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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 19 Feabhra 2025*

*Wednesday, 19 February 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh) i gceannas ar 9.12 a.m.

***Paidir agus Machnamh.***
***Prayer and Reflection.***

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## Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss Garda resources and station opening hours in south Cork city division.

Deputy Martin Daly - To discuss the development of the regional national rehabilitation unit at Roscommon University Hospital.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the shortage of available GP places in the south Cork area.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the potential pedestrianisation of the old Ballina-Killaloe bridge.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the provision of childcare in Ballymun and the building blocks grant scheme.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss crime in Dublin city.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss cutbacks in Aircoach services.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss requests from clinical consultants for treatments that fall outside the range of services routinely commissioned.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the roll-out of BusConnects for Wicklow.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the dramatic decline in participation in the dental treatment service scheme.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the means test for the carer's allowance as it applies to a parent of an autistic person.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss school places in Kildare.

Deputy Tony McCormack - To discuss competitiveness in the FDI sector and supports available to workers made redundant in this sector.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - To discuss an gá le soiléiriú maidir le stádas Gaelcholáiste 2, 4, 6 agus 8.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the issue of online catfishing.

Deputy Liam Quaide - To discuss the need for special schools in east Cork.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss provision of an enhanced mains rehabilitation and replacement scheme for Cork city.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the continued existence of the GP Care for All practice in Dublin 1.

Deputy Frankie Feighan - To discuss the lack of home help personnel available in the north west.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for additional school places for children with autism in Fingal west.

Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss the long-awaited new wind energy guidelines.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss regulation of airborne drones used for commercial delivery purposes.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss long-term voids in Cork city and the need to reform the voids return programme.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the transition to the new provider of Irish Coast Guard search and rescue aviation services.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the provision of modular classrooms for Saint Francis Special School, Portlaoise.

Deputy David Cullinane and Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the publication date for the report on the review of specialist cardiac services. To discuss a publication date for the report of the review into specialist cardiac services.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss issues with access to drinking water for people in areas of Kerry.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne and Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss tax relief or other incentives for gym membership as a health promotion measure. To discuss tax relief or other incentives for gym membership as a health promotion measure.

The matters raised by Deputies Barry Ward, Donna McGettigan, Danny Healy-Rae and Jennifer Whitmore have been selected for discussion.

## Online Safety

**Deputy Barry Ward:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht teacht isteach chun déileáil leis an gceist seo. At first glance, "catfish" might sound like a non-native marine animal but this is something that has been brought to the fore in the past year or more by people using their power in the media. I refer in particular to the two Johnnies and journalists like Ellen Coyne, who have highlighted the practice of catfishing. This is a process whereby somebody uses an image or false identity online to dupe another person into believing he or she is somebody else and uses that knowledge to act against that other person. Catfishing is essentially where a person dupes another person online into believing they are somebody else. In many instances, it has happened in the context of online dating and romantic contexts but there is also a wider issue in respect of fraud and things like that.

In Ireland alone, there has been a great deal of discussion of catfishing. Most people will be aware of the GAA catfish story. In this case, one particular person is estimated to have duped around 40 people online into believing she was somebody else entirely and that she was in a relationship with them even though they had never physically met. For people who are not online and who are not dealing with the online world, this might seem strange but the reality is that people are increasingly living online. They are conducting their business online and conducting relationships online before they ever meet in person. This is, therefore, an area that is ripe for abuse and misrepresentation by nefarious people.

This false online presence and duping of other people is now happening an awful lot. As I have said, it was also highlighted by journalist Ellen Coyne in the "Cruel Intentions: Catching the Catfish" podcast. It leads to the people who have been duped feeling foolish and like they have done something wrong. They feel like they have not been careful enough or that they have been stupid when, in actual fact, the level at which this happens is extremely sophisticated and detailed. Listening to Johnny B. and Johnny Smacks on "The 2 Johnnies Podcast", the extent of and detail involved in what they describe as having happened is extraordinary. Any person could be hoodwinked by it. This not only leads to that person feeling foolish and that they have been duped, giving them a fear of bringing the matter to the attention of the authorities, but it equally affects the person whose image has been stolen. It must be remembered that the images used to dupe people online are images of real people, although they have been misused in the context of the catfishing. Those people are also affected by this. On the "Cruel Intentions" podcast, I heard of a young woman whose image had been stolen. She is afraid that, when going into a local coffee shop, she will be approached by someone who thinks they are in a relationship with her because her image has been used online. It damages a whole range of people, even if they are not involved and have done nothing wrong.

We can all recognise that this is wrong and immoral. What is extraordinary is that it is not illegal. It is clear that catfishing is not against the law in Ireland. When it goes into the wider realm of fraud and people are defrauded out of money, an offence is certainly committed under the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2001. There have also been attempts in these Houses, particularly by my former colleague, the former Senator, Lisa Chambers, to bring forward legislation to outlaw this practice but, at the moment, it is not against the law. Notwithstanding the fact it is immoral and patently wrong and that it damages a whole cohort of people,

including both those whose images are stolen and those who are fooled online by stolen images, how can we expect to stop people from doing this and how can we expect anything to change if we do not make this illegal and introduce real consequences in the courts and in criminal justice legislation for people who do this?

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Jerry Buttimer):** I thank Deputy Ward for submitting this very important Topical Issue. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Justice, Deputy O'Callaghan. I commend Deputy Ward on his proactivity both here this morning and in the Seanad when he served there. I commend the former Senator, Lisa Chambers, and Deputy Ward on their work on this particular matter.

I acknowledge the important concerns raised by Deputy Ward regarding the dangers posed by online catfishing. He has rightly illustrated and outlined a number of prominent examples we have seen. The Internet has undoubtedly transformed our lives for the better, fostering global connections, enabling remote work and providing vital platforms for communication. This digital transformation has also introduced serious challenges, however, especially when it comes to online safety and personal security.

One of the fundamental risks of online interactions is anonymity. While anonymity can be a force for good in certain contexts, it can also facilitate harmful behaviour, including bullying, stalking, fraud and breaches of privacy. Catfishing exemplifies this darker side of online engagement. As Deputy Ward has said, it is where individuals create false identities to deceive others, often with devastating consequences. Deputy Ward is correct; it is about the damage, the immorality and the fear it creates. Victims of catfishing experience significant emotional distress, financial loss and, in some cases, reputational harm. These cases are not isolated to one victim alone. Those whose identities are stolen also suffer. As more relationships and interactions begin online, it is crucial we explore ways to protect individuals from this deceptive practice. We are talking about people here. I hope the Department will reflect on the points Deputy Ward made in his contribution.

The Government has already taken significant steps to enhance online safety through various regulatory measures. The EU Digital Services Act is a key framework ensuring online platforms take greater responsibility in preventing harmful activities and protecting users. Nationally, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act marked a turning point, shifting the burden from self-regulation to enforceable accountability. Coimisiún na Meán, the new media regulator, has recently adopted its online safety code, which mandates video-sharing platforms to curb harmful content and introduce stronger reporting mechanisms. We all share the view that some of those entities could do a lot more work in that area. In addition, our criminal justice framework has been strengthened. The Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 has broadened harassment laws to include impersonation and the unauthorised disclosure of private information. The Harassment and Harmful Communications Act, or Coco's Law, further criminalised abusive online behaviour while existing fraud legislation already penalises impersonation for financial gain. It is essential these laws are fully utilised and enforced. Education and awareness also play a vital role in ensuring Internet users, particularly young people, recognise the signs of deceptive behaviour and protect themselves accordingly.

This debate is an opportunity to reflect on any remaining gaps in our legal and regulatory framework. The Deputy highlighted a number of these, in particular the issue that catfishing is not against the law. It is important we all ensure our response remains robust and that victims

of online impersonation have the protections and recourse they deserve.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I welcome the acknowledgement of the seriousness of what I said. I welcome the fact the Minister of State and the Department acknowledge that catfishing is wrong. I also recognise that the Minister of State said it is not illegal. I was in these Houses when we passed Coco's Law, but Coco's Law does not stop this from happening. The various legislative instruments to which the Minister of State referred do not stop this from happening. At the end of the day, this is illegal. I welcome the fact he acknowledged that it can cause significant emotional distress, financial loss and, in some cases, reputational harm. These are all serious issues. The Minister of State is right to say this is an opportunity for us to reflect on this issue, but let us stop reflecting and actually do something. Let us pass laws that make this illegal.

The Minister of State referred to emotional damage and distress and financial loss. Arguably, financial loss is covered by provisions within the theft and fraud offences Act. I am less worried about that, but the emotional distress that is totally unaddressed by the law at present cannot be allowed to go unanswered. The reputational damage the Minister of State mentioned also cannot be allowed to go unanswered. There are arguably defamatory aspects to it, but let us put legislation in place that specifically states catfishing is not allowed. Let us define what it is in legislation and let us acknowledge the damage it does both to the people directly affected by it through being duped online and those whose images are falsely used to catfish. Let us acknowledge that harm. Let us stop reflecting and let us say this is illegal and, when somebody does this, there will be serious consequences for that person in our courts, including prison time and substantial fines. Perhaps most importantly, there will be a mechanism to stop it. At the moment, if I go to Twitter, Instagram, any of the online platforms or any of the Internet providers, I cannot get them to stop somebody using my image. Let us be honest, nobody wants to use my image, but we cannot stop images from being used illegally because we have not passed the requisite law. Let us pass a Bill. Let us make this illegal.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I reiterate that online catfishing is not a trivial issue. It is a very serious matter that has a real and lasting impact on the victim both emotionally and financially. The anonymity the Internet affords cannot be an excuse for deception and harm. I fully agree with the thrust of what the Deputy said. While we have strong legislative measures in place, we must continue to assess whether further steps are needed. I hope this debate will be a stepping stone and starting point. The enforcement of our existing laws is critical and public awareness must remain a priority. Education campaigns, guidance from regulators such as Coimisiún na Meán and vigilance from online platforms are all essential components of the broader strategy. At the same time, personal responsibility is key. Simple precautions, such as verifying online identities, being cautious with personal information and reporting suspicious behaviour can help mitigate risks. Nobody should feel unsafe or deceived when engaging online.

It is important we strike a balance between protecting legitimate anonymity and preventing the exploitation of others. The points made by the Deputy are ones we need to take cognisance of. As legislators, we have a duty to ensure victims of online deception have the protections they need, including that suite of measures the Deputy spoke about, and that those who engage in catfishing are held accountable for their actions. This discussion is an important step in ensuring our laws continue to evolve in response to the challenges of the digital age.

The Deputy is right. Catfishing cannot be allowed or condoned in any shape or form. The people affected are not anonymous. They are people we all know. They are victims and we

need to ensure they are protected. I thank the Deputy for bringing this matter to the House. I look forward to working with him and the Department of Justice in ensuring we can enhance whatever suite of measures we need and protect the people we need to. I thank the Deputy.

## Dental Services

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** I wish to discuss the ongoing decline in the dental scheme for medical card holders in County Clare. I have raised this issue time and again. The Irish Dental Association has also raised it and has made repeated calls for the scheme to be overhauled. The association states the scheme does not work either for dentists or patients and that a lot of lip service has been paid to it but nothing is happening.

In November 2021, as a county councillor in Clare, I tabled a motion calling for the then Minister for Health to engage with dentists in Clare to prevent a total collapse of the scheme and to ensure funding was available to boost public dentistry in the county in the coming years. At the time of this motion, there had been a 46% reduction in investment in the dental scheme between 2017 and 2021, according to the Irish Dental Association. At this time, we also saw a reduction in the number of dentists signed up to the dental scheme, resulting in only 16 dentists enrolled in Clare. We were in fear of a total collapse of the scheme.

The decline of the scheme is replicated throughout the State. The number of participating dentists has declined by 50% in the past decade. In June 2024, I submitted a parliamentary question to the Minster after several constituents contacted me to say their dentists were not offering the scheme anymore. I was shocked to find out that 12 dentists had signed up but only eight had submitted claims for reimbursement, which meant realistically we only had eight dentists. The constant crisis in UHL has also had a huge impact on dental patients. Some patients, such as children, require anaesthesia to have teeth extracted, but when UHL enacts its surge capacity, the day ward is filled with patients from accident and emergency and day procedures are cancelled. Of course, there is no dental general anaesthetic service in Ennis.

It is a near certainty that everyone in the House has constituents who are suffering due to the failure of previous Ministers to fix the dental scheme, which includes the Minister of State's constituents. People are being left in pain or, worse still, they have to watch their loved ones suffering. Dentists often detect eating disorders and certain types of cancers, so these could also be going undiagnosed. Tooth decay can have serious medical consequences if left untreated. In addition, people are only entitled to two fillings per year under the scheme, so if they have a problem with another tooth, it may have to be extracted when it could have been saved. This is causing a moral issue for dentists as they are about saving teeth.

There are nice words in the programme for Government, including that there will be new contracts, new recruits and lots of dentists, but no facts or figures. What meaningful, tangible steps will the Minister of State commit to now to address this serious issue and give some sense of reassurance to patients and their families?

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):** I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to address the issue of participation of dentists in the dental treatment services scheme. The scheme provides dental care, free of charge, to medical card holders aged 16 and over. Services are provided by private dentists and clinical dental technicians who hold a contract with the HSE to operate the scheme. Services available annu-

ally and on demand include an examination, 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, is available subject to the approval of the local HSE principal dental surgeon.

To support contractors to provide care under the scheme, an additional €10 million was made available in budget 2022 to increase the preventative care available and increase by 40% to 60% from May 2022 the fees paid to contractors for most treatment items. The HSE advises that while the total number of contractors on the scheme has been reduced from 1,046 as of the end of December 2022 to 813 as of the end of December 2024, the introduction of these measures has improved access to care for patients. In 2024, 227,691 additional treatments were provided nationally under the scheme, with more than 44,208 extra patients treated when compared with 2022. The Minister acknowledges, however, that access issues remain and that complete modernisation of care, the service model and, subsequently, contractual arrangements for adult medical card holders is required. I understand where the Deputy is coming from. There are huge challenges. I see the same in the area where I live.

The vision for this service reform is set out in the national oral health policy. Budget 2025 allocated €2 million for this year, increasing to €4 million in 2026, to continue the implementation of the national oral health policy. The programme for Government and the HSE's national service plan for 2025 both contain commitments to implementing the national oral health policy and reforming oral healthcare services for medical card holders. The plan for the first phase of policy implementation, up to the end of 2027, is being finalised by the Department of Health and the HSE, following targeted consultation in quarter 3 of last year. The plan includes reform of services for medical card holders as one of several priority actions. I understand it is a priority.

The policy also highlights the need for strategic workforce planning to ensure a sufficient number of appropriately trained oral healthcare professionals, including dentists, dental hygienists, dental nurses and other auxiliary grades. It is heartening to note we have more registered dentists in Ireland than ever before – 3,778 as of January 2025, which means an additional 129 registered dentists since February 2024. To increase this number further, the Minister supports the creation of additional capacity in higher education, including in oral healthcare. That is so important and I really feel it will make the change. Any investment must be considered by the relevant Department in the context of the ongoing national development plan review, given the significant capital costs involved in expansion.

Substantial modernisation of the service and contractual model, in tandem with increasing workforce capacity, will train and enable more dentists to take contracts to care for medical card holders.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** I welcome any news that will help to bring about an increase in the service. The key trends documentation for 2024 mentions that spending on health almost doubled between 2014 and 2023, and this is reflected in the enhanced availability of services throughout the country. Why, then, do we see only half the expected number of dentists participating in the scheme? The number is not reflected in the figures. If we increase the number of dentists in this scheme, it will have to be through contact and talks with the Irish Dental Association, which I do not see mentioned in the Minister of State's reply. I would like it to happen because the association has been calling this out for a long time.

The Minister of State referred to more money having been invested in 2024, but that is not reflected on the ground. It is not what I was hearing at any of the doors during the local and general election campaigns last year. Every single person we met who needed the services said they were not getting them.

I welcome the commitments. The Minister of State's ministerial predecessors were members of her party and her coalition partner's party, and their record is nothing short of disgraceful. Therefore, I hope that in her new role, the current Minister of State's record will be a better one for the affected people.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Deputy. In all our areas there have been major challenges. I work with families regularly, so I do know the challenges. I have listened to and taken on board the points the Deputy has made. I can assure her that addressing access to dental care, including for adult medical card holders, is a top priority for the Minister and the rest of the Government. A substantial additional investment in oral healthcare services has been made in recent years, but we need to address the issues that arise.

Fundamental reforms are also being progressed through the implementation of the national oral health policy. The policy sets out the vision for the future of oral healthcare services. While it will take several years to bring it to realisation, there will be early and continued emphasis on addressing the current issues.

The fundamental aspiration of the policy is that all Irish people will have their own so-called dental home, whereby they will build a lifelong relationship with a local dental practice or practices of their choosing for continuity of care. That is so important and I agree with it.

The policy has two goals: to provide the supports to enable every individual to achieve their personal best oral health and to improve access to dental care. These are so important. I am confident we can work on this, and we need to deliver on it. I will relay to the Minister my belief that we need to talk to representatives of the Irish Dental Association. That is important. I am not aware of whether meetings have taken place but I will definitely look into it and certainly bring the matter back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I thank the Deputy for raising this very important Topical Issue.

## Water Supply

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to have the opportunity to raise the very serious plight of people in Knight's Mountain, Knocknagashel and Lyracrumpane, which are beside one another. They have very little water. In fact, their wells are now obsolete because the water is undrinkable. When you pour the water out of them, it is like a cup of coffee. It has gone brown and they just cannot drink it anymore. There are up to 18 houses involved. The cost of the group extension is too prohibitive. In this instance, where the supply line is 4.8 km away, the cost of the overall scheme would be €720,000. This price was given two years ago, so it would be more expensive now. I understand there are up to 18 houses is involved. Each would have to contribute somewhere between €38,000 or €39,000 and €45,000, which is totally prohibitive.

There are two more affected places in Gneevgullia, namely from Knocknaseed to Banard and from Coom over to Banard, where five and seven affected houses, respectively, cannot get

a connection because the cost of the group scheme is too prohibitive.

There are also high areas up in Castleisland where the pressure goes down in the summertime, making water scarce. These include Dooneen, Crag, Churchtown and Glounsharoon. These people suffer from very low water pressure every year when water gets scarce later in the summer. All they are asking for is a mile of an extension to where there is an adequate supply coming from the Brosna side. For years, they have been asking for this but they have been left behind.

Will the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, consider very seriously doing something for these people? Water is a basic human right. We can remember when houses were without water for four, five or six days a few weeks ago, which was terrible, but can you imagine being without water all day every day, week after week? The people at Knight's Mountain tried to get the group scheme going in 2022 and the price they got at the time was €720,000. Even after the grant, they would have to pay up to €45,000 per house. That is not on at all. We must help the people. Kerry County Council is the local authority that administers the group water schemes. This has to be done to Irish Water's standards, which require top-standard work. That is insisted upon. The cost is so prohibitive that the Government will have to do something, perhaps helping the people to lay the main themselves. These roads are very quiet and those concerned could work along the sides of the roads themselves. The Government should please do something to help these people to get going and ensure they have water.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan):** I thank Deputy Healy-Rae for raising these two important matters, which we will try to address today.

