aged 47, Dublin and County Louth; Elizabeth Fitzgerald, aged 59, Dublin; Breda Bernadette Grace, aged 35, Dublin and County Kerry; Archie Harper, aged 73, County Monaghan; Antonio Magliocco, aged 37, Dublin and Italy; May McKenna, aged 55, County Tyrone; Anne Marren, aged 20, County Sligo; Anna Massey, aged 21, Dublin; Dorothy Morris, aged 57, Dublin; John O'Brien, aged 24, Anna O'Brien, aged 22, Jacqueline O'Brien, 17 months and Anne-Marie O'Brien, five months, Dublin; Christina O'Loughlin, aged 51, Dublin; Edward John O'Neill, aged 39, Dublin; baby Martha O'Neill, stillborn, Dublin; Marie Phelan, aged 20, County Waterford; Siobhán Roice, aged 19, Wexford town; Maureen Shields, aged 46, Dublin; Jack Travers, aged 28, Monaghan town; Breda Turner, aged 21, County Tipperary; John Walshe, aged 27, Dublin; Peggy White, aged 45, Monaghan town; and George Williamson, aged 72, County Monaghan.

These were ordinary people going about the business of their everyday lives in a city and in a town where they had no reason to feel unsafe. Then their precious lives were wiped out. For 50 years, for five decades, for half a century, their heartbroken loved ones have fought courageously for the truth and justice that is still denied. Some of the families and more are in the Public Gallery with us this evening. We salute their bravery and resilience and we stand with

them now and always.

The families have always gone toe-to-toe with the British state, which has, at every turn, blocked the truth, withheld evidence and prevented the release of important documents related to the bombings. The British Government has pushed ahead with callous amnesty legislation to shut down transparency, and the agenda is clear. While loyalist paramilitaries planted the bombs, they were aided by dark-hand agents of the British state. Collusion is no illusion, yet the British state continues to deny that the bombings in Dublin and Monaghan were part of its dirty war in Ireland. These inspirational families have also been profoundly failed by this State. The initial Garda investigation as so limited in remit as to render it useless from the get-go. Incredibly, it was wrapped up by the August bank holiday of that same summer.

Over the past five decades, successive taoisigh have openly admitted that they have not raised this travesty with their British counterparts. Understandably, the families and survivors felt abandoned, dismissed and forgotten, and the absence of the truth hangs in the air around them. It casts a long shadow over their lives. Bernie McNally, who survived the blast on Talbot Street, said:

> To deny people the truth is just so wrong. And it will never go away until it is righted. It will always be there, it will always be hanging over us all.

This is the weight that the families and survivors carry around with them. The injustice and the contempt they have faced for 50 years is woven through the fabric of their everyday lives. It is now time to do right by the families and survivors. The British state must now provide all relevant information, evidence and documentation it holds regarding the Dublin and Monaghan bombings.

The Irish Government must insist and impress upon the British Government that this must happen without any further delay. Fifty years is a lifetime and family members of those who died have passed away without ever knowing the truth. Other family members have been born and have grown up with this injustice hardwired into their lives so now is the time for the light of truth, now is the time for justice for the forgotten.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On Friday, 17 May 1974, three car bombs exploded in Dublin city centre. Less than 90 minutes later, outside Greacen's pub on the North Road, a fourth bomb exploded in Monaghan town. Some 34 lives were lost, including that of an unborn child. Nearly 300 were injured. Countless lives remain both physically and mentally scarred to this day.

On Friday, we will mark 50 years since the massacre of Irish citizens by a death squad involving members of British state forces. It was the worst atrocity in this State since the Civil War. Friday's anniversary will be marked by wreath laying by the President and speeches by Ministers, lord mayors and cathaoirligh. In recent years, we have seen the attendance of taoisigh at commemorations. I expect that tonight will be the fourth occasion since 2008 that the Dáil has adopted a resolution supporting the campaign for truth and justice with cross-party support. It would be easy therefore to now get the impression that this State has always stood with the victims and survivors; unequivocally, that was not the case.

All those who lost loved ones or who were injured as a result of the conflict deserve access to the truth. Whether they were victims of British state forces, loyalist paramilitaries or the IRA, the pain is the same. There cannot be a hierarchy of victims. I hope everyone in this House shares that sentiment because throughout those dark days and years there was a hierarchy and

different approaches were taken to different events and losses. Almost immediately after the bombs in Dublin and Monaghan detonated, people knew that British state forces were involved. The close sequence of the explosions, the technical features of the bombs, the components that were used that calculated maximum impact and the timing all pointed to a capability and resource that was not available to loyalist gangs without the direct support of British state agents. Any reasonable person would have expected both the Irish and British Governments and An Garda Síochána to move swiftly to apprehend the perpetrators and assert the full facts, but that did not happen. In debates in this House immediately after the bombings, speakers seemed more concerned that those suspicions be deflected rather than addressed. Indeed, several politicians and some elements of the media over the years disgracefully sought to use these murders for their own narrow political agenda.

In his report of a meeting of an engagement with the then foreign Minister, Garrett FitzGerald, the British ambassador at the time reported that the "predictable attempts by the IRA to pin the blame on the British... has made no headway at all". The truth is that for years neither Dublin or London made any serious attempt to pursue the perpetrators. The British Government knew the identity of the perpetrators and claimed, in fact, to have interned them. They shared this information with the then Taoiseach and Ministers in September 1974 and it seems that nothing was done with this information. It was left to the families and victims to campaign. In the first instance, they had to campaign for recognition. They, alone, and the friends they made along the way, actually investigated what the authorities failed to do. A small number of journalists deserve great credit for lifting the lid on decades-old secrets. In particular, the 1993 Yorkshire Television documentary "Hidden Hand: The Forgotten Massacre" ensured a new generation had the starting basis for a renewed campaign but only a determined campaign by the families, the victims and their friends eventually shifted attitudes in official Ireland. I join Deputy McDonald in welcoming members and supporters of the campaign group, Justice for the Forgotten, here today and I thank them for their relentless work on behalf of the victims and their service to the cause of truth and justice.

I commend the motion to the House and I urge the Government to act upon it. I also urge the Government to demand that the British Government releases all information pertaining to this attack and all others perpetrated by the so-called Glenanne gang, and in all instances where the British state or its agents colluded in attacks and murders on this island, North or South; to use every mechanism at its disposal to exert pressure on the British Government, including through multilateral and international fora, to finally do the right thing and come clean on its dirty war in Ireland; and on this 50th anniversary year to also acknowledge the failings of this State in the aftermath of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and in the decades that followed. Thanks to the work of the people here and others, the victims of Dublin and Monaghan are no longer forgotten, but they have yet to secure justice.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Friday will mark the 50th anniversary and the 50th year since 34 innocent lives were lost as a result of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. As we heard, hundreds were also injured on that day. The Dublin and Monaghan bombings changed the lives of so many forever, and not just those who were killed or injured. I want to acknowledge the presence, as my colleagues have, of some of the families of the victims. The Justice for the Forgotten group has done so much in its campaign for truth and justice over the years.

It is now undisputed, except by those who have a *modus operandi* to hide the truth and frustrate justice, that the bombings were carried out by loyalists with the collusion of British security personnel. That tactic was deployed by the British state for decades, and was championed

by Frank Kitson, using what he called "counter gangs" to carry out the designs of the British military, intelligence services and government.

To this day, the British Government has refused to disclose the actions of its intelligence services, both in the wider conflict and with respect to the bombings on that fateful and tragic day. In 2005, the committee on justice was unequivocal in its conclusion when it stated, "We are dealing with acts of international terrorism that were colluded in by the British security forces". The British Government's legacy Act is indicative of its approach to truth and justice and the lengths to which they will go to in order to protect themselves and the British state with little regard to victims and their families. In this matter, these atrocities remain unsolved.

The motion calls on the Government to ensure that all requests made by Operation Denton to authorities in this jurisdiction are acted on as a matter of priority and to urge and directly raise with the British Government the need to provide all relevant materials to investigators. This motion has received cross-party support, similar to previous motions that were tabled and introduced by Sinn Féin in the past years. They were also unanimously adopted. However, what is required is not simply words; we need actions. The families demand actions. Every victim is deserving of truth and justice, and that includes those who lost their lives in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. As we approach the 50th anniversary of these atrocities, it is time to redouble our efforts so that they and their families get what they deserve: truth and justice.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I first want to welcome the bereaved families to the Gallery this evening, along with everyone who is involved with Justice for the Forgotten. They have my support, as well as the support of these benches, in their campaign for truth and justice. Their struggle for justice, despite the barriers they have faced, is absolutely inspirational. Truth, as all families who have been impacted by the conflict will know, is incredibly important. Collusion was no illusion, as so many families have had to discover and experience through their own losses.

We have had previous motions in the House on this, the single greatest loss of life in the entirety of the conflict, with 27 victims in Dublin and seven in Monaghan. Yet, now, in this the year and the week of the 50th anniversary of these bombings, the legacy Act facilitates the perpetuation of cover-up and denial of truth and justice for families. It is essential that the interstate case repeals this Act. In recent weeks we have seen in the cases Seán Brown, Fergal McCusker and others whose inquests were closed with calls by coroners for public inquiries in cases of collusion which again shows we need the interstate case to be successful and the Act to be scrapped.

Even post the Good Friday Agreement the British Government has not delivered for victims' families and has not lived up to its responsibilities. We need to hear from the Irish Government that it is on the side of families and we need to hear from the Tánaiste this week because the silence has been too much. Irish citizens whose lives have been destroyed as they go through the trauma of the enacting of the legacy Act, all families impacted by the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and families impacted by the policy of British state collusion must hear in words and see in actions that this Government is on their side and that I will do everything to secure the repeal of this Act. The Government must do more and must do everything in its power to support these families in their quest for truth and justice.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this the 50th anniversary of the awful bombings in Dublin and Monaghan. I also welcome to the Gallery some members

of the families of the 27 Dublin victims and the seven who lost their lives in Monaghan along with representatives of Justice for the Forgotten. The impact of the tragic events in Dublin and Monaghan still reverberates through every one of those 50 years. Despite several motions in the House since at least 2008, there is still no resolution. The horrific events of that sunny May day in 1974 and the innocent lives lost in Dublin and Monaghan will never be forgotten by anyone of us who lived through them.

Despite being in the full knowledge that those atrocities were carried out by loyalists, aided and abetted by British security personnel, successive British governments have denied the victims and their families the closure and justice they so richly deserve. Now to add insult to injury, the passing of the callous legacy Bill by UK Parliament has copper-fastened the British Government's unwillingness to be open and transparent.

The 2005 report by Mr. Justice Barron was absolutely clear and unapologetic in concluding that the events of 17 May 1974 were acts of international terrorism that were colluded in by British security forces. Yet after 50 long years neither the innocent victims nor their families have had even a hint of justice being done.

I remember the events of that day as a child with my mother telling me about the O'Brien family - mother, father and two beautiful baby girls - all killed outright by the Parnell Street blast. Innocent lives were lost and we are still waiting for the truth to be told. I implore all in this House to support this motion and call on the Government to leave no stone unturned, no avenue unexplored to ensure that this matter is no longer unresolved and to bring all possible pressure to bear on British Government to provide full disclosure of all requested documentation and material. All victims are equal. They are all innocent and all equally deserving of justice. This Government must do what its predecessors did not. The Tánaiste must raise this with the British Prime Minister, Mr. Sunak. Fifty years is far too long.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I only have a few seconds. I wish the families well. My thoughts are with them and all their loved ones. I thank Justice for the Forgotten, the Pat Finucane Centre and Relatives for Justice for all their hard work over the years. They have been a long time waiting on justice. We are not supposed to have a hierarchy of victims, but clearly in this case I do not think the Irish State has treated them very well. I genuinely believe that they will get justice. I look forward to seeing them all on Friday.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I am pleased to confirm that the Government will support this motion.

There are moments in time when we are confronted with the sharpest of contrasts in human nature - the contrast between decency and depravity, between good and evil, between love and hate. On 17 May 1974, this country faced such a moment. On a Friday evening, bright with the promise of early summer, decent people, including parents, children and pensioners, were going about the ordinary business of work, of care, of living. The familiar and easy rhythm of Dublin and Monaghan settling into a weekend was brutally interrupted by the horror of mass murder. The decency of the everyday was transformed by bombings into a catalogue of carnage with the highest number of casualties in a single incident during the Troubles, a period of murder, mayhem, and terrible and unjustifiable violence. On that day 34 lives were lost and 300 people were injured.

It is right that the House recall the devastation of that evening as we prepare to mark the

50th anniversary on Friday. Each death, each injury, scarred the lives of so many families and individuals. These were people with hopes and dreams, who were part of the social fabric of their communities, and whose loss has been felt acutely ever since. They were people who mattered and who still matter.

For half a century, the Dublin and Monaghan families have been tireless in campaigning in memory of their loved ones, demanding justice, accountability and truth. I acknowledge that we are joined today in the Visitors Gallery by representatives of Justice for the Forgotten, which has worked for decades with those families that suffered loss in the bombings. Others impacted are following these proceedings online.

I extend deepest sympathies on behalf of the Government to all those who suffered as a result of those tragic events. Foremost in our minds today are the victims and the duty that we as public representatives have to them. It is important that we demonstrate to the survivors and to the loved ones of those killed, that in this House we stand united in our support of them as they continue to seek answers.

On three prior occasions all parties in this House have come together to express that united support. In 2008, 2011 and 2016, Dáil Éireann with one voice urged the British Government to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents relating to these atrocities. Today we have the opportunity to repeat that call with one voice. This is a demand I have personally made to the British Government in various roles throughout my career in public service, and which I continue to make now in my role as Tánaiste and Minister of Foreign Affairs. In fact, I raised the Dublin-Monaghan bombings with the current Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, just weeks after I took up my current role, at the January 2023 meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. I followed up in writing and at subsequent meetings of the conference in June 2023, November 2023 and April 2024 as well as in our private meetings.

This British Government can have no doubt of the strength of feelings in this House and, more importantly, the salience of the issue for so many families. That half a century on from the atrocities of 17 May 1974, 21 years after the Barron inquiry and 17 years after the final McEntee report we are still asking for co-operation is a matter of profound regret and disappointment. I know from my own engagement with many of those affected that the loss and pain suffered on 17 May 1974 has been compounded by the frustration and hurt of unanswered questions.

The Barron inquiry, whose reports were subsequently considered by the Government and the Oireachtas, and the commission of investigation led by Patrick McEntee SC did important work that should be acknowledged. The Barron report drew well-founded conclusions on a number of key elements, not least that the attacks were carried out by two loyalist paramilitary groups, most of whom were members of the UVF. It also asserted the likelihood that members of the UDR and RUC either participated in or were aware of preparations for the attacks and the likelihood that the farm of James Mitchell at Glenanne played a significant part in the preparation for the attacks.

In both cases, the reports produced were clear that they were hampered in providing a fuller picture, including on long-standing questions on whether a role was played by British security forces before or after the attacks, by the lack of access to original documents held by the British Government. The motion passed today will be sent to the British Parliament. I hope that lawmakers there take to heart the message that the demand for access to these documents by

an independent figure is not going away. Our shared determination to pursue this issue, as a government and as an Oireachtas, is undiminished. With the Barron and McEntee reports, we challenged ourselves. I would ask that others do likewise.

As I said, I have been frank in my discussions with British counterparts on their shortcomings in this case. It is important that we, too, are honest about where we as a government and a society have fallen short on what we owe the victims and survivors of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings. The Barron Report made serious criticisms of the original Garda investigation into the bombings, including the failure to make full use of information obtained and weaknesses in forensic analysis. It remains the case that 50 years on from these terrible attacks, there has not been a single conviction. I know that this is a source of terrible hurt for the families. For many years following the bombings, theirs were lonely voices demanding answers and, frankly, they did not get the support or answers they deserved from the Government of the day, nor indeed from Dáil Éireann. The high level of engagement across our political system on this case today is in stark contrast to the muted response of the first two decades following the bombings. Not a single parliamentary question specific to the case was asked, from any quarter, from 1975 until 1991. I find this truly shocking. Still, the families did not allow their case to fade from view. In 1996, Justice for the Forgotten was formed and it has been campaigning with passion and determination ever since. I have met with it on a number of occasions and my Department continues to fund its important work through the reconciliation fund. That work continues.

I know the Dublin-Monaghan families have been watching closely the work of Operation Denton, an independent police analytical review into the activities of the so-called Glennane gang, as well as a Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland investigation of the same topic. We know how important such investigations are to families. I recently met with the new head of Operation Denton, Sir Iain Livingstone, and underlined the importance we attach to his work. When Operation Denton investigators sought assistance from An Garda Síochána, the Minister for Justice took steps to put in place a bespoke mechanism to allow relevant information to be shared. Survivors and the families of victims have also taken their own civil case in Belfast, which it was decided last month, will proceed to trial. I will not comment on the details of a case that remains *sub judice*, but Deputies across this House will appreciate how meaningful a development this is. It is particularly meaningful as, tragically for many other families bereaved during the Troubles, the entry into force of the UK's legacy Act at the start of this month ended their ability to progress their cases through the civil courts, coronial inquests and police ombudsman investigations.

I have explained before to Deputies the fundamental concerns that prompted me to recommend to Government that we take a case at the European Court of Human Rights in respect of this Act, not least in relation to its compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights. I will not repeat those arguments today, which are best left to the court, but it is important to state explicitly that this Government's policy on legacy issues is a part of and, in fact, central to our efforts to further reconciliation on this island. Without an effective, human-rights compliant framework for dealing with the legacy of the past that commands the confidence of victims and survivors, how can we ask individuals or society to move on? How can we expect to achieve genuine reconciliation? We can do better. The best way forward is one where both Britain and Ireland work together in an agreed way to deal with the complexities and hurt which the violence of the Troubles inflicted on so many - too many. While for some families it is too late, an agreed, comprehensive approach that commands public confidence is the best way to consolidate reconciliation.

In the run-up to this important anniversary, we have heard a lot from those who survived and those who lost loved ones. RTÉ and others have rightly given them a space to tell their stories. These first-hand accounts bring home the scale of the loss for families and for our society. Fifty years ago this Friday, when Clery's clock struck 5 p.m., Dublin was caught up in the normal Friday evening rush. By the time the clock had struck six, this city had changed, our country had changed and hundreds of lives had changed. Fifty years on from the darkest day in their lives, the Dublin and Monaghan families continue their campaign. There is no expiry date in their desire for truth and justice. Today, we come together across this House to say, once again, you are not alone in this campaign. Today, we mourn with you the great loss suffered by the victims of the bombs of 17 May 1974. We offer our humble acknowledgement of the obstacles you have overcome and the mountain you have climbed to get your campaign to where it is today. We recognise our own past shortcomings as a State and political system. We call on the British Government to look afresh at this request, which has been agreed by this House three times already and this House again makes that call today. We recommit ourselves, in the most solemn terms, to pressing the British Government to respond positively to the demand for answers that the families have sought for so long. The Government hopes that all Deputies will support this motion.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. Before moving on, I say céad míle fáilte do na cuairteoirí inár gcomhluadar inniu. I extend a very special welcome to the visitors who are with us today in the Gallery. I move back now to the speakers from Sinn Féin.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I also welcome the families in the Gallery. I was five years old when the bombs were detonated in Dublin and Monaghan and I lived a short distance away, in Sheriff Street. Growing up in the north inner city, the impact of these bombings left a long legacy of fear in the area and the wider city of Dublin. Everyone knows that this attack in Dublin and Monaghan was carried out by a combined group of British army agents and loyalists, with probable direct logistical support from British security services. What we all know is that there has never been a single person brought to justice. What we know is that the British state refused to release its files on who its agents were and what roles its agents and members played in the attacks in Dublin and in Monaghan. It is inconceivable, given that the British state had agents running to the very heart of loyalist groups right up until 1994, that the British state security services did not know the attack was being carried out.

Mr. Justice Barron, as has been mentioned, was very critical of the Garda investigation. His report found the investigation was limited and short in duration and that it was extraordinary that an investigation into an atrocity of this size and scale could, or should, be wound down so soon. Why was this investigation pulled after a number of weeks? Will the Tánaiste help explain that to the victims and their families, and the people of Dublin and Monaghan. Listening to the RTÉ podcast, I was stunned to hear that some witnesses had never been interviewed. Shockingly, one victim of the bombing in Dublin said he was targeted for questioning about the bomb by An Garda Síochána. This man, even now, deserves an apology. I find it inexplicable that successive Governments failed to raise this with the British Government over the years. It is time, 50 years on, that pressure was put on the British state to ensure all material relevant to the work of Operation Denton is provided to investigators. It is time for justice now. It is time for answers for the victims and their families because justice delayed is justice denied.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Next Friday is the 50th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. We remember the victims of one of the worse atrocities of the Troubles, when three bombs exploded in Dublin and a fourth one in Monaghan. This resulted in the deaths of 34

civilians, including baby Martha O'Neill, and the injury of almost 300 people.