First, I will outline some of the schemes that are available. I appreciate the Deputy has pointed out what the cost might be per household, but it might be helpful to outline what is available. There are a number of grants available, through the local authorities, under the Department's rural water programme to support householders in carrying out improvement works to their private water supplies. The amount of grant funding available to households is as follows. There is 85% of the approved costs for a new well, subject to a maximum grant of €5,000, and the Deputy outlined that there are issues with wells in this area in terms of the water quality that is provided. There is 85% of the approved costs for well rehabilitation works, subject to a maximum grant of €3,000. That is if a grant is well in place already. Then there is 100% of the approved costs for works that are necessary to treat the water to meet the water quality standards set out in the drinking water regulations, subject to a maximum grant of €1,000.

There are also nine individual funding measures under the most recent cycle of the multi-annual water programme, which covers the period 2024-26. Each funding measure is directed at a specific activity - for example, source protection, water treatment, network improvements, etc. Two measures are focused on the provision of safe and secure piped water supply to those households currently without such a supply where it is technically and economically viable to do so. Under the programme, these measures are measure A5 and measure A7.

Measure A5 provides funding support for extensions to existing group water schemes and the development of new stand-alone group water schemes. The measure supports the continued expansion of piped water supplies to those parts of the rural population that cannot be served by public water supplies. The grant funding available is 85% of the cost of necessary and approved works, subject to a maximum of €15,000 per household.

Measure A7 provides funding for community water connections. This measure too supports the continued expansion of piped water supplies to those parts of the rural population reliant on private wells that can be served by the public Uisce Éireann water supplies. The funding provided under this measure enables Uisce Éireann to take in charge a network constructed to an appropriate standard. The amount of grant funding available is 85% of the cost of necessary and approved works subject, again, to a maximum of €15,000 per house connected.

My Department is committed to delivering improvements to water services in areas of rural Ireland where there are no public services. In respect of the public water supply aspect raised by the Deputy, Uisce Éireann has confirmed that Lyracrumpane is a scheme that it is currently upgrading. However, Uisce Éireann outlined that it has not received any notifications of any supply issues in this area. In addition, Uisce Éireann confirmed that Knight's Mountain, Knockariddera, is not currently part of any scheme and there are no plans in place to extend to this area. Both Gneevgullia and Castleisland are part of the central regional Lough Guitane supply, where there is ample capacity. Some of Uisce Éireann's team are currently working on replacing 3 km of water mains from the reservoir in Castleisland to the town as part of its mains rehabilitation programme. However, Uisce Éireann is not aware of any pressure issues on the Castleisland supply.

That may contradict some of what the Deputy says about the issues people are facing in the regions of Kerry he talks about in terms of supply issues and the cost per house. I agree with what he said in his opening statements: basic running water should be a right of any human being and any household. I will absolutely undertake to take back the issues he has raised today. Clearly, Uisce Éireann says that it has no reports of people raising issues in that area, so I urge anyone in the area to contact Uisce Éireann - there is a helpline they can contact - and report any underlying issues they have. We have in our Department a section that deals directly with Uisce Éireann. I will undertake to raise the issues the Deputy has raised here and ensure that he gets an adequate and proper response, especially if he is saying that households will have to fork out in the region of €45,000. That cannot happen. That is not acceptable.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I hear the Minister of State say that Uisce Éireann has not heard anything and knows nothing about this. I did mention to him that it is Kerry County Council that has the responsibility in the first place for group water schemes and to administer those schemes. I am kind of amazed that Kerry County Council has not liaised with Uisce Éireann in this case, but the facts are as I have outlined to the Minister of State very clearly. These people, especially those in Lyracrumpane, applied back in 2022 and they failed to get it going. The Minister of State said there is a grant of up to €15,000, but he never said there is a minimum requirement of having 25 houses. What about the seven, five and 18 houses I have mentioned? There are several others like them. The smaller number must be considered as well, and 18 is almost there in my book, but we cannot have that everywhere.

I am amazed also that Irish Water is not aware of the pressure problems up in the higher areas of Castleisland. I know it is doing works, but that is going a different way. It is going into the town, where there was a massive amount of breaks from Ballymacadam and down through the Main Street in Castleisland. That is dealing with a different issue, but the areas up in Crag have no drop of water for half the summer every year. I am asking the Department to go back and get Kerry County Council to liaise with Irish Water if that makes a difference. However, it is Kerry County Council that is responsible for the group water scheme and its provision and to make it more friendly for the people who need water to do something. This minimum of 26 houses cannot be entertained when five or seven houses and 18 houses do not have any water

and where their wells went wrong. These people have done everything possible. They have drilled wells in different places and so on and they do not have drinking water at present. I am asking the Minister of State to do something about this in this Government's time.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I completely appreciate where Deputy Healy-Rae is coming from on this. I reiterate that under the recent review of the rural water programme, the amount per household was increased from €9,000 to €15,000, but I accept that there has to be some degree of flexibility, especially when a smaller number of houses are impacted. That is something that I will relay back to the Department. This is not just an issue in Kerry. There are areas in my area as well, in west Cork, where we have seen pressure issues in particular where there is break after break and we see that Uisce Éireann will replace the next section and then it just moves the problem down the line. What is needed in many of these situations is a substantial overhaul of the water supply. I can tell the Deputy - and this is serious; I am not making light of it - that people in certain parts of Lissavard, in particular, and Rathbarry were happy to see the Healy-Rae vans on site a number of years ago when they were in replacing the pipe network in and around there. The problem was solved and it was fantastic. However, these black spots exist right around west Cork and, obviously, in Kerry. There has to be a programme of replacing these pipes in order that we sort out the water pressure issue. I will take back the Deputy's point about the group water schemes and the fact that where there are smaller groups of houses they seem to be left out of these group water scheme programmes. However, €15,000 is a significant amount per household, but, obviously, if it is an issue where they do not have-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You would need €45,000. It is no good.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** If it is an issue where the necessity is for 25 houses and some areas are being left out, that is something I will undertake to take back to the Department and see if it can be investigated and see if there can be some level of flexibility in these areas of Kerry. I know how frustrating it can be not to have a decent, adequate water supply. Urban areas never have any issue with water supply. I will take the comments back, and I thank the Deputy for raising this again.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank the Minister of State. I do appreciate that he will see after west Cork, but I am asking him now, seeing as he is in the position, to see after Knocknagashel, Knight's Mountain and other places in Gneevgullia, and Crag, in Castleisland. I am depending on him to see after those places now for me.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** It was the Healy-Raes who saw after us in the end.

## Bus Services

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I congratulate the Minister of State on his new role and wish him the best in it. Public transport is a key challenge facing the country, but there is a lot of potential there to provide a service that will benefit so many communities across the country, and it is a vital service that we need to invest in and make sure operates properly. Key to any really good, successful public service is reliability. If it is not reliable, it completely undermines the whole system. People and the public have to have trust that a bus will show up when it says it will show up. We have seen the BusConnects programme being rolled out across Dublin and, in particular, I will talk about north Wicklow over recent weeks. This programme has been talked about and promised for a long time. There were quite a number of false starts with it but

it was eventually rolled out a number of weeks ago. Unfortunately, when it was rolled out, the provider was not ready for it. GoAhead Ireland was contracted to provide a service under the BusConnects programme, and it was clear that it did not have enough staff or enough capacity to actually roll this programme out. We had an incredible situation where three, four or five buses in a row were being cancelled on particular routes and there were drivers who did not know where they were meant to be going. People were really frustrated. College kids could not get to college and people were missing interviews. It caused enormous difficulties for people when it should have been a positive addition to the locality. This should have been a positive news story but because Go-Ahead Ireland was not prepared, it completely undermined things and still has not got fully on top of it. I had a meeting with the company. Apparently it did not have enough mechanics, which it is now recruiting. There is a really serious question here about why Go-Ahead Ireland got this service. How was it contracted to provide this service when it is not able to fulfil the most basis terms of service, namely, that a bus shows up when it is timetabled to do so? That is something I would like the Minister of State to examine in his role. If we contract out, those contractors are being paid to do a job and they must be able to do that job. This impacts everybody, but what has been raised with me is the huge problems that are caused for people with disabilities when their buses do not show up.

As I said, Go-Ahead Ireland has been contracted to provide this service. I understand a new tender has gone out and I think the company is also to get the new contract. Why is that and how is the Government going to be sure the company is going to be able to fulfil that? Dublin Bus provided the service on many of these routes previously. It was in a much better position to provide this service and it is problematic when we see this privatisation, especially when the private operators are not able to provide the service. I want to ask the Minister of State about this because I have been told a number of other routes are going to be privatised. They are going to be taken from Dublin Bus and given to other operators. One of those routes is in west Wicklow in my constituency: the 65 that goes from Ballymore Eustace through Blessington into Dublin. Can the Minister of State confirm that the 65 route is going to be privatised and can he explain why when we see so many failures with the current privatisation of the system?

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising this very important matter. I concur completely that the biggest need is for bus services to be reliable and on time. We share the belief that should not just be an aspiration but a reality for the consumer, the travelling public. I thank the Deputy and appreciate the issues she has outlined in her contribution. I commit to bringing the issues she has raised back to the Department. I have not got all the answers for her this morning as I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

I clarify at the beginning that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, but neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and works with the public transport operators that deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. That said, I reassure the Deputy that, as outlined in the programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future, the Government is strongly committed to enhancing transportation networks and infrastructure development and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, under budget 2025 the Department of Transport secured €658.442 million of funding for PSO and TFI Local Link services. This represents an increase from €613.813 million in 2024. This package includes funding for the continuation of the various fare initiatives, such as the young adult card and the 90-minute fare until the end

of 2025. Funding has also been provided to extend free child fares on PSO services to include those aged five to eight years old and to support the roll-out of new and enhanced bus and rail services under programmes such as BusConnects and Connecting Ireland.

The Deputy is right when she says that we can have all those wonderful measures but if the service is not reliable and there is an issue with buses not being on time or not turning up, all of that counts for nothing. I concur as a Member who lives in an urban constituency and understands the importance of the issues the Deputy is speaking of. The Deputy is right and I will bring that back this afternoon.

BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system to provide better bus services across our cities. It is the largest investment in the bus system in the history of the State and is managed by the NTA. The aim of the network is to improve the existing Transport for Ireland system through enhanced services with high-frequency spines and new orbital and radial routes. Phase 6a involves the E-spine of the Bus Connects network redesign project. It was launched on 26 January 2025 and includes the introduction of two 24-hour spines - routes E1 and E2 - which serve areas including Bray, the city centre, Ballymun and Santry. It also provides new local and Xpress routes including L1, L2, L3, L12, L14, L15, L26, L27, X1 and X2 serving Greystones, Newcastle, Kilternan, Blackrock and more. The Bray to city centre core bus corridor will support integrated sustainable transport usage through infrastructure improvements for active travel and the provision of enhanced bus priority measures for all services that will use the corridor. The aim of these works is to provide improved bus, cycling and walking infrastructure on this key access corridor in the Dublin region, which will enable and deliver efficient, safe and integrated sustainable transport movement along the corridor. The core bus corridor scheme is a key measure that delivers on commitments within the National Development Plan 2021-2030, the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022-2042, the Climate Action Plan and the National Planning Framework 2040.

I understand the Department of Transport is engaging with the NTA regarding recent issues concerning particular bus services that are, as outlined by Deputy Whitmore, operated by Go-Ahead Ireland across some of its greater Dublin area routes. I am advised these issues are linked to fleet reliability issues across its network of services in Dublin due to a shortfall of mechanics. As the Deputy rightly said, the company has advertised for this role. This has had a knock-on impact on the routes launched in the Bray and Greystones area on 26 January as part of phase 6a of the BusConnects network redesign programme. The NTA will continue to monitor the situation closely. It is receiving daily reports from Go-Ahead Ireland on service availability by route. I have been advised the latest reports indicate a significant improvement in the situation. I will be interested to hear the Deputy's reply on that. I reassure her that all of us - the Department of Transport, the NTA and the public transport operators - must work to ensure the customer has a reliable service, as she has outlined, and the resources will meet passenger demand. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I thank the Minister of State. On reliability and improvements, there have been some improvements, but when we are still missing services that is going to hugely impact on the people who require that particular bus. For example, the bus from Newcastle has been frequently dropped. If there are improvements in say, the L3 in Delgany, that is not going to make any difference to the person in Newcastle who needs to get to work. It cannot be the case that there are slight improvements. We must see reliability across the whole system. Every bus that is due must turn up on time when it is meant to turn up and where it is meant to turn up.

I raise also the Xpress services. In Greystones we had the 84X Xpress service. It was a very good service that got people from Greystones into town in good time. It was run by Dublin Bus and was reliable. Under the BusConnects programme this is now being covered by the X1 and X2. There are a couple of problems with this. It now takes perhaps half an hour longer for the Xpress service to get to where it needs to go because of the changes, but as well as that the NTA has dropped a number of daytime services so it is now only a rush-hour service. My message to the Minister of State is this: if it is not broken, please do not fix it. The 84X was an excellent service that everyone appreciated. The service should have been expanded rather than being reduced and being made take longer. It is incredible that under the "transformative" BusConnects programme, as the Minister of State called it in his reply, transformation means Xpress services are taking 20 to 30 minutes longer than they did. That makes no sense. I ask the Minister of State whether more X1 and X2 services can be provided during the day to equate to what people had prior to the BusConnects roll-out and whether the 84X route can be brought back because it worked very well, unlike this expanded route.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Deputy Whitmore again for her contribution and for bringing the matter to the House. I assure her I fully recognise that transport connectivity is hugely important for the people who live, work and study in the areas she has mentioned and across urban and rural areas. It is vital and key to revitalising our villages, towns and urban centres.

I accept the challenges we have heard this morning and I will work with the Deputy to bring the issues she has raised back to the Department. I fully agree with the Deputy that reliability is critical. That is the end of the discussion; it has to be.

*10 o'clock*

By expanding the public transport network and increasing service levels, as outlined in policies like Connecting Ireland and BusConnects, and as committed to in the programme for Government, the Government will aim to achieve with the providers more balanced regional development and greater connectivity for all public transport users. I can assure Deputy Whitmore that I will take the points she has made with regard to the 84X, X1 and X2 bus services and bring them back to the Department, which I hope will liaise with the providers and the NTA.

BusConnects has already achieved significant success in transforming Dublin's public transport network. In the latest progress report, published in the summer, comparisons were made between network redesign phases 1 to 5a before launch, from quarter 4 of 2019, and after launch, from 2023. The programme has led to a substantial increase in service levels. Customer satisfaction research into phases 1 to 4 of the network redesign project shows an 80% level of user satisfaction. There is, however, a piece that we need to get right. I concur with Deputy Whitmore in that regard. I can reassure her that the NTA and the Department of Transport will continue to work closely with the operators to enhance the punctuality and reliability of public transport services, both on existing routes and in the new services which continue to be rolled out.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been advised that the NTA is liaising and working closely with Go-Ahead Ireland to improve service delivery on the impacted routes and that improvements have already taken place. Further, through initiatives such as the implementation of new ticketing technologies, we are taking steps to enhance capacity and improve the overall transport experience for members. On behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, I again thank Deputy Whitmore for raising these matters this morning. I assure her that I will bring her concerns back. It is important that we listen, hear and engage.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Bogfaidh muid ar aghaidh go dtí tairiscint maidir leis an ghéarchéim tithíochta in ainm na nDaonlathaithe Sóisialta. Is é an chéad duine atá ar an liosta agam anseo ná an Teachta Rory Hearne.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and former Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, repeatedly promised to deliver 40,000 homes last year but spectacularly failed, with just 30,330 homes delivered;

- housing delivery is not just slowing down, it is reducing, with a drop in housing delivery of nearly 7 per cent between 2024 and 2023;

- members of the Government have briefed the media that without a dramatic reset of housing policy, there is virtually no chance of reaching their own housing targets;

- the Taoiseach has stated this reset will involve "very politically difficult decisions" and said the Government needs to "pivot more strongly to the private sector";

- in an interview on RTÉ radio on 9th February, 2025, the Taoiseach signalled the imminent end of Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs), saying the Government could replace them at the end of this year;

- within 24 hours of these remarks being made, the share price of the State's largest private landlord, Irish Residential Real Estate Investment Trust (IRES REIT), soared to its highest level in eight months;

- rents are already at record highs, having more than doubled in a decade, and increased by 34 per cent in the lifetime of the last Government; and

- 83 per cent of private tenancies in the country are in RPZs;

acknowledges that:

- a report published last year by the Central Bank of Ireland entitled "Institutional Investment and Residential Rental Market Dynamics", found that 78 per cent of the homes owned by investment funds were bought as existing properties;

- the same report found that institutional landlords increase monthly rents by about 4.1 per cent more than other landlords;

- since 2021, when the previous Government introduced a 10 per cent stamp duty levy on the bulk purchase of homes, investors have bulk bought half a billion euros worth of residential property; and

- in Budget 2025, the Government increased the stamp duty levy, which does not apply to apartments, from 10 per cent to 15 per cent;

further notes that:

- in 2020, then Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe TD, said investment funds were engaging in "aggressive behaviour to avoid tax" and said the Revenue Commissioners were investigating and compiling a report;

- the report from the Revenue Commissioners was never published, with the Finance Minister claiming in the Dáil on 13th February, 2025, that "tax compliance issues" had been dealt with via legislation;

- however, since 2020, investment funds controlling more than €28 billion worth of Irish property have reduced their tax payments by half, from €74 million to €32 million;

- the proportion of new housing available for sale has nearly halved in the last six years;

- in Dublin city in 2023, 94 per cent of all new housing was apartments, 98 per cent of which was solely available to rent; and

- first time buyers bought just 75 new homes in Dublin City in that year; and

calls on Government to:

- close loopholes which allow investment funds aggressively avoid tax;

- increase the stamp duty levy on the bulk purchase of homes to 100 per cent, and extend it to apartments;

- instead of introducing further tax breaks for developers and vulture funds, access European Union streams of finance like InvestEU and the European Regional Development Fund;

- introduce a savings scheme like the French Livret A model, to leverage some of the €160 billion in Irish household savings, to invest in affordable housing;

- provide increased and early-stage finance to approved housing bodies and local authorities, so they can ramp up the delivery of genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy; and

- retain RPZs, until there is an alternate system ready to put in place which can protect renters.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. We are bringing forward this motion today because the housing crisis is a catastrophe and an emergency. The Government's plans are failing disastrously and we need a new approach. We are calling on the Government to be brave and ambitious and to take new emergency measures that can actually deliver affordable homes on the scale needed to solve the housing crisis, which is now corroding the very fabric and social cohesion of Irish society.

While I thank the one Member of the Government who is here, it is deeply frustrating that the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, is not here to engage with the Opposition and answer questions. It is an insult to the people of Ireland that the Minister for housing does not attend

the Dáil for a debate on the issue for which he is directly responsible. The Government has been asking us to bring forward solutions and then when we do, the Minister responsible does not bother to turn up. Not being here to discuss the most pressing issue facing this country indicates a lack of openness to new ideas and a lack of seriousness.

Today, there are half a million adults stuck living in their childhood box rooms, infantilised and lacking hope of starting their own independent lives. Almost 1 million people are living in the private rental sector. They are struggling with rents and the fear of eviction, which has been worsened by the Government's statements that rent caps could be removed at the end of this year. Some 14,864 people are living a daily trauma of homelessness, of whom 4,510 are children who are suffering adverse childhood experiences with lifelong impacts from growing up in homelessness. There are also tens of thousands of people not counted, measured or considered by our State who are stuck in hidden homelessness. The Government's housing policies are causing a mental health crisis. We do not have enough public health nurses to provide developmental checks and the very construction workers we need are emigrating because they do not see a future in this country where they can have a home of their own.

I will give a few examples of the lived reality of this social catastrophe. A mother living in emergency accommodation in my constituency became homeless just before her baby was born. The baby is now a toddler. That baby was born into emergency homeless accommodation, which is a traumatising situation for her and her young son. What have we become as a country when we have normalised children being born into homelessness? I was contacted by a housing association in rural Ireland and told of a young couple, a secondary school teacher and a construction worker, who are living in a damp mobile home. They do not qualify for social housing and cannot afford to rent a place. A teacher in her early 30s shared her housing situation with me. She is still living at home after nearly seven years. She and her boyfriend were saving to buy for years but their relationship of more than ten years has broken down. She said that her chances of buying now as a single person are shattered from little to nothing. The housing crisis has had a truly devastating and harmful impact on her. It has deprived her of the opportunity of independence for years on end, which has made her depressed and constantly anxious about the future. She feels tired at the end of each day as they are understaffed and lonely at the weekend because her friends have migrated. It is soul-destroying for her to spend all of her 20s with her parents while working hard and paying tax to a Government which does not spend her money on affordable housing.

Beyond that, the Government's housing crisis is having profound social implications. Research published last week showed that 69% of 25- to 34-year-olds say the cost of owning a home is causing them to delay getting married or having children. It is utterly heartbreaking to hear these stories. When will we say that this is enough?

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael housing policy is dragging us back to the 19th century. The supposed parties of home ownership have brought about the largest collapse in home ownership levels among young people since the foundation of the State. They are turning our younger generations into long-term tenants of the big landlords once more, only this time it is the US, German and Irish wealthy funds. They have become the parties of the large landlords. Despite the stamp duty measures implemented, institutional investors have continued to buy up existing properties. The build-to-rent apartment developments were never included within the restrictions. Funds have had free reign to snap up tens of thousands of apartments being built across Dublin. In 2023, institutional funds bought 6,203 newly completed apartments, while ordinary home buyers bought just 846. The Government claims that rents rising further will incentivise

a supply of expensive rental properties that will then lead at some point in the future to rents falling. Where is the evidence that an increase in supply of institutional investor funds build-to-rent housing leads to a fall in rents? A report of the Central Bank found that institutional landlords increase monthly rents 4.1% more than other landlords.

The Government's housing plans were sold to the electorate on the basis of a misleading claim that its policies were working. We hear today that it is saying to a generation stuck at home to try a cabin out the back. The Government is giving investor funds tax breaks and higher rents and sheds out the back for our locked-out generation. This is "let them eat cake" stuff, only for the Government it is "let them live in sheds". The Government has spent the past ten years incentivising the private market and investor funds through tax breaks, developer levy waivers and help-to-buy schemes, but they are not working. We need a new direction.

The Social Democrats is bringing this motion today because we have outlined serious solutions that could solve this housing crisis. First, we are calling on the Government to set up a State savings scheme that would leverage the €160 billion that is in private bank accounts to enable private investment, which is what it would be, in social and affordable housing, just like in France with the *Livret A* scheme. We are saying we do not have enough funds to finance housing, but that is €160 billion which could be leveraged.

We are also calling on the Government to allocate a significant proportion of the budget surplus this year, which will be approximately €9 billion, into directly delivering affordable housing via housing bodies and local authorities. Providing early-stage finance for housing bodies and local authorities means they can ramp up the delivery of genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy, rather than the affordable housing we have seen come out today in O'Devaney Gardens on public land where €400,000 for a two-bedroom apartment is to be considered an affordable home. On what planet is the Government living for that to be considered affordable? We have put forward a proposal for State funding of €2.3 billion per annum that would deliver an additional 10,000 affordable purchase and 5,000 cost-rental homes on top of current targets. Finally, we call on the Government to retain the rent pressure zones until there is an alternative system in place that can protect renters. The Government should make a clear statement that rent pressure zone caps will not be lifted at the end of this year, given that rents are already unaffordable for renters and renters are experiencing huge anxiety at the suggestion that the rent caps could be ended this year.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** When will the penny finally drop? When will the Government get that its approach to the housing crisis not only means it is incapable of solving it, but is making it worse for tens of thousands of people across this country.

The numbers tell a grim story. A total of 15,000 people are living in homeless accommodation and 4,500 children are living in single rooms in bed and breakfast accommodation. These children are not just statistics. They are the faces of a growing crisis. In the past year alone, the number of children experiencing homelessness has increased by 12%. Child homelessness has been normalised by the Government. Let me be very clear. This is not normal. There is nothing normal about child homelessness. What could be normal about children who experience developmental delays because they are forced to live in overcrowded, cramped conditions? What is normal about children who cannot learn to crawl or walk properly because there simply is not enough space for them to do so? What is normal about children who cannot invite their friends over to play, not because they do not want to but because they do not have the space or are ashamed of their living conditions?

When the Minister of State sits down to devise housing policy, who comes to mind? Who does the Government think of? Is it the people struggling to make ends meet, who pay extortionate rents and live in constant fear of eviction? Is it the 60% of young couples delaying having children because they simply do not have the space or stability to raise a family because they cannot find or afford accommodation? Is it the 440,000 young adults who are still living with their parents, unable to afford their own homes? Or is it the young people the Minister of State's Government, through policy failures, are driving out of this country? In the past year alone, 69,000 people have left Ireland to go overseas for a better future. This is not because they cannot find jobs here - they have jobs - but because they cannot afford or find anywhere to live. When the Minister of State sits down to devise his housing plans, who does he think about? Who does he prioritise? Right now, it does not seem to be the vulnerable families and young people struggling to get by.

Let us take a step back and look at who is benefiting from this housing crisis. Where and what is the bigger picture here? It is clear it is the investment funds. They are raking in the profits while ordinary people are left behind. The Government allows these funds to avoid paying taxes and to bulk purchase homes that should be available for families to buy. The Government allows them to push up rents and monopolise the rental sector and provides them with tax break after tax break. Its solutions to the housing crisis always revert to type - subsidise the big players.

The housing crisis is not just an economic one, it is a moral one. It is a failure of leadership and a failure to protect those who need it most. The Government has failed to deliver real solutions and, until it realises that, the number of homeless children, families struggling to make ends meet and young people forced to leave this country will continue to rise. International investment funds, under the Minister of State's watch, will continue to find ways to drain the Irish coffers with the blessing of the Government. It is time for the Government to wake up, focus on real solutions and end this crisis that has gone on far too long and affected far too many of our people.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Almost every single week, I have listened to the Taoiseach responding in a very tedious manner to legitimate questions from the Opposition, including ourselves in the Social Democrats. He asks where our solutions are and what we would do differently. I have a simple question now. Where is the housing Minister? It is becoming farcical at this point. Parliamentary debate means that we present in our time, which does not come for us regularly - it is about six opportunities a year - and we use it to discuss housing. We bring forward the solutions but this Government, which is now taking a hostile approach to parliamentary function and debate, decides the Minister will not be available and simply will not answer questions. We used to have ghost estates and now we have ghost Ministers.

Regardless of that, today we are once again bringing forward solutions, as we did throughout the last term and will continue to do through this term. This motion contains real practical measures that can be implemented now. These are measures to make home ownership more achievable, rebalance the housing market in favour of people rather than investors and ensure that rent does not swallow the entirety of a person's income. These are alternatives to the reality facing people today. What does the Government do? It will not only vote against it, it will not even debate it, but the Taoiseach will come into the Chamber later today and say we need to have a discussion on housing. The hypocrisy of it stinks. He will say he wants home ownership to be within reach, yet the Government will vote against motion after motion seeking to limit the bulk-buying of homes by investment funds. The Government will say it wants to stabilise

the rental market yet it will vote against a motion that aims to strengthen protection for renters and curb excessive rent hikes, as is the norm in most European countries.

The Government says it wants affordability yet it continues to give tax breaks to institutional investors that do not build homes for ordinary families but instead hoard housing as an asset class. The same Government that says the Opposition has no idea will reject every opportunity to work constructively on solutions. The truth is that this is not because these proposals will not work; it is because they are politically inconvenient for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the class they represent. To adopt these policies would be to admit their approach to housing has failed and that their reliance on the private market to solve this crisis has not delivered. The Government's policies have locked an entire generation out of home ownership and forced people into precarious renting well into their 40s. Its policies have made housing the number one reason young people are once again leaving our country. The Government cannot face up to that failure, so we get platitudes. The Government resorts to excuses. It says now is not the time and that these measures would spook investors. It says it has a plan but it can never quite explain why it is not working. Most tedious of all, the Government will say parties such as the Social Democrats had the opportunity to go into government. Every single day, it proves why we were right to walk away from that opportunity, when this is the reality facing this country as a result of its continued and unwavering approach to failure. A Government that claps itself on the back for record housing supply is still failing to meet demand. The Government tells people they should be grateful for small improvements, as if stabilising a crisis of catastrophic levels is something to celebrate.

There is nothing in this motion that is radical or unreasonable. It is the bare minimum that a functioning and serious Government should already be implementing. Housing is not an abstract economic concept; it is the foundation of people's lives. It determines whether they can build a future, put down roots and plan for their families. This Government does not see housing that way, however. It sees it as an investment opportunity first and a human right second. When it sees a crisis, it reverts back to tax breaks. The Government will vote down this motion today, not because it is unworkable but because it is unwilling. It is unwilling to change, to improve or to be better for the collective rather than just for those in whose interests it seeks to legislate.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I wish to raise two points on the issue of housing - the housing disaster - and how it affects the education system. First, students who wish to attend third level courses in institutions of their choice are curtailed because affordable student accommodation is not possible. For the ordinary student, it is unaffordable. Therefore, they may choose a course that is not their top priority in order to allow them to commute because they need to live at home as they cannot afford to rent. They might decide not to go to third level education because they cannot afford to study and need to work to contribute to the family income because the cost of living is so high in this country.

In my own constituency of Dublin South-Central, particularly in Dublin 8, there has been a swell of student accommodation built in recent years. The area is very close to the city centre and has easy access to colleges and universities. It should be fantastic for students to live there, but the cost of this student accommodation is far beyond what an ordinary student can afford. Rents are approximately €1,250 per month for a one-bedroom student room with a shared kitchen. For a self-funded student this is completely unaffordable. Student accommodation is vitally important for students in our economy. It must be appropriate and affordable. Only today, I read about the international students who have been asked for sex for rent. That is an

absolute horror and disgrace.

The second problem we have, particularly in urban areas, is the retention of education professionals due to high rents and unaffordability. Housing costs in Ireland are already among the highest in Europe. Rents have doubled in a decade and there is double-digit house price inflation. Newly qualified teaching staff, SNAs and other educational staff cannot afford to pay ridiculously high rents and certainly cannot afford to buy their own homes. They are locked out of the market yet are expected to turn up every day to teach, support and help our children and young people in schools and education services. In October, half of primary schools in the commuter belt, as it is called, could not find teachers to fill vacant positions. An INTO survey in the autumn found that these shortages in teaching staff have a profound impact on the quality of education in many schools. Schools are having to resort to unqualified teaching staff because they cannot afford to live here. I spoke in this House yesterday about the lack of school places for children with special needs. These vulnerable children are being failed by this country. Housing has a significant role to play in that failure.

The motion we are proposing has a vision and a pathway to ensure we start to get out of the housing disaster that is destroying this country on so many levels. I am speaking about it from the lens of the education system but there is no element of life that it does not affect.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy):** I move amendment No. 1:

> To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:
>
> "acknowledges that:
>
> — Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland, sets out an ambitious multi-annual programme that seeks to deliver more than 300,000 new homes between 2022 and 2030;
>
> — since Housing for All was published in September 2021, almost 120,000 homes have been added to the National Housing Stock, with delivery of 92,500 new homes in the three years from 2022 to 2024, representing a considerable 49 per cent increase on the quantum delivered in the previous three-year period;
>
> — while the policy aim is to reach, if not exceed, the target in each successive year, the primary goal is to maintain an upward trajectory in supply and in line with or ahead of the overall target over the longer-term;
>
> — delivery of affordable housing supports will significantly exceed 2023 outturn, while the supply of new build social homes continues to be at a level higher than it has been for many years;
>
> — the development finance required to deliver 50,000 homes per year is in the region of €20 billion annually, and capital is needed from a range of sources to ensure the provision of private, social, and affordable homes; and
>
> — the Housing for All Action Plan Update, published in November 2022, included a commitment to 'Review the operation of the private rental sector and report on policy considerations', and the housing Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) have played a key role in protecting renters during a period of historic inflation, and that is why they are remaining

in place during the review;

further notes that:

— the Irish Real Estate Fund (IREF) legislation was introduced in 2016, to address concerns regarding the use of collective investment vehicles by non-residents to invest in Irish property;

— on 22nd October, 2024, following Government approval, the then Minister for Finance, Jack Chambers TD, published the Funds Sector 2030: A Framework for Open, Resilient & Developing Markets', a wide-ranging review of the funds and asset management sector, and this review fulfilled a recommendation of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare 2022 report, which called for 'an examination of the regimes for Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) the IREFs and their role in the property sector, including how they support housing policy objectives';

— European Union funding streams are already accessed in the context of housing delivery in Ireland, and in this regard, European multilateral banks, such as the European Investment Bank Group, and the Council of Europe Development Bank have already played a role in delivering affordable and social homes in Ireland, and provided financing to bodies such as the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) and the Housing Finance Agency (HFA);

— under the term of the last Government, a number of measures were taken to restrict the bulk buying of homes by institutional investors, such as:

— a higher rate of Stamp Duty on the acquisition of houses situated in the State, where a person acquires at least 10 such houses during any 12-month period, was implemented in October 2024, and this rate was increased to 15 per cent from 2nd October, 2024;

— the Section 28 Guidelines for Planning Authorities 'Regulation of Commercial Institutional Investment in Housing', issued in May 2021, aimed to prevent multiple housing and duplex units being sold to a single buyer, providing an 'owner-occupier' guarantee, by ensuring that new 'own-door' houses and duplex units in lower-density housing developments can no longer be bulk-purchased by institutional investors in a manner that causes the displacement of individual purchasers or social and affordable housing, including cost-rental, and initial estimates for this period indicate that these Section 28 guidelines have continued to be impactful and have led to a further increase in home ownership through the use of planning conditions; and

— from May 2021 to November 2024, a combined total of 55,684 residential units were estimated to have received planning permission with conditions restricting the bulk buying or multiple sales to a single purchaser; and

— the Housing Agency is currently undertaking a review of RPZs and the expected timeline for a completed review is Q1 2025, and the review will consider whether RPZs should be continued as is, removed, modified, or replaced, and the extension to the Residential Tenancies Act in May last year, ensures predictability for tenants while this review takes place;

recognises that:

— the Housing Commission have advised that in order to create a housing system that functions across tenures and for all people, we need diverse and stable sources of financing;

— this capital is needed to ensure the provision of private, social, and affordable homes, homes of all tenures for families across the country at all price points;

— following on from a review of the rental market in July 2024, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, has requested the Housing Agency to undertake a review which will assess the operation of RPZs and it is expected that this review will be completed by end of Q1 2025, and any potential future policy options that arise from this review will be fully considered by the Government and implemented as required; and

— the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is continuing to deliver accelerated funding schemes across the affordable and social programmes which have the potential to unlock delivery of schemes in good locations, while enabling additional supply, with over 60 per cent of active approved projects under the Cost Rental Equity Loan being accelerated projects scheduled for completion between 2025 – 2028; and

affirms Government efforts to:

— diversify sources of investment, noting the level of investment required in the long term cannot be solely the responsibility of the State, it will also require a very significant level of private investment, including appropriate institutional capital investment which is essential for the delivery of critically needed private rented stock;

— engage with domestic lenders to ensure that the banking sector is appropriately using its lending capacity to support the development of new housing nationwide;

— develop new financing sources, especially for brownfield sites and small builders, with support from Home Building Finance Ireland, the HFA and domestic banks, as well as State support of equity investment;

— enhance protections for tenants, while appropriately vindicating landlords' constitutionally protected property rights, through measures introduced by successive recent Governments via the Residential Tenancies Acts;

— build on the significant number of social and affordable homes provided in 2024, expanding State investment, with almost €5 billion available for the delivery of social, affordable and cost-rental homes in 2025, supplemented by Land Development Agency investment and HFA lending, which will bring the overall capital provision to over €6 billion; and

— deliver on the far-ranging commitments in the Programme for Government and informed by the Housing Commission's proposals for the long-term reform of the housing system, accepting this is an appropriate response to the current housing challenges which Ireland is now facing.".

It is a matter of public record that I am a landlord. I just wanted to put that on the record of the Dáil. I assure all Deputies that the Government is absolutely committed to building more homes and that we are working on all fronts to achieve that goal and to ensure the great needs within our society and our economy are met. I thank the Social Democrats for raising this issue as it is important that we have a full, informed and clear discussion on what we must do in terms of what are shared ambitions, namely, improving conditions for renters, increasing affordability of homes and, most important, increasing overall supply.

There are many times in the various debates when the Social Democrats will be represented by one or two Members in the Dáil. That does not mean the party is uninterested. I am here representing the Government and I can assure Members that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is aware of the debate that is ongoing today. What we can all agree on is that a substantial increase in the supply of new homes is the route to solving Ireland's housing crisis. Where we might differ is that this Government understands that the State cannot act alone in achieving this. That is why we are opposing this motion.

This year, we are channelling a record €6.1 billion in capital expenditure into housing, a fact the Social Democrats failed to acknowledge. For context, this is a six-fold increase over the past decade. Although this is a significant level of funding, the estimated development finance required to deliver 50,000 homes is a substantial €20 billion every year. The Housing Commission and the Department of Finance have advised that in order to deliver homes across varied tenures and for all people, we need diverse and stable sources of financing, including private capital.

The motion calls for the Government to retain rent pressure zones until there is an alternative system put in place that can protect renters. What this motion fails to acknowledge is that this system is already in place. The Housing for All action plan update published in November 2022 includes a commitment to "review the operation of the private rental sector and report on policy considerations". In May 2024, we extended rent predictability measures to the end of this year through the amendment of the Residential Tenancies Act. In doing so, we ensured that the current system of rent controls would give tenants absolute certainty while that review took place. That review is currently under way under the aegis of the Housing Agency and the expected timeline for completion is quarter one of 2025. Under Housing for All, the Government is committed to increasing the supply of rental properties, protecting renters and encouraging sustainable investment. The review will examine the operations of rent pressure zones since their introduction, assess their impact on key stakeholders and consider whether rent pressure zones should be continued in their current form, removed, modified or replaced.

Let me be clear. Protecting renters and attracting finance for home delivery are not mutually exclusive. The Department of Finance estimates that large landlords delivered some 17,000 apartments in Ireland between 2017 and 2023, accounting for 46% of the 37,500 apartments built during that period. The importance of this type of investment underscores the importance of policy certainty for investment in this sector going forward. In doing so, we are acting to benefit both today's renters and those wishing to avail of accommodation in future. One thing is certain - increased supply benefits all renters and that is why it is our key ambition.

Responding to concerns in 2021 that new housing was being acquired by investment funds for subsequent rental, the Government took a number of actions to ensure that homes are available for purchases by families and individuals. This included the introduction of a higher rate of stamp duty on the acquisition of houses situated in the State where a person acquires at least

ten such houses during any 12-month period, with some exemptions and refund provisions applying. This rate was increased to 15% from October 2024. The proposal to extend 100% tax to apartment purchases would effectively end the forward-funding channel for apartment supply - worth approximately €4 billion in investment between 2019 and 2022. This is an example of the ill-thought-out aspects of this motion from the Social Democrats. While its intentions are no doubt well placed, the reality of its policy is fewer homes and higher rents.