I pay tribute to the families and campaigners from Justice for the Forgotten in the Gallery. I acknowledge their long struggle for truth and justice, which is a testament to their commitment and determination to get justice for their loved ones 50 years on. Those who died that awful day were aged between five months and 80 years. Many who survived the bombings, as well as the families of the victims, still bear the physical and emotional scars of that day. Although the bombings were claimed by the UVF, they had all the hallmarks of collusion with the British army and British intelligence. Irish Supreme Court judge, Mr. Justice Henry Barron, in his report on the bombings in 2005, clearly indicated the likely involvement of the British military and intelligence services. This explains why the British Government has been reluctant to release its files on these bombings and has obstructed and frustrated the families' struggle for justice over the years. By continuing to withhold vital documents, it is wilfully denying justice for the bereaved and the injured. It makes the British Government more than just complicit in the denial of justice for the bereaved families and the injured; it retraumatises the survivors and the families of the victims. Various British Governments use the excuse of national security as a reason for not releasing its files. This is not about national security. It is about protecting the guilty. The British Government is not interested in or concerned with the victims of this atrocity. Its only concern is to hide its own involvement and protect its agents and personnel who worked side by side with loyalists such as the Glennane gang. For the families and the survivors, justice delayed is justice denied.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I join my colleagues in acknowledging the presence of the families of some of the victims as well as members of Justice for the Forgotten who are present in the Gallery. I extend my solidarity and sympathies to them. The 50th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings will be marked on 17 May. Fifty years on, the families are still looking for truth and justice. It is important this Dáil renews the mandates that were established by previous motions on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. It is welcome that it has been indicated that this motion will receive cross-party support today. It is important that the Government takes action to deliver on the core essence of this and previous motions.

All victims are entitled to truth and justice. The British Government's recently passed legacy Act is aimed at denying truth and justice and covering up the malevolent part it played in fuelling the conflict. We know the bombings were carried out by loyalists and British agents with logistical and technical support from British security personnel, yet no one has ever been brought to justice, while the British Government maintains its denials and refuses to release files and information on the attacks. Previous Irish Governments and institutions of this State do not have a proud record either when it comes to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. "Anatomy of a Massacre", a new documentary to mark the 50th anniversary of the bombings, refers to the silent years between the bombings and the early nineties, when they were never raised by the Government or the Opposition of the day, with the media compliantly ignoring the bombings during this period also. Raising this matter in every meeting with the British Prime Minister should be a priority for any Taoiseach. Too often, previous Taoisigh were content to admit they had not raised the matter. The Irish Government must use every diplomatic tool at its disposal to encourage the British to co-operate and release all relevant files. Truth and justice must be pursued and obtained.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: "We are dealing with acts of international terrorism that were colluded in by the British security forces". That is what the Oireachtas committee on justice said in 2005. That says it all. Bombs ended up on the streets of Dublin and Monaghan. There

were 34 victims and a huge number of people were injured. Their families have been impacted all this time. This happened because of British state forces and their agents. It was facilitated. No one has looked into this to the degree it needs, outside of journalists and families, whom I welcome. I welcome all those who fought hard for justice over many years, which has been denied to this day. The British Government was never going to accept its role in the dirty war it executed in Ireland. My parents were getting the train to Dundalk and ten minutes before the bomb went off, they passed Talbot Street. One of their friends, whom they met there, arrived covered in debris from the bombs. That is the sort of good luck they had and the bad luck others had. Loyalists showed a capacity they did not have before or after. Those papers need to be released.

I also mention Seamus Ludlow and the Dundalk bombings. We need to make sure we look after those victims also. I also think of Hugh Waters, Jack Rooney and the victims the Glenanne gang made that night with its attack on Donnelly's bar. It was co-ordinated and controlled. There has been no justice for the families.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ba mhaith liom an spotsolas a dhíriú ar chathair agus contae na Gaillimhe inniu. Mar is eol don Taoiseach, is cathair álainn í. Go teoiriciúil, is cathair dhátheangach í agus geata chuig an Ghaeltacht is mó sa tír. Tá an t-ádh dearg orainn go bhfuil lánfhostaíocht sa chathair ach tá fadhbanna tromchúiseacha ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta agus go háirid ó thaobh infreastruchtúr de. Tá easpa infreastruchtúr bunúsach ata fite fuaite leis an bhfadhb ó thaobh tithíochta de.

I salute the families and campaigners, especially Margaret Irwin whom I have known for many years, in Justice for the Forgotten. When officialdom discouraged families and those seeking justice and their supporters from delving into this matter, they continued to seek the truth. They fought hard and fast to try to get the media in this State in particular, but also elsewhere, to look at the acts of international terrorism by British forces against civilians on the streets of Dublin and Monaghan on 17 May 1974, and in other attacks in 1972 and 1973. They stood strong. The attacks by British agents on 17 May were tantamount to a declaration of war, aiming to strike terror in the Irish public. They were straight out of Kitson's war manual. People need to go back and look at that. Many questions remain unanswered. I welcome the new docu-film by Fergus Dowd and others, "Anatomy of a Massacre", showing in the IFI at the moment. It highlights the failings of the Garda investigation. Those questions need answers. The British need to once and for all admit their role and the truth of their slaughter on the streets of Dublin and Monaghan.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I, too, welcome warmly to the House representatives of Justice for the Forgotten. On 17 May 1974, 50 years ago, co-ordinated bombings were carried out by loyalist paramilitaries. Three bombs in Dublin and a fourth in Monaghan shattered the lives of countless families. Thirty-four were killed and almost 300 injured. It happened during the Ulster Workers' Council strike called to oppose the Sunningdale Agreement. One of the bombs exploded in Talbot Street, a route to Connolly Station for Wexford people going home. I was in college in Dublin. More often than not, I would have taken that train. Somebody I knew very well, Siobhán Roice, a girl of my age from Wexford, did walk down that street that night and lost her life. It was timed for 5.30 p.m. to hit passengers heading for that train and others.

Prior to this horrific series of bombs in 1974, there were four previous paramilitary bombings in Dublin city centre. The first was at Burgh Quay on 26 November 1972. It was outside the wall of the Film Centre cinema at O'Connell Bridge House. That bomb injured 40 people,

among them my sister Jackie and her husband Paddy. Both had very serious leg injuries, with part of a cinema seat embedded in Paddy's leg. I commend the perseverance and resilience of the Justice for the Forgotten group. My sister refers to the 1972 bombing as "The forgotten forgotten". I recall, as a schoolboy, visiting my sister and her husband in the Mater Hospital. It was surrounded at the time by armed gardaí because also in the hospital at the exact same time was Seán Mac Stíofáin, chief of staff of the Provisional IRA. He was on hunger strike. I remember the terror of trying to get through that phalanx because the night after the bombing, an eight-man IRA unit unsuccessfully tried to free Mac Stíofáin from the Mater and exchanged gunfire with members of An Garda Síochána.

The full truth behind each of these atrocities needs to be fully investigated with, for once, open and complete disclosure from British and Irish Governments and all their various security services. No one, as others said, has ever been arrested or charged with these attacks. The truth remains hidden. Despite our expressions of unanimity, after 50 years, we seem to be no closer to the truth. Today's motion recalls previous all-party motions. On this, the 50th anniversary, we repeat yet again the same basic point made three times previously, that access to the truth requires wholehearted co-operation between governments and security services throughout these islands. That is true not just of these atrocities but of all the killings and maimings that happened during what we call the Troubles. One major change since the Dáil last addressed these issues is the passing of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. We all know that Act will do little or nothing to achieve its stated objectives. It is instead yet another obstacle to truth and reconciliation. Legacy issues remain the unfinished business of the Good Friday Agreement. It is somehow easier for Northern Ireland parties to devise institutions of government, as difficult as that has been, than to devise ways to address the past and its legacy of horror. Little progress has been made on this matter. In fact, few real attempts have been made. Neither side was willing to see that the only way forward is compromise. The reason there is a need for compromise is that implicit in the Stormont House agreement is the recognition of a stark reality. Relying on traditional policing and justice approaches to these legacies is bound to fail, and many know that. However, there is no compromise on legacy. The British Government stepped in and unilaterally imposed its defined solution. Its approach is not impartial or even-handed. The British Government has its own constituency of army veterans and their families, and its legislation is designed to meet the needs of that constituency and its political objectives. The Act has no support in Northern Ireland and no support in the rest of Ireland. There is a basic need for people in Northern Ireland to consent to any process that is designed to address the past, that truly has the objective of reconciliation at its heart.

The British legislation, in truth, is not entirely bad. It will set up an independent commission for reconciliation and information recovery to review deaths and injuries caused by conduct forming part of the Troubles. It is encouraging that it does not matter if that event or conduct occurred in Northern Ireland, in another part of the United Kingdom or elsewhere. In theory, at least, while the Dublin and Monaghan bombings could be examined under that Act, the circumstances surrounding the high-handed enactment of this legislation and its imposition mean that it will not work or be worked. The truth is that it is not just the paramilitaries and Northern Ireland parties that have backed away from addressing these issues in a fundamental way. The policing and other security services in Britain and Ireland are also haunted by their own part in all of this. There is deep-seated political and institutional resistance to efforts to ensure that wrongs are fully and completely ventilated and that wrongdoers, from wherever they come, are identified. All the time the clock is ticking, and that has been the objective because delay defeats justice.

I welcome the commitment given to Colum Eastwood by the British Labour Party leader Keir Starmer that the legacy Act will be repealed by any incoming Labour government. Whoever is in government here must keep that new Labour government to that commitment and must work with it to restore the current toxic Anglo-Irish relationship in order that these bombings and other issues can be addressed and resolved. It will be far preferable to have the legacy Act dealt with politically by agreement between governments than by awaiting a judgment of the European court. I believe the Tánaiste would agree with that. Simple repeal of the legislation will be nowhere near enough. A return to the *status quo* will achieve nothing. In many, if not most, of the historic cases, evidence continues every day to degrade, memories continue to deteriorate and witnesses are dying. Simply leaving open the possibility of future criminal prosecutions is in many ways offering a false hope to the majority of victims, survivors and their families. Bear in mind the sheer number of cases that are still unsolved. Well over 3,500 people died during the Troubles and more than 47,000 people were injured. It has been estimated that one third of the people in Northern Ireland were directly or indirectly affected by political violence. Many others obviously suffered in Britain, in this part of the island and across Europe. Even with a limitless budget there is neither the policing resources nor capacity to carry out all these investigations.

We have a responsibility as political leaders to lead our supporters towards a mechanism that is both workable and principled. That is the only real and substantial hope we can offer the victims and families of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and to all of their communities, who still grieve in such a real and obvious fashion. Unless we make that commitment, all of our expressions of concern, however often we repeat them, remain mere verbiage.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this incredibly important motion. In Dublin everybody has a story about the bombings that took place 50 years ago this week, in 1974, but absolutely nobody feels they have a full understanding of the truth of what happened that day, although everybody suspects they know what happened. We will go into that further.

I have talked to a number of different people who shared their stories about that day in 1974. Earlier today, on my way back here, I had a conversation with my father. I wanted to get the context and place myself in the environment of what happened. He has told me the story a few times. When I think of how the events of that day are told in my house, we always refer to the chopper bike my dad owned as a ten-year-old. He remembers being in Hill Street flat complex cycling around on the chopper bike. Miss O'Reilly looked over the balcony and asked him to go find her son who she said was down in the barber shop. As it was approaching dinner, she wanted him to get her son and bring him back home. My dad, on his chopper bike, left Hill Street and cycled down the hill past Paddy's pet shop. He checked the two or three barbers on Parnell Street and went down towards the Welcome Inn, where he suspected his cousin may be if he could not be found anywhere else. He asked a couple of people, and subsequently cycled back up North Great George's Street to get back into Hill Street. As Miss O'Reilly relayed to him that her son had just come home, he said he heard the most ungodly boom, a boom he remembers to this day, and which did not so much knock him off his bike but made the ground shudder underneath him. As a ten-year-old, curiosity got the better of my father and he got back on his bike and cycled down to Parnell Street. He says the thing he remembers most about the scene of devastation and glass he witnessed that day was the silence. He says that following the loudest boom he could imagine was a silence that was deafening, as the people on Parnell Street came to terms with what was happening. My dad still did not really know what had taken place.

He just saw devastation and cycled back up the road to his own accommodation in a tenement off Gardiner Street to find his mother sobbing and crying with joy when he went in. He said just as they were about to embrace, they heard the second boom from Talbot Street. For me, that is the luckiness and good fortune. I am conscious we are gathered in the Chamber with so many people in the Public Gallery who were not as lucky as my family and my father. Their stories are more harrowing, but the memory and trauma ingrained in people the length and breadth of Dublin and Monaghan of that day 50 years ago lives on in the stories that are shared across the board. My father also told me that a couple of years ago in the warfarin clinic he bumped into a friend of his, Derek Byrne, who passed away not too long ago. When they asked each other why there were there, Derek relayed that he still had shrapnel throughout his entire body because of what took place 48 years before that meeting. My dad's story is one of fortune and luck, but the stories of so many other people are not.

Today we gather to reflect on the darkest chapter in the history of Ireland, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 17 May 1974. It was the single deadliest attack during the tumultuous period known as the Troubles. As we approach the 50th anniversary of that day, it is our duty to remember the 33 innocent lives lost and the hundreds more that were irrevocably changed due to this heinous act. The bombings, executed with ruthless precision, saw three car bombs explode in Dublin during rush hour, followed by a fourth in Monaghan less than 90 minutes later. The magnitude of the devastation was unprecedented. The shock and grief were profound and far reaching. Families were torn apart. The sense of security within these bustling communities was shattered in an instant.

As we delve deeper, the further we get away from this history, it is imperative to discuss the serious allegations we know to be true, but which have surfaced more in the decades that have followed and point towards collusion by elements within the British state, or indeed the British state itself. Reports and investigations have demonstrated a shadowy interface between the bombers in the Glenanne gang and the British security forces.

7 o'clock

These allegations suggest that rogue elements in the British military or intelligence may have had prior knowledge of, or directly assisted in, the planning and execution of these attacks. Such accusations deepen the scars and compound the pain with a profound sense of betrayal. The weight of these allegations call for thorough scrutiny and transparency. For too long, the families of the victims and survivors have carried the burden of the unknown. They have lived with unanswered questions and unresolved grief. The path to healing must include the pursuit of truth. This pursuit has been championed by the tireless campaign groups such as Justice for the Forgotten, which have been instrumental in pushing for further investigation and accountability. Their quest for justice has seen some progress in the establishment of various inquiries and the release of reports that have shed light on potential oversights and failures which may have masked collusion. However, much remains to be done. Campaign groups have repeatedly called for full access to all relevant documents and records, some of which remain classified by the British Government under the pretext of national security. The reluctance to release these files only fuels suspicion and hinders reconciliation efforts. As we approach this solemn anniversary, our call to action is clear. We must support the demand for transparency and full disclosure. Every piece of information that can be unearthed must be brought to light to bring some measure of peace to the victims' families. We owe it to them to ensure that their decades' long struggle for answers and justice is not in vain.

The Governments involved should take proactive steps to acknowledge and address the past. Only then can we foster an environment where truth can pave the way for genuine reconciliation. Only by confronting these uncomfortable truths that we can hope to prevent any tragedies of the future.

Let us remember not only the lives lost and the families broken but also our duty to uphold the principles of justice and truth. The Dublin and Monaghan bombings remain a stark reminder of the fragility of peace and the destructive power of hatred. As we reflect, we must commit ourselves to a future where history cannot be allowed repeat itself. Reconciliation can only be brought by truth and then justice.

The enormity of what happened can never be lost on us as it was in the first decades by the State architecture here and in the UK, that is, a terrorist attack inflicted on the people of Dublin and Monaghan was carried out by forces of the British state. Until that is acknowledged and until that truth is revealed, reconciliation for the families that have been torn apart and among a populace which still demands answers can never be fully achieved. Fifty years on, families are in the Gallery demanding that we, as their representatives stand true, and hold the British state to account. I am very conscious of other acts of collusion, such as the tragedy of what was inflicted on the Miami Showband. That truth cannot be allowed to lie. It is incumbent on us in this Chamber – and no one has a monopoly on this role – to seek and demand answers and accountability from those who were complicit in that most heinous crime of terror – the state-aided terror – which was inflicted on the people of Dublin and Monaghan and throughout communities in the North.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Sinn Féin for brining forward this important motion. I welcome Justice for the Forgotten and the families of those who were murdered 50 years ago this month in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and the survivors. I also welcome Fergus Dowd, who is the producer of the film that was mentioned earlier and which premiered last Friday. "May-17-74: The Anatomy of a Massacre" was produced by Fergus and Joe Lee, the director, in conjunction with the families and Justice for the Forgotten, to once again shine a light on this horrific act of mass murder. It was the greatest single atrocity that took place during the period of the Troubles. Incredibly, 50 years on, those families are still looking for the truth about and justice for what happened to their loved ones or, in the case of survivors, what happened to them. No words any of us can say here can possibly convey or do justice to the pain, loss, tragedy, the impact and trauma of this horrific act of mass murder which was carried out by loyalist paramilitaries with the collusion and involvement of the British state. It is simply outrageous that they are still fighting for justice. I am not an expert in this area. I want to thank the families I have talked to, and Fergus and others, for helping me to understand some of what I hope are the important questions they are looking to get answered.

One of the relatives of victims of that day, Cathy Doyle, asked me to show the Tánaiste and the House these shoes, which are the shoes of one the victims, Jacqueline, who was 16 months old. Jacqueline O'Brien was murdered on that day along with her sister, Anna Marie who was four months, and her mother and father, Anna O'Brien and Johnny. Anna was 22. I hope Cathy will not mind me saying that her life has been indelibly scarred by the loss – how could it not be – of her nieces, of her sister and her sister's husband. She remains traumatised. I asked her how she felt about the film the other night and she said that to be honest, she was thoroughly shaken by all those memories being brought back. Talking to some of the other relatives outside, I asked about their expectations for today. I think it is fair to say it was pessimistic, really, as to whether anything was going to change and whether they are actually going to get the truth

and justice that they deserve.

It does not surprise me greatly that Britain wants to hide its involvement in this massacre. It is an absolute disgrace and it tells you something not very pleasant – something quite dark – about the British state that it will not give the people the information and the truth about what happened and the involvement of the British State in this act of mass murder, in this act of terrorism. But the questions I want to ask are about what this State owes to the families and the victims. How could it be – the State surely has some information about this – that the investigations here were closed down after ten weeks? Why are the Garda files missing? These have never been seen and are generally believed to have been destroyed. Why was the forensic evidence of the bombing sent North and the person, Dr. James Donovan, the Garda forensic technical expert, who did get some of the material, did not know until 25 years later that this had happened? Therefore, of course, there was no co-operation on the examination of that forensic material, which would have shown something about who carried it out, about the collusion and so on. How could it possibly be that not one survivor or bereaved family member was interviewed by the Garda after the atrocity or to date? It was only in the context of Operation Denton that Jon Boutcher knocked on the doors of some of those affected. How could it be that the investigative material presented to the McEntee report has been blocked from being given to the families' legal teams by the use of the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004, by which it can be blocked for 50 years? How could it be that even now, the Irish State is not willing to give those affected and the survivors the information to which they surely are entitled? How could it be that 29 justice Ministers have refused to give over information, evidential files and so on that has been sought by the families? These to me are absolutely incredible. It is not just about what the British state refuses to disclose about its complicity with this atrocity but the questions the Irish State has to ask about this. Indeed it is about the circumstances, as the film well dramatised the other day, in which the sort of muted response of the Irish State to this atrocity seemed more concerned about scoring political points in the context of a wider political debate than to actually pursue the justice deserved by the families and victims of those horrific bombings. I hope that some of those questions can now be answered by the Irish Government in the context of the 50th anniversary.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 17 May 1974 were the single most bloody event of the Troubles. Thirty-four people were killed, 27 in Dublin and seven in Monaghan, and 300 people were injured. Car bombs in Dublin were placed strategically near to train stations during rush hour in the middle of a bus strike. Many of the victims were young women workers. The Monaghan bomb was very probably deliberately timed to distract security and facilitate the safe passage of the bombing team back across the Border.

I express my solidarity and the solidarity of the Socialist Party with the families of those who died and with the survivors. I also salute the Justice for the Forgotten campaign in keeping this issue alive because 50 years on, there are still very many unanswered questions here. Why has no one ever been charged with the bombings? The UVF admitted responsibility in the early 1990s but did higher-ups in the UDR and RUC turn a blind eye to the attack and cover up after it? Why does the British state continue to this day to refuse to publish key documents related to the case? The Barron report, an Irish Government inquiry, found that British security force personnel, or MI5 intelligence, was likely involved. Would the publication of documents prove this to be the case? I believe that very clearly they would and that there was involvement there.

The Barron report criticised the Garda investigation and said the investigators stopped their work prematurely. Why was this the case? Why have all of the files not been handed over?

Why did the Irish political establishment not want to know about this case for so many years?

The Dublin and Monaghan killings are a justice issue and a working-class issue. It is an issue that needs to be taken up by the working-class movement. The working-class movement has nothing to hide when it comes to investigating the legacy of the Troubles. Sectarian forces on both sides will want to see investigation of the atrocities that were carried out by the opposite sectarian side. The British state will try to whitewash its role, as shown by the Tories' legacy Act and the refusal to release documents relating to this case.

The working-class movement has clean hands and has an interest in seeing justice for all working-class people who lost loved ones during the Troubles. No to cover ups. Justice for the forgotten.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I too welcome members of the campaign group to the Gallery tonight. I thank them for all the work they have over the years on this. The fact they have had to do it shows that this building and the people who have been in this building for the past five decades have simply not done their jobs. It is the responsibility of the political establishment. It is the responsibility of the Department of Justice and the Minister for Justice to make sure the citizens of this country are projected, are kept safe and if there is an injustice done to them that there is a proper investigation and the truth is achieved about that. I also thank Fergus Dowd, who worked on the film about this issue, and I look forward to seeing the film and to gaining a better understanding of the events of the day.

It goes without saying that the Dublin and Monaghan bombings were the worst single atrocity that happened during the Troubles. They were unique in their severity. That is in no way to take away from the pain and suffering that was experienced by anybody else who lost a loved one during the Troubles. The Dublin and Monaghan bombings destroyed the lives of so many people and radically damaged the survivors and families left in their wake.

The emotional damage that was created cannot be quantified in any way but it is also important to recognise that many of these families were left destitute as a result of what happened to them and that families lost their homes in some circumstances. They were made homeless. Other families lost their fathers, who were the breadwinners in their homes at the time. It is incredible to think many of these families received absolutely no compensation whatsoever from the State for what happened to them and that people in the North of Ireland who have suffered significantly from the horrors of the Troubles have been offered compensation. This State has not seen fit yet to provide similar compensation for families who have lost so much over the last while.

These bombs killed 34 civilians and injured almost 300 people. There has been no justice. I think there are two reasons there has been no justice. The first is that the British state is responsible for the killings of these 34 individuals. The British state murdered these Irish people on the streets of our capital and the British state does not want the truth to ever come out about that. The British state used the Glenanne gang as a vehicle for the perpetration of these murders.

The Glenanne gang killed 120 people in Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s. I also want to mention Barney O'Dowd, a neighbour of mine who recently passed away. He survived an attack on his family in 1976. It was an attack that murdered his 24 year old son Barry, his 19 year old son Declan and which also killed his brother Joe. That attack was carried out by the UVF in tandem with the Glenanne gang on that day and Barney died just a month ago at the age

of 100. He never received justice or truth for what happened to his family.

The British Government does not want to see the truth and has created the legacy Act to cover up the truth. It is important to say that the legacy Act seeks to allow people to get away with murder. That is exactly what it seeks to do. It is the son and heir of the cover-up and the collusion that happened between the British army, the RUC and a host of loyalist terrorist groups in the North of Ireland. It is a unilateral Act that undermines the rule of law and the human right to justice and makes the British Government an outlier internationally. It makes the British Government a rogue state internationally and this Act is heaping pain and suffering on those who have suffered so significantly at the hands of the British state for so long. The British try to distance themselves from the murders that happened in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s but the legacy Act locates that cover-up right at the heart of the British establishment. It puts the cover-up into Downing Street because now it is directly responsible for that cover-up in everybody's view at the moment.

I also think there is a second barrier to the search for truth about this issue. I believe the Irish State has been a barrier to the search for truth and justice about the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. I still cannot believe, this being the worse atrocity of the Troubles and which happened in this State - in our capital and in Monaghan - that the State's reactions to it were so feeble, so small and so reduced that there was no effort really in the State to try to get to the truth and justice in this regard. Incredibly, we had a situation where the Garda investigation was closed down after ten weeks. I am told that many of the survivors and the people who were there on the day never received a knock on the door from the Garda at the time or were never interviewed about what happened. For some people, the first knock on the door about this from any policemen was from Jon Boutcher four decades after the event had happened, that is, an English policeman was the first person to knock on the door of some of the families who lost so much at the time.

That is a scandal that points directly to this Government and I believe the Government needs to account for that. Incredibly, Garda files went missing. Forensics were not dealt with in the time they needed to be dealt with. Forensics were sent 11 days afterwards to the North of Ireland, which is an incredible situation and it is a scandal that the existence and whereabouts of those forensics were unknown to people who were meant to be in charge of the investigations. I understand that when Bertie Ahern became Taoiseach, he block-booked a whole day to read the Garda files on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and it took him one hour to look at the files that exist. That files had gone missing and there were so few files on this is an absolute scandal. That the authorities North and South did not work together is a scandal. I cannot believe that happened.

Looking back at this State's understanding of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, the fact that they do not appear in the schoolbooks of this generation is also a scandal. It is as if the Dublin and Monaghan bombings are buried in the consciousness of official Ireland at the moment. Nearly 30 years of Ministers have gone by - Ministers for Justice have existed since the bombings. When the families went to meet some of those Ministers, their response was that if the families found any more information, they should come back to them. Those Ministers should have been the engine to seek information for those families and should have provided the energy to search for justice. The fact that we have words here tonight and many motions have been passed in the House without action speaks volumes to the people of Ireland and survivors of that horrendous day.

I believe there has been an airbrushing of this issue by official Ireland. I do not believe that official Ireland has pushed this issue with the British Government with the level of energy necessary to achieve justice. I ask the Government to focus on that. On funding, I mentioned that some families were left destitute by the bombings. Previous Governments pulled funding from the campaign group. Today, funding is achieved through the Pat Finucane Centre. The money must go North first and then come back South to the families, which shows a complete lack of logic.

I ask the Government to start to focus on this issue with the level of sincerity, effort and realism that it demands. This is a unique issue. It is a shocking human tragedy, where one state murdered the citizens of another. The responsibility of this State is to defend and protect its citizens and make sure justice is achieved. I ask the Government to provide not just words and go through the motions but to set itself a task of forcing the British Government to seek justice. I would go further than that. Given the fact that we have never properly investigated this, that the Government did not do its duty and that many families were left on their own to deal with this, I ask the Government to apologise to the families here tonight for not doing its job and supporting the families historically, not investigating what happened properly and leaving families to do all of this work by themselves.

Deputy Michael Collins: We welcome and support this motion, which acknowledges the work done by the sub-committee of the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights, the report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin and Monaghan Bombings and the three related Barron reports. This recognition of past efforts sets a precedent for continued investigation and resolution. We support the call in the motion urging the British Government to allow access to all original documents relating to the atrocities for an independent international judicial figure. This is a call for transparency and co-operation in resolving these crimes. The quest for obtaining access to information held by the British Government on the bombings has been pursued for many years. This persistence underscores the importance of obtaining the truth and resolving these crimes and providing closures to the families of the victims.

This week, Friday, 17 May, marks the 50th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. This serves as a reminder of the passage of time and the growing need to provide all necessary information to assist families. We strongly support any efforts to seek justice for the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. It is one of Ireland's worst atrocities. A trio of no-warning car bombs exploded in Dublin city centre within the space of three minutes, killing 27 and injuring 215. Barely 90 minutes later, another car bomb was detonated in Monaghan town, killing seven more people, with a total of 34 lives lost.

That day, 17 May 1974, was the deadliest single day of the entire Troubles. Despite the evidence implicating known loyalist paramilitaries, no one was ever brought to justice for these attacks. Persistent allegations of collusion between the killers and the British security and intelligence services have been made over the years. However, previous investigations have been stifled by the British Government's refusal to release key intelligence documents. The Garda investigation into the bombings was mysteriously disbanded just seven weeks after the attacks, with crucial evidence sent North to the RUC being subsequently lost or destroyed, while the official inquest into the 34 deaths was never completed.

It was truly extraordinary that Garda files could end up in the hands of the RUC in this way, especially when it transpired that RUC personnel were involved with a County Armagh-based

UVF outfit. The Glenanne gang, which included UDR and RUC personnel, went on to carry out a number of other notorious Troubles killings, including the Miami Showband massacre.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ba mhaith liom ar an gcéad dul síos fíorfháilte a chur roimh na daoine agus na clanna go léir a fuair bás in the Monaghan and Dublin bombings. I want to welcome the families here and empathise with them. My welcome is not much good to them; they need justice. Unfortunately, they are not going to get it.

I compliment Sinn Féin on bringing forward the motion. It will probably be in the next Government and I hope when it is in government, it will have motions like this and will bring justice, because there is none. We inherited a system in the Free State from the British Government which left a lot to be desired. We kept so much of the old British system. During the time of the Troubles, there was the very same *modus operandi*, including cover-up and denial.

I was in second year in St. Joseph's College, Cahir, when about 50 of my fellow pupils and I were in Dublin on that fatal day on a school tour. It was a traumatic and frightening scene. We were very close to it and panic set in. People ran in different directions. We met poor unfortunate people who were seriously injured. We did not know what to do. I want to sympathise with everyone who lost their lives. It was a traumatic scene and there was huge carnage.

My wife of nearly 40 years was putting in the cows at home in Tedavnet, in County Monaghan, when she heard the explosion seven miles away in Monaghan town. That is how ferocious those blasts were. There were no mobile phones at the time. Our parents did not know what had happened until we got home to Cahir at nearly midnight, instead of being home at 7 p.m. or whatever. We can imagine the angst, loss, trauma and devastation of the families involved.

Last Sunday morning, I heard on the radio an account of a woman pushing her two children in a pram, who was injured. She ran to a house and then collapsed in the yard, where neighbours and others helped her. Bombings and things like that - we know what happened in Northern Ireland - are not simple. The worst part is the collusion, lack of investigation and the failure of as many Ministers for Justice as the number of victims since the bombings. The same system goes on and continues to perpetrate the cover-up, which is worse. There was no effort whatsoever. I am sure the gang concerned was involved in other incidents.

Last week, I met Stephen Travers, a survivor from Tipperary who was in the Miami Showband. Those murders did not happen in our jurisdiction. I know plenty about the Omagh bomb and the man who took the bomb. That could have been stopped and all of those lives could have been saved. I met him numerous times. I will not say anything else because I do not want to identify the man concerned. He is dead now. That was collusion North and South, which could have been avoided.

There was no investigation into the Whiddy Island disaster. There was a cover-up. I am not in any way making little of the plight of the families of those affected by the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and the fight for justice. Fr. Niall Molloy was murdered at a wedding in Offaly. He had connections in Tipperary. John O'Brien and Patrick Esmonde were killed off the coast at Helvick Head about 13 years ago. Fighting for justice for them is a waste of time. They were killed. Their deaths were not accidental but there was a cover up. I have been hugely involved in that case but to no avail. Shane O'Farrell from Monaghan is another case. His mother has been in here for debates and Sinn Féin tabled motions on it. Again, what

happened there was a disgrace. The man who killed him was involved in criminal activities and had been stopped at a checkpoint an hour beforehand. There was a cover-up there. He was wanted in two jurisdictions. The cover-up continues. There was also Aidan McAnespie. I did not know him but my family knew him well. He was shot by British soldiers. They go on and there are many more, up and down the country, and they are still happening. Grievous and serious wrongs are being perpetrated and there are cover-ups. There is not a shred of wanting to have a fair, decent, and respectful Ireland that the men of 1916, 1921, 1922 and 1923 fought for. It is not there because we inherited that old system, but by God did we make it better and make it better for the system. To hell with na daoine na tíre, to hell with the people of Ireland. We had a young man killed in a Garda station in Clonmel, Brian Rossiter, almost 25 years ago. Fight for justice? You cannot fight the city hall or the system. The system crawls in around you and it stops justice being served.

I compliment Sinn Féin on its motion and I am glad the Government has not rejected it but this is no good. Sinn Féin may be in government in less than a year and we will see then if we get justice. Whoever is Minister for Justice will be called in and told "You can't touch this. You can't touch that. You can't look at this. This is closed.". This is what is going on, in the name of our democracy, in 2024. I wonder why men sacrificed themselves for our freedom because we do not have it. We do not have it, unfortunately. We have the name of democracy, freedom and justice but we will see, within a week, across the river - trasna na habhann - in the other institution, that justice is not being served. It is being delayed, denied, and restricted for ordinary people and ordinary families. The families here tonight want justice. We saw how long it took the Stardust victims. We saw what happened here two or three weeks ago, on their awful anniversary. I was in Dublin that night also. I was hardly in Dublin ten times in my life before I got married but I just happened to be in Dublin both times. It is just so sad that in a democracy, so-called, that we cannot have the truth. The fact is that there is ample evidence there. The authorities knew who did it but files got lost or were destroyed. That is happening to this day. Files are being lost or destroyed. It happened with the Geoghegan family in Limerick when they had serious issues with a plant there and were very sick but their blood samples got lost. It is happening today, as we speak. There is cover-up after cover-up. I did not think I would be saying this, having spent 17 years in this House. We have the name of being a democracy. We hear of countries that are not democracies and of what goes on there. We have the name of a democracy but what goes on here is nearly worse than what goes on in some of those juntas. That is a sad thing for me to say but I say it honestly, from my heart. I have only mentioned a fraction of the cases. The Government comes across them, deals with them but just passes them on because nobody wants to know.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. I wish to warmly welcome the survivors, relatives and members of the Justice for the Forgotten group who are in the Public Gallery this evening. I had the privilege of meeting them today for the first time. I have to say that I am disappointed in myself and I apologise to them for not playing more of a role and linking in with them as a civilian and public representative. I hope I will be able to assist them in the future.

This was one of Ireland's worst atrocities. Three no-warning car bombs exploded in our city centre within the space of three minutes, injuring 258 people, killing 27 and impacting thousands. Barely 90 minutes later another car bomb detonated in Monaghan town, killing seven more people. This was the deadliest single day of the entire Troubles and yet despite evidence implicating known loyalist paramilitaries, no one was ever brought to justice for the attacks.

Now, almost 50 years later, a new documentary, "May-17-74: Anatomy of a Massacre", revisits the bombing, hearing from eyewitnesses, survivors and relatives of those killed in the blasts about their continuing campaign to get answers. I attended a screening of the documentary last Friday with my brother. He was 17 at the time and was coming home having worked his shift in An Post. He got caught between the Parnell Street and Talbot Street bombs but made it home okay. My mother was also in town that evening. She had passed Guineys and was going under Amiens Street bridge when the bomb went off. There was a bus strike that day and many people were walking towards Connolly Station to get trains home. I remember waiting at the window of my house to see if my mam would return home, not knowing if she would. Fortunately she did but many others did not.

I would like to thank the families, survivors and relatives as well as Joe Lee, the director, and Fergus Dowd, the producer of the documentary. Anybody who was born after 1970 should go and see that documentary. I was struck by the amount of people who knew people affected, who heard the bombs and whose families were affected and yet we forgot it. We absolutely forgot it over the last 50 years in many ways. The families and the Justice for the Forgotten group have been leading a long campaign. The film explains how the Garda investigation was mysteriously disbanded just seven weeks after the attacks, with crucial evidence sent North to the RUC being subsequently lost or destroyed or both, while the official inquest into the 34 deaths was never completed. It also examines the accusations of collusion between British intelligence and loyalists believed to be involved in perpetrating the attacks, including the notorious County Armagh-based UVF outfit, the Glenanne Gang, which included UDR and RUC personnel who went on to carry out other notorious Troubles-era killings including the Miami Showband massacre.

The documentary also focuses on the work of Justice for the Forgotten, a victims' group formed in 1996 by bereaved families and survivors to campaign for the truth. I was going to speak about some of the victims and family members who were in the documentary but the main point I want to make relates to the questions that Deputy Boyd Barrett raised, which the film makers also asked me to raise. In the Government's response to the motion the Tánaiste said that we mourn "the great loss suffered by the victims of the bombs on 17 May 1974", which is both good and welcome. He added:

> We offer our humble acknowledgement of the obstacles you have overcome and the mountain you have climbed to get your campaign to where it is today. We recognise our own past shortcomings as a State and political system.

Our shortcomings should be dealt with now, so that we can go to the British state with our heads held high and demonstrate that we are transparent and doing what we can to find truth and justice. Why were the investigations in the Irish State closed after ten weeks? Garda files went missing. Forensic evidence was sent North after 11 days instead of 24 hours and it also went missing. Not one survivor or member of the bereaved families was interviewed by the Irish police in Dublin or Monaghan after the atrocity or to date. Jon Boutcher, who initially headed up Operation Denton, was the first policeman to knock on people's doors as part of his report, four decades later. The investigative material presented to the McEntee report has been blocked to the families' legal team under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004, which stops family members and legal teams from seeing this material for 50 years. Why? Who made that decision? Why can the Government not intervene and say that this material should be released? At a minimum, this information should be released. Garda forensic technical expert Dr. James Donovan, who was sent some material to test by gardaí was not aware for 25 years that the

material went North. A total of 29 Ministers for Justice were not willing to release Garda files to the families. Two particular Ministers, Nora Owen and Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, told the families at meetings to find information and if they found it, to come back to them. If we got our own house in order, we could then go and argue with the British Government and try to compel them to respond to our requests for answers.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Cathaoirleach for the opportunity to speak on this motion on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. I would like to welcome the survivors, relatives and the Justice for the Forgotten campaigners to the House today. I fully support this motion which calls on the Government to urgently address the matter of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings directly with the British Government in order to actively pursue the implementation of the 2008, 2011 and 2016 all-party motions to seek out information regarding these tragic events. I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion.

As has been mentioned, the 50th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings will take place this Friday. The fact that the victims and their families still do not have a full picture of what happened that day is a disgrace. Over the years Irish Governments have been very quick to point out failures by the British Government to investigate such instances, while simultaneously failing to acknowledge its own appalling failures.

The Irish Government failed the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and their families 50 years ago and successive governments have continued to do so ever since. Stories from victims of the atrocity and their families all seem to have one thing in common, namely, that nobody was given any information about what happened or communicated with in any way. Most were left in the dark with no answers and many were forced to deal with the trauma of the day without any support or information. Shockingly, not one survivor or bereaved family member was interviewed by the Garda in Dublin or Monaghan after the atrocity or to date. Jon Boutcher, who initially headed up Operation Denton, was the first policeman to knock on people's doors as part of his investigation, and that was four decades after the bombings. The Garda completely failed to properly or thoroughly investigate the bombings. Gardaí closed their investigations after just ten weeks and did not pursue anything further. That must have been devastating for the victims and their families.

There are some discrepancies as to when Garda files and forensic evidence were sent to police in the North. Those files subsequently went missing. It is clear there was little to no co-operation between the police forces North and South. There have been many examples of incompetence and failure to act by both forces following the bombings. In one instance, a Garda forensic technical expert was sent material to test by the Garda but was not made aware that it had been kept in the North of Ireland for 25 years. It would have made sense for the forensics team in Dublin to work with its counterparts in Belfast. An explanation for why this was not the case has not been provided.

The investigative material presented to the McEntee inquiry was requested by the families' legal team. It has been blocked by the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. The family members and their legal teams have been prevented from seeing this material for 50 years. There have been 29 Ministers for Justice since the atrocity. None of them has been willing to release Garda files to the families' legal teams. It has been reported that two Ministers told the families to "go and find your information and if you find something come back to us". That is a disgraceful way to treat families who have lost loved ones or whose loved ones were severely impacted by the bombings. To suggest it is the responsibility of families to seek out and gather

information is unreasonably cruel. It has caused a lot of pain and disenfranchisement with the system. Families are already having to deal, without support, with the devastating consequences of this devastating tragedy. The very least the Government could have done was ensure they had access to all available information.