The kind of investment Ireland needs to attract now and going forward requires a stable tax and policy framework within which those who are building more homes, be they social, private or cost-rental, can operate. Our focus is squarely on creating an environment that encourages the stable delivery of new homes. In that respect, the Government is putting record capital behind our local authorities and approved housing bodies to deliver. The State is doing more than it has ever done before. An unprecedented level of public resources are being directed at housing. For 2024, the delivery of affordable housing will significantly exceed the 2023 outturn, while the supply of new-build social homes continues to be at levels not seen since the 1970s. As stated previously, this Government is channelling a record €6.1 billion in capital expenditure into housing this year alone. This is into social and affordable housing. That is the right thing to do and the Government will continue to invest significantly in the supply of social and affordable housing.

Furthermore, the Government is committed to continuing to diversify sources of investment in order to increase the supply of homes. This will include engagement with domestic lenders to ensure that the banking sector is using its lending capacity to support the development of new housing nationwide. It will include developing new financing sources, especially for brownfield sites and small builders, with support from Home Building Finance Ireland, the Housing Finance Agency and domestic banks as well as State support of equity investment. As part of this effort to build more homes, we will not just welcome but compete for private and patient capital from long-term investors such as pension funds. We will attract and welcome inward investment for housing, as we have successfully done with investment in other sectors of our economy. That is a normal facet of housing investment across Europe and beyond and it is what is needed to keep delivering more homes across Ireland.

Further to this, EU funding streams are already being accessed in the context of housing delivery. In this regard, European multilateral banks such as the European Investment Bank Group and the Council of Europe Development Bank have already provided financing to bodies such as the NTMA and the Housing Finance Agency. I can assure the House that there is strong engagement between the Government and these banks with regard to identifying investment opportunities in line with our priorities in the programme for Government, including housing.

Overall, we need a broader consideration of how we as a country are going to approach private sector investment in housing. In that process, we will continually review and improve the regulatory environment to create a functioning housing system that delivers across all tenure types, engaging diverse and stable sources of finance. We will, however, do that without undermining the stability and certainty needed for investors.

From a taxation perspective, we have many schemes in place that are working and playing a positive role, including help to buy and the zoned land tax. These are positive interventions that I believe will contribute to more homes being built. Put simply, we need more housing of every type, including social, affordable and private, and this can only be achieved through the public and private sectors working together and to their respective strengths. For that reason,

the Government is opposing this motion.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** It is a new low that the explanation for the absence of the Minister for Housing is that he is aware the debate is going on.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Is this what democracy in the Dáil is reduced to? The senior Minister responsible does not turn up but we are meant to be okay with him being aware the debate is taking place. Is that the situation with this Government? It has happened two weeks in a row for debates on housing motions that the senior Minister-----

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Will the Deputy's party be present for every debate in the Dáil? Will the Deputy's party members take their seats for every debate in the Dáil?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The Minister should be here.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Minister should be here. This is unprecedented.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** We do participate in every debate in the Dáil. The Minister should be here.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Will the Deputy's party be fully present for every debate?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** Sorry, we must have order-----

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** The senior Minister should be here.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** I ask Deputy O'Callaghan to speak through the Chair.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** The Minister of State interrupted me. If the Cathaoirleach is going to intervene, it should not be biased against the Opposition.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** Deputy O'Callaghan, do not accuse me of bias. Before I corrected you, I corrected the Minister of State.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I will proceed. The Minister of State said in his response that the Government would not support the motion because the State alone cannot achieve what is needed in housing. We have never said that the State alone needs to achieve what needs to be done in housing.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It can.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** What we have said is that the private sector on its own is not delivering, that there is a large affordability gap and that there is a greater role for the State and the not-for-profit sectors. If it does not see that and thinks its housing policy is working, that shows how deluded the Government is.

It is disingenuous to say that 100% stamp duty on bulk purchase of homes would prevent forward funding. It does not. As the Minister of State must understand, stamp duty on bulk

purchases is on purchase transactions. That does not prevent forward funding. It does prevent the buying up of existing homes. A report published last year by the Central Bank found that 78% of the homes bought by investment funds were existing properties. That is the problem we are seeking to address.

For example, 500 new homes are being built in my constituency. They are being financed through the State and the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund is one of the main sources of finance. Those homes, however, are going to be sold to an international fund instead of being made available to people at affordable prices. Why is public money being used to build homes to be sold to international funds? The idea that it is all being used for forward funding is simply incorrect.

The Minister of State said that EU funding streams are already being accessed. Whoever wrote his reply clearly has not read the report by Housing Europe, which was commissioned by a Fianna Fáil MEP. The report goes into great detail about the EU funding streams that could be accessed but are not being accessed by the Irish State. Those funding streams could be used to help to build affordable homes. The Taoiseach was clear last week that he has not read the report and it still has not been read.

There are solutions to the housing disaster. The Government could introduce affordable housing zoning to ensure that land is available for affordable homes at affordable prices. It could introduce savings schemes such as *Livret A* in France. That scheme has leveraged billions of euro of savings into affordable housing. The Government could also consider those proposals from Housing Europe. Instead, the response of this Government is to offer tax breaks to developers and garden sheds to everybody else. We need a more serious approach from the Government. The senior Minister should attend housing debates and engage constructively with us.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** As a new TD, I am truly stunned not only that the housing Minister is not here but that there is only one representative on the Government benches when in the media and in the Dáil Chamber, all we hear is that the Government wants solutions from the Opposition. When we offer concrete, well thought-out, researched, evidence-based solutions, this is the showing we get.

I come from the human rights sector where we talk about housing as one of the fundamental rights without which it is impossible to realise other rights. We have heard from my colleagues the stories of so many people in Irish society whose lives are simply on hold. Their careers, family plans and love lives cannot advance. I have spoken to people on the doors in my constituency and constantly receive emails from people who are frustrated at living at home with their parents way past an appropriate age because of the housing crisis. My constituency has some of the highest house prices in the country. The median house price last August was €635,000. We also have a proliferation of buy-to-let accommodation and very little affordable offering within the constituency.

Even though this crisis reaches into the pockets of every life in Irish society, it is important to remember those groups who are pushed to the fringes of society anyway and who are uniquely impacted by the crisis. I am talking, for example, about lone parents, who have to live in substandard accommodation because of the discrimination they face. I am talking about the overcrowding that migrants experience. I am talking about the fact that our Traveller heritage is being erased because there is no culturally appropriate accommodation available for them.

Our Gaeltacht community is under threat because Gaeltacht communities can no longer stay together. We are at risk of losing some of the precious heritage that we all want to keep.

With this motion, we are offering public solutions to a chronic public problem that we in Irish society are facing. These solutions offer to control the market not to inflate it. I urge the Minister of State to listen to us and on behalf of his absent Government colleagues, to listen to what we are offering. We want to work with the Government to resolve this housing crisis on behalf of the people who voted for us, just as the Minister of State says he wishes to solve the housing crisis on behalf of the people who voted for him. I ask the Government to listen to us and work with us. I ask him please to take on board this motion and the solid solutions within it.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** The Social Democrats are introducing this motion on addressing the housing disaster at a time when the Government is clearly at an ideological loss. Its policies of incentives for developers and investments for vulture funds, and their inflationary demand-side measures, have failed to move the dial on the housing disaster. More people are homeless today than ever before and the Government is falling significantly short of its own housing targets, delivering fewer homes in 2024 than in the previous year. The private sector is not able to meet the targets set out in the Government's own strategies. Now it seems that the Government is going to double down on this failure with measures that will deepen the crisis further. We are now entering a phase in Irish society where spiralling homelessness is in danger of becoming normalised and the social divisions that spring from extreme inequality are becoming entrenched. We are also facing the appalling vista of adverse developmental and mental health outcomes for many of the people, particularly children, who are caught up in prolonged homelessness.

The Taoiseach is feeling emboldened by his majority in government to push ahead with policies that he would dare not mention in the lead-up to the general election. Once more, as with the Occupied Territories Bill, voters were misled. A strong Opposition pushback against this slide into gross inequality and corrosive social division is signalled by the Social Democrats' Private Members' motion today. We are calling on the Government to move away from introducing more tax breaks for developers and vulture funds, and towards accessing currently underutilised funding sources at the EU level, such as InvestEU and the European Regional Development Fund. We should be emulating good practice in other EU countries, such as Austria, which has achieved a fairer and more sustainable housing system. One of the measures we are proposing is the leveraging of Irish household savings to invest in affordable housing, similar to the French *Livret A* model. Under this model, households can put their money into a special State-backed savings account which offers a more attractive interest rate than other savings accounts. Those savings, in turn, are managed by a special State investment vehicle whose specific purpose is to finance infrastructure and social projects. The largest recipient of funding in France is the social housing sector. Households make a return on their savings and the social housing sector gains access to reliable capital at a reasonable rate.

We also need to provide increased and early-stage finance to approved housing bodies and local authorities. Doing so will greatly increase the supply of actually affordable homes for rent and purchase. I call on the Government to reconsider its "Reeling in the Years" nostalgia trip into the Celtic tiger era and take on board the substantive proposals brought forward by the Social Democrats this morning.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I thank the Social Democrats for tabling this very important Private Members' motion. Sinn Féin is happy to support it. As is often the case in these debates, there are some policy details where we have differences of emphasis but we fully support its spirit,

and on that basis we are opposing the Government's amendment.

This really is unprecedented. The line Minister was not available last week; he was at Cabinet. That is fair enough, but he did not have the courtesy to notify the sponsors of the Labour Party motion for the reasons for his absence. This week he is not here. We do not have any explanation and again no courtesy extended to the Social Democrats as to why he is not here. Worse than that, the Minister of State present is not even a Minister of State in housing. I cannot think of a time since I was elected to the Oireachtas that neither the Minister or a Minister of State from the Department was present to deal with a debate on housing. I would like the Minister of State present to give us an explanation as to why the Minister is not here. If he has some more important engagement, if he has some family business, that is entirely legitimate, but so far we have not heard and, on that basis, it is deeply disrespectful not only to the sponsors of the motion but also to the House.

There are two issues I want to raise. I wrote to the Minister this morning about the first of these and I was hoping to put these questions to him directly. Yesterday, the Cabinet agreed €450 million to deliver 3,000 social and affordable homes over the next three years. I am looking for some clarity on this. I want to know, for example, if this is money additional to the capital that has already been provided to the Department of housing for 2025 to 2027, inclusive, or if it is within the existing capital ceilings. If it is additional, how much for this year and when will the Supplementary Estimate come to committee so that we can have transparency on that? Is this, as I believe it is, funding for those approved housing body and social and affordable projects that have been stalled for six months waiting for approval in the Department of housing? If so, does that mean they are in the existing targets for 2025 to 2027, inclusive, rather than additional? Will the Minister provide a timeline for how many of these homes are due to be delivered this year, next year and the year after? There is a very dishonest attempt by the Government to present the money announced yesterday and the targets as additional and extra, when I do not believe they are. The Minister needs not only to come out of hiding but also to come clean on that.

A couple of weeks earlier, I wrote to the Minister about the tenant *in situ* scheme because the outgoing Government and Minister could not get it together to agree the targets. We now have a situation where local authorities cannot proceed with new tenant *in situ* applications. It is not just angering many of us in the Opposition but also many of the Government's own backbenchers and maybe even the Minister of State. Worst of all, it is putting families, couples and single people at risk of homelessness. Why? Because they are getting their eviction notices, their landlords are inquiring about tenant *in situ* and they are being told they cannot proceed. I think it is now four weeks since I wrote to the Minister and he has not replied. I raised it with Micheál Martin last week and he said it would be addressed in a matter of weeks, but then last week he said there was a problem with the allocation. It is not large enough so there are currently discussions on how we can target this scheme for those most needy and particular areas where it makes absolute sense for people who would otherwise become homeless. This sounds like the Government is going to restrict the tenant *in situ* scheme further than the restrictions introduced last April as well as delays. Obviously, the Minister, Deputy Browne, is not going to do it today but whether in correspondence to me or to Deputies, he needs to come clean on yesterday's announcement and on tenant *in situ* and, in future, when he is not able to attend a Private Members' motion or debates from the Opposition, he should have the courtesy to pick up the phone and notify us. That is what previous Ministers did. That is what I did with Deputy Hearne this morning when I was not able to attend due to a media engagement and that is what

Ministers from this Government should do. The fact the Minister has not done so shows the height of disrespect for us, this House and the electorate. The Minister of State knows that despite his heckling of Deputy O'Callaghan earlier.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Ar an gcéad dul síos, gabhaim buíochas leis na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta as ucht an rún seo a ardú ar maidin. Tabharfaimid tacaíocht don rún agus táimid in éadan leasú an Rialtais.

I can just add to what Deputy Ó Broin has said and Deputy Hearne about the failure of the senior Minister to come to the House. It now seems he is hiding and that he is scared to actually talk about housing. It is ridiculous. There is no doubt the public was sold a pup in the last election. People were promised 40,000 new homes. The CSO made it clear for quite a while that the Government was not going to get close to 40,000 but it promised it again and again. People desperately wanted to believe it was true but it was all politics at its most cynical. However, the truth is out now. We know now that the Government came up 10,000 homes short, home building is declining and the housing crisis is deepening. All that is left in the public is an air of desperation as the Government tries to distract from the failures of the past. The Government has an army of media advisers spinning all types of nonsense, such as the idea that pandering to investment funds is some kind of new idea, that the only way to reduce rents is actually to increase rents and that we are doing renters a favour, if anyone wants to believe the Taoiseach, or that cowboy Celtic tiger policies are the answer.

The Government is trying to blame the private sector in all of this. The Taoiseach keeps telling us the State cannot do everything. This is pure and utter spin. Who is claiming the State should do everything?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** If we look at the targets, they are far too low, but it is the private sector which outperforms targets every year. It is the Government which misses its public housing targets every single year. It is the State and this Government that is not pulling its weight. There is a half a billion euro hole in the housing budget this year. This is a Government that failed to build enough houses last year and now plans to spend half a billion euro less this year than last year. Far from a fresh approach, the Government is doubling down on the failed policies of the past. The Taoiseach is going around threatening renters with stripping away the little protection they have, but Fianna Fáil does not stop there. That is not far enough for it. It is reaching deeper into the bag of old tricks and pulling out from that bag section 23 tax reliefs from the architects of the crash. Section 23 drove the reckless speculation that broke this economy, saw two thirds of construction workers unemployed and gave us 3,000 ghost estates, shuttered businesses and destroyed lives. That is Fianna Fáil's solution to the housing crisis. That is its solution to the Government's failures.

Resurrecting section 23 will be a disaster on the same level as when Fine Gael invited in the vulture funds, a strategy which has now been embraced by Fianna Fáil as if it was something new. Some €30 billion worth of homes are held by investment funds. Institutional landlords are extracting rents that are sky high and making a healthy return. They get a free pass on paying no tax whatever on their rental income. In excess of 1,000 homes were bulk purchased by investment funds over the past two years – 1,000 homes snapped up under the noses of first-time buyers since this Government said it would end that practice. Again, it misled the public every step of the way because it is in the pockets of those developers and vulture funds and that

is why we have a housing crisis.

Now that the Government is through the election, it is time to be honest and come clean. Does it want rents to come down? It obviously does not because it is removing the protection. Does it want house prices to come down? It obviously does not. If he were here, I would ask the Minister for housing to state that he wants rents and house prices to come down. I believe he will not because all the Government's policies show it will push them in the other direction.

What we need is a serious rethink and restep in relation to a change of direction on housing. That we see the number of people in homelessness increase month after month is absolutely scandalous. Do not, like the bluffer who sat where the Minister for housing should sit now, pretend there is nothing you can do. Of course there is: ban rent increases, ban no-fault evictions, scrap the sweetheart deals for the vulture funds, end the bulk purchasing of homes and build houses that ordinary people can afford to live in.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion on the housing crisis. What does a housing crisis look like? Take my clinic in this week alone. On Monday morning, I had a single man who is working. He is living with his family and has nowhere to live. A family which is 12 years on the list has received a notice to quit and will be homeless in months. A family which is five years on the list and has absolutely no chance of getting social housing has received a notice to quit and will be homeless by the summer. A family which is 11 years on the list has received a notice to quit. This is what it looks like. That is what a housing crisis looks like. That is just my office. I guarantee that right across every single constituency, probably even including the Minister of State's, people are coming asking for help and asking what we can do. When will the Government ever accept that its housing strategy has failed? Until it accepts it, this is what will happen every day. Families and individuals - human beings - will be forced into homelessness. What does that looks like in Dublin 15? There is one homeless hub in Dublin 15 that has only recently come on stream. Where else do they go? They go to Clondalkin. They go to town. They go to Swords, Santry and all over the city. Where do their children go to school? They are still in the same place and they are forced to come back into the area every day, hang around and then go back again. That is the failure. That is what failure looks like.

There was a scheme - Deputy Ó Broin brought this up - which is the tenant *in situ* scheme. It is a good scheme and it has helped people to stay out of homelessness. What we are getting now into our offices and the local authorities are telling us for the past number of weeks is that they cannot progress any more in the tenant *in situ* scheme because the Government has failed to give them the targets for 2025. That is the reason people are going into homelessness. It is because the Government has not given the local authorities the targets to be able to move forward with them.

The restrictions on the tenant *in situ* scheme make it really difficult for local authorities to engage with people who are willing to sell. There are landlords out there who want to keep their tenants in their properties and they want to sell them to the local authorities but it is caught up in so much red tape and so many delays that it is extremely difficult for them to hold on so they are pulling out of the scheme and they are going onto the private market. That is on this Government's head. I urge the Government to get its act together, get the targets, give them to the local authorities and let them get on with the job of keeping people in their homes.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Rents in Galway have been far too high for many years and they are only continuing to rise. We see, in Galway city, that the average rent is now over €2,100. In Galway county, it is over €1,500. That is a 70% increase just in the past five years. This is when rent pressure zones were supposed to keep rents at an affordable level but like so many of the previous Government's housing policies, they have absolutely failed in meeting their goal. Now the new Government intends on continuing its failed policies and the Taoiseach is talking about scrapping rent pressure zones, one of the only measly protections renters have.

The reality is we need to ban rent increases completely. The reality is that, for people across Galway city, as rents increase, all it is doing is pushing ever more people into homelessness. That is something that Galway cannot continue to have and cannot take more of. The local authorities are working extremely hard to keep people out of homelessness but they are struggling because of this Government's failed policies.

Emergency accommodation in Galway is full. There is a waiting list. I am dealing with many families who are either couch surfing, living with family or living with friends, and that can be going on for years.

People in Galway can also access homeless HAP supports but these are meaningless because there are no rental properties in Galway that fall under HAP. What are people supposed to do? Last week I had somebody in with me who was trying to get HAP and is in homeless accommodation with two young children, and he needs to be near the hospital for medical purposes. He has to stay beside the hospital. What can he do? He cannot move somewhere extremely far away. Even the HAP place finders find it impossible to find places for people to rent. This is not what you call a functioning housing policy.

Even when a person through some kind of stroke of luck is able to find somewhere suitable to rent with HAP, it is barely enough support to keep the rent paid. Most people are paying a sizable top-up rent to their landlord every month in addition to the HAP contribution. I had one particular case, and I will detail it to the Minister of State here because it is one of those cases that really struck me. I had one woman who had left an abusive relationship and was temporarily staying in a refuge while she was looking for a place to rent. In County Galway, there was nothing affordable but she finally found a place in Mayo. At this point, she was desperate. It was time for her to move on from the refuge. She had seen other women in the refuge end up in emergency accommodation when they were not able to find anywhere to rent. She had also seen women return to the home where they had been suffering abuse because they could not get anywhere else to live. That is horrifying, especially when we have already seen women killed in 2025. She decided to agree to the tenancy in Mayo. Because of current HAP scheme rules, she would get the Mayo HAP rents but pay the Galway differential rate. That is a lower HAP rate and a higher differential payment in this case so she is squeezed in every way. To me, those are institutional barriers that we place in front of women who are trying to get away from abuse. At the time, I wrote to the Minister for housing and he, unfortunately, completely refused to engage on the issue. It is clear to me that we are continuing with these institutional barriers that mean that women cannot get away from domestic abuse and domestic violence. I have seen so much domestic abuse and domestic violence presenting in my office over the past number of months - far more than I have ever seen in the past ten years - and every time that abuse is disclosed to me, it is specifically linked to the housing crisis that they are in and the impact that that has on their ability to leave that domestic abuse situation. This is something that this Government needs to take seriously. We need to make sure that this Government's housing policies do everything possible to support women who need to leave domestic abuse situations.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** It seems that every time that housing is outsourced to the market, it causes problems. Whether that is for students, asylum seekers, people in nursing homes or people on local authority waiting lists, the answer from the Government always seems to be to outsource it again. Their idea is to build more units, not to focus on social and affordable housing.

The housing crisis is the biggest issue facing the State today and the failure to deliver sufficient supply, especially of affordable and social homes, has had devastating consequences for ordinary people. People are forced to live in old houses, in increasingly damp and hazardous conditions, posing serious threats to their health. Young people are emigrating at an alarming rate because they cannot afford extortionate rents.

The House has heard many examples from the Social Democrats - I thank them for bringing the motion today - of individual cases. In my own constituency, it is hard to find a family that has not been impacted by this crisis. This week alone, in my office I had a family of two adults and two children who have recently been told it would be 12 years before they would be considered for a house, and another couple is waiting for a house for 16 years. A 67-year-old man who is in hospital with pneumonia is living in or returning to a house that is nearly as old as himself. He suffers from COPD and arthritis, is recovering from pneumonia, as I said, and he is expected to go back to an old house in damp conditions. I also met a wheelchair user who has been waiting years for a ground floor apartment to no avail and another family with three children, one of whom has Down's syndrome, that needs more space for all the medical equipment they need in that house.

It is glaringly obvious to anybody who is paying attention that the solutions offered by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the past ten or 14 years have not worked. They have refused to change tack. The only changes that the Coalition of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry group, which includes my constituency colleagues, junior Minister, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, and Government-supporting Deputy Danny Healy-Rae make will be at the expense of ordinary workers and families.

Unlike this Government, I do not believe that renters should be punished for Government failures. I certainly do not believe that it is acceptable to pull the wool over people's eyes, as the Government did recently when it claimed it would complete 40,000 homes by the end of 2024 during the general election campaign. They have missed their targets, year after year. In fact, 30,000 homes were completed, a far cry from the 60,000 that will be required over the next five years. Let me be clear. The housing plan of the Government is failing the people of Kerry and the people of the State.

During the previous Government, house prices and rents rose to historic highs. In Kerry, rents rose by between 6% and 8.5% last year and the average monthly payment is now in or around €1,400 per month, the 15th consecutive quarter in which rents have jumped in Kerry. Where is the change that is to happen? What is the Lowry group bringing to the table?

As if it could not get any worse, the latest move from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independents may cause rents to rise even further. If the Minister were here - it is ironic that someone who was calling out other people for hiding seems to have disappeared over the past few weeks - we would ask him about the tenant *in situ* scheme. In July, three or four years ago, when the scheme was announced initially with no targets and no scheme shown to the local authority in Kerry, the then Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin, said it was a cop out by Kerry County Council to say it did not have the procedures in

*11 o'clock*

place, but the same thing is happening three years later.

Last weekend, the Minister's revelations put the fear of God into many renters. They were told to brace themselves for difficult decisions that lie ahead. Were things not bad enough without having to put the fear of God into renters?

The situation is similarly bleak for those looking to purchase homes. House prices are rising faster in Kerry than in many other areas. The national average is 9% but house prices in Kerry rose by 11.4%. The average price is now 41.6% above pre-Covid levels. Is it any wonder when housing supply in Kerry is down 17% on last year, one third of the average from 2015 to 2019.

People want to see this Government fix the crisis-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** -----I will finish on this - not give kickbacks to developers, stand up for ordinary workers and families who want to out a roof over their heads, build more social and affordable homes, ban rent increases and ban bulk buying.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I welcome the Minister of State to the House. It is very disappointing, yet again, that we do not have even a Minister of State from the Department of housing. I tabled a housing motion in the Dáil last week with my Labour Party colleagues. The Minister for housing was, unfortunately, not available last week and did not even have the courtesy to contact me or my colleague, Deputy Bacik, to say he could not come to the House. I understand there was a convention before that when the line Minister was not available, the Minister would contact the sponsor of the motion. I am disappointed about that. We have not had an adequate explanation as to why the Minister is not here this morning either. Perhaps he has been locked in a box by lobbyists or investors.

I thank the Social Democrats for tabling this motion, the essence of which the Labour Party supports. I have a strong sense of *déjà vu.* Here we are, another week, another motion that will invariably be voted down, an absent Minister, and a similar generic reply just restating what the Government has already said and offering very little in the way of meaningful change or engagement.

I represent the city of Limerick where the average price for a three-bedroom semi-detached house is now €320,000. It is a city where, on Monday, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil councillors amended a very small Part 8 application for a development of housing for elderly people and people with disabilities to bring it down to three storeys, as a result of which the development is now unviable. We have a situation where, during the recent extreme weather, rough sleepers were turned away from emergency accommodation. There are now 456 people accessing emergency accommodation in Limerick. That is up from 149 in 2024. My inbox, WhatsApp and my clinics are inundated with people who come to me from situations of complete despair. It is very upsetting because in a lot of cases there is very little I can do for people.

With regard to the tenant *in situ* scheme, when will the unit allocation for 2025 be confirmed? We are nearly into March. I am dealing with numerous cases, as I am sure other Deputies across the House are, of people who cannot move forward with their applications because the local authority has not received the circular or the allocation. That means people are barrelling down towards their eviction date with absolutely nowhere to go.

When the Government spoke before the election about reaching its housing targets, to say the Government was economical with the truth is the understatement of the year. The Government knew it could not and would not reach the target of 40,000 despite its own repeated use of very selective data. The idea that the solution to this is to open the floodgates to tax cuts for developers and institutional investors is deeply misguided and flawed. We know construction costs have increased but we also know that more than 16% of the cost of construction is made up of the cost of land. Several independent reports flagged that the number of apartments being built in 2024 would fall by more than 50% as early as July and August of last year, so it is simply not credible for the Government to come along in the run up to the election and say it will definitely meet the 40,000 figure. This was caused by the Government's decision not to clamp down on institutional investors bulk buying apartments and the reliance of Housing for All on these investors to deliver apartments in Dublin. These institutional investors do not only elbow out buyers, they also artificially inflate market rents. We see this time and again with some of the large apartment developments in Dublin city, where management companies offer rent-free months to prospective tenants to keep overall rents high and to work around the cap on rent increases.

We know the housing market in this country is rigged. It is rigged against renters, against first-time buyers and against young people. It is rigged in favour of the vested interests - landlords, property speculators and institutional investors - which this Government, like the previous one, seems intent on bending the knee to. It is very clear this Government is already out of ideas. The Fianna Fáil side of the Government wants to re-erect the Galway tent while the Fine Gael side is determined to plod on in the same manner as before with sweetheart deals for vulture and cuckoo funds. We have had the absurd scenes where the Taoiseach last week and the housing Minister yesterday on the "News at One" said nothing is off the table as far as tax cuts are concerned. The Minister for Finance, on the other hand, is saying clearly that Celtic tiger tax cuts should not and cannot return. The idea that the solution to this crisis is to dust off the best of the Celtic tiger with the bill put on the country's credit card is insane. We know where these policies got us and it is primarily people my age who have had, and are continuing, to foot the bill.

The Taoiseach spoke about difficulties activating brownfield sites. That is specifically why we in the Labour Party want to see a land management and land activation unit in each local authority and why we seek to scale up the LDA to meet this challenge. We also need a stick, and that is why we need to see the vacant homes tax at least tripled. The Government talks about cutting the cost of building homes yet refuses to even consider implementing the recommendations of the Kenny report to cap the cost of land, something that would actually reduce the cost of housing. Instead, the Government wants a direct transfer of wealth to property developers and institutional investors without any guarantee this saving will be passed on to putative homeowners. The Taoiseach himself called for the implementation of the Kenny report in 2018. He said he thought implementing Kenny was the morally right thing to do. The Labour Party introduced a Bill in 2021 to implement the provisions of the Kenny report, and much like our motion was last week and like this motion will be, it was voted down by Government.

I welcome the fact the motion calls on the Government to make use of EU funding streams. The European Union can and should play a greater role in solving this crisis. My colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin MEP, as head of the Irish delegation in the influential S&D group, successfully helped negotiate the appointment of a housing commissioner . I would urge the Minister if he were here - he is not - to invite Commissioner Dan Jørgensen to visit Ireland as soon as

practically possible. The Government must make better use of existing EU funding streams. I know my colleague Aodhán will be pushing hard for more EU investment and for changes to state aid rules in favour of investment in social and affordable housing. Member states should be allowed to double policy investment in affordable housing, but the Government also needs to play its part and bring forward a working definition of what actually constitutes affordable housing. It is anticipated the EU may revise state aid rules as soon as next year to enable housing support measures and the Government must be ready to pull every lever at its disposal.

The Labour Party believes the State must give builders alternatives to expensive private equity funding. That is why we want to see a State investment and development bank that will provide finance to private housing development using a portion of the €8.4 billion placed in the Future Ireland Fund. We also want to develop a new, long-term financing product for approved housing bodies, underwritten by the State, to provide financing at 3% or less over 50 and 60 years. We would unlock private savings by developing a housing solidarity bond via State savings, with an attractive interest rate to redirect private investment from vulture funds towards housing development and provide further opportunities for credit unions to underwrite mortgages and invest in housing using surplus savings.

I reiterate what I said last week, that we must also retain rent pressure zones at least until a viable alternative becomes available because although rent pressure zones are a blunt instrument, they have slowed the runaway train that is the private rental sector. I would challenge anyone to come into this House and defend the conduct of some of the big landlords and institutional investors in this country, the same landlords and institutional investors that Government rigged the housing market in favour of.

The fact is that we have half a million young people living at home and 1 million people stuck in the private rental trap. These people are mostly my age. I am in my early 30s. They are usually young, hard-working professionals who will never be able to have a secure home of their own and now, if you are to believe what is being floated in the media this morning, the Government effectively wants to evict them from the box bedroom and to move them into the garden shed. This sounds like another of Government's famous quick fixes, after co-living, build-to-rent and strategic housing developments. We need serious long-term solutions and not beds in sheds. We have a horrific housing crisis with record rents. People cannot get mortgage approval. The fact that the solution to this is to shove your fully grown adult child into what I would describe as a glorified wooden coffin at the end of the garden will not cut it.

Irish parents have had a clear goal for many years, my own parents included. It is simply summed up as being to get the children out of the house. This policy further seeks to undermine that. The fact that the Government wants to move people out of their houses and into log cabins is farcical and ridiculous. Is this really the best the Government can offer? It is saying it cannot house people properly but will move them into the shed.

As I sum up, I thank the Social Democrats for tabling the motion. I am disappointed that we do not have more people here on the Government benches, because the same tumbleweed that blew across the House last week is blowing here yet again. We are clear about what we believe in setting our vision for a State-led approach and greater State investment in housing. We will make no apologies for that, despite the heckling yesterday of my party leader at Leaders' Questions. We are clear about why we decided not to go into government. We knew Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would not and could not offer the change that people need regarding housing and were not meaningfully willing to engage with us about our housing policies. The Taoiseach,

frankly, is going to have to come up with a better answer than turning to us and saying that we did not want to sit with the Government.

I am disappointed by the lack of any semblance of meaningful engagement. The Opposition comes here week after week and brings forward constructive solutions. We in the Labour Party have brought forward many constructive solutions and we get the same generic response from the Government. It is disappointing and disrespectful that the Minister for housing, for the second week in a row, has not bothered to come to the House to account for the Government's failing housing policies.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Minister does not bother his backside to turn up for two housing debates in a row and the Government refuses to discuss for nine months the Housing Commission report which provided a damning indictment of the failures of Government housing policy. Why? It is because the Government does not want to solve the housing crisis. It does not care about the people who have been on housing lists for a decade or more or families and children in emergency accommodation, people who are quaking with fear because they are threatened with eviction. The Government does not care about them. The people it cares about are the corporate landlords, vulture funds and property investors. It is dancing to their tune and they do not want to solve the housing crisis because they make money from the housing crisis.

The sooner the people in this country who care about it and are affected by it realise that that is why we have had over a decade of a housing crisis and, before that, a property crash, the better. The emphasis is on "property", which has dominated this country, because the rich in Ireland and now their friends, international investors, make money from it. Why on earth would corporate landlords which can charge €2,500 a month want to see rental property which is charged at an affordable level for the average worker of €1,000 a month? It is self-evident that they would not want that to happen. They could not make profits if they did. Why would a property investor which is selling houses in my area on what used to be NAMA land for €600,000 want to sell them for €200,000, which would be affordable for an ordinary worker? They have no interest in that happening. They have an interest in making sure it does not happen. That is the problem.

It is summed up for me by a number of developments in my area. Niche Living is a co-living development on Eblana Avenue in Dún Laoghaire. We campaigned for social and affordable housing. We got a co-living development. It is now being advertised on *booking.com* for €1,000 a week for tourists. St. Helen's Court is an apartment block across from my office. Most of it has been empty for seven or eight years. They have evicted all the tenants and it is owned by vulture funds. They sit on it, waiting to evict the tenants, ramp up the value of the asset and then flip it on. That is who the Government is representing. It is not representing ordinary people. We need a revolution in this country on the issue of housing because you lot do not care.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Half a million young people are living with their parents, including two thirds of under-35s. The Government has said today that people can go from the back bedroom to the back garden or alternatively to Boston, Berlin or wherever. Young people in my constituency told me when we were out canvassing that we would not see anyone over 23 in the area and that young Blanchardstown is in Australia. I will be parliamentary here. This Government has just given a massive "F you" to young people on housing. The Government has the brass neck to not have the Minister here and then to send the Minister of State, Deputy

Troy, somebody who had to admit that he did not declare his own property interests, is a major landlord and has profited off the housing misery and housing crisis by selling homes to local authorities and not declaring them. It is an absolute insult.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** Can we stick to the motion?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** With respect to the Social Democrats, they should not have started the debate with the likes of that.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** What has been stated here today is factually incorrect. It is factually incorrect and I ask Deputy Coppinger to withdraw that remark.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Deputy Troy can answer after my time.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** Stick to the motion, please, Deputy Coppinger.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** People who are profiting from the housing crisis are coming in to answer about it. It is unbelievable. Not everyone had a chance to buy a gaff when they were 20, like the Minister of State. He said he was not a person of privilege, but he is. I want to go back to the Government itself. It wants to pivot to the private sector. IRES REIT profits have increased 3% since the statement by the Taoiseach on Monday. Landlords got tax breaks of €160 million. The Government is feeding the beast and landlords are not interested until rents go up even more.

I want to finish by speaking about the public sector. It has been said it cannot resolve the housing crisis but of course it can resolve the housing crisis. It has done it before. Please do not kowtow to the idea that the private sector has an interest. We have a major land bank in Dublin West where the council has told us it could build 7,000 homes with schools, facilities and parks. It is sitting idle. What is this Government going to do about other local authorities with similar land banks included in their long-term strategy? Is it going to leave the councils off the hook, or is it going to push them and fund them to see those homes get built? What it has done today is an absolute insult to young people in the private rented sector and to anybody like teachers, nurses and therapists who we cannot get. The whole crisis is affecting every single thing seeping into society and they do not care.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank the Social Democrats for bringing this motion. There are six basic asks in their motion. They are pretty basic when we have a housing crisis with just under 15,000 people homeless. Homeless accommodation in Galway is at capacity and people are waiting between 15 and 20 years. People are living in tents. People are living in cars. People are sleeping on couches. I have talked more on this subject than any other subject since I came in here in 2016. This Government and previous governments have absolutely created this crisis with their policies. One of the worst was the HAP, and the legislation for it, which twisted language on its head and called the housing assistance payment - money straight into the landlord's pocket - social housing. Another was our utter failure to build public housing on public land. Even now when we talk about that, it is a sleight of hand with regard to social housing. HAP is not social housing. Social and public housing is local authorities, which should be properly funded, building public housing on public land.

I read the Simon report every quarter, which tells us there are no properties available in

Galway under any HAP scheme. I am here as somebody from Galway where people daily come into my office begging me to do something as a TD. We have a tenant *in situ* scheme. I have often described the Government's policy and previous policies as a jigsaw with no overall picture. It relies on the market. When the market fails to provide, it bolsters the market with a jigsaw of schemes. One of them is the tenant *in situ* scheme, and then like that it just stops it. The Government encourages the councils, like the city council in Galway, to buy houses to protect the tenant when the house is being sold and then with a phone call, it says it is suspended. I have desperately tried both Ministers of State. I have asked the Taoiseach. I have used every parliamentary method to try to get an answer - parliamentary questions, standing up under promised legislation, a Topical Issue last night and again now. Is the tenant *in situ* scheme suspended or not, pending the new scheme? Will the Ministers of State answer that to make language mean something?

**Deputy Charles Ward:** I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion, which I support. I am disappointed that like the Labour Party motion last week, there is no mention of the defective concrete crisis in this motion. This is a crisis that impacts tens of thousands of people in County Donegal and 16 other counties. It is a crisis that every single party needs to address. Every day we discover more problems with the Government's defective concrete blocks scheme. We discovered this week that homeowners are being unfairly penalised by delays due to a lack of contractors and Donegal County Council. In many cases contractors are forced to take on other jobs due to cash flow issues because of the council's processing delays. Builders are understandably abandoning these sites due to unpredictable payments and families are being left in a difficult situation. These delays are completely out of control. Homeowners yet again are the ones expected to carry the financial burden. It is clear that application progress is completely inefficient and chronically slow. Excessive paperwork, portal outages, slow claim approvals, repeat submissions and an overwhelming amount of further information requests are slowing down this progress. The portal system lacks basic reminders for key deadlines, leaving homeowners vulnerable to missing extensions. We know now that the 65-week timescale is unrealistic for people on this scheme to complete their builds. We have seen how the Government's own construction projects, particularly the hospital, are taking a very long time.

We have thousands of homes in Donegal under construction, and a severe lack of contractors. Of course there will be delays. Instead of the council unnecessarily contributing to these delays it should be addressing the minor discrepancies and the final claim rather than delaying the whole process mid claim. I ask the Government to work with Donegal County Council to provide an extended timeline and ensure a swift process turnaround. We must do all we can to ensure that these people, who are traumatised and are victims, are not subject to more unnecessary hardship. I ask the Minister to show a bit of compassion for these impacted families.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The devastating housing crisis is undermining the social fabric of Irish society. This housing disaster was created by the Bertie Ahern Government, which privatised social, affordable and public housing, and handed over the housing market to the profit motive of the private market and stopped local authorities building houses for 20 years. The result is the disaster we now have, and that disaster now looks like 15,000 families homeless including almost 5,000 children. There are 120,000 families on local authority waiting lists and HAP schemes. There are skyrocketing rents and almost half a million young people in their 30s and 40s living in their childhood bedrooms. It means thousands of families locked out of home ownership, either slightly over the local authority limit for the waiting list and not able to afford or to get a mortgage or condemned to pay huge rents and to poverty into the future.