It is now time for the Government to put an end to this cover-up and act decisively. The soft approach we have been taking with the British Government has not worked. We need to put as much pressure as possible on it to co-operate. The Government also needs to stop pointing fingers and start taking accountability. This State, too, has played a role in this cover-up and in the hurt and pain caused to victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and their loved ones, over the past five decades. If needs be, an inquiry should be held without Britain. It would not give us the full picture but it would at least get us some of the way there. We should be doing everything in our power to give the families of the victims of this atrocity the answers and justice they deserve.

The citizens of this island have been forced to endure secrecy, suffering and cover-ups at the hands of the British Government for decades. We have to ask what role, if any, Irish Governments have played in the inaction over the years. Surely there must be some responsibility on us in the South as well. We have allowed the Brits to get away with what happened and what has continued to happen. If we do not do everything in our power to uncover the truth, we are no better than them. If we do not seek out truth and justice, we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of our former colonisers and the current situation will continue into the future.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome our visitors to the Public Gallery. I commend the work of Justice for the Forgotten. On many occasions, I have attended events associated with anniversaries of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. I am always struck by the great grace and dignity of the families as they remember their lost loved ones and continue their campaign for truth and justice. I fully appreciate that the process of trying to get justice for the families of the bereaved has been absolutely frustrating, painful and, indeed, totally unacceptable.

There were many dark days on this island during the era commonly referred to as the Troubles. The darkest of all was 17 May 1974, with the murder of 34 innocent people in Monaghan and Dublin and injuries caused to more than 300 people. Those atrocities resulted in the highest number of casualties on any one day during that very difficult time. The UVF, a loyalist paramilitary group, claimed responsibility for them, but there are clearly credible allegations that elements of the British security forces colluded with the UVF in the bombings. By passing this motion, we, as a sovereign Parliament, are again sending a clear message to our counterparts in Westminster and to the British Government. We are also showing strong and enduring cross-party support for the victims and survivors in their quest for truth and justice.

It is totally unacceptable that the British Government continues to ignore the requests of successive Irish Governments and the unanimous motions passed by this House in 2008, 2011 and 2016. The Barron and McEntee reports referred to their work being limited by a lack of access to original intelligence and security documents in the possession of the British Government. There cannot be any justification, after the passing of five decades, for the British Government denying access to all files and papers pertaining to those atrocities to an eminent, independent, international judicial figure. Obtaining that access was a core request in the motions passed unanimously in this House. A number of us in the Dáil have raised with British Ministers at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly the need for the British Government to respond. We did so again as recently as last week when members of the Oireachtas Good Fri-

day Agreement committee met with members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons.

Unfortunately, there have been many instances in which nobody has been brought to justice for horrific crimes. I think of the bombing in Belturbet, in my home area, which resulted in the deaths of two teenagers, Geraldine O'Reilly and Patrick Stanley. That bomb was brought across the Border from Fermanagh in another act of collusion. We should always remind ourselves of the important work of Anne Cadwallader in her publication, *Lethal Allies: British Collusion in Ireland*, and the work of Professor Edward Burke in his time at the University of Nottingham.

The British Government's recent legacy Act is absolutely reprehensible. It is a charter for murderers, whether they were members of the British state forces or members of paramilitary organisations, to absolve themselves of the most heinous of crimes. The Bill says clearly to families that they should forget their dignified campaigns and the information that has accrued form that work. It is a shameful message and one that should not come from a government in a parliamentary democracy.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank all Deputies for their contributions on this important and timely motion. A show of unity on an issue such as this sends a strong message to victims' families and survivors and, I hope, to the British Government. The events of 17 May 1974 mark the greatest loss of life in any single day of the Troubles. This Friday will mark 50 years since that callous and brutal act of violence. Our discussion today is a timely and essential reminder of the deep and lasting effects of these terrible attacks and of the failure to secure any prosecutions or hold anyone accountable for the lives lost and injuries sustained. On behalf of the Government, I express my deep and sincere condolences, including to the family members who join us in the House today, for the terrible loss suffered. No words can heal the pain and grief they have experienced. Despite the passage of time, they continue to feel the loss of their loved ones deeply.

Today's motion is an opportunity for this House to again call upon the British Government to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. It is 16 years since the first all-party motion was agreed in 2008. The British Government has still not responded in any meaningful way. Many people have listened to the RTÉ podcast, "The Forgotten", or seen the documentary "May-17-74: Anatomy of a Massacre", both released over the past week and to which many family members and victims contributed. Their deeply moving first-hand testimony brings home the painful reality they have all lived with for 50 years, driving home the long impact the lack of answers has had on their lives and their ability to move on. These stories must continue to be told to keep memories alive. They must be told as a reminder to our society that this happened not that long ago. They must be told to keep pressure on all for access to the information that might allow some measure of resolution.

In addition to the family members who are with us today, I also welcome the representatives of Justice for the Forgotten, who have campaigned tirelessly since 1996 to see justice delivered for the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. That this House is gathered here today to agree a fourth motion on the bombings is a testament to the relentless courage and determination of those who campaigned for answers for years. As the Tánaiste noted in his opening remarks, we should not shy away from the fact the lack of action by the authorities in this jurisdiction in the first decades after the bombings exacerbated and prolonged the distress

of victims. Despite these challenges, the campaigning of victims and families has made this a priority for all parties and progress has been made. There have been a number of inquiries and investigations into the bombings in this jurisdiction, including the Barron inquiry and the commission of investigation under Patrick McEntee. Each progressed our understanding of what happened and brought us to the important point where there is now strong all-party consensus on what needs to be done to establish the full record.

In 2016, 2011, and 2008, this House called on the British Government to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, as well as the Dublin bombings of 1972 and 1973, the bombing of Kay's Tavern in Dundalk and the murder of Seamus Ludlow. Today is the fourth occasion on which we reiterate this call.

Successive Governments have raised this issue with the British Government at every possible opportunity. We will continue to do so. An unwillingness to engage has characterised the British Government's approach to the Dublin-Monaghan bombings for decades. Both Mr. Justice Barron and Patrick McEntee SC publicly regretted the lack of co-operation received from the British Government in the course of their investigations. As a result, their reports were limited in scope.

While our track record in this jurisdiction is imperfect, this Government has taken specific, unilateral measures to ensure that we can co-operate with historical investigations in Northern Ireland to the fullest extent possible, including Operation Kenova and Operation Denton, which includes the Dublin-Monaghan bombings. On our small, shared island, any attempt to adequately address the past requires strong co-operation between the British and Irish Governments. Regrettably, the failure of the British Government to engage on the bombings in Dublin and Monaghan is not an isolated incident, but forms part of wider pattern of engagement on legacy issues more broadly. The most clear expression of this is the UK legacy Act, which shuts down all inquests, PSNI and Police Ombudsman investigations, and civil cases concerned with events that occurred during the Troubles.

I know that all Members in this Chamber share the Government's fundamental concerns about this legislation's impact on victims and its compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights. The Good Friday Agreement speaks of the necessity of acknowledging the suffering of victims. Addressing the legacy of the past has been stop-start, difficult and incomplete. Without an agreed path, we cannot move forward. The ones to pay the cost for this failure are victims and survivors, in both jurisdictions, from all communities.

In the absence of verifiable information, theories will rush in to fill the vacuum. I believe we are better trying to face the legacy of the past, as difficult as that sometimes might be, on the basis of facts, not supposition or worse. We in this Chamber have responsibilities to the victims of the Troubles, North and South, to do everything possible to ensure their access to justice and to information. We must never lose sight of the individuals at the heart of this atrocity. It is essential that we keep this issue alive, and continue to press the British Government to respond to our collective calls. Its ongoing refusal to release the relevant documents related to the Dublin-Monaghan bombings remains a fundamental barrier to achieving justice. The date of 17 May 1974 was one of the darkest days of the Troubles, yet for half a century, families have been left without answers, perpetuating the pain of their loss. They deserve better. The Government is pleased to support this motion.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I also welcome the families and Justice for the Forgotten to the Dáil this evening. We need to shine a bright light on these dark and dirty days on our island. They were days when the dogs in the street knew the collusion between the British state forces and loyalist paramilitaries. They were days when that reality, through which some lived and often died, would not be spoken of in here, in particular by those who brandished a very large political brush and a very large political carpet. Some 50 years on, that carpet is shrunk and threadbare. There is no more brushing, no more airbrushing. Every file and every document must be released, with no ifs or buts. Now, 50 years on from the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, the need-to-know basis is that everything must be known and everybody has a right to know it, especially the families themselves. It would be a grave disservice to the families if we were to subject them to a superficial treatment of their loss; if we were to continue to subject them to fake emoting and professional empathy while, at the same time, continuing to turn a political blind eye to the perpetrators, the colluders, and those who knew or suspected and said nothing or did nothing. Even now, I sense a political rush to divert, supposedly to the pain of the families, instead of turning laser political and police attention to exposing the cause of that pain. Because they live that pain, they want the truth. The Government should give it to them.

I listened to the Tánaiste's speech. He has "raised". He has "written" to the British Government. He has "been frank" with the British Government. He is "pressing" the British Government. However, in 50 years this State has never conducted a public grilling of any key British political or security figure. They have been green-roomed and red-carpeted. Successive Irish Governments could do with a public grilling too.

On the evening of the bombings, I was a child waiting for my father to come home. I remember he was on duty in Dublin that day. He did come home, but for all those who did not, we should bring them truth and justice and bring it home to them now.

Deputy Martin Kenny: They say that peace is more than the absence of war. Some 50 years ago this country was in terrible turmoil and there was terrible death across the entire island. All the lives that were lost in that conflict are a terrible loss and a terrible tragedy to all of those families. Thankfully, we had the Good Friday Agreement 25 years ago. The promise of that agreement was that we would look at the causes of war. The cause of war is the absence of justice. Now, here we are 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement and we are still not dealing with the problems of that conflict.

The real issue here is that the Irish State has simply not done enough to put pressure on the British State, but also within this State, to provide the documents to the families and their legal representatives. We have action to take here in this State. The people involved have been mentioned. We all know the UVF was involved. There were members of the RUC and members of the UDR, both full time and part time, involved, but there were also members of British military intelligence forces, who have a direct line back to Whitehall. That is the reason the British Government does not want to expose this. It is because it was British Government policy in Ireland to support loyalists to carry out these atrocities. That is why it refuses to engage. It is because it goes right to the heart of the British Government's policy. That is something this Government must recognise and acknowledge. If the British military intelligence services had such influence on loyalists at that time, when we look at what happened with the Garda investigation and the actions in this State, we must wonder whether they also had influence here, and if that is part of the reasons for all of this.

The families and their representatives are present. I know Margaret Irwin, whom I met

several times. She is one of the key contacts with the families in respect of all of this. She has worked tirelessly for the last 25 years with every Government and done everything, including putting on every pressure to try and ensure that we would get a solution. That has not happened. That is the reality the families face. Others here have said that justice does not exist, but we must remain relentless. We cannot accept that. We cannot accept that there will not be a day when these families will get the truth. The truth can be hidden but the truth does not change. The truth is the truth. These people deserve it. This Government must step up to the mark and ensure that it delivers for them.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: On the way up from Mayo this morning I listened to the sister of Anne Marren from Sligo talk about the horror of 17 May 1974 when her family waited for her at the train station in Sligo, as many do when people are returning from Dublin to rural Ireland. She described what the other families had gone through as well. I welcome the families here to be with us this evening, and also the relatives, and Justice for the Forgotten. I commend the Relatives for Justice and the Pat Finucane Centre. As I stand here, I wonder where we would be without them. We certainly owe them a debt of gratitude for the truth they have laid bare in recent years.

They have had 50 years of waiting for the truth of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, 50 years of cover-up, 50 years of denial, 50 years of having doors shut in their grieving faces, and 50 years of files shut tight. Those files must now be released. The British Government must be upfront and honest about the role its intelligence services played in the conflict and in the collusion. The Irish Government must answer on the failings of this State, the cover-ups, the unexplained actions and the lack of action that was taken. Raising this matter must be the priority for any Taoiseach in every meeting with his or her counterpart in Britain.

This is the final point I will make because I am out of time.

8 o'clock

To add insult to injury, the British Government now presenting an independent public history of the Troubles is an insult to everybody across this island.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There are not too many issues that would secure all-party support for a motion on four occasions, namely those tabled in 2008, 2011, 2016 and today. Some might say it is surprising that there has been a need to bring virtually the same motion before the House on four separate occasions. The most surprising aspect is that it took 34 years for the first motion to be tabled. That is telling. I hope what we can offer to the families and campaigners joining us here tonight is that on this occasion, the motion will be met with action.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, particularly those on the Opposition benches. I thank the Government representatives, particularly Deputy Brendan Smith. The Deputy was the only Government Member who represents either Monaghan or Dublin to participate in the debate.

The truth is that the British Government murdered Irish citizens. Sometimes it did it quite overtly, including the murder of children and that of Aidan McAnespie, as he went from my county to a football match in neighbouring Tyrone. In most instances, these murders were committed covertly and in collusion with loyalists, unionist death squads and armed groups. In some instances, nobody claimed responsibility. It was a key part of a British Government strategy. As others have stated, the files will not be opened on this particular case unless the British

Government is forced to open them. That is because when the files relating to this case are opened, the entire British colonial strategy will be exposed. The actions of the British Government in Ireland were not unique to this country; they were part of the colonial playbook across the parts of the world in which Britain was active.

That is why the truth of collusion needs to be spoken. For a long time in this House and across official Ireland, collusion was presented as republican propaganda and people were given no succour. Anybody who dared to suggest it was likely to get a visit from the Garda special branch. That was part of the core aim of successive Governments. After Dublin and Monaghan, other bombings in Dublin, the bombing of Castleblayney, the bombing of Belturbet, the bombing of Dundalk, the murder of John Francis Green and all of the acts in this State in which the British Government had a hand, the instinctive objective of Governments in Dublin was to ensure that such acts did not lead to an increase in support for republicanism. That was the basis on which decisions were made, not the need to secure truth and justice for those who had been bereaved. The key policy objective was censorship and ensuring that the conflict, as it was considered in Dublin, was contained in the North.

All I can say is thank God for people like those in the Gallery. Thank God for Relatives for Justice, the Pat Finucane Centre and Justice for the Forgotten. Their tenacity, determination and absolute belief that loved ones would not be forgotten ensured that official Ireland had to change tack. I thank them again. We have to say with one voice across all political parties and on all sides of the House that Britain must be held accountable for the actions of its agents in Ireland. This House and the State also need to be held accountable for their failure to hold Britain accountable.

I will respond on one point. I thank Deputy Howlin for his contribution. The Deputy was a member of Government in 2014, when the Stormont House Agreement was passed by all parties in the North and by both Governments. The only signatory to that agreement that has failed in any way to live up to its responsibilities in respect of transparency, accountability, truth and justice is the British Government. This will be a stressful and emotional week for the families of Dublin and Monaghan but I hope it will also be a week of vindication.

I thank Margaret Irwin in particular. All of the people involved deserve great credit but Margaret Irwin has been a true champion of the families and of Justice for the Forgotten. We owe her and all those who have campaigned for truth and justice a debt of gratitude. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): 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 Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - To discuss recruitment for children's disability network team, CDNT, services in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 5.

Deputy Bernard Durkan - To discuss the need for school places right across Kildare North,

including special education places.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the placing of all Cork hurling championship games to date in 2024 behind a pay wall.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss the boil water notice in east Cork.

Deputy Chris Andrews - To discuss the task force to make Dublin a more attractive and safe city.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the long waiting lists for replacement dentures.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for additional electric trains for the Cork Metropolitan train network.

The matters raised by Deputies Bernard Durkan, Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Thomas Gould and Pat Buckley have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Conservation

50. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of heat pumps installed to date relative to the 2030 target of 400,000; the challenges he has identified with heat pump installation; his plans to address these; if alternative technologies are being considered; if he is aware of the high number of calls made to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, SVP, regarding to high electricity bills associated with heat pump use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21896/24]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: This question relates to the number of heat pumps installed to date relative to the 2030 target of 400,000. Will the Minister of State outline the challenges he has identified with heat pump installation and his plans to address these, if alternative technologies are being considered and if he is aware of the high number of calls made to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and others regarding high electricity bills associated with heat pump use.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank the Deputy for the question. The national retrofit plan set targets to carry out 185,000 energy upgrades and install 45,000 heat pumps in existing homes by 2025 and the equivalent of 500,000 B2 upgrades and 400,000 heat pumps by 2030. Between 2019 and the first quarter of 2024, almost 150,000 energy upgrades were supported by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI. Expenditure increased from €104 million in 2019 to a record €324.5 million last year and the budget is €430 million this year. Demand across the SEAI schemes is growing and so is spend and output.

Heat pumps are one of the most challenging technologies to implement at scale in the existing residential sector, though new builds are predominantly using them. Research indicates that upfront costs and ancillary works can be seen as obstacles. We are addressing these issues under the national retrofit plan and heat pump delivery is growing, with 16,600 installed in existing homes with support from SEAI schemes or under the local authority scheme, including a

fourfold increase between 2019 and 2023.

Heat pumps are extremely efficient and very economical to run with no requirement for additional heating sources, meaning there are no additional bills for oil, gas or solid fuel. While electricity prices remain above pre-pandemic levels, consumers have experienced reductions in electricity prices in recent times. This reduction is welcome but I am aware that some homeowners, both with and without heat pumps, have faced challenges with their bills. It is important to note that throughout the period of high energy prices, Government has continued to support energy consumers to stay warm and well. This includes a €2.2 billion suite of cost-of-living supports to assist families, pensioners, carers and people with disabilities as part of budget 2024. My Department is currently developing a revised energy poverty action plan and I would encourage all stakeholders to make a submission to the consultation process.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The first part of my question was straightforward but I do not think the Minister of State answered it in his response. To reiterate, there is a 2030 target of 400,000 heat pumps. To date, how many of those pumps have been installed? By my estimation, on the figures I have received, it is in the region of 10,000, or 2.5% of the total. The Government is behind its own targets by 30%, which is a significant amount. By all accounts, from listening to people and engaging with those who are having retrofits done or who are eager to have retrofits done, there are real challenges regarding the installation of heat pumps. What is the Government going to do to address that? Will the Minister of State acknowledge those figures? Will he update us on the heat loss indicator study to see if there are additional properties that may be suitable for heat pumps?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: So far, 16,600 heat pumps have been installed in existing homes. The target for 2025, which is the next target date, is 45,000, so we have to get from 16,600 to 45,000 in two years to meet the 2025 target. The next target after that, which is much more demanding, is 400,000 heat pumps by 2030. The structure of these targets is set so the vast majority are in the second half of the decade compared with the first half. That is the answer on heat pump installation.

Approximately 90% of new homes that are built are being fitted with heat pumps. As about 30,000 homes a year are being built, this means approximately 27,000 pumps are being installed every year in new homes. It is a new and complex technology, but this is helping with the skilling that is required to both install them and maintain them for the future.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On the second part of the question, what engagement has the Minister of State or the SEAI had in regard to the practicalities of operating heat pumps when they are installed in existing properties? I am thinking in particular of the energy poverty strategy as it relates to social housing. I have heard on a number of occasions of heat pumps being incorrectly installed or operated. For example, one constituent who has a recently installed heat pump is reporting electricity bills in the region of €1,000 - to be precise, €745, €1,135 and €1,018 - compared with her neighbours, who are reporting electricity bills of €150 or €200. I raised this with Meath County Council. Obviously, it would be a dreadful story for heat pumps if they are heaping additional costs onto people. Whether it is an educational piece or an installation piece, it needs to be addressed. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is reporting increased calls.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: In order to install a heat pump, people need to ensure their home is suitable for heat pump installation, certainly in terms of whether it is insulated sufficiently to

be ready to have the heat pump installed. Installation of a heat pump is a skilled activity and requires an understanding of connecting the heat pump with the plumbing system, for example, so it does take certain skills. The SEAI approves and certifies suppliers for doing this and it provides advice to homeowners on what type of insulation they need to install a heat pump. Presumably, there are heat pumps that have been incorrectly installed.

I do not think the usefulness of heat pumps is in question. However, I am sure it would be worth having a study to see what the actual performance of heat pumps is in the real world and how they are functioning in the retrofit system in Ireland. I know the SEAI regularly carries out studies to see what the actual performance is of the buildings they have subsidised for upgrades. I accept the Deputy's suggestions in this regard.