It means forced emigration with young people forced to emigrate to Australia, Canada and the United States of America.

It is shocking to see that the current Government is again placing housing at the mercy of the private market. That decision can only create additional misery into the future. The housing crisis is an emergency and needs to be dealt with as an emergency. As I have said before and will continue to say, we need a declaration of a housing emergency in law. What would that housing emergency do? It would oblige the State, in law, to deal with housing as the overriding priority, and it would oblige each Government Department, in law, to housing proof its policies and actions. It would freeze and reduce rents. It would allow local authorities to purchase vacant properties by agreement or compulsory purchase and refurbish those for people on the housing waiting list. It would require the sale of houses to provide for tenants *in situ* to remain as tenants and stop the drift into homelessness. It would stop the block purchase of houses and apartments by wealthy individuals, vulture funds and developers on a buy-to-let basis. This would stop these individuals and organisations competing with first-time buyers. This is generally thought of as a city problem, but I have lately come across it in the constituency in my own town of Cahir, where a small development has been purchased by an investor even though local families had already paid a deposit. An emergency would provide emergency funding for a massive programme of social and affordable housing by local authorities on public land.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I welcome this motion on housing, particularly in light of what we learned yesterday about County Mayo being the biggest county for derelict properties. Some 14% of the country's derelict properties are in Mayo. It is also the second highest in terms of vacancy, at almost 11%. Yet so little is being done - it is important the Minister hears this - to assist local authority housing staff in turning over those properties. It is not just on the private side. Local authorities right across this country are responsible for hoarding, and I believe the State is the biggest hoarder of vacant properties with 4,000 social and local authority homes across the country vacant. It takes an average of eight months to turn around these properties between lettings while it takes an average of less than a month in the private sector. It is really important that urgency is shown in that situation to turn those properties around quickly. We should look at directly employing tradesmen who will work with the local authorities on a full-time basis to ensure that those small issues are dealt with as quickly as possible.

On vacancy, I welcome the vacant property grant but, when it was initially introduced, you essentially had to be a homeless homeowner to qualify. I recently came across a homeless homeowner. He had a derelict property and came into my constituency office seeking assistance. I sought out every scheme the Government has to offer and found that we could not help him. We cannot help him because he cannot draw down funds in advance or in stage payments. This man is a pensioner and is unable to draw down any finance from the banking sector. This man will remain homeless because he is unable to access support through the vacant property grant. Will the Minister consider that situation? Will he consider introducing a scheme that would allow payments to be drawn down to help homeowners who are struggling to come up with the finance, if possible?

On construction costs, I would like the Minister to seriously consider reducing the cost of construction by removing VAT from construction materials. The State takes the lion's share of building costs in this country. As I have mentioned before, this Government is great on rhetoric, PR and schemes but it is very poor on delivery. I will give another example. The affordable housing scheme is essentially still a pipe dream in Mayo. Five units have been promised but they are yet to come on stream. We hope they will come on stream soon. The entire part of

Mayo I am from, the Claremorris municipal district, an area in south and east Mayo, will not even be considered for affordable housing. There is an absence of any real scheme. On the tenant *in situ* scheme, a constituent called me last week who has been waiting longer than a year to sell a property to the local authority and who cannot do so. In the absence of these schemes, will the Minister consider reducing the cost of construction by removing VAT from construction material? It would make a very great difference in reducing the cost of construction.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I wish the Ministers well in their new positions. I have been in construction all of my life. Part of the Government's plan is now to allow buildings at the back of other properties. I do not have an issue with that once they are proper buildings that can be built. What I do have an issue with are the planning guidelines as they apply in County Limerick. For a number of years, we have been told that we cannot built to the back, side or front of any place because there is no infrastructure to allow for it. People now have their children, their children's partners or wives or their grandchildren living with them. We now have ten living in my own house. I am in the construction business so you would imagine that I could help with the cost of building but, when they try to save for a mortgage, it is shoved another step away from them. They are saving hard but, when they try to build a house or get planning permission for one, it is pushed away from them as a result of cost inflation. Every week, I get a letter telling me that the price of concrete products or anything oil-based has gone up another 10%. Over the last two years, there have been 11 increases in the cost of building materials across the board. The people who are living at home have no choice because they cannot afford a house. They now need something they can place within the area of their own house. I do not have a problem with that but people in the countryside should also be allowed to build on a half-acre site to allow their parents to step to one side and have their own private unit. This would allow the next generation to go into the parents' house but the laws do not allow for it. If we are to allow something to be placed behind the house, we must also allow building on a site that is capable of taking a second house. In a city, you can build 20 houses on half an acre but in the county you are only allowed one. We have to make sure that the next generation, both in urban and rural areas, are allowed to build for the future.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I wish the three Ministers well in their new portfolios. I welcome this morning's announcement on modular homes and log cabins but there is one thing I cannot fathom. I hear it is 40 sq. m. The modular homes being built at the moment are 600 sq. ft, which is 60 sq. m. I do not know why it is 20 sq. m less but I still welcome it because it is going to help people. Let us give praise when praise is due.

The planning situation needs to be tackled. An emergency should be called because objections are holding up many planning permissions. I ask the Minister to look at that. I also ask him to look at one-off housing because councils are so inconsistent. I was talking to a person in Sligo this morning and apparently Sligo is nearly a no-go area. I have also been talking to people in Leitrim and other counties. I welcome the Croí Cónaithe scheme. It is helping a lot of people. However, there are inconsistencies between councils. I will give an example. I know a person whose chimney was cracked in their old two-storey house. They took it down and put up slates. They then could not get an exemption because they had taken down the chimney. What madness is going on in the planning sections of councils? I ask the Ministers to address that. As the Ministers know well, in building houses, sewage and water are ferociously important.

I will ask the Ministers to do one thing. I have brought this up a number of times. If a builder is building 100 houses in the private sector but has not done a State job in the last three years, they cannot tender. That is total madness within the Department from whoever wrote

that rule. You could be building 100 private houses but still cannot tender for a public job. I ask the Ministers to look at that.

There is another thing that needs to be looked at within the Department. People give out about the councils. Yes, they can be slow at times. If someone dies and the house is being done up, there is damn all funding from the Department. If you are to bring the house up to the specifications introduced by the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, it will cost €60,000 to €80,000. What does the Department provide? It is €25,000 to €30,000. Do councils have money? No. Everyone is wondering why there are 3,000 to 4,000 houses that are lying idle and have not been done up, as was said earlier. It is because councils do not have the funding.

There is another thing the Ministers can do. The Department brought out a good scheme under Deputy Darragh O'Brien. The scheme was for sewage schemes in areas where there was no Irish Water infrastructure. Not one has been done in three years. Why is that? It is because it must be done to Irish Water specifications and you have to go back to the councils. It goes over and back. The Ministers' Department gave a budget for works throughout the country but not one red cent has been spent within those towns that need sewage schemes to help in providing water.

I ask the Ministers to look at those few fundamental things. On top of that, an emergency should be called with regard to social and affordable housing. As has been said earlier, there are many councils that do not even know about the affordable housing schemes. They need to be brought in for a day to be told how they operate. If that does not happen, it will not be done. This is not about criticising but about throwing in ideas and trying to work together. We can come in here and argue every day but what we need to do is to try to put in ideas that will work to solve this problem. I ask the Ministers to listen to the ideas I have given them and to take them on board.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** It is good to have the opportunity to speak on housing again so soon. I welcome the motion from my Social Democrats colleagues. Looking at the Government amendment, I would vote against it but I will put on the record that I am participating in a pairing arrangement today and so will not be voting. However, I will speak in support of the motion. It is very important to emphasise a couple of things. The Government statement says that some of the investment has to come from the private sector and that there is not an over-reliance on it. It seems that going forward there will be an increasing reliance on the private sector. The so-called vulture funds and investment funds that are coming in are obviously there to make a profit. There is no way in the world the price of any housing for sale, if they sell it, will be cheaper. The rents will not be cheaper either.

I will give the local example of Lucan swimming pool. For some reason, South Dublin County Council decided to tender out the management of this pool, which was won by a private company. As a result, there are higher costs for using the Lucan pool. For example, it is €6 for a swim in the Clondalkin pool operated by the council but it is €10 for a swim at Lucan. I can only quantify that in housing terms by saying if people are in it to make their profit and margin, and to give their investors a return, it will always be more expensive. If we are talking about giving breaks, we should be giving breaks to small landlords, those who own one property and have been keeping people on reduced rents for years but are being squeezed out of the market, or the single property investor. I agree with rent pressure zones and keeping rents down, but if there are people operating in rent pressure zones whose tenant leaves of his or her own volition, they should be able to put it in for a market rent. Other than that, we need to keep prices down.

We need to give tax incentives to assist the smaller landlords.

The State should be the biggest developer in the country. I do not mean the State should don all the shovels and do everything. It should work with the private sector but as the lead partner. There are ideas. In County Louth, for example, there is a housing development that will be produced in a new and innovative manner through 3-D printing. Although modular housing has been overblown in some areas, in other cases it is being delivered more cheaply than traditional bricks and mortar.

I would like more time to speak, but I welcome something I raised a while back at the council regarding people being able to build in back gardens. As long as it is not being rented out to the private sector and is for family use, it is a brilliant idea. Let us keep moving with it as quickly as possible.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan):** I will share my time with the Minister. I again thank the Social Democrats for tabling the motion. It is important that we discuss this important topic. It is also fair to say, despite what was said, that we all want the same thing. There is a shared ambition in the House for increased home ownership, increased housing delivery, decreased rents and ending homelessness. Despite that, it is a mischaracterisation to say that our interests are developer-led. They are not. We are interested in helping the same people that the people on the other side of the House are interested in helping.

It is clear that, despite the progress we have made under Housing for All, we need to increase supply. We need to get to approximately 50,000 houses per year. To do that will cost around €20 billion per annum. The State's contribution at the moment is in or around €6 billion. Whether or not that increases - everything is on the table and it may well increase - the fact of the matter is there still remains a deficit of approximately €14 billion. The State cannot do that on its own. We cannot fill that gap on our own. It is, therefore, important that we have input from private investors. However, as soon as we suggest that it is completely mischaracterised. We hear accusations that we are only out there for the developers and that the Celtic tiger is back. That is simply not true and is a mischaracterisation of the truth.

We constantly hear the Housing Commission being referenced in these debates. We are putting on the table and suggesting solutions that have been put forward by that commission. One solution is that we have a diverse and stable source of funding, which includes funding and sources of investment from private investors. I have also constantly heard during today's debate that the RPZs are gone and we are getting rid of rent caps. Nothing of that sort is being suggested. A review is going on. It is only right that we review and look over what we have done so far. To say that we are ending rent caps or that RPZs are gone is, again, a mischaracterisation.

Deputy Hearne mentioned a mother living in emergency accommodation and a baby being born there. Of course, that is unacceptable. That is something we all want to see an end to. Deputy Catherine Connolly referenced people living in tents. These are situations that are unacceptable that we want to see an end to. The Deputies are right to bring these up and this is their opportunity to raise those issues, but what we never hear from the Opposition is how Housing for All has helped people and where it has been a success, which it has. In my constituency, I have seen hundreds of people get secure tenure from social housing under Housing for All. That is something we never hear about. I know these people. They have keys to their

houses and are very glad of interventions from Housing for All. We never hear of those people who availed of the help-to-buy scheme and simply would not have a house without that scheme. We never hear of those people who have availed of the vacant property scheme. Housing for All has helped. It is not perfect but it has helped, although of course we need to do more. We also hear about emigration and people going to Australia quite often in this debate, but we never hear about those who are coming back, which they are. They are coming back in their droves. I know them. They are friends and people my age, and both younger and older, who are coming back. That is something we do not hear about.

We need to have a mature debate on this. I welcome the debate but there has to be room for the private sector to fill that gap. That is quite clear.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I thank the Social Democrats for tabling the motion. We all have a shared ambition of solving the housing crisis. We may come at it from different angles but keeping the debate going is very important.

I will address the comment Deputy Bacik made yesterday on me not being present for Private Members' business last week. The Cabinet was sitting at the time. That is where I was, but two Ministers of State for housing were present. In relation to-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Where were you this morning?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** Sorry, it is the Minister's turn now.

**Deputy James Browne:** I am here.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** No, you were not here for the debate.

**Deputy James Browne:** I am here.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** You came in at the very end.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** Deputy Hearne had his speaking time.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan):** Sorry, there is no talking across the Chamber. The Minister to speak, please.

**Deputy James Browne:** I thank everybody who has contributed to this very important debate. As my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, stated at the outset, this Government is absolutely committed to building more homes in Ireland. We are working continuously to meet the challenge to design and implement policies that shift the dial on delivery and to review and improve our approach where we identify obstacles to meet our targets. In that regard, we want to work collectively with Deputies throughout the House to bring forward solutions to the challenges that we face. This requires addressing the many challenges around housing delivery to achieve that shared goal rather than creating further obstacles or difficulties.

Addressing Ireland's housing shortage requires a substantial increase in the supply of new homes for purchase and rent. In that respect, simplifications are not constructive. They do not build homes and they set public opinion against channels that do. We must be clear on our purpose in attracting private capital; it is to increase the supply of housing. While we hear a lot

of high-level remarks in here and a lot of ideology, we do not hear how we will increase that supply of housing and how we will get to those houses that we need delivered.

While Housing for All is backed by unprecedented State investment of more than €6 billion per annum, developing homes will require a significant amount of investment capital. The Government cannot deliver on this programme alone. Through the updated modelling undertaken by the Department of Finance, it is estimated that €20 billion of development funding per annum, comprising both debt and equity, will be required to develop the 50,000 homes per year that we need. While a portion of this will come from our domestic banks, the majority of private development finance will be acquired from international sources. Institutional investment, such as investment by Irish and European pension funds, is critically important in generating the additional supply of homes we need. Without this investment, activity in the housing market would be much reduced and would increase the significant pressure already facing renters and prospective homeowners.

Capital from well-established investors, including pension and insurance funds, is a normal facet of housing systems in many of our European neighbours and beyond. External sources of finance will be needed to bridge the gap between the overall funding requirements to build 50,000 homes each year and that provided via direct Exchequer funding, State borrowing, HBFI and the domestic banking sector. Apartment development in particular is capital-intensive. The forward investment provided by institutional finance has been a key enabler by unlocking the development capital required, enabling construction to proceed and to deliver much-needed supply. Many of these homes would not be available today without that investment. Since 2019, apartments as a proportion of overall completions have risen from 16% to 33%. This would not have happened in the absence of non-bank funding.

Overall, it is clear that in order to continue to make progress we need investment from multiple sources both private and public. Our mix of policies must reflect that. The State is doing more than it ever has before. An unprecedented level of public resources is being directed at housing. That is the right thing to do and the Government will continue to do it. However, we cannot do it alone. We need more housing of every type – social, affordable and private. This can be achieved only through the public and private sectors working together and their respective strengths. The Government is firmly focused on the delivery of more homes for families, individuals, those who need support from the State, private owners, renters and right-sizers. Housing needs are varied and we have a multifaceted response to them. We have seen much progress in the delivery of homes; however, we know we need to do much more and we are committed to doing what is needed.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** I thank the Minister for his comments. What is happening is deeply frustrating. Government policy should not rely on luck. Indeed, the people of Ireland should not have to rely on luck when it comes to housing, but it is too often the case. I believe the Minister will agree with me because we are now starting to see the unravelling of the housing policies of successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments. What has come to pass is that the relationships between the parties are coming apart. We are seeing discontent, tension and thinking-out-loud policy. We are now asking young people to sleep in sheds and we are talking about the eradication of rent pressure zones and tax cuts for developers. I am starting to wonder whether we are talking to the same people in Ireland. When it comes to housing, is the Government hearing from the same people we are hearing from, the people who cannot cope anymore with the precarity of their living situation? They are either homeless or facing the threat of homelessness. They may be ten years or more on a social housing list. Children

and families are in family hubs, which were meant to be temporary solutions, despite it being years on. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, said this morning it is unacceptable, but these policies are accepting it. Not only are the policies accepting the situation, they are also doubling down on it. It is worsening around us, not improving, so it is very disingenuous for the Government to say it is committed to improvement and seeing effects. It is not committed to these because the policy is not changing. The precarity of so many people's living circumstances will continue to worsen. That is a fact because we rely on the private market to meet a public need. That is on the Government.

We are here and we are ready. The Taoiseach said yesterday he is open to and wants a debate on housing. Where are we? What are we doing? It is so disingenuous to think this is a debate on housing. We are not talking about policy here. The Minister arrived in for the end of the debate. I believe things can be better. We and others in this Chamber are here to work constructively on solutions, but it has to start with an acknowledgment that where things are right now with housing policy is very concerning and does not seem to be getting any better.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** I find it really hard to listen to the Government's rhetoric on housing. The Minister comes in here and talks about the progress the Government has made but homelessness has hit an all-time high. How is that in any sense progress? Rents and house prices are soaring, and schemes such as the help-to-buy scheme are just driving up house prices. The Government is failing people in this country every single day, yet its members come into the Dáil and state they are doing more than ever before. It is clearly not working.

Like my colleague, I wonder whether the Government members are meeting the same people I meet. Are they meeting the multigenerational families who are crammed into small houses? Not only are people stuck in childhood bedrooms but there are parents, children and grandchildren living together not out of choice but out of necessity. There are people sleeping in doorways and tents. There are people existing in emergency accommodation. I say "existing" because it is hard to have a life when you are stuck in homelessness. There are older people being given notices to quit and they have nowhere to go. There are people waiting for over a decade for social housing in Cork city, and young people emigrating because they have lost hope of ever owning a home in this country. These are the people I see and meet and who need solutions, not spin from the Government.

It is really frustrating that when we highlight these issues, we are told we do not have solutions. When we set out our solutions, the Government refuses to listen. Its members turns up late. Fine Gael members seem not to have turned up at all. Despite the Taoiseach having said yesterday he wants a debate on housing policy, the Government does not engage in it. All we get are spin and bluster.

We have set out in detail, in numerous documents, our solutions. I encourage the Minister to read them. We have detailed housing policies and he can have a read of them. We have also set out in detail, in this motion, some of the solutions. They include closing the loopholes that allow investor funds to avoid tax, increasing the stamp duty on bulk purchasing, accessing EU funding, providing early-stage finance to approved housing bodies and local authorities, and protecting renters by not removing rent pressure zones until there is an alternative in place. I believe these are the solutions. The solution is not more beds in sheds.

The key issue is really around affordability. Over the past five years, the Government has really failed to provide affordable housing. The few houses that were built under the Afford-

able Housing Act stretched the definition of affordability to breaking point. In my constituency, Cork South-Central, some of the houses cost over €400,000. On what planet is a house that costs over €400,000 affordable?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** Branding the houses as affordable increases the level of hopelessness among young people. They feel the houses are just more out of reach for them. I believe we should rename the Act the Unaffordable Housing Act because unaffordable housing is genuinely what it is delivering.