Electricity Generation

51. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the total electricity generation capacity that has been energised since February 2020, broken down by fuel source and year; what percentage of Ireland's electricity was imported in each of the years since 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21897/24]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister of State the total electricity generating capacity that has been energised since February 2022, broken down by fuel source and year; what percentage of Ireland's electricity was imported in each of the years since 2020; and if we will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The climate action plan sets challenging targets for installed generation capacity in 2030. This includes 9 GW of onshore wind, 8 GW of solar and at least 2 GW of additional gas-fired generation capacity. Ireland now has over 6 GW of renewable electricity generation capacity, with 46% of electricity generated in Ireland in 2023 being renewable.

I am informed by ESB Networks that the following volume of generation has been grid-connected since 2020 by fuel source and year. I will share a written copy of the table with Deputies and will now outline the following summary. Some 784 MW of onshore wind has been grid-connected since 2020; 654 MW of grid solar has been connected since 2020 and, for clarity, this excludes rooftop solar, which is growing at pace; and 718 MW of batteries have also been grid-connected in this time period. For gas-fired generation capacity, 243 MW has been grid-connected so far, with a further 433 MW due to be connected in the coming weeks. In total, this means over 2 GW of new generation capacity has been grid-connected since 2020, with a further substantial amount of generation capacity due to come online this year.

Ireland's net import of electricity accounted for 9.5% of electricity supply in 2023, which compares with 0.7% of electricity supply in 2022 and 4.8% in 2021. Ireland was a net exporter of electricity in 2020.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Although it was not what prompted the question, the Minister of State will have heard from the Climate Change Advisory Council yesterday in regard to the electricity sector and the reports on the challenge of meeting our targets. We had a roundtable last week involving members of the Oireachtas climate committee and some of those in the offshore wind sector. Both of those examples paint a similar picture of ambition but a failure to implement at pace and scale the type of change that is required. We talk about a lost decade

in terms of renewables between 2010 and 2020. In effect, we had a lost year last year and we cannot afford lost days, never mind lost years, in the roll-out of renewables. One of the issues raised by the CCAC was the need to progress the transposition of the revised renewable energy directive. When will the Government do that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Government acknowledges the Climate Change Advisory Council report and agrees that we must move at greater speed and scale to achieve our electricity targets. Ireland has achieved an unprecedented decrease in energy-related emissions. We had a 7% annual reduction last year and a 21% decrease in electricity-related emissions. This is despite a large increase in our population and a large increase in energy use. It is because of a great increase in wind and solar renewable electricity and also increased overseas interconnection.

Under our climate action plan update, Ireland is targeting to reach 80% of electricity demand from renewable sources by 2030. We have emissions reductions driven down through onshore wind, onshore solar and 5 GW of offshore wind. That is very ambitious. To reach 80% of our electricity demand coming from renewable sources by 2030 and to have a clear plan to reach that is certainly ambitious. Acceleration of the deployment of renewable energy this decade, especially onshore wind and solar, is now fundamental to meeting our sectoral climate targets. The main issues we have faced are planning barriers and delays relating to planning difficulties. That is why the Government is bringing in its new Planning and Development Bill, which will be enacted this summer.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: This echoes previous reports from the CCAC which point towards progress in terms of legislation, regulation and planning but, repeatedly, there is an implementation deficit. Last year certainly saw an implementation deficit. We need to be energising 1.6 GW a year of new renewables, new grid scale and onshore renewables but, instead, it was just 0.6 GW last year. What is the Government going to do to ensure those onshore renewables are delivered? There are obviously issues with the planning system. Time is of the absolute essence. The question I asked was about the renewable energy directive. Other countries have used that as a mechanism. The European Union has essentially given the green light on it to deliver renewables at scale. Is the Minister of State going to take that opportunity or what else is he going to do?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I think the first part of the question was about delivery. It was about how much the Government has installed of new capacity. We have seen more than 2 GW of capacity installed over the course of the past four years. The fact there is now 1 GW of solar on the grid is incredible. I expect another 1.5 GW will be added this year and another 1.5 GW next year. Looking towards an 8 GW target for 2030 is absolutely achievable.

What I see in all of these areas, despite the challenges, is delivery. I see connection of new wind onshore. I am seeing connection of solar for the first time ever. I see renewable energy from offshore wind coming in huge volumes soon, and I see that following on from the EU's prescriptions about how we should speed up our planning process and so on, the DMAP has now been designated for the south of the country off the coast of Waterford and Wexford. That has been clearly announced to the market. I see a lot of interest from wind farm companies investing in Ireland. Overall, I see a large volume of not just electricity being put onto the grid but customers from other European countries coming to Ireland and saying they want to buy our excess renewable energy in the future.

Corporate Governance

52. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to detail the process for the establishment of Re-Turn Ireland; the governance structures of that entity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21899/24]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I wish to ask the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to detail the process for the establishment of Re-Turn Ireland, the governance structures of that entity, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: A national deposit return scheme, DRS, has been introduced to encourage more people to recycle bottles and cans and to ensure we meet our ambitious EU targets for the recycling of those materials under EU single-use plastics and packaging legislation.

The Separate Collection (Deposit Return Scheme) Regulations, SI 599 of 2021, makes it the responsibility of beverage producers to establish a deposit return scheme and to nominate an operator for approval by the Minister. Those regulations were updated by the Separate Collection (Deposit Return) Regulations 2024, which is SI 33 of this year.

Deposit Return Scheme Ireland CLG, trading as Re-Turn, was established by the Irish beverage industry as a new, not-for-profit company to fulfil its obligations under the DRS regulations. In July 2022, I approved an application from Re-Turn to establish and operate a DRS. This approval is valid for a period of ten calendar years from its commencement date. A review of the approval will take place by July 2025 and that approval will be reviewed every three years thereafter. Re-Turn is obliged to deliver to me an annual report on the scheme, with the first report due by mid-summer.

Under the terms of its approval, Re-Turn is required to operate to the highest standards of corporate governance and specifically in accordance with the code of corporate governance developed for extended producer responsibility schemes. This code is based on the underlying principles of accountability, transparency and probity. My Department is monitoring all operations by Re-Turn closely and I receive very regular updates.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister of State. I have a number of concerns about it. They may all be completely fine and not warranted, but there is no information on the Re-Turn website anywhere about the organisation, how it is structured, who the board of directors are or any of that information. When the Minister of State talks about transparency, it is not there at the moment. He talks about the highest standards of corporate governance. When you look at the board - I have seen a list of names online of people who are on the board but I do not know if this is correct - it would appear there are 11 people on the board. Seven of them are large producers, such as Coca-Cola, Diageo and Heineken. It reads more like a stakeholder group than a board of directors.

It is very unusual to have people on a board who could be deemed to be conflicted because of their originating company. I would be interested to know why those people are on the board and it is not based on skills, which is usually how a board is formed. You look for someone who has accounting, communication and marketing skills, not people who are stakeholders.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. I take her point that she did not find sufficient information on Re-Turn's website. As I said, I speak to it regularly and indeed receive information from it daily. I will ask it to update its website and add more information, certainly to the

level that is on any other. I did not check.

The members of the board, for confirmation, are Tony Keohane, who is independent; Tara Buckley, who represents RGDATA, which is a collection of small retailers; Thomas Bourke from Coca-Cola; Conor Hyland from Heineken; Kevin Donnelly from Britvic Ireland; Rosemary Garth from Tesco; Joseph Owens from the Claddagh Group, which is a west of Ireland bottling company; Shane Kelly from Lidl; Noreen O'Kelly, independent; and David Kelly, independent.

The company is structured as a not-for-profit. It cannot legally distribute profits to its members or distribute dividends. It has also been legally constituted to be a membership organisation that is a producer responsibility organisation. It is built on the same framework or template as an organisation like Repak.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I would be interested, and the Minister of State might not have the figures now, in what the salaries of the staff are and whether there are any bonuses or salaries being provided to the directors. That is very important information. Regarding the revenues that are made by this not-for-profit company, they could actually be quite large. It has been estimated that from 1 February to this point, there is potentially €65 million in unclaimed vouchers that will be staying with this company. That is a large amount of money. I know it is just the start of this scheme and I would imagine that will be the Minister of State's argument, that it will not be like that all the time. However, if we are looking at Denmark and its 92% rate of recycling, if we apply that in Ireland, that would still mean there are 152 million cans and bottles every year that will not be returned through this scheme. That would equate to between €23 million and 38 million a year, minimum, that this company will have. Does the Exchequer see any of this money or does it remain in this organisation?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will explain the financial structure of the company, very briefly. Yes, I expect that eventually, when the scheme is mature, it will only be returning 92% of cans and bottles, that is, 8% where a deposit is paid and not returned. The money from that pays to run the scheme, in co-operation with a payment by the producers that will be of a similar quantity. The amount of money from unclaimed deposits will be similar to the amount of money paid in by producers for each bottle or can they produce and put on the market. At the moment, that amount is 2 cent for a plastic bottle and 1.25 cent for an aluminium can. There is a third source of revenue for Re-Turn, which is the value of the aluminium and the plastic that is collected. What the company did was produced its financial projections, we analysed them with our financial consultants, and it constructed a scheme for a company that pays for itself and which is non-profit. In other words, the amount of money that comes in matches the amount of money that goes out. That is the structure of the company, and this is a well-understood and well-tried and tested company structure like Repak and every other extended producer responsibility scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to Question No. 53 in the name of Deputy Darren O'Rourke.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Do I not come in again?

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

Renewable Energy Generation

53. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures he is taking to address surplus renewable energy that is wasted; if he plans to introduce measures to redirect surplus energy to energy-poor households; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21493/24]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister of State the measures he is taking to address surplus renewable energy that is wasted; if he plans to introduce measures to redirect surplus energy to energy-poor households; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The climate action plan recognises that a range of cross-government policies are needed to transform our electricity system so that it can become more flexible and successfully accommodate an ever-increasing volume of renewable energy sources that are widely distributed across our island.

The dispatch down of renewable energy refers to renewable energy that is available to the grid but must be reduced as it cannot be used by the electricity system. This can be due to broad power system limitations, known as curtailments, local network limitations, known as constraints, or energy supply exceeding consumer demand. Dispatch down is unfortunate and both EirGrid and ESB Networks are addressing the grid limitations that cause it through various measures under their strategic roadmaps. Dispatch down can also be minimised by the adoption of demand-side response measures and greater levels of interconnection and storage.

We also recognise that Ireland's citizens and communities can play a central role in our new energy future through flexibly managing their energy use in response to the level of renewable energy available. By doing so, they can not only support the electricity grid but also lower their own energy bills and reduce their carbon footprint. The energy security package recognises this, and it commits the Government to improve the ways that homes and businesses manage their energy use by providing an evidence-based programme of communications and supporting active consumers through smart metering, smart energy services and related technologies.

These services will enable consumers, including those who are in energy poverty, to flexibly adjust their demand in response to market signals and the changing level of renewable energy that is available. Furthermore, a consultation to inform the development of a revised energy poverty action plan was published on *gov.ie* in March 2024. The revised plan sets out a wide range of clear, time-bound actions aimed at tackling energy poverty with appropriate governance and evaluation, and considers the use of smart technologies, such as those used by EnergyCloud and other smart energy technology and service providers, to benefit energy-poor households and other vulnerable citizens.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister of State is familiar with the EnergyCloud model, and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has said positive and encouraging things about it. The Minister of State spoke of "dispatch down". He is the Minister of State with responsibility for the circular economy, and it is a waste of energy. Poor people's hot tanks are there, waiting to be charged and store that energy. They are immediately available and there is a need to link one with the other. I am not entirely sure from the response the Minister of State gave tonight, or indeed from the written response by the Department to the climate committee today, whether that is seen as an immediate solution. I think it is an immediate solution and it needs immediate action. I wonder, given what the Minister of State has said, if he sees an improved grid and

storage elsewhere as the answers.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: As I understand it, EnergyCloud works by offering people who are on low incomes the chance to have a hot tank of water overnight, and that is done through energy that otherwise would have been thrown away and wasted. I understand this has been a successful experiment. I was asked about it before it started a couple of years ago and I understand that since it has been running it has been working well. It is for that reason that it is part of the energy poverty action strategy, which is in consultation at the moment. I urge the Deputy to make a submission on that and say whether he thinks it should be continued or changed in any way.

Part of the response to this is how we will make sure we are not wasting energy by having sufficient grid and sufficient connections to the rest of the world. At the moment, our electricity connections are only to the UK through Northern Ireland. We are strengthening our connection to Northern Ireland, and we are also building a new connection to France. We are in discussions with Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: To be clear, my colleagues, Deputy Ó Laoghaire and Senator Boylan, will be making our submission tomorrow. I think the deadline is tomorrow.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Yes.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We will clearly say we believe there is an immediate strong and positive role for EnergyCloud and, in the future, for other technologies for an improved grid, improved battery storage, and everything else that goes with that.

I want to know if the Minister of State supports it. If he does support it, what needs to happen is for ESB Networks and the CRU to come together with EnergyCloud to ensure the regulatory processes are in place. The potential is immediately there. They are essentially working on a pilot basis with a number of Clúid houses at this stage. Almost to embarrass us, from time to time they publish the amount of energy that is lost to the system - it is hundreds of millions of euro. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people are living in energy poverty. The Minister of State needs to act and match those two things up.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: There is a very simple answer to the question of whether I support the EnergyCloud system that takes energy that otherwise would have been thrown away and gives it to them to heat their water at night. Yes, I absolutely do. It has been a very successful experiment and I want to see it continuing. If we are going to continue with this kind of system, people need somewhere to store the energy in their home. A tank of water is one way of doing that, and a battery on the wall is another. An electric car is another option.

Over the last two years, energy credits were only a part of a much larger system of trying to give people money to make it possible for them to get through the winter without being cold. In other words, we subsidised the increased cost of electricity over the last two years. We spent €2.2 billion over the last two winters putting money directly into people's accounts. I would much prefer if we needed to target payments in the future that we could provide electricity to people to store directly in their homes, particularly from sources that were cheap or that would otherwise be thrown away. I think we could have devised a much better system for the future and working on this would be well worth it. It would pay for itself. I look forward to its success in the future.

North-South Interconnector

54. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the meetings he has had, and-or the briefings he has received, in respect of the North-South Interconnector. [21467/24]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I ask the Minister of State to outline the meetings and briefings he and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, have had in respect of the North-South Interconnector.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The North-South Interconnector is an essential infrastructure project that will link the electricity transmission networks of Ireland and Northern Ireland, leading to a more secure, affordable and sustainable supply of electricity across the island.

As a transmission project, the North-South Interconnector is being undertaken by EirGrid, which is independent of the Minister, with EirGrid determining the means of delivery of the project. In so doing, it seeks to work in close collaboration with affected landowners and local communities. The Minister does not have a role in the delivery of electricity infrastructure on the ground and this is in line with the 2012 Government policy statement on the strategic importance of transmission and other energy infrastructure.

The Deputy has asked about meetings and-or briefings that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has had in respect of the North-South Interconnector. The most recent meeting was for the North-South Ministerial Council, NSMC, where the Minister met with his party colleague, then Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, Sinn Féin MLA for Newry and Armagh. Both the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I, wish to take this opportunity to wish Conor well in his recovery.

The Minister, Conor Murphy, and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, discussed the North-South Interconnector, with the Minister, Conor Murphy, also acknowledging the benefits the interconnector will bring to the island of Ireland, including lower-cost electricity, an improved security of supply and a greater investment in renewable electricity. The briefing for this meeting was provided by officials from the Department, who have responsibility for policy that is related to the development of the electricity grid. They brief the Minister on grid-related matters, including the North-South Interconnector, from time to time and as necessary.

Deputy Matt Carthy: According to the Minister of State's response, the only briefing that was received was in respect of the North-South Ministerial Council. The only meeting-----

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The most recent.

Deputy Matt Carthy: But that is not the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: It asks about the meetings and briefings the Minister has had.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Yes and this is important. The Ceann Comhairle has ruled several questions on the North-South Interconnector out of order because the Department now claims that those questions do not fall under the remit of the Minister, despite the fact that similar questions have been previously answered by the Minister and his predecessors, and now-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us not get into the debate. Let us just talk about the issues. The issues clearly are the meetings the Minister has had and the briefings he has received.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I just want clarification on this. The response indicated that there was one meeting and one briefing. Is the Minister of State saying that there were others or that was the only information he had? Were they the only briefings or meetings that were held by either the Minister of State or the Minister?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Sorry, that is the information I have to hand. It only relates to the most recent meeting. I am not aware of whether there were other meetings or briefings before that. If the Deputy has a specific period in mind, as the project has been going on for decades at this stage, I will come back with a better answer.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Okay, but with due respect, the Minister has not been in office for decades. The Minister has been in office for four years. Either there were briefings and meetings that were too numerous to relay in a response to a parliamentary question, or there was a small number over that four-year period. If there was a small number, that information could be given to the House.

The one thing I do know is that neither the Minister of State nor the Minister has actually engaged with any representatives of the communities affected who tell us that more than 90% of landowners have made it absolutely clear that they will not facilitate entry by EirGrid or anybody acting on its behalf to their lands. Essentially, EirGrid has outlined that it is planning to engage in a collision course with local communities. In my view, this is a collision course that will lead to a substantial, further delay to this project. If there are benefits to the project, as I agree there are, then we should be trying to ensure the project is delivered as quickly as possible. The way to achieve that is through undergrounding the interconnector. The only way is if the senior Minister directs EirGrid to pursue that.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I am glad that the Deputy agrees with his colleague, Conor Murphy MLA, that there are great benefits to this project. I absolutely agree that there has to be good engagement with landowners. EirGrid manages the national electricity grid. It recently issued letters to about 400 landowners on the route of the planned North-South interconnector. The letters outline the infrastructure proposed on landholdings and the compensation payments being offered to landowners which are approximately €50,000 per pylon and €160 per metre of overhead lines. Plans are in place to liaise with those homeowners situated within 200 m of the proposed electricity line who will receive proximity payments. I understand that EirGrid, ESB Networks and the CRU are considering their next steps in the event that a sufficient number of landowners do not reach a voluntary agreement with EirGrid.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is precisely what is going to lead to conflict and delay. What I find staggering about the Green Party Ministers, supported by all accounts by their Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael counterparts, is that they seem completely oblivious to the realities on the ground. If EirGrid pursues its current trajectory the only thing to be delivered will be court cases, delays, frustration and the lack of whatever semblance of goodwill it is still possible to achieve. Has the Minister asked EirGrid precisely how many landowners have indicated specifically that they will not engage directly with it? In percentage terms, that information should be provided to the Members of this House.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister of State's response seems to be in the wrong

tense because that consultation has already happened. EirGrid knows exactly the response. The Minister has a responsibility to find out exactly where that project is. Deputy Carthy is absolutely right. If as the Minister of State says, EirGrid, ESB Networks and the CRU are considering their next steps, that is a direct collision course with communities and will further delay this project.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: In Deputy O'Rourke's previous question about curtailment, he clearly showed an understanding of what the problems are when we have too much electricity in one part of the island and not enough in another and we cannot share it from one to the other. I am sure he understands what the benefits of the project are. Like any infrastructure project, whether building a road or a greenway, there is always a need for engagement with local communities and a need to obtain consent as far as possible. The project has to be built eventually. It has to go through all the due diligence and due process, and eventually issues need to be worked out with the landowners on the ground. It is never easy but this process has not been rushed. We have been hearing about this for many years. There have been many rounds of engagement and legal process with the involvement of An Bord Pleanála, open hearings and oral hearings. I have heard about it for many years at this stage. We are now at the point where landowners are being are being offered compensation and we will have to see what the response is.

Recycling Policy

55. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the engagement his Department has had with local authorities to progress the next phase of the deposit-return scheme development and roll-out; the number of local authorities that have registered interest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21563/24]

59. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to provide an update on the implementation and operation of the deposit-return scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21557/24]

60. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he is aware of ongoing concerns with the roll-out and operation of the deposit-return scheme; the measures he is taking to address these concerns; if he will report on Ireland's experience thus far when compared with other EU states based on data he received (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21492/24]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Minister of State to provide an update on the engagement his Department has had with local authorities to progress the next phase of the deposit-return scheme development and roll-out, and the number of local authorities that have registered interest to date.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I propose to take Questions Nos. 55, 59 and 60 together.

Since the deposit-return scheme, DRS, went live on 1 February, more than 100 million containers have been returned and €18 million has been refunded to consumers in deposits. Daily return rates are growing all the time, regularly exceeding 2 million containers. It reached 3 million on Sunday.

A four-month transition period is in place to allow for the selling-off of existing non-DRS stock and also to focus on supporting consumers and retailers through the critical set-up period. As with any new scheme of this scale and complexity, there have been some teething issues, but I am satisfied that Re-turn is taking the right actions to sort these out.

I am very encouraged by the early engagement rates. While Re-turn is providing periodic data to me, it is important not to draw final conclusions prematurely. In reality, a full 12 months of operation will be needed to make that first meaningful assessment. Such a period is essential for the scheme to mature, ensuring that the metrics we eventually use and report to the EU are both accurate and reliable.

At present, there are almost 2,700 retail return points, about 90% of which are reverse-vending machines, with the rest being manual. The scheme also allows for non-retail operators, such as local authorities, to provide take-back facilities, complementing the collection infrastructure provided by retailers. My Department and Re-turn continue to engage with the sector and already five local authorities have approached me about installing reverse-vending machines at civic amenity sites as part of the next phase of roll-out.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. In that response he referred to five local authorities. I ask him to name them specifically. If engagement with any other local authorities is at an advanced stage, he might indicate how many, even if he cannot name them. I broadly welcome the scheme. The initial Amárach research showed that over 80% of the population were in favour of it and committed to engaging with it. I listened to Ciaran Foley on RTÉ Radio One as I drove up this morning. If that 3 million figure that the Minister of State quoted in his response can be replicated, I would like to think that people will continue to positively engage with the scheme.

I ask the Minister of State to expand on the issue of the excess money. This morning Ciaran Foley alluded to the fact that Re-turn is working with community groups and charities on what might happen to that money. I ask the Minister of State to outline to the progress on that.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for his response. Like every new scheme, there are bound to be teething problems and there were a few along the way in the last few weeks. Like my colleague, I broadly welcome the success rate that has been illustrated. I note with appreciation the amount of time that the Minister of State gave to the Oireachtas joint committee recently where he went through this in great detail.

Reliability is an issue with some of the machines in place. I wish to discuss the possibility of transferable credit, rather than being stuck with credit for a particular retailer. People often choose to return to a particular location for convenience's sake rather than in a retailer that one might use on a regular basis because of that reliability issue.

There are deposit-return-style schemes in other jurisdictions where they have the capacity literally to pour a bag of bottles and cans into a machine and the machine does the work and will most likely kick out ones that are not appropriate. Can we investigate moving to such machines? It would be of extreme convenience for people and make the experience a little less onerous at the weekends in particular. I am sure the Minister of State is aware of the queues in his own constituency as I am in mine.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I have a similar question. I hope for the successful implementation of the scheme. I believe it has been reported that less than 1% of the machines have

performance issues. Is there proper oversight regarding internal malfunction of the machines? What training regimes are in place to ensure they are operational as much as possible?

People are now seeing an increasing number of bottles and cans with the Re-turn logo on them. Is the Minister of State satisfied that the transition period will run according to schedule?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Deputy O'Sullivan asked me to name the local authorities. I know my own council, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, is engaging with councils in other European countries to figure out how they manage it. I hope it will be one of the first. I do not have a list of the other four local authorities, but when I get it, I will send it to the Deputy.

On the question about excess money, I outlined the financial model to Deputy Whitmore. It is not for profit. The scheme has significant running costs and the largest cost of running it is payments to retailers to handle the bottles. They receive a handling fee for each bottle or can they return and they use that handling fee to pay for the machines. This feeds back into Deputy O'Rourke's question about training for machines, reliability and so on. The machines are the responsibility of the shops which pay for them and enter a service level agreement with the different suppliers. It is their responsibility to make sure the machines are emptied, the tickets are refilled and that they are working. We are at an 86% reliability rate for machines at the moment. I expect that to go above 90% soon.

Regarding the question about transferable credit and whether a credit note could be used if you go from one shop to another, our transferable method of credit is that you are always entitled to cash. Money is the form of transformable credit, which you can bring from one shop to another. You do not have to accept store credit.

Could you pour a bag of cans into a machine? There are machines that are shaped like washing machines. You could get a bin bag filled with 100 cans, pour them in and the machine quickly sorts them. I expect the county councils will opt for those models of machine because there is a high volume when you are going to your recycling centre.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I again mention following up with the local authorities. The only concern I had listening to Ciaran Foley this morning was when he was asked about the accessibility of some of the machines for people who have issues. They might not be very mobile or able to reach the machine, depending on the type. He said some machines were capable of tending to the needs of people in wheelchairs, for example, but he did not confirm that all machines were accessible. If the local authorities are going to roll this out, I ask that at least those machines would be accessible for all, as opposed to the hotch-potch that might be there at the moment. As I said, all speakers in the House tonight have spoken about the positivity of the scheme and how we want people to engage with it.

To follow up on what Deputy Farrell said, I note the Minister of State's response about cash being a genuine way to reimburse people but perhaps there could be some kind of app on a phone that could be credited. I am not going to say it should be Revolut or whatever, but if there was something like that that could credit someone's personal account, it might be more efficient.

Lastly, on the reliability issue, I know this morning Ciaran Foley said most machines were functioning properly. There could be some kind of app flagging that machines-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: -----were out of order.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am pleased to hear there may be scope for the sort of machines to which I referred to be introduced by local authorities. That would be good. To refer to some of the remarks made by Deputy O'Sullivan regarding accessibility, it is an issue. Will the Minister of State investigate whether, as standard practice, these machines could be a particular height, including where precisely the entry point for the cans and bottles is located as it does matter?

My other question is twofold. The first is on retailers clearing out old stock and either deliberately or unfortunately applying the return cost. I have no evidence but have heard remarks made by constituents that this is occurring. The other relates to restaurateurs. Are they to charge for the DRS for cans they serve at a table? When they clear the table they take the can back. Again, it is a question, not an accusation.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to go back to that question of whether the Minister of State is satisfied. It is positive we are seeing increasing numbers of cans and bottles on the shelves with the return logo. Is he satisfied that this transition is going to continue? There were initial problems - more than problems - with databases and barcodes not matching up and lots of teething problems. I echo those points on accessibility. The Minister of State would have heard them loud and clear at the committee as well. It is a piece that needs to be front and centre in terms of reviews and the ongoing implementation.

I also raised the point at the committee of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht areas. It is something that has been raised with me by colleagues. To make a success of the programme and to ensure it is operating to the highest possible capacity, these are matters that need to be kept under constant review.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Deputy O'Sullivan suggested that the local authorities should have the most accessible machines and that is a very good suggestion. I will go back to the local authorities on that. He asked about credit being applied to people's phones. Local authority civic amenity sites do not handle very small quantities of cash, such as 15 cent. They are really looking at what the solution is for dealing with cash. Credit to a phone may be the answer. There is a difficulty with transaction charges on very small amounts of money, which is why electronic transactions are not usually used. The Deputy also suggested flagging on an app when the machines are out of order and this is a good suggestion. If that data is available, I will ask Re-turn to do that.

Deputy Farrell asked about the height of machines. This is set at 1.2 m. There was extensive consultation with the National Disability Authority before the Re-turn scheme went live. A forum of people representing those with disabilities and those with lived experience with disability is sitting this month to see how the scheme is working in practice and if any changes are needed. Retailers should be selling off their old stock at a discount before the end of the month-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Tá an t-am istigh.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: -----because if they try to sell to sell any stock that does not have the Re-turn logo from 1 June, they are liable to fines of up to €5,000.

Questions Nos. 56 and 57 replied to with Written Answers.

Cybersecurity Policy

58. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to outline the role of the National Cyber Security Centre in tackling cyber scams [21487/24]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Will the Minister of State outline the roll of the National Cyber Security Centre in tackling cyber scams?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: There is close co-operation across many sections of Government regarding cyber risks and threats and the specific issue of cybercrime is under the remit of the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána. The National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, which is part of my Department, monitors, detects and responds to cyber security incidents in the State, and builds resilience in IT systems with particular emphasis on critical infrastructure and Government. Those resilience-building measures include a set of security requirements applied to critical infrastructure which is to be augmented and expanded through the transposition of the new network information security directive, NIS2; a formal information sharing network, which is called the CyberCORE network; a development of national and EU certification schemes; and advisories circulated relating to vulnerabilities and risks across critical infrastructure and Government. The NCSC works closely with An Garda Síochána, ensuring we have a cohesive national response to cyber-related risks. The national programme for EU Cyber Security Month is organised jointly by both organisations. An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice are members of the national counter ransomware task force, which was founded by the NCSC.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: When we hear of cyber scams, we initially think of the attack on the HSE in 2021, or the large-scale attacks on our institutes of higher education. These are the headline stories but the reality is that there is no one in Ireland today who has not been touched in some way by cyber scams. Whether it is a credit card scam, a hacking of a social media account or the stealing of a password, cybercrime is now unfortunately a common occurrence. These crimes can have devastating personal, professional and financial consequences for victims. The mid-term review of the national cybersecurity strategy committed to developing and publishing, on a more frequent basis, tailored advice and guidance documents on steps that can be taken by citizens to prevent and mitigate these cybercrimes. Will the Minister of State confirm if the tailored advice and guidance documents are being updated and published frequently in order to protect our citizens?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I can confirm the NCSC is doing that in co-operation with An Garda Síochána because the gardaí are the people who see first-hand what the effect of these scams is. The scams are always changing because people are protecting themselves. It is an arms race. The criminals then change their methods. Then the NCSC and An Garda Síochána communicate to the public through communication campaigns. They have a cybercrime week in October when they tell people about how to protect themselves from cybercrime. It is not just aimed at vulnerable or older people. It is aimed at everybody because it could happen to you or me. You are not concentrating for a second, you click on a link or follow something and you are scammed. These crimes are not just about a large organisation being hacked. They are also about having your identity stolen, your social media account or your bank account hacked. There are stories of people experiencing this, and not just stories. An Garda Síochána reports that people lose their entire life savings or are encouraged to take out loans and then transfer

the money. It is an increasing problem which the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau tackles.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: What the Minister of State is saying is correct. This was brought to my attention. Just last week, it was discovered that 76,000 websites had been set up by a network of criminals based in China. The websites were marked as official sites of well-known brands, many of which have a well-established customer base in Ireland.

9 o'clock

Experts are now calling it one of the biggest online scams ever. Up to 800,000 people, mostly in Europe, were tricked into providing personal and financial information to these bogus sites run by criminals. While An Garda Síochána is not as yet aware of any Irish citizens impacted by the scam, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Irish people have fallen victim to this or a similar highly-sophisticated scam. What is being done to protect the citizens from these sophisticated scams, which are not easily identified as scams and, therefore, may trick a large number of people? I know the Government is working with An Garda Síochána but what is happening is mind-boggling. This is really worrying. As the Minister of State said, it affects everyone. What else can we do?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: A lot of us learned, if we had not already understood, the dangers of cybercrime with the HSE attack. We all get scams through mobile phones, whether number generation and a call from Revolut or text messages that plague us every day. It is an issue. It impacts everybody. So many are sent that, unfortunately, even if a small percentage are executed, it will impact a huge number of people on the basis of the information they get. Is there any update on whether the legislation has been progressed around Pegasus and Predator? They are directed Trojan horses. We all know that the clients of the companies that use them are generally inhospitable people and some inhospitable regimes. They are generally directed at politicians and journalists and others. We need to make sure, particularly with anything operating in this State, that there are rules and regulations to deal with them.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: It is not just a matter for the Garda. As our lives go online, criminals go online. We spend more of our time there so it is natural that more crime happens online. That is why the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau is a growing division of the Garda - as so many crimes are reported. During the pandemic, there was a huge increase in the amount of scam texts and calls with people trying to get money with fake deliveries and so on. I convened a meeting of the chief executives of all the phone companies and asked them to work together. Through co-operation with ComReg, we came up with an action plan and a number of scams were defeated as a result. There were five different points, which I cannot reveal because that would give the information to criminals. Representatives of banking organisations work closely with us because the money stolen from people ends up in banks. They help to provide guidance to the NCSE and the Garda on how to stop that movement of cash out of the system. Regarding Pegasus and Predator, Ireland signed up to a global anti-spyware initiative to stop the companies that produce these technologies operating in an unfair way in our jurisdictions.

Questions Nos. 59 and 60 taken with Question No. 55.

National Broadband Plan

61. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the action he is taking to progress areas still pending survey in mid-Cork under the National Broadband Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21551/24]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I wish to clarify with the Minister of State the plan to advance the roll-out of the national broadband plan in areas around Macroom and west of the town, where there are no surveys pending and no expectation of a national broadband plan until 2025 or 2026.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Ireland's digital connectivity strategy, published by my Department, sets ambitious targets, which include providing a gigabit network to all households and businesses in Ireland by 2028 and access to 5G in all populated areas by 2030. Through the national broadband plan, all sectors will be provided with the connectivity needed to fully exploit digital opportunities, leading to more balanced regional development, while supporting the green transition. There are more than 283,989 premises in County Cork, of which over 82,000, 29%, are within the AMBER area. They will be provided with high-speed broadband through State-led intervention. I am advised by National Broadband Ireland the following in relation to deployment areas in mid-Cork regarding pending surveys which are imminent. Dunmanway survey will commence in May 2024. It is anticipated it will be completed in August 2024. Ballingeary survey will commence in July 2024. It is anticipated that survey will be completed in August 2024. Carriganimmy is to commence in August 2024. It is anticipated that survey will be completed in September 2024.

Also in County Cork, there are five deployment areas that have premises passed: Templemartin, Carrigaline, Midleton, Youghal and Rathmore and one deployment area that is premises build complete, Tallow. There are ten deployment areas that have commenced - Eyeries, Skibbereen, Lauragh, Clonakilty, Kinsale, Mitchelstown, Fermoy, Kanturk, Meelin and Abbeyfeale. There are six deployment areas that are premises design complete: Dursey Island, Bere Island, Kilcrohane, Schull, Bantry and Killavullen. There is one deployment area that is survey complete, Grenagh, and one deployment area under way, Charleville. As of 30 April 2024, 26,723 premises in the AMBER area in County Cork are passed and available for immediate connection. This means 32% of those premises in County Cork are now covered by the programme.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Locals in the areas of Kilmichael, Ballingeary, Baile Bhuirne, Carriganimmy up towards Aubane asked about the roll-out of the national broadband plan. When they log onto the website and see 2025 or 2026, one can imagine it is frustrating. I appreciate the details the Minister of State has on the different switches in Carriganimmy, Dunmanway and Ballingeary. It is not available to the public when they log on to the website. They look down the Lee Valley towards the city and see other switches were switched on, such as Templemartin, which covered a huge area from Crossbarry to Coachford. That was a positive development. There is another switch in the middle of that area, in Baile Bhuirne, which the Minister of State did not reference. Perhaps he could clarify if the Baile Bhuirne area will be covered by one of the nearby switches in Carriganimmy or Béal Átha an Gaorthaidh.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: As the Deputy said, this information is not available on the website at the moment. When I started in this position, at the launch of the national broadband plan, there was no information beyond two years. If it was beyond two years, it just stated some

time between now and 2026. I asked the NBI to provide the exact date or at least to the nearest quarter when it would be provided to tell people what it was, even though it could change. That has been useful and allowed people to plan. If they know they are not getting it until the last year, they know they can use some type of intermediate solution like low earth orbit satellite, other fixed wireless access or some other type of wireless connection. Regarding Ballingeary, I mentioned that the survey will start in July 2024 and complete in August this year. I do not have data on Baile Bhuirne. I will come back to the Deputy on that. If he comes to my office I will give him the answer. That applies to any other area the Deputy is curious about. I will go back to NBI to see if it can provide more detailed information on when surveys are happening. People are curious to know when their area is coming next. We have a very high take-up rate and people do have access.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The Minister of State is right; if the information was available, it would ease some of the stress on people. You look down the valley and you see places the Templemartin switch, which was connected, bringing a fantastic service in areas from Crossbarry, Newcestown, Coachford, An Chúil Dubh and a wide area there. The focus has now been moved up towards the Donoughmore area. On this area, west of the town, if the Minister could give clarity regarding those communities and the opportunity, it would be very positive. At the moment, they look at the website and see a date of 2025 to 2026. I will give the Minister of State the details of the different settlements and parishes, from Aubane, Carriganimmy, Clondrohid, Béal Átha an Gaorthaidh, Baile Bhuirne, Inchigeelagh and towards Kilmichael, Togher, Coppeen and that area as well. Will the Minister of State clarify that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I am willing to give the Deputy or any other Deputy information like that if they seek it in particular. About 240,000 homes have now been passed. About one third of the people passed have connected to the service. I expect that will keep rising until about 80% of people passed will connect. We will also reach the halfway mark for the project and will complete by the end of 2026. We will complete on time and on budget. Later this year we are going to connect to the Black Valley in neighbouring County Kerry, one of the hardest to reach areas in the country for infrastructure. They will have full fibre broadband for everybody in the valley who wants it by later this year, in the next couple of months.

Renewable Energy Generation

62. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 177 of 16 April 2024, the status of the community-led projects that were successful in RESS 2; the number that remain in the process; if these projects are on track to energise by 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21571/24]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question relates to the renewable electricity support scheme. I have a particular interest in it because having community involvement is an essential part of the solution to being sustainable in Ireland. What is the status of the community-led projects under the renewable electricity support scheme 2? How many remain in the process, and when will they be energised? Will it be 2024, 2025 or 2026?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Through the first two renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, auctions, my Department has provided pathways and supports for communities to participate in renewable energy projects through the application of a community projects category. Ten

community projects were successful in the RESS 2 auction. Of these, eight signed implementation agreements to deliver under the RESS 2 terms and conditions and remain in the scheme. Those projects are proceeding through the scheme milestones. Some may develop through alternative routes to market, including the upcoming small-scale renewable electricity support scheme, SRESS. The final date for projects to achieve commercial operation in RESS 2 is 31 December 2026. There is evidence of significant challenges which renewable energy community projects may face with the competitive, auction-based nature of RESS, along with grid and other barriers to project delivery. Community projects therefore will now transition to the non-competitive small-scale renewable electricity support scheme. The export tariff phase of SRESS to support small-scale and community renewable projects is due to be launched in the coming weeks with the announcement of relevant tariff support rates which will be a major step forward in supporting the community energy sector. It will include similar community energy-enabling technical and financial supports that are currently provided under RESS.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the last part where the Minister of State said the new SRESS scheme will be announced in the next few weeks. A climate emergency was declared in 2019, as he well knows. The renewable electricity support scheme was introduced in 2018. It is now six years later, and we seem to be limping on and limping on. I am really trying to find out information about the first RESS scheme. I did not ask about that specifically tonight, but my question is based on a series of questions trying to get a handle on the community-based projects. On the specific question asked tonight the Minister of State tells me ten applied and eight remain in the scheme. Can we get any details on where those eight are? What happened to the other two? He then said they are going to progress through different stages and through the market. When and how will that happen? It seems that it is all slowly evolving in a reactive way as opposed to a planned approach to community involvement for maximum effect.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I start by acknowledging that community energy is really important. It creates a sense of ownership and belonging and the mechanisms that might work in the commercial sector have not worked in the community. The mechanism of auction has not proved appropriate in the community sector. It is because of this that a new scheme is being launched. There was extensive engagement with communities to try to devise a scheme that would be suitable and successful whereby instead of bidding for a price, a price would be agreed through negotiation. These are not, after all, large profit-making companies and a scheme that was more appropriate for a smaller community-led project than one that was backed with large corporate finance could be determined. I have full faith at this stage that it will succeed.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not share the same faith with the Minister of State, although I share the importance of community involvement. I will repeat that this has been going on from 2018 to 2024 and we are limping on and limping on. I have no handle on which communities have been successful. I want to share that with my own constituents in Galway. The private sector has a huge offshore plan in Sceirde that is causing great community division with the scale and size of it offshore. We will come to that another day. We are here talking about success stories in theory, but I do not know where they are. I do not know how many relate to solar or how many relate to wind, what is the involvement or what are the challenges. I know that the auction-based method did not suit. We knew from day one that it was never going to suit. Indeed, the total corporatisation does not suit either, but that is perhaps a discussion for another day. Will the Minister of State guide me? I am not tired asking questions, but it is a slow and painstaking way of trying to elicit information that should be upfront. If these are success stories, we should be celebrating them, learning from them and rolling them out more.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can the information be provided to the Deputy at an early stage?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will ask the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to provide that information to the Deputy directly.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is presumably not secret.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I do not imagine it is. I do not know if there is any legal impediment to releasing it. All the Deputy has asked for is the nature of the products - whether they are solar or wind, who the projects are, and what the status is of the eight projects proceeding. I will ask the Minister to provide the Deputy with more details on that. I do not have details of those particular eight projects, and I am not sure if that is asked for within the question. However, I will ask the Minister to provide her with that information and I reiterate that the new small-scale scheme is due to be announced in the coming weeks.