We need a radical reset of housing policy. The answers to this crisis are not found in the failed policies of the past. We need the State to be more involved in the direct delivery of affordable homes, and we need the Government to start listening to first-time buyers, renters and those in homelessness instead of those with vested interests because, until it does, nothing is going to change.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I appreciate the Minister coming in for the last ten minutes of the debate. I look forward to hearing from him the reason he was not here earlier. I believe, in all fairness, that it is disrespectful for the Minister to claim he was present for a debate when he arrived in at the very end. It is indicative of a Government that is unwilling to listen to new ideas.

When this country was dirt poor, the State built houses. It built the estates of Marino, Crumlin and Ballymun. In towns and cities across the country, councils built housing for our people. Now, however, with unprecedented wealth, we say we cannot do it. We have to bring in global vulture funds and hand our young people over to them to become income streams for them in perpetuity, to become permanent renters in poverty. We do not agree with this and believe there is an alternative way. The Minister claims the State is doing all it can. That is misleading. It is not doing all it can. In this regard, consider the delays affecting the tenant *in situ* scheme and the failure to protect tenants from eviction. Just 2,000 homes were liable for the vacant property tax last year when there are at least 88,000 vacant homes. The Minister talks about the private sector. A significant proportion of the overall housing budget is going directly to the private sector not to build homes but as an income stream, through the rental accommodation scheme, the housing assistance payment and social housing leasing. Every year, some €1.5 billion goes to the private sector. It does not deliver homes but takes money out of the public budget.

We have put forward very clear solutions today. One is to develop a new State savings scheme that would provide additional finance – we have €160 billion in deposits – to build social and affordable housing. We have heard in the debate from people across this country who are very clear that the councils, our local authorities, are not funded sufficiently to develop on land banks, tackle vacancy and tackle dereliction. They do not have the capacity to deliver the affordable and social homes that are needed, so we still need to see the radical reset of housing policy. We have suggested that the Government put an additional €2.5 billion into local authorities and not-for-profit housing bodies to deliver the housing.

*12 o'clock*

The question is not where we will get the private finance from but why we are not using the public funds available to deliver social and affordable housing through our local authorities and our not-for-profit housing bodies.

In our health system, we do not say to people that we are restricting the funding and restrict-

ing their access to accident and emergency or to maternity care because the State has decided the private sector has to deliver them and if the private sector does not deliver the accident and emergency wards or the GPs, they will not get access to healthcare. In housing, the State has to guarantee and deliver the homes people need. That is the Government's responsibility, it is the State's responsibility, and it is time we got the policy changed to do that.

Amendment put.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Under Standing Order 85, the division is deferred until the weekly division time this evening.

## Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** "Housing delivery is the number one priority for this Government." That is the opening line of the statement issued by the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste following the first meeting of the Cabinet committee on housing. From this meeting, they had promised a slate of new and dynamic ideas, they said, to tackle the housing crisis, but that has not materialised. In fact, they have brought nothing new at all. The truth is that the Government's housing plan is in freefall after its figure of 40,000 new homes for 2024 was discovered to be a work of fiction. Now the Government has this scattered, frantic, directionless approach where it is talking about everything but dealing with nothing.

Just to remind the Taoiseach, we still have sky-high house prices - the CSO tells us €200,000 more expensive now than a decade ago. We still have rip-off rents and shocking levels of homelessness, and today a report reveals the extent to which international students are being pressurised for sex in return for rent-free housing, surely a new low. The Government proposes to end the rent pressure zones and proposes to reintroduce tax breaks for developers but it gives nothing on how the Government will deliver homes that working people can actually afford to buy or rent. After all the high-level meetings, its big centrepiece idea, it seems, is to relax planning rules to allow people to build cabins in the bottom of their gardens. Now, greater flexibility is needed in this, and we will work with the Minister to get the regulations in place. However, to cast this up as the solution to the housing crisis simply highlights just how broken and how failed the Government's response to the housing crisis is. Tinkering around at the edges does not cut it. We need a serious change of direction in housing policy, one in which the housing needs of ordinary people are prioritised and where affordability is tackled head-on.

In O'Devaney Gardens, now called Montpelier, here in Dublin, the largest Government so-called affordable housing scheme in the State, we read this morning that a two-bedroom apartment in the development can cost anything up to €402,000. That is not affordable. It is certainly not the cost we should be getting from a Government-subsidised housing scheme. This was, remember, public land on which the State should have and could have developed genuinely affordable homes, but instead the Government forced Dublin City Council to hand it over to a private developer and now we have these prices that are out of reach for the vast majority of working people.

The Taoiseach has stated that "everything is on the table" when it comes to housing, but in reality this is code for not having a clue what to do next. His so-called new Government has

no new ideas and no coherent plan. Tá plean tithíochta an Rialtais ina phraiseach; mar sin, tá an cur chuige trína chéile. Níl tuairim ná freagra nua ar bith ag an Rialtas seo atá in ainm is a bheith nua, mar dhea. This Government is all over the place on housing. The big question now is when it will get its act together. When will it bring forward new ideas and solutions to this crisis?

**The Taoiseach:** Is léir ó 2020 amach go bhfuil dul chun cinn le feiscint ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta. Tá an-chuid déanta againn ach is léir maraon leis sin nach bhfuil dóthain déanta againn agus go bhfuil i bhfad níos mó le déanamh sna míonna agus na blianta atá romhainn. An tuairim atá agam féin ná go bhfuil an polasaí atá ag an Rialtas seo i bhfad níos fearr agus go mbeidh sé i bhfad níos éifeachtaí ná na polasaithe atá foilsithe ag Sinn Féin. Níl aon amhras orm faoi sin. Since 2020 onwards, there has been progress on housing. We went from 20,000 a year to over 30,000 a year. We exceeded the targets that were set in Housing for All, which were realistic targets taking variable factors into account. Given, however, the rise in the Irish population and the growth of our country, it is not enough, and I acknowledge that.

Housing is the number one issue facing us. The last Government introduced a range of schemes. This Government, only a number of weeks in office, has announced a further €450 million in additional funding for social, affordable and cost-rental homes. We are setting up a new strategic housing initiative office, as recommended by the Housing Commission. We are publishing the national planning framework to allow us to zone much more land and to enable the county councils and the city councils to zone additional land for more houses to be built. We are hitting the ground running as regards the housing agenda.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** I will contrast that with Sinn Féin's position. I acknowledge all the challenges and the pricing and so on, but the bottom line is that our schemes have helped an enormous number of first-time buyers. The help-to-buy scheme has seen about 51,000 approvals. Sinn Féin opposed it and proposed to abolish it. As regards the first home scheme, likewise, over 3,000 homes have been bought by young couples or young individuals using that scheme. Sinn Féin proposed to abolish that. That is, I believe, why the people were not persuaded by its housing policy platform. Then it had a convoluted idea under affordable housing that people could buy the house but could not buy the land on which the house was built, and a Sinn Féin government would dictate how they would sell the house subsequently, which appealed to nobody out there in respect of young people looking to buy a house for the future.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Not true. At least they could afford the houses, unlike under the Government's policy.

**The Taoiseach:** Those are the facts, and people made decisions based on that.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Based on the figure of 40,000.

**The Taoiseach:** That does not get away, however, from the need to get to 50,000 houses per annum, as the ESRI indicates are required, given our population growth. The focus has to be on initiatives that make that happen. Deputy McDonald mentioned O'Devaney Gardens. I accept that those prices are high, but they are being heavily subsidised as it is by the State, so the Deputy cannot have it both ways.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** But we told you this was going to happen. You ignored our advice.

**The Taoiseach:** The entire intervention in housing at the moment-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We told you how to do it properly and you ignored our advice.

**The Taoiseach:** This is now repeatedly happening, a Cheann Comhairle - repeated heckling and interventions by Sinn Féin-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I am just reminding you, Taoiseach. We gave you an alternative and you ignored it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, finish. You have 30 seconds left.

**The Taoiseach:** -----every time I speak on Leaders' Questions. Those sorts of intimidatory tactics and attempts to disrupt must be stopped.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, I will handle that. You have 30 seconds left.

**The Taoiseach:** Well, I am just making a point-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** As am I.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and I am not going to take it without making the point. Deputy Ó Broin seems to be aspiring to be the leader of Sinn Féin or something. I do not know-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Absolutely not. I am happy where I am, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** -----but he is constantly interrupting on these matters.

As regards other initiatives we will take-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** -----we outlined those yesterday in the aftermath of the Cabinet subcommittee-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up now.

**The Taoiseach:** -----on housing, which we held on Monday.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I can only surmise that the Taoiseach wishes to deflect and comment on Sinn Féin's policies because he knows he has been caught out. He has been found out. He spoofed during the election campaign. He presented a work of fiction. It was fact flexibility from Fianna Fáil. What a novel thing - not. Now he is in the hot seat again and there is an expectation of delivery and he is showing no serious intent, much less any capacity, to actually deliver the affordable homes that working people require at scale, and no real interest in taming runaway rents - far from it. He is quite happy to listen to his lobbyist friends and all of his old party political mates who now find themselves in other places of influence.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Government has missed social and affordable housing targets every single year on the Taoiseach's watch and the typical home, as I told him, is

€200,000 more expensive than it was over a decade ago.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond. Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach claims progress but the residential property price index demonstrates-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, your time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----prices are up by 8.7% in the last 12 months.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** You are failing, Taoiseach. Why do you not just stand up and accept that fact?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Hear, hear.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach, please.

**The Taoiseach:** First of all, the differences in our policy platforms on housing are clear. Sinn Féin would do away with supports for first-time buyers.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We would reduce prices and rents.

**The Taoiseach:** We are going to double down and continue our supports for first-time buyers in particular.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We have very different policies.

**The Taoiseach:** In the first weeks of this Government we have substantially increased allocations for social, affordable and cost rental by an additional €450 million.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** But still less money this year than last.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Ó Broin, please.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is still less money this year than last, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** Now the big issue facing the country is outturn.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Misleading the House again.

**The Taoiseach:** We are not misleading anybody, Deputy.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Less money for social and affordable housing than last year.

**The Taoiseach:** Is this going to be a constant-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Tell the House the facts.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please stop interrupting.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Ó Broin, I have heard your leader speak, through the Chair-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, it is your leader asking the question. Allow the Taoiseach to speak. Thank you.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I would be interested in an answer to the question.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**The Taoiseach:** This is a constant behavioural tactic of Sinn Féin to prevent the Government side of the House from at least presenting its position.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** When the time is up, the time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** The main point I was going to make is there are a number of options facing us. We have to get the private sector involved much more, as we know from all the lobbyists Deputy Ó Broin met. I also take the point that was made earlier-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your time is up, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** -----in respect of public expenditure.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** We need to increase public expenditure-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We move to Deputy Bacik of the Labour Party.

**The Taoiseach:** -----on housing.

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

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Less this year than last, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** We have to try to do both.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Less money for social and affordable housing this year than last.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**The Taoiseach:** Whether it is a tax-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is the truth.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up, Taoiseach. Thank you.

**The Taoiseach:** This is not satisfactory, a Cheann Comhairle.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Bacik of the Labour Party.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not satisfactory.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** State the facts, Taoiseach.

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

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Do not mislead the House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Bacik.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This winter has set yet more alarming new records for people on trolleys in our emergency departments. That means more people whose care may be compromised because there is no space for them or no one to admit them. It means more risks for patients' conditions to worsen in a place where they should expect to improve.

I welcome the new efforts the Minister for Health announced to tackle overcrowding. These are long overdue. In yesterday's press release from her Department, she identified two issues exacerbating the problem. The first, she said, is the ongoing lack of capacity in hospitals. The second, she tells us, is the increased number of people on trolleys over weekends and on bank holidays due to lower discharge rates. She spoke strongly on radio about this earlier. These are serious issues but the single largest problem, in reality, is the continued chronic shortage of healthcare staff, including nursing staff, support staff and medical staff. The continued pause on recruitment is having a real and serious impact on healthcare in our communities and our hospitals and everyone knows this. Anyone who has recently visited a hospital knows this, so it is not just our view in the Labour Party.

Last week, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation released its first Behind the Trolley Numbers survey conducted by nurses working in acute hospitals and treating patients on trolleys or in hospital corridors. This is the real-world experience of those on the coalface of the crisis. Their view is overwhelming. When it comes to ending overcrowding, 83% identified bed capacity and 80% said recruiting more staff are key to addressing the issue. When it comes to building hospital capacity, clearly there are a great many measures that must be taken. Some of these have been announced, in fairness, by the Minister. We would welcome these, such as the digitising of health records, which is long overdue, and new methods to increase productivity and forward planning in advance of weekends we know will place more strain on the system. Ultimately, however, these measures will come to nothing until the Taoiseach's Government acts to recruit more healthcare workers and until it introduces ways to improve conditions for staff who are already there so we have better retention rates, because staff do not feel they are being treated with respect.

We have an ageing population, we have more complex needs than before and demand for emergency care has increased, but that is no excuse for outrageous gaps and delays in the system. Last week I raised the case of an elderly woman in my constituency. She was left waiting three hours for an ambulance to take her ten minutes up the road to a hospital. I have received contact from so many other paramedics and ambulance workers since then about they care they provide being compromised by staff shortages. When will we hear more about the new healthcare plan, specifically on staffing and working conditions? Crucially, when will the Government urgently act to carry out the necessary recruitment drive to ensure we have enough staff working in our healthcare system?

**The Taoiseach:** Admhaím go bhfuil brú ar na seirbhísí éigeandála, go háirithe ar na hospidéil. Bhí sé sin le feiscint ar Lá Fhéile Bríde agus an deireadh seachtaine sin. Níl sé sásúil agus tá sé sin ráite ag an Aire Sláinte. I acknowledge first of all the very significant challenges facing emergency departments, especially over St. Brigid's weekend, the pressure on people and the distress that causes to people waiting long hours in our emergency departments. The overcrowding on St. Brigid's weekend, however, which the Minister was right to highlight, was directly linked to low weekend discharges and subsequent high numbers on trolleys. This has

been an issue for quite some time. The introduction of the public-only contract, which was a very significant development achieved last year, was very much linked to a changing roster arrangement and deployment of senior decision-makers in our hospitals to give weekend cover.

Historically in the public health service, weekends are the worst times to be admitted to a hospital. The House needs to engage with that. There has been enormous investment in health in the past five years by any standard, both in recruitment and infrastructure, and there needs to be more. Parallel with that investment we need to analyse forensically the deployment of people with a view to getting the optimal outcome for patients and people who attend our hospitals. We have wonderful people working in our hospitals but we have long said it cannot be five days. There has to be rostering of senior decision-makers to enable better discharge so we do not get this issue at weekends, especially bank holiday weekends, which have been a feature.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Who is in government?

**The Taoiseach:** There have been some successes on that front.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** How long is the Taoiseach in government?

**The Taoiseach:** Some hospitals, like Waterford, Tullamore and Connolly, for example, had zero or low trolley numbers as well. There is therefore a management issue as well as one of resources.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Managers not consultants.

**The Taoiseach:** We need an increase in resources and we have been recruiting extensively. Funding has been allocated for further recruitment of staff this year, especially medical staff, nurses and allied healthcare professionals. These are issues we need to discuss and engage on with hospital management and representative bodies. It is not just about increases and increases on their own. We have to analyse deployment and ensure we get the best outcomes for patients. That is what the Minister has been highlighting in her comments and in the data she has received, especially in relation to St. Brigid's weekend.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I have acknowledged there are issues with discharge rates at weekends. Clearly there are issues with workflow and management practices, but changes in workflow and management practices are no substitute for properly addressing the real issue underlying the crisis in healthcare, which is the issue of staff shortages. We are hearing from hospitals that know they need to recruit more staff, that have identified gaps and engaged in recruitment but are not getting the go-ahead from the HSE to be able to offer the jobs. Thus, we hear from healthcare workers who are leaving for other countries because they are so chronically overworked due to staff shortages. This is not just in emergency care but across our healthcare system. The shortage of public health nurses in the community is causing babies to miss key developmental checks and the HSE has confirmed it has had to scale back its service, thereby leaving children and babies at the mercy of a postcode lottery in terms of key developmental checks.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I will ask the Taoiseach again-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** -----when will the Government carry out the necessary recruitment drive?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy and call the Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** When will it end the pause on healthcare recruitment so our communities can get the healthcare we so badly need?

**The Taoiseach:** First of all, there is ongoing recruitment. There are now 25,000 more people working in the health service since 2020. That includes nurses and consultants. The number of consultants employed in our health service has gone up 42%. We are continuing to recruit, there is ongoing recruitment and funding was put into the Estimates for additional numbers in 2025. However, the attendances are also going up. An ageing population is putting pressure on our emergency departments. What is working best is a whole-of-hospital approach to emergency departments. It is producing results in several hospitals. There has been analysis of certain hospitals of what has been happening within them and so on. Recruitment is ongoing and we are committed to affordable recruitment of nursing staff as well as investment in capacity-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and elective facilities such as surgical hubs and elective hospitals.

**Deputy Máire Devine:** That is not true.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** That is not true.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** That has not been approved.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now move to Deputy Cian O'Callaghan of the Social Democrats.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Growing numbers of children and their families across Ireland are being left waiting for assessments of need well in excess of the legal timeframes permitted. According to the Disability Act 2005, an assessment of need must be completed within six months of the date the application is received. I have received new figures from the HSE which show that, at the end of 2024, there were 14,221 children overdue an assessment of need. That is an increase of nearly 60% compared with 2023. That is 60% in just 12 months.

As the Taoiseach knows, early intervention is key. Getting a quick assessment followed by services and supports means the child can reach their full potential. According to the HSE, the average duration of the assessment period is now more than two years - two years. Even more, when a child gets their assessment of need, they can be left waiting years for services and supports which often never materialise. The State is failing children and their families. This is creating huge stress and pressure. Children are being left behind during these critical early years of their development. To make matters worse, we cannot even rely on these figures. In some areas, manipulation of waiting lists is taking place. Some families have been told their child has been put on a waiting list to be put on a waiting list. Not only is this completely disingenuous, it adds to the significant stress and pressure families experience.

The situation is so bad that there are now several law firms who will issue a legal complaint to the HSE on a family's behalf after three months and initiate legal proceedings after six

months. This typically results in the HSE providing an assessment of need through contracting a private service. Families who do not go down this route are left at the back of the queue while legal costs for the State are mounting. Instead of the State forking out money on legal fees, would it not be much better to instead spend the money on ensuring the legal timeframes are met in the first place?

During the election campaign, the Taoiseach said the establishment of multidisciplinary teams in schools, including speech and language and occupational therapists, would be a red line issue for Fianna Fáil if it were returned to Government. He also said work would begin on this on day one. Will the Taoiseach tell the 14,221 children and their families who are overdue an assessment of need what this Government is doing about it? When will the Government meet the six-month legal timeframe for completing the assessment of needs, and when will the multidisciplinary teams that were promised be put in place?

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy O'Callaghan is correct insofar as I identified the provision of a schools-based multidisciplinary therapy service, particularly in special schools, as a core priority and red line issue of mine. We are pursuing it. I have already had meetings with my officials and we will be convening a meeting with all relevant Ministers and agencies in respect of delivering on that. There were attempts at a pilot initiative on that front in the past year which did not yield the outcomes both the HSE and the Department anticipated it would. That was based on a HSE model. That is one initiative we have to take but it will not solve all the issues. The CDNT teams are recruiting, so it is not a funding issue. They have, however, had challenges recruiting therapists to the model established since progressing disabilities services was introduced in 2013, which has not worked. That is why I passionately believe in a schools-based system, especially in special schools to begin with.