Climate Change Policy

63. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which Ireland continues to make progress towards meeting climate change issues with particular reference to flooding prevention, land drainage or management and any other issues of potential positive impact in meeting the various climate challenges in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21542/24]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to ascertain the extent to which measures to meet climate challenges are successful, and if there is available to the public some scientific evidence to indicate that their efforts are being rewarded and that, if continued, their efforts will be of benefit.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The statutory 2018 national adaptation framework, NAF, sets out Ireland's climate adaptation policy. Following my Department's review of the framework I approved the development of a new NAF, and the draft was completed in December 2023. It incorporates key sectoral and stakeholder input, including from the Climate Change Advisory Council. A statutory public consultation was undertaken earlier this year. The NAF will be submitted to Government for approval shortly, with publication anticipated in the second quarter of 2024. The new NAF integrates national and international policy developments since 2018, and includes work progressed at local authority level, sectoral adaptation plans and climate research. It outlines a whole-of-government and society approach to climate adaptation in Ireland. By taking a sectoral approach through relevant Departments, it aims to improve the enabling environment for mainstreaming adaptation action through key sectors and local government, along with civil society, the private sector and the research community. According to the Climate Change Advisory Council's 2023 climate change adaptation scorecard report, the agriculture, forestry and seafood sector was rated as moderate overall, with good progress observed in mainstreaming adaptation into new policies, planning and financing frameworks. The flood risk management sector was rated as good overall, with the OPW found to have strong internal co-ordination structures in place to co-ordinate the planning, implementation and monitoring of its SAP. Following Government approval of the NAF, key sectors including flood risk management and agriculture will develop new SAPs to address the negative impacts of climate change and to benefit from potential positive impacts.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I am also thinking that in order to succeed in any such situation there needs to be evidence available to support the concept. We have, for example, for want of a better word, flashpoints around the country where severe flooding takes place and has taken place again and again. We call it a hundred year flood or whatever it is. The fact is that there is a means to stop it. We have the means to stop it. A drainage system, if operated, will curtail the kind of flash floods we have in the centres of towns and villages and so on. To what extent can we deal with that more quickly than we have done in the past? The same floods appear again and again, and the same floods threaten houses again and again, year after year. Why should that be? Is it not possible with today's technology to be able to ensure the drainage takes place to be able to alleviate the potential for flooding?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We spent most of our time talking about the climate action plan, the ways to reduce emissions and prevent the worst effects of climate change from happening, and the adaptation plans are what is done when it does happen, and when flooding occurs, how we build the infrastructure to prevent it from happening.

There are many questions in this House on flooding. They are answered by the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW. It is the OPW which has responsibility for making one of these sectoral adaptation plans and it is its job to make sure it is incorporating all the science and research to make sure it can prevent floods from happening in blackspots. From listening to the replies from the OPW, there seems to be a very long list of places in the country that are affected by flooding. It seems the once in a hundred year events that are marked on the flood risk maps happen much more frequently than that. We can look back at the experience in Midleton and see how important it is that we find a way to prevent these things from happening.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for that reply. Again, I am a bit puzzled that we have the incidents repeating and we have the technology to alleviate the problem. While we can say in the long term that we can reduce emissions, which is beneficial to the environment, at the same time we have a situation where parts of the island are being rewetted. I would think most people would agree that over the past 12 months, and over the past six months especially, this island has been rewetted sufficiently to worry some people. I appreciate the work that is being done. However, the EPA published a report recently that said we are doing very well, that praised the country and the Minister for their efforts, but that said more needs to be done. Well then, let us do it. Let us do the job that has to be done to alleviate the flooding and to stop it - the 100-year flooding and the 50-year flooding and the 200-year flooding or whatever it is – because that is achievable in the short term.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I agree with everything the Deputy is saying but it is very important these questions are put not just to the Minister for the environment, Deputy Ryan. He is not alone in being responsible for dealing with all of these problems. That is why there are sectoral plans that are allocated to each of the relevant Ministers. For example, there is an agriculture, forestry and seafood plan for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. There is one for biodiversity which is with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Then, as I said, flood risk comes under the OPW. The effects on health come under the Department of Health and effects on transport come under the Minister for Transport, who is also the Minister for the environment. It is important we do not allocate all the environmental problems in the country to the Minister for the environment and that we have a whole-of-government solution. That is why there are allocated Ministers in each of these sections. I encourage the Deputy to put the question to those relevant Ministers to see what they are doing to satisfy and complete their sectoral adaptation plans to make sure they are taking responsibility for their

share of the problem.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I can assure the Minister of State I have done so.

National Broadband Plan

64. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which broadband provision throughout the country is progressing as intended; if efforts continue to bridge communication gaps that have become obvious; if he can see a means whereby the provision of broadband throughout all the regions can be maximised in early date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21543/24]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I know there have been similar questions to this on broadband. It is on the ongoing drive to provide a full scale level of high-speed broadband throughout the country. We have had tremendous success and there are areas where there have been huge improvements. Then there are other cliff-edge areas between those areas which have received no adequate service at all yet. When will we join them all up?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Ireland's digital connectivity strategy, published by my Department, sets ambitious targets, which include providing a gigabit network to all households and businesses in Ireland by 2028 and access to 5G in all populated areas by 2030, which is high speed and future-proofed. National Broadband Ireland, NBI, is rolling out a broadband network through its contract with the Minister. The intervention area covers in excess of 1.1 million people living and working in more than 560,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 672 schools. NBI is connecting about 4,000 homes each month. NBI expect to have passed in excess of 300,000 premises by the end of 2024, with about 120,000 premises passed each year thereafter until the end of deployment. I am advised by NBI that more than 243,000 premises are passed across 26 counties and available for immediate connection. In excess of 80,200 premises are already connected to the national broadband plan's high-speed broadband network.

My Department has engaged with NBI at every opportunity to explore options that might increase the pace of roll-out. For example, my Department has been working with directors of service and broadband officers from each of the 31 local authorities, the Local Government Management Agency, the County and City Management Association, the Road Management Office and other Departments, where appropriate, to ensure any possible barriers that might delay the roll-out are addressed as soon as possible. Engagement with other bodies such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Irish Rail and ComReg are also undertaken. I understand that NBI is in regular discussions with Eir, which is responsible for the remediation of poles, to increase the rate of pole replacement each month and Eir has responded positively to these requests. NBI has also procured the necessary subcontractors, materials and equipment to support the programme into the foreseeable future to ensure there are no bottlenecks in the supply chain.

The network roll-out for the NBP is divided into 227 deployment areas across the country. These typically measure approximately 25 km in radius and cover 96% of Ireland's landmass. The network is specifically designed based on Eir exchanges or the metropolitan area networks which allows NBI to reach every premises quickly.

Along with the NBP intervention contract, progress is being made by commercial operators

in expanding their next generation networks throughout the State and ensuring the targets set out in the digital connectivity strategy are achieved.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We should recognise and acknowledge the fact the provision of broadband is a massive leap forward in communications in this country. It is hugely important to business and industry, education, hospitals, schools and science in general. It has been speeded up dramatically by the availability of a reliable and adequate high-speed broadband. However, there are chasms in the system still that people do not really understand. They will say the broadband is at the top of the road and has gone by there and the people in the next townland or village are enjoying it. They will say they are all in favour of it but they have none and they cannot do the job they are supposed to do until there is an extension. Insofar as it can be done, can we extend to cover those gaps and blackspots to improve the service overall?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The nature of the plan is 100% coverage. The country has been divided into 227 areas. The contractor only gets paid when it connects 100% of premises within that area. In other words, it has to pass fibre past every farm, business and home to get its payment. This is not a scheme that leaves people out. It completes by the end of 2026 and at that point 100% of the premises in the intervention area in rural Ireland – 560,000 houses and 1.1 million people – will have access to fibre broadband if they want it. In fact, at that point, at the rate we are going, urban Ireland may not have everybody connected. It is urban Ireland that will have the problem with blackspots unless I devise a blackspot scheme for urban Ireland. In fact, rural Ireland will get there first in 2026 at the current rate of progress. Urban Ireland will be covered by the end of 2028.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I agree entirely. There may be other blackspots that have not appeared just yet, but the lack of appeals on their part should not inhibit us in any way from making the changes the Minister of State referred to in identifying blackspots that need urgent attention and to do it now, insofar as it can be done and thus eliminate many of the delays.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: There are crews working in every county in Ireland. The plan was devised in such a way that, rather than go from one county or province to the next, the whole county would be worked on at the same time. It is not a case that one county or community is being left out. Naturally, with a seven-year plan, there are people who will be passed in year 7 and they will not be as happy as the people who got passed in year 1. Naturally there are borders. Just as there are county borders and areas that have been completed, there will be somebody next door who will not get the connection for a while. I understand that is frustrating for people. That is why I have asked NBI to provide as much information as possible to people on their website so that people can plan and will know how many months away they are from getting their connection and whether they will need to use some kind of stopgap. I agree with the Deputy when he says it does have the effect of revitalising rural Ireland. In the past, the dream was that a factory or employer might come to a village and then there might be some life or some money in the town. Now people can go home and work from home. They can live close to their families. They can pay a mortgage and can shop locally. They can bring all that business because they can work remotely and bring cash into their rural area.

Questions Nos. 65 to 78, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Energy Conservation

79. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the progress being made in the installation and promotion of communal and district heating schemes in the State; if there are targets for the number that could be installed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21525/24]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am asking for an update on any progress made in the installation and promotion of communal and district heating systems in the State, any targets for the number that could be installed and if the Minister of State will make a statement on the matter. I do not think he will be shocked I may raise the issue of Carlinn Hall in my supplementary answer. I have met SEAI about possible solutions. I think there is a long journey to go and I hope there will be governmental support for the residents.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I am not sure I have the answer to the question at hand. My apologies.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I can just give the Minister of State a number of requests and he could say "Yes". I would be reasonably happy with that.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I would like to give the Deputy a proper answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Minister of State does not have that question response to hand-----

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I do not think I do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I take it that the Minister of State and the Deputy will correspond and that he will give the Deputy a written response?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will correspond with the Deputy and I am happy to give him a full answer. Does Deputy Ó Murchú want to make a point on the general issue?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that. In fairness, I welcome that the feasibility study was carried out by SEAI with regard to geothermal and heat pump technology to replace what is in the gas-fed system. We all know the issue that 50% was lost. It used to take two units of gas to provide one unit of heat and that there was a loss in the system. I met the SEAI and am very happy it is willing to facilitate the possibilities. We are now looking at third-party companies from a point of view of putting a proposal together. There will be a need for a greater level of analysis to be carried out. It is just making sure that if necessary, with regard to any governmental pieces, I think we are looking at a grant scheme similar to what would be offered to biomass. I do not think it is as straightforward but it can be done because we know this is not good from an environmental point of view. It is the almost the Achilles heel of district heating systems, which we all welcome. We need to look at one of these types of solutions or, in a perfect world, a district heating solution that would be perfect. There are possibilities here. My intention is that between the management company, others, some of this third-party expertise and myself that we can put a proposal together. If the residents are reasonably happy with it, it can be put together with all the funding schemes and all of those necessary parts that could improve the system.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Enrolments

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this particular matter again. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to reply.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Drive on

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: In north Kildare we have a particular problem. We have a rapidly growing population. This population growth continues year after year but particularly in the last couple of years. We at local level, Oireachtas Members and members of local authorities et al., have put forward proposals ourselves to ensure catchment areas were regularly defined and that they were logical in terms of travel distances from the point of view of the parents. The problem is that most or all of the parents are at work so they have a difficulty if they cannot travel to the nearest school. The problem that now exists, unfortunately, is that for ordinary mainstream education there are difficulties in virtually all schools. There is a difficulty in gaining access for children and their parents and grandparents went to those schools. However, because of some changes that took place in the planning department it is found that they cannot attend the school of their choice which happens to be maybe a school their siblings are also attending. As a result, there is total confusion in the community. In trying to be helpful, possible solutions have been put forward by the Department of Education to the effect the children could go to another school that beyond the existing school and have transport provided and so on. That is all very fine but would not be necessary if adequate provision was made with regard how the management of the catchment areas was done and how much regard it had for the parents.

This is also a particular problem with regard to children with special needs. In some cases there is more than one child in the one house. In many of these cases there is no place available at all. We had a meeting some time ago and the Minister kindly arranged for a meeting in her Department with the interested parties. It transpired during the course of the meeting that the planning department had done its own sums and made its own plan but it did not measure up to the needs of the community. This causes very considerable difficulties. For example, there are some cases where children are already being deprived from joining the school that is nearest to them and to which their parents went and where they already have siblings in the school and they cannot join them. That is impossible for parents to handle if they have to do a school run in the morning and in the middle of the day. It cannot be done. It is a tough enough challenge for the parents to be able to handle a child or more than one child with special needs and depending on the degree of special needs. It is very important at this stage to try to resolve the problem by identifying how that can be dealt with in the shortest time possible and in the quickest way with the minimum of disturbance to both the parents and the children. I ask that at this stage an urgent review of the catchment areas and the plan that is obviously not working be done forthwith with a view to bringing some kind of resolution to the problem.

Deputy Niall Collins: I would like to thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It gives me

the opportunity to set out for the House the position with regard to school places including special education in north Kildare for September 2024 and onwards.

I can assure the Deputy that the provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary level, including children and young people with special educational needs is an absolute priority for the Department of Education and the Government.

The Department has invested significantly in schools in County Kildare over recent years. Under the national development plan, a total of almost €250 million has been invested in schools in County Kildare over the past five years. This investment has focused on provision of additional capacity to cater for its increasing population and there are further significant projects in our pipeline including for the north Kildare area. In line with the Department's demographic projections of post-primary school place requirements, there has been a continued growth in enrolments throughout many school planning areas in North Kildare. In response, the Department is progressing a number of building projects in north Kildare under the national development plan. This includes projects at primary and post-primary schools and provision for mainstream accommodation as well as for children with special educational needs. These projects include recently completed new school buildings for Maynooth Community College, Maynooth Post Primary School, Naas Community College and Maynooth Educate Together National School. Additionally, a number of further new school buildings and extensions are at construction or planned, including: St. Farnan's Post Primary School, Prosperous; Scoil Dara and Scoil Uí Riada, Kilcock; Maynooth Boys National School; Celbridge Community School; Scoil Naomh Padraig, Celbridge; St. Raphael's Special School, Celbridge; Leixlip Educate Together National School; Gaelscoil Ruairí, Maynooth; Mercy Convent Primary School, Naas; Hewetson National School, Clane; and St. Patrick's Boys National School, Clane.

The Department is aware of pressure for school places in north Kildare. As part of planning for September 2024, data on applications for admission has been received by the Department from post-primary schools across areas of known enrolment pressure, including the school planning areas of Maynooth, Naas, Celbridge, Newbridge, Kildare, Prosperous and Clane. The sharing of this data has been very effective in the identification of school place requirements across the areas. In the majority of areas across Kildare, through the work of schools, patrons, management bodies and the Department, there are sufficient school places available to meet the needs of children in the area. The Department is working with schools and patrons to make additional places available in a small number of areas where a need has been identified. As part of this engagement with patrons, the Department is also collaboratively planning towards 2025-26 and future years, as part of forward planning generally.

I also wish to acknowledge the invaluable work being done by school principals and wider school authorities in expanding the educational provision for pupils with special educational needs. The Department has close engagement with the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, which has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. The NCSE is working actively with the Department and other key stakeholders, including school patrons and management bodies, to provide additional special classes and special school places for the 2024-25 school year, including across north Kildare.

The Deputy will be aware that a new special school is being established in Kildare for the 2024-25 school year, under the patronage of Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board. It will provide additional special school places to meet the needs of families in the area.

With respect to special classes, I can assure the Deputy that the Department is working to ensure that there is appropriate provision in place to meet the school place needs of all children. In the first instance, it is focused on ensuring that the use of existing school accommodation capacity is fully optimised. Where additional capacity is required, this can be provided by means of modular accommodation where accelerated delivery is required or by means of traditional construction projects. The Department will continue to plan for future school place needs using most up-to-date information, including child benefit data, enrolments, census data and information on current and planned residential development activity.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for a comprehensive reply. In it, he identified all of the pinch points that are already visible and causing problems. The Minister of State is correct. There has been huge investment. However, even new schools that have been built recently are now overflowing and there is difficulty for pupils in catchment areas in gaining access to those schools. In some cases, decisions have been made by the planning section to move a child to a different school, thereby creating a further catchment area that will disrupt the entire system if it is allowed to continue.

At this stage, there is evidence to show that schools are overflowing. St. Farnan's Post Primary school and new post primary schools in Maynooth are facing difficulties. There are difficulties in Straffan and Clane, as well as in all the other places Minister of State mentioned. In Naas, the Mercy Convent School has sat half-finished and idle for the past couple of years. It is vital that work is ongoing in order to meet the challenge. If we do not meet that challenge between now and next September, we will fall further back because the population is growing more rapidly than we are able to build for it.

The Minister of State identified all of the crucial areas. I ask that the planning and development section goes to work immediately to meet the challenges that are there now for mainstream pupils, as well as children with special needs who need attention more quickly because parents are under pressure to ensure that, as far as they can, they get a reasonably good education.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy. I also wish to point out that the Department will continue to liaise with local authorities in respect of their county development plans and any associated local area plans, with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements across school planning areas. I can assure the Deputy that Department of Education officials will continue to work to ensure there is sufficient school place of provision for all children throughout north Kildare for the 2024-25 school year and into the future.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State.

Disability Services

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I want to raise the issue of children receiving substandard services in children's disability network teams, CDNTs, in Carlow. I was disappointed to read in a response to a parliamentary question I submitted that the HSE has delayed a new children's service facility in Carlow which was to be the new home for the CDNT. Part of that was to include the Holy Angels centre.

A funding allocation of approximately €7.1 million was identified for the project, and a design team was engaged and proceeded with the design process last year. My understanding

is that the stage 1 report from the design team in December 2023 estimated that the cost of the project would significantly exceed the funding allocation. We welcomed the funding allocation, which is in the capital plan, but we have been told there is not enough money. The HSE disability service estate is arranging stakeholder engagement to review the project and provide a revised scheme of the works and funding. I ask that funding be put together urgently because it is needed.

We need investment, innovation and reform. If we cannot future-proof a development such as this, how will we prioritise our disability services? When we began implementing disability services in CHO 5, the core focus of the change was to ensure the children with complex needs, and their families, would receive an appropriate and accessible family-centred service. However, I am hearing every day that this is not the case.

There is only one CDNT led by the HSE in Carlow, which is located in Bethany House, on Barrack Street. Across that team, there are 294 children with complex disabilities registered for clinical services, 50 of whom have active individual family support plans. Some 230 children are waiting on initial contact. I have been told that filling vacant clinical posts across these teams is the HSE's top priority in order to address the needs of children, deal with waiting lists and provide clinical services to new applicants.

I believe there is a proposal to move to an alternative model of enhanced disability services in the community by way of increased support hours in a home setting, increasing capacity in current respite services and offering alternative models of delivering respite services. We are not adequately serving the needs of the children, however. My office makes at least one representation a day for a child waiting on speech and language therapy, occupational therapy or autism assessments. I know of families who are going into debt in order to get vital interventions for their children.

What priority is being put on recruitment? There is no embargo on recruitment for these posts. When I spoke to Bernard Gloster recently, he assured me that interviews were taking place for staff for South East Community Healthcare services for all vacant clinical posts. It is my understanding these interviews were completed on Friday, 16 February 2024 and that job offers from the recruitment campaign are in train. Is there any way we can speed up this process because it is so important? In Carlow, family forums have commenced to provide information to families on the services the CDNTs are providing and resources available to them, but families are telling me these are not working the way they would like. They feel they are just a box-ticking exercise. The next family forum meeting was scheduled for today and I will be contacting the families to see how it went. The CDNT in Carlow continues to receive referrals and many end up in the family forums. We need to see real action. Staff growth in this area is very important.

Deputy Niall Collins: I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, who thanks the Deputy for raising this matter. The Minister is fully committed to the continued development and enhancement of our children's disability services through the CDNTs, as they seek to ensure equitable access to services for all children with complex needs. The Minister of State acknowledges the difficulties faced by children and their families seeking to access the services of CDNTs in CHO 5 and takes this opportunity to reiterate her unhappiness at this situation and her commitment to addressing the underlying issues.

Presently, there are significant challenges both nationally and globally regarding the recruitment and retention of health and social care professionals, particularly for children's disability services. While funding has been allocated, vacancy rates in CDNTs unfortunately remain high. In CHO 5, the HSE advises that the vacancy rate of the teams stands at 41% which equates to around 92.05 whole-time equivalent posts out of the approved 223.78 posts. This is based on the 2022 CDNT census. However, the HSE advises that the latest census is expected to be available in the very near future.

The Minister of State can assure the Deputy there is ongoing recruitment for vacant posts in CHO 5, both through the HSE's national recruitment services and the HSE HR section at a local level. The HSE launched the first nationwide CDNT recruitment campaign in January 2024 with the theme "Be part of our team, be part of their lives". The Minister of State has been advised by the HSE that, at this time,and without prejudging the final outcome of the recruitment and selection process, CHO 5 is anticipated to significantly benefit from job offers arising from this campaign. If those offers were to be accepted by the applicants, it would represent an approximate 25% increase in staffing across CHO 5. However, to sound a note of caution, the applicants concerned may have other offers from the competition, so the Minister of State will await the finalisation of the process and a more detailed report from the HSE.

The Minister of State welcomes additional measures being progressed under the progressing disability services roadmap to increase capacity on CDNTs, including student sponsorship programmes for health and social care professionals; a target of 175 therapy assistants to support health and social care professionals in delivering the most effective and efficient services in environments appropriate to each child's needs; and dedicated work on marketing CDNTs as workplaces of choice. While recruitment measures are ongoing, the Minister of State can advise that the HSE is driving forward several initiatives to reduce waiting times and strengthen services for children waiting. These include sourcing assessments and interventions from private service providers and the imminent launch of the children's disability service grant fund. The launch of this fund called for applications from disability service providers and community groups who can provide additional and innovative services, including, but not limited to, recognised sensory programmes; evidence-based therapies; respite services, including clubs, evening and weekend sessions; Saturday clubs; sports sessions; and additional therapy sessions for service users such as managing challenging behaviours. There was a huge response from voluntary and community groups and private agencies, with around 495 applications for funding. The HSE intends to issue letters to applicants in the very near future and commence the process of engagement around the drawdown of funds.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State. I was made aware the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, would not be able to take this Topical Issue tonight but, in fairness to her, I have worked very closely with her and can say she is totally committed to trying to recruit for disability services. One of the biggest issues I have been talking to her about recently is the inclusion of assessments and intervention from private service providers, which I welcomed. That made a difference but we still have a long road to go. As I always say to the Minister of State, early intervention is the only way forward. It is important that children are assessed early. That is the most important issue going forward.

I welcome the information on recruitment and await the final numbers for CHO 5. The Minister of State, Deputy Collins, is probably not aware we have a huge HSE site in Carlow and we will be getting a new CDNT building there which also includes the Holy Angels day care centre. I ask him to raise the funding for that project with the Minister of State, Deputy Rab-

bitte. While I welcome the €7.1 million that has already been provided, the cost of construction materials now means we may need extra funding for that new building. It is important we get that new building. It will make a huge difference to the children in County Carlow.

I referred to a lot of figures tonight but I have families coming in to me daily who are borrowing to get their children assessed because of the long waiting times. Timing is crucial and we do not want any family to have to borrow money from grandparents or other family members. We need to provide these services urgently. I know Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is committed but I ask that she would get back to me directly with regard to the recruitment and what is happening there.

Deputy Niall Collins: While recruitment and retention of staff to CDNTs remains a considerable challenge, the Minister of State wishes to reaffirm her commitment as well as that of the HSE and her Department to exploring all avenues to improve access to CDNTs for children and their families in CHO 5. I will make the Minister of State aware of all of the issues the Deputy raised here this evening.

Sports Events

Deputy Thomas Gould: Cork's heroic victory over Limerick last weekend will go down in history as one of the most exciting games of the modern time but thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people were not able to watch it, including diehard GAA people and hurling people who love the game. So far, not one of Cork's hurling championship matches have been on television. The games against Clare and Waterford were also crackers but people did not get an opportunity to see them. This decision by the GAA and by RTÉ is a disgrace and flies in the face of all the volunteers who have given their time and commitment to the association. It costs €12 to watch a match which, for people on limited incomes or budgets, for young people whose parents might not be interested and for other people who are struggling to pay their bills, is a lot. A lot people cannot afford this. There were three Cork hurling games and the Cork versus Kerry football match so people in Cork would have had to pay €48 to watch them all.

In today's edition of *The Echo*, the elderly rights campaigner, Mr. Paddy O'Brien, condemned the GAA for what it is doing to older people and to volunteers who have given their lives to the association. I spoke to a former Cork hurler in Blackpool on Saturday. This man has limited mobility and is on crutches. He played in an All-Ireland with Cork in 1984 and he has senior all-Ireland medals with his club, Glen Rovers. He was going to a pub to watch the match. This is a man who has graced Croke Park. He was going to the pub because he could not watch the game on television. Money was not the issue for him. The issue was that he does not have a computer or a smartphone to watch it so his friends had to bring him out. I spoke to another man on the northside who played hurling all his life. He listened to the game on 103 FM. I thank and commend 103 FM for providing proper public service broadcasting, unlike RTÉ. If it were not for 103 FM, people in Cork would not have been able to listen to live coverage of the match.

10 o'clock

Last year, 1 million people watched the all-Ireland hurling final. That is the level of love for hurling in this country. Instead of fostering the game, as the GAA, especially, and also RTÉ, the public sector broadcaster, should be doing, they are putting it behind a paywall to make money.

The question is whether the GAA is more worried about making money or promoting hurling.

The number of GAA players is decreasing. In 2019, 22,514 club teams were signed up to the association. Between October 2021 and September 2022, that number fell to 20,994, which was a decrease of 1,520 teams. It is no wonder clubs are not fielding teams. Last weekend, the under-15s hurling féile took place in Cork. It is the most prestigious underage hurling competition on the island. I know of two clubs that did not field teams last weekend because players were playing other codes. Instead of the GAA promoting hurling and getting more young people to play the game, it is putting matches behind a paywall for money. It is a scandal.

I love the GAA. I am a lifelong member and my family is steeped in the association. I love hurling and I love the GAA. It is an unbelievably good sporting organisation. However, too many people in Croke Park are living in a bubble. GAA members are not professionals. We are volunteers. We are based in the parish and the community. That is what the GAA should represent; not big business, not big money but the love of hurling.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, to which I am replying on behalf of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. It is important to note that the GAA, like all national governing bodies, NGBs, in sport, is an independent, autonomous body. The management of broadcasting and commercial rights is entirely a matter for the association. The GAA, like all NGBs, is free to enter into commercial agreements to generate revenue to support the continued development of its sport from grassroots to elite levels.

A challenge for all sports bodies, including the GAA, is to strike a balance between generating revenue through broadcasting rights and ensuring accessibility to as wide an audience as possible, particularly those who might not have the technical know-how to engage with a streaming service. There is a vital need to promote sport generally, and active participation in sport in particular. One way to do so is to give access to live sporting events. There is also a need to ensure there are sufficient levels of coverage of our national games. In this regard, there has been much discussion about the need to promote hurling, in particular. Widespread free-to-air availability is a part of this.

I appreciate that fans will want to see more games but it is important to consider the practicalities of broadcasting those games. Public service broadcasters are not dedicated sports channels. They have a statutory obligation to meet the expectations of all people and to provide a broad schedule that caters for the interests of the whole population, on all subject matters and via all programme types, not just sport. In saying that, there is, rightly, still a significant amount of sport available to view on free-to-air television. In the case of Gaelic games, I understand there was no reduction in the number of games shown free to air by RTÉ in 2023. It is worth considering that if GAAGO did not exist, a number of matches would not be aired at all.

I understand that between Friday and Sunday last, there were 12 GAA matches played from under-20s to senior level. Six of those matches were available on free-to-air television, with a further three available on GAAGO. More than 300 Gaelic games matches will be shown live on free-to-air television this year. They include matches shown on TG4, which has expanded its Gaelic games broadcasting over the years and now shows national league, club, intervarsity and underage championship games, as well as women's football. A quick look at the television schedule shows there will be Gaelic games coverage on TG4 every day this week, including three live matches. In addition, two live matches will be shown on RTÉ next weekend, as well

as highlights shows.

Obviously, sports fans would like to have more games available free to air, especially those involving their own counties. However, it simply may not be possible to broadcast all matches. The number and frequency of games, and the potential for clashes, are issues of the sporting calendar, not the television schedule. Recent changes in championship structure and season duration are bound to result in fixture congestion. The scheduling is a matter for the GAA to address. It must work with its broadcast partner, RTÉ, to decide which games are broadcast. This is not something in which the Government can or should be involved.

With regard to the broadcasting policy element of guaranteeing free-to-air availability of sporting events, there is provision in national and European legislation to designate major events as free to air if they are deemed to be in line with statutory criteria. The legislation also provides for regular reviews of the list of events that are designated as free to air. A review is currently under way. It included a public and stakeholder consultation, which was launched by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, last January to invite feedback on a number of new events being considered for free-to-air designation. While the consultation phase is closed, there is now an independent analysis and assessment of the outcome of the consultation.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I do not accept the Minister of State's assertion that there is no role for the Government in this matter. Hurling is not just another sport. It is our national game. It is part of our culture and tradition. It is what Irish people from the island of Ireland and all across the world associate with being Irish. To say the Government has no part to play in it, while other sports are on every television channel, is not acceptable. We must protect our game.

Hurling is a minority sport. Fewer and fewer people are playing it, especially at a higher level. For the past two weekends, there has been no senior Munster or Leinster championship game shown on television. That is the truth of it. RTÉ is a public broadcaster. Its job is, or should be, to show hurling. If it does not want to do that, other organisations should be allowed to do so. The Minister of State said there has been no decrease in the number of games shown. There was uproar last year when this happened. The review should have been finished earlier and the results should have been published.

There are solutions to be found. Will the Government increase funding to the GAA to ensure it does not have to sell its soul, and the souls of GAA members, for money? GAAGO will probably bring in approximately €4 million. Are we interested in promoting our national game or are we interested in profit? That is the question. I am really disappointed by what is happening. In every city, town, village and parish, the GAA was the mainstay of communities. It needs to go back to its grassroots and back to basics.

There is so much the Government should be doing. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister have made comments on this issue. We need less talk now and more action. I spoke on this matter last year, I raised it again this year and I speak on it once more tonight. What has happened is a disgrace and a scandal. I am thinking not of myself but about every person out there who ever played the game, ran a team, washed a set of jerseys or lined a field. I am talking about the people who are at the heart of our great association. I am really disappointed in the new president's comments. I believe, as a lot of people do, that he is a great man to bring about change in the association. However, he seems to be listening too much to the money men in Croke Park. We have to get back to where we came from and to what made the association so great. What has happened is wrong and it is time to reverse it.

Deputy Niall Collins: I referred to the independent analysis of the consultation that took place. This will inform which events will be brought to the EU for approval, as required. Already, all-Ireland football, hurling and camogie finals are designated for free-to-air coverage. The current review involves an examination of the possibility of designating a number of additional GAA events, such as the quarter- and semi-finals of the All-Ireland series and provincial finals. A number of these are traditionally broadcast free to air already, but we are right to examine the merit of protecting or possibly extending this free-to-air status.

Upon detailed consideration of this report, the final list of events to be designated will be laid before the Houses and will then be submitted to the European Commission for its consideration and approval. What is very important to bear in mind with the designation process is that it is not intended to designate an entire competition or all of one particular sport's events. Rather, the intention is to ensure free-to-air coverage of major national events and events involving national teams. In addition, it is important to remember that designation does not guarantee coverage. It does not and cannot oblige a broadcaster to purchase rights to an event. It is designed to protect certain significant events and ensure they are available free to air.

There are many strong views on this issue and, as such, the debate is to be welcomed. What is important is that the concerns raised by Members of this House, and the sporting public, need to be considered by the GAA and responded to accordingly.

Dental Services

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke, for being here tonight. I am raising the long waiting list for dentures, specifically for people over 70. I want to go back to a newspaper article in January 2009, which appeared under the subheading: "Dentures will be rationed for medical card holders as part of a wave of Health Service Executive ... cutbacks, dentists representatives warned." The article states:

> The Irish Dental Association ... chief executive ... said dentures are the most expensive discretionary item provided for under the general medical card scheme.
>
> Because of that we are getting strong indications they will be the first thing to go," he said.
>
> Currently, dentists can perform routine dental work, such as examinations, fillings and extractions on medical card patients without receiving authorisation from a HSE principal dental surgeon. More expensive treatment items, such as advanced gum treatment, large x-rays and dentures, must be authorised by the HSE.

In July 2023, the same chief executive said that nearly 500 more dentists were needed in order to meet demand. An article in the *Irish Independent* on 19 March last stated, "More than 13,000 people now on waiting lists for dental surgery".

The issue of dental services was recently raised in the Seanad by Senator Tim Lombard. The information he received is that in the Cork and Kerry region, as of last June, while 860 patients had their orthodontic needs assessed in the first six months of the year, a whopping 2,900 patients were still waiting for an assessment. While 1,937 patients were in active treatment at the time, there were 2,600 patients waiting to start treatment at the end of June. That

is slightly different in that it probably relates to the younger generation, but it is still indicative of the crisis that the dental service is in. It was also stated that the HSE says that the problem is a lack of participation by private dentists in the scheme, because there is an embargo on the recruitment of its staff.

A number of people have been in contact with my office in recent months in respect of this matter. I also spoke to a very good friend of mine about it at the weekend, which prompted me to table a parliamentary question on it but I have not received a response to it yet. We will call my friend Dave from Midleton. About 15 months ago, he had problems with his dentures. He brought them to the local dentist and paid to get them fixed. The Minister of State should bear in mind that he is a pensioner. When he went on a waiting list more than a year ago he asked how long he would be waiting. They said it would be about two years. Nearly four weeks ago he again had a problem with his dentures. He went back to the dentist and paid to get them repaired. When he asked where he was on the list, he was told he would probably be waiting for two years. He said he was told that last year, so now it is three years.

There are other costs involved. I went on the patient information page on the UCC website. What this gentleman needs is a full upper and lower denture replacement. The quote I have is for €1,100. As a pensioner, there is no way he can afford that. One of the necessities in life is that we are able to eat. We can imagine what it would be like at that stage in life if we could not even put in dentures to chew food. It is absolutely ridiculous that the basic rights of the most vulnerable are being ignored and excused by waiting lists, but if a person has cash, he or she would only be waiting a couple of weeks. What will the Minister of State do for the likes of this man, and the others who have come to me? They are in fear of their life. They are afraid to ask. They are ashamed to say they cannot afford it, so they just sit there in pain.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Colm Burke): I thank Deputy Buckley for raising this matter. I am dealing with this reply on behalf of the Minister. Dentures and denture repairs for medical card holders are provided by contractors through the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS, which provides dental care, free of charge, to medical card holders aged 16 and over. Denture-related items are available from both dentists who hold a DTSS contract and contracted clinical dental technicians who only provide dentures on the scheme. Services available annually and on demand through the DTSS include an examination including preventative advice, two fillings, emergency extractions, and a scale and polish. More complex care, such as dentures, and a broader range of treatments for patients with additional needs and high-risk patients, are available subject to the approval of the local HSE principal dental surgeon.

The DTSS contract enables patients to have a new denture provided every five years, and to have denture repairs undertaken as required. Medical card holders may choose to attend any contracted dentist or clinical dental technician to access repair or replacement dentures. In response to contractor concerns regarding the scheme, the Minister approved measures from May 2022 providing for increased preventative care and increased the fees paid to dentists for most treatment items, including dentures and denture repairs, by 40% to 60%. This has increased both the number of patients seen and the treatments provided in the DTSS.

The HSE is unaware of any waiting lists in contracted practices. However, the Minister is aware that medical card holders in some areas continue to have difficulty accessing care. While there are a significant number of contract holders, appointment availability fluctuates daily according to practice demands. The local HSE principal dental surgeon may be able to provide

assistance in accessing DTSS care. The HSE is required to support the provision of emergency care to adult medical card holders who have difficulty accessing a local dentist. In the longer term, the Government is committed to fundamentally reforming dental services, including the DTSS, through implementation of the national oral health policy, Smile agus Sláinte. The policy sets out a complete transformation of oral healthcare services and expansion of the care available for both children and adults. The HSE has appointed a strategic reform lead to drive policy implementation across the organisation and to move forward in 2024 with developing new services in line with the policy. This will include work on planning new services for medical card holders. The HSE is currently developing the clinical aspects of new packages of preventative care for DTSS patients, as the first phase of reform of the medical card scheme. An implementation plan for the first phase of roll-out is being developed between the Department of Health and the HSE, for consultation and then publication in the third quarter of this year. This report will be set out by the third quarter of 2024.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State. I respect the response outlined. I am well aware that new dentures can be provided every five years, but that is if a patient can access a dentist. That is the issue here. Then there is the medical stuff that goes with it. Oral health is vital. The Minister of State's written statement reads, "The HSE is required to support the provision of emergency care to adult medical card holders who have difficulty accessing a local dentist." In the case I am talking about, the gentleman was told a year and three months ago he would be waiting two years. Three weeks ago, he was told he would be waiting another two years. That is not a very proactive way to provide emergency care for adults.

When I was speaking to the gentleman, he laughed. The older generation always have a good sense of humour and a bit of fun. He said he would be like the elderly couple in the burger restaurant. The husband was sitting across from the wife and they had the burger cut in half. She was chewing her half but he had not touched his. A young couple spotted them and did not know what was going on but assumed they were sharing the burger. The young gentlemen went up, purchased another burger and dropped it at the table of the older couple. He told the man to have that burger and let his wife have the other burger. The other man said he was missing the point, that there was nothing wrong with the cost of the burger and that he was waiting for her to finish eating her half of the burger so he could use her dentures to chew his half. That is the story that gentleman told me.

The Minister of State mentioned the HSE assisting people. It assists people by telling them it is tough luck, to go away and get things fixed again and come back in two years. That has to be revisited. The written statement reads, "The HSE is required to support the provision of emergency care to adult medical card holders who have difficulty accessing a local dentist." That is where the problem is. They cannot access them and the HSE is not helping them to do it. It is just giving them the hard luck story. I do not know where we will go from here. I do not know what I will do or what I will tell this gentleman and others when I go back to my constituency at the weekend.

Deputy Colm Burke: I fully understand where the Deputy is coming from in relation to any person having difficulty accessing dental care. It is clearly set out in the statement, "The HSE is required to support the provision of emergency care to adult medical card holders who have difficulty accessing a local dentist."

Access to dental care, including for adult medical card holders, is a top priority for the Minister and Government. The Minister has made substantial additional investment in oral health-

care services in recent years. In addition to more than €200 million the Government invests in public oral healthcare services annually, €17 million in one-off funding has been invested since 2019-2020 to address service backlogs.

The national oral health policy, Smile agus Sláinte, highlights the need for strategic workforce planning to ensure a sufficient number of appropriately trained oral healthcare professionals, to include dentists, dental hygienists, dental nurses and other auxiliary grades. Maximising the contribution of all our oral healthcare professionals and allowing them work at the top of their licence is central to Smile agus Sláinte and to increasing services.

It is heartening to note we have more registered dentists in Ireland than ever before. There are 3,652 registered dentists, which is an additional 177 since March 2023. This reflects positive trends, with the comparative figure being 3,217 in 2018. That is an increase of more than 400 dentists.

The Minister supports the creation of additional capacity in higher education, including in oral healthcare. The Higher Education Authority is undertaking a process to identity a set of options to achieve this important step towards health workforce sustainability for Ireland. I am confident that, working with the dental profession and other stakeholders in line with their respective roles and responsibilities, the goals of this policy will be met.

I accept there is a need to increase the output of dentists from third-level colleges. It is not only dentists but also dental hygienists and all of that area that needs to increase because we have an increasing population. It is important to note there has been an increase in the number of dentists available to provide a service in this country. Let us keep working towards increasing it further.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.25 p.m. go dtí 9.10 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 1 Bealtaine 2024.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.25 p.m. until 9.10 a.m. on Wednesday, 15 May 2024.