We also must deal with the outcome of the 2022 High Court judgement of Ms Justice Phelan in the case of CTM and JA *v.* the HSE which found the preliminary team assessment approach described in the HSE's standing operating procedures for assessment did not meet the requirements of the Disability Act. We must deal with that through legislation. There has to be engagement if we want to move this on. This has had a huge impact on the assessment of need process and that must be acknowledged. There were issues around recruitment in that but that ruling has had, operationally, a significant impact on the situation. We need to admit that, and when I say "we", I mean we collectively in the House, but politically people may not want to deal with that. I believe we have to deal with that. It is just another step towards changing around the situation here.

We must then significantly increase the number of training places in our universities for therapists, particularly speech and language and occupational therapists, physiotherapists, audiologists and allied healthcare professionals. The last big initiative was taken when I was Minister for Health and Children in 2003 when we created new colleges. At that point, there was only one college in Ireland training speech and language therapists, but we need to double down on that in this era and create significantly more places in our third level colleges in this area. In the interim period, the HSE has been facilitating parents with private sector services and accessing private providers. I want a national health-based system for clinical assessment and then an education system for special schools.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** A total of 90% of assessment of needs are being done outside of the legal timeframe. This is the law. It is not an optional extra for the Taoiseach or the Government. I am not clear from the Taoiseach's answer if the Government is going to meet the

legal requirements of the Disability Act. Is it going to take action so that 90% turns to 0% so the Taoiseach and his Government are compliant with the law on this? Is it the intention of the Government not to meet the requirements of the Disability Act? Will the Taoiseach be clear on that? Is the Government going to take action to meet the requirements of the Disability Act or is it intending not to do so and allow the current situation to continue?

**The Taoiseach:** We are not prepared to allow the current situation to continue. All focus will be on improving access to therapies, for children in particular, and turning around the entire approach from the earliest days of a child coming out of paediatric services. There is not a sufficient link between coming out of paediatric services and follow-on services. In some cases, however, the needs of children will not be immediately apparent. Some manifest later in a child's life, but there needs to be far greater synergy between the world of paediatrics and the follow-up and early childcare services. We also need to increase significantly the capacity, context and environment for therapists to work. There have been challenges within the CDNT teams. In many cases, the workload has been particularly onerous and many therapists have left the service. There is now a difficulty recruiting therapists to the service, notwithstanding the funding we made available to enable them to do so.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. Agus Seachtain na Gaeilge ar siúl go luath i gceann coicíse, bhí mé ag smaoineamh faoi conas a chothaítear níos mó Gaeilge a úsáid, go mór mór i measc na nÉireannach nua. I ndáiríre, tá fadhb againn. Léiríonn figiúirí ón Roinn Oideachais go bhfuil 8% de dhaltaí bunscoile sna Sé Chontae Fichead ag freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna agus go bhfuil 8.3% de na bunscoileanna sna Sé Chontae Fichead ag baint le Gaelscoileanna. Léiríonn taighde ón ESRI, áfach, go bhfuil an leibhéal éilimh ar an nGaelscolaíocht ag 23%. Tá níos mó daoine ag lorg spás sna Gaelscoileanna.

Dúirt mé an tseachtain seo chaite go gcaithfidh muid níos mó Gaelscoileanna a oscailt. Tá sé seo fíor. I measc thuismitheoirí na ndaltaí sna Gaelscoileanna atá againn anois, áfach, cé mhéad acu siúd a rugadh in Éirinn? Níl figiúirí níos deireanaí agam, ach sa bhliain 2017 measadh go raibh 6% de dhaltaí ar fud an bhunleibhéil Gaeilge, agus go raibh titim go 1.6% i mbunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Tá mé cinnte go bhfuil go leor tuismitheoirí ag iarraidh go bhfoghlaimíonn a gcuid páistí Gaeilge ach níl an deis nó an t-eolas acu lena dhéanamh. Tá sé deacair nuair nach é an Béarla a gcuid teanga dúchais, gan trácht ar an nGaeilge. Mar sin, caithfidh muid féachaint i ndáiríre conas líon na nÉireannach nua a mhéadú sna Gaelscoileanna.

Is cinnte go bhfuil daoine ag cur isteach ar shaoránacht Éireannach. Is é mo thuairim ar aon nós gur cheart go mbeadh siad in ann líofacht a léiriú i gceann amháin dár dteangacha náisiúnta ar a laghad, agus leibhéal réasúnta comhrá sa teanga eile, an Ghaeilge is dócha. Is smaoineamh é sin.

Ag an am céanna, tá orainn níos mó Gaeilge a labhairt i rith an lae. Níl mé ag caint faoi Ghaeilge líofa ach faoi chomhráite Ghaeilge. Tá a fhios ag formhór na ndaoine go bhfuil caighdeán níos fearr Fraincise ag daltaí meánscoile thar an Ghaeilge tar éis sé bliana, cé go raibh ocht mbliain acu roimhe sin sa bhunscoil ag foghlaim Gaeilge. Cén fáth a bhfuil sé mar seo? Is í an dara cheist atá agam ná cad a cheapann an Taoiseach faoi chúrsaí nua sna scoileanna san ardteist nó sa junior certificate le béim ar chomhráite trí Ghaeilge?

**The Taoiseach:** Ar dtús báire, tá mé buíoch den Teachta as ucht an cheist seo a ardú. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil a fhios ag cách ach tá leabhar foilsithe ag Mark Henry a bhaineann le stair

na tíre ó 1922 go dtí 2020 agus an méid dul chun cinn atá le feiscint in áiteanna éagsúla. Is é ceann de na figiúirí a léiríonn sé ná go bhfuil i bhfad níos mó daoine sa lá atá inniu ann ag labhairt agus ag foghlaim na Gaeilge, agus le cumas na Gaeilge acu, ná mar a bhí sa tír seo in 1922.

Tá an ceart ag an Teachta nuair a deir sé go bhfuil tionchar faoi leith, nó go raibh tionchar faoi leith, ag fás agus forbairt na nGaelscolaíochta ar na figiúirí sin. Sa Dáil seo, tá i bhfad níos mó Gaeilgeoirí tar éis a bheith tofa ná mar a bhí cheana féin. I bhFianna Fáil, tá an-chuid daoine anois againn a bhfuil cumas na Gaeilge acu. B'fhéidir go bhfuil glúin nua ag teacht ar an bhfód agus an Ghaeilge go nádúrtha acu de bharr na béime ar níos mó Gaelscoileanna agus coláistí lán-Ghaeilge ag an dara leibhéal. Caithfidh muid a chur san áireamh chomh maith go bhfuil dualgas ar an ngnáthbhunscoil an Ghaeilge a chothú agus béim a chur ar an nGaeilge.

Maidir leis na hÉireannaigh nua, caithfidh an meon a bheith ceart. Caithfidh muid gach aon iarracht a dhéanamh an Ghaeilge a chur ar fáil do na hÉireannaigh nua chun iad a mhealladh agus tacaíocht is áiseanna a thabhairt dóibh. Mar a dúirt an Teachta, ba cheart dúinn deiseanna a thabhairt dóibh an Ghaeilge a labhairt go nádúrtha gan mórán béime ar an ngramadach nó ar chruinneas na teanga agus mar sin de.

Tá an dealramh ar an scéal go bhfuil roinnt de na hÉireannaigh nua báúil don Ghaeilge. Tá fonn orthu an Ghaeilge a labhairt. Tá a fhios agam féin nuair a bhí mé ag dul timpeall na tíre ag bualadh le grúpaí áirithe go ndearna na hÉireannaigh nua iarracht an Ghaeilge a labhairt. Bhí sé sin soiléir.

Aontaím leis an Teachta go bhfuil níos mó le déanamh againn. Caithfidh muid níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt, ní hamháin do na Gaelscoileanna ach freisin do na bunscoileanna ó thaobh áiseanna agus teicneolaíocht a chur ar fáil chun feabhas a chur ar an scéal, go háirithe sna bunscoileanna.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Taoiseach. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil caighdeán Gaeilge an-mhaith sna gnáthscoileanna freisin agus go bhfuil na hÉireannaigh nua ag lorg áiteanna chun an Ghaeilge a labhairt an t-am ar fad freisin. Tá a fhios agam sin.

Is mór is cuimhin liom nuair a bhí mé i mo mhéara ar Chomhairle Contae Átha Cliath Theas, fuarthas cuireadh ó ghrúpa reilige ar Lá Fhéile Pádraig agus bhí an ghrúpa ag canadh go leor amhrán. Chan siad amhráin as Béarla agus as Gaeilge. Ba mhór an bród a bhí ar an ngrúpa seo as a bheith ina nÉireannaigh agus as a gcuid tíortha nádúrtha ag an am céanna. Chuala mé freisin an Córán á léamh trí Ghaeilge. Tá a lán daoine ag iarraidh Gaeilge a labhairt ach caithfear an tslí a dhéanamh níos simplí. B'fhéidir go bhfuil orainn comhrá a bheith againn faoin chaighdeán Gaeilge.

**The Taoiseach:** Is suimiúil go raibh an taithí sin ag an Teachta nuair a bhí sé ina mhéara. B'fhéidir go léiríonn sé go bhfuil orainn i bhfad níos mó a dhéanamh ó thaobh tacaíochta a thabhairt do na grúpaí áirithe ar fud na tíre agus i measc an phobail i gcoitinne. Tá mé sásta bualadh leis na hAirí Gaeltachta agus Oideachais agus leis an Rialtas i gcoitinne faoi conas is féidir níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt do ghrúpaí den saghas sin a luaigh an Teachta chun an Ghaeilge a labhairt. B'fhéidir go gcaithfear áiseanna a chur ar fáil dóibh chun a bheith níos compordaí agus níos muiníní as an nGaeilge a úsáid go rialta mar tá fonn orthu. Tuigeann siad go bhfuil nasc idir cumas na Gaeilge agus a bheith mar Éireannach nua, mar a dúirt an Teachta é féin.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** As there are 18 Members wishing to speak, I ask that we stay within the time limits. Someone will lose out. I call Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I wish to raise the issue of staffing levels at the children's hospital. A serious letter has been written by all 12 surgeons at the department of paediatric surgery and urology at Children's Health Ireland. I believe it has gone to the Minister for Health. In this letter, the surgeons outline bizarrely that the plans for opening the new children's hospital will see it understaffed from day one. The surgeons believe that they have been ignored and that the recommended workforce of 17 paediatric surgeons has not been factored in. In their words, they believe that will impact negatively on the provision of safe and sustainable services. They go on to outline their concerns that this risk has not been properly assessed. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree that this is an unacceptable situation. This hospital is now delayed five years and there still is no proper plan to open it. What will he do in respect of this staffing shortfall?

**The Taoiseach:** In the opening of any major hospital facility - I have experience of both sanctioning and providing the funding for some major facilities from my time as Minister for Health and Children - there is always a subsequent debate and issue around the proper commissioning and staffing of a hospital, particularly in the context of movement from the older facilities to the newer facility. I understand that Children's Health Ireland has been working on this for quite some time and that there has been a whole range of structures set in place to facilitate a smooth transition from the existing paediatric hospitals and tertiary hospitals to the new national children's hospital. I accept that this will be on a scale never experienced before, particularly in paediatric medicine. In my view, the new facility will be state of the art. There will be a huge step change in terms of health and we need to match that with the required staffing levels.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Monday will mark three years since Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. I wish to express my solidarity, and that of the Labour Party, with the people of Ukraine who have endured such devastation over those three years and have defended their country so courageously against Russia's imperialist aggression. I condemn last night's remarks by US President Donald Trump implying that Ukraine had started the war. Indeed, I condemn what we are seeing now with the sidelining of the European Union and, most importantly, the sidelining of Ukraine from Trump's so-called peace negotiations with Putin. Ireland is militarily neutral but we are not, and should not be, politically neutral when it comes to standing with Ukraine. I am asking how the Government can best continue to show solidarity with Ukraine as we approach this anniversary. Will the Taoiseach commit to retaining support for the accommodation recognition payment at its current level?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I will be attending a virtual meeting of European leaders later this afternoon convened by President Macron regarding the unfolding situation on the war in Ukraine. We will take that opportunity to reiterate our support for Ukraine. I will also be pushing strongly for the EU to accelerate the membership process and the application from Ukraine to become a member of the EU. Apart from the economic, social and wider aspects of membership of the EU, there would be a significant security benefit to Ukraine by virtue of being a member of the EU. The Ukrainian Government has responded very admirably. I welcome what US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said, namely, that

there needs to be a sustainable and durable peace and that Europe and Ukraine will have to play a part in any outcome to any talks that may develop.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** What about the accommodation recognition payment?

**The Taoiseach:** The Minister for Justice is dealing with that.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** Families in Dublin South Central are contacting me because they are in fear of becoming homeless. This issue arose today a number times during the debate on our Private Members' motion. The home they are living in could be sold to Dublin City Council and the landlord is willing to do so. However, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has not allocated the funding for the tenant *in situ* scheme so, therefore, they cannot do that. The landlord is willing to sell and the council is willing to buy but the budget has not been allocated. Today is 19 February so I would like to know when the Minister will allocate the budget this year. I would also like to know that this is done in advance for next year and subsequent years. If there is money in the budget and there is a plan for it, what is the reason for the delay?

**The Taoiseach:** Is this one family or a particular family?

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** Several.

**The Taoiseach:** The tenant *in situ* scheme has been subject to a short review in terms of targeting and making sure we get the best value for money but also making sure that families most in need benefit from the scheme and we get the best outcomes all round in terms of the application of that scheme. There has been engagement within the Department on that issue and we expect that to be resolved shortly.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act was passed in 2017. Under that Act, there was not merely a promise but a legal obligation to carry out a review. That Act was brought in ostensibly to provide better protection for sex workers on the ground. There was much debate at the time so the review is essential to see if the legislation is achieving what it was set up to do. We were promised it in 2020, 2021, mid-2022 and on into 2023 but no review has been completed, although I am given to understand that it may have been completed. Has the report been completed and, if so, when will it be published? If it has not been completed, when will it be completed?

**The Taoiseach:** Do I have to take this or can it be the Minister?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister can answer during Questions on Promised Legislation.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I raised that issue in the Department shortly after I was appointed. I am aware that the review has been ongoing. It is not yet completed but I agree with the Deputy regarding the urgency of it being published. I will go back to the Department and find out the date of publication.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am delighted by the news today that the Government is planning to exempt cabin-style units at the back of family homes. This is a wonderful idea. My brother, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, and I have been looking for this for many years never more so than now. It is a great idea and I thank the Government. This is a real attempt at housing people that can happen very quickly.

In tandem with that, many people are being denied planning permission in respect of sites at their parents' homes. They are being deprived because of something called urban-generated pressure. "Urban" to me means town or village. These people never lived in a town or village. They lived in their parents' house in the country. Why are they being disallowed planning permission? These people will cost the Government nothing. They want to build the houses themselves and all they are asking for is the green light.

**The Taoiseach:** The issue of exempted development was raised and we dealt with it at the Cabinet sub-committee at the beginning of the week to set in train measures to facilitate that. I welcome what appears to be a broad welcome from the Opposition as well in respect of that. Perhaps the Social Democrats are not in favour of it but Sinn Féin seems to be welcoming it anyway. We will have to move the issue quickly. As I have said here repeatedly, every avenue has to be looked at in terms of increasing housing supply. Regarding the Deputy's point about people in rural Ireland who can develop housing on their own land or their parents' land, we have to look at existing guidelines to facilitate capacity for young couples, in particular, to do that. I will come back to the Deputy on that.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** As the Taoiseach knows, I speak a lot in this Chamber about Shannon Airport and advocate for it. I was delighted to see the Government take on my proposal that Shannon be a test bed for new forms of aviation over the lifetime of this Government. Indeed it is in the programme for Government. I would like to hear some expansionary thoughts from the Taoiseach as to what that role could be. The future mobility campus in Shannon, which many Ministers have visited, could play a major role in this.

A few years ago, I travelled to Rotterdam Airport with the then Minister of State, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell and former Deputy Joe Carey. We witnessed a significant amount of incredible stuff going on such as electric aircraft, vertical take off and landing and drone technology and I think Shannon could play a massive role in terms of developing some of this in Ireland. Regarding the future mobility campus testing all forms of new vehicles and AI-powered vehicles, it could also have a role in testing some of the new Garda fleet when it is provided.

**The Taoiseach:** It is true to say that the Deputy has been a very consistent and strong advocate for Shannon Airport and the Shannon area. At the beginning of the week, we met with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. One of the first comments he made regarding Ireland's historic relationship with China involved the degree to which China took on board the example of the Shannon free development zone. Shannon was one of the first areas he highlighted regarding how it led the way in terms of industrial development and how the Chinese more or less followed through on similar proposals decades ago. I take on board what the Deputy is saying because there will be very significant developments, particularly around AI, future mobility testing and so on. I will take the points made by the Deputy about the expansion and development of certain industries allied to Shannon Airport back to the Minister

**Deputy Michael Murphy:** Could the Taoiseach provide an update on the new proposed Garda station in Clonmel and tell me whether a contractor has been appointed? I welcome the commitment in the programme for Government to provide funding for 5,000 additional gardaí during the lifetime of this mandate. Ensuring law and order is also a challenge for towns and villages in rural Ireland, including my constituency of Tipperary South - towns like Tipperary, Cashel, Cahir, Clonmel, Carrick-on-Suir and Fethard. It is so important that we strengthen and better resource the community policing model at a local level. Can the Taoiseach give me an assurance that constituencies like Tipperary South will get their fair share of the additional gardaí

that will come on stream during the lifetime of this Government?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I have been told by my Department that a contract has been signed in respect of Clonmel Garda station, which, as the Deputy knows, is badly needed. I am also told that it will be finished by the end of 2026, which is very good news.

Obviously, we are doing our best to ensure we recruit up to 1,000 gardaí each year. The intention is that they will be spread around the country. Obviously, Clonmel in the Deputy's constituency will be very much supported by the gardaí when we get the extra resources in.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** It will come as no surprise to the Taoiseach that I wish to raise the ongoing crisis in University Hospital Limerick. As we sit here, 113 people are on trolleys there. These are people who were assessed as in need of a bed but no bed was available for them. The trolley crisis at University Hospital Limerick continues to impact patient safety and well-being, as the Minister is well aware. Already this year, we have had 3,392 people treated in this manner. It is totally unacceptable. It is not fair on them and their families or on the staff who must deal with them, often in an unsafe and desperately overcrowded emergency department. The lack of beds affects nearly all departments across University Hospital Limerick. Much of the normal activity in the hospital is suspended daily. Additional patients are moved onto wards and into hallways outside emergency units. Elective surgeries are cancelled. People arrive at the hospital to be told that their scheduled procedure has been cancelled due to the lack of beds. What steps is the Government taking, here and now, to deal with the numbers of people on trolleys and to stop the cancellation of procedures in the hospital because there are no beds available?

**Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill):** I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. A number of different things are happening. As the Deputy is aware, Limerick has already been the beneficiary of additional bed capacity and staffing. Another 96-bed unit will be completed shortly. There is also a surgical hub. The Deputy mentioned scheduled procedures being cancelled. Those procedures will be scheduled in the surgical hub and that will be followed by an elective hospital. Limerick is the beneficiary of considerable investment in beds and staff. There are still problems, however, and I thank the Deputy for highlighting them. He is quite right to do so. As he is aware, I have this week placed a particular focus on the deployment of all of the contracts in all of the hospitals to ensure we are getting the best outcomes for patient safety and to ensure that all hospitals are consistently using all the levers available to them to avoid the consistent problems that Limerick has.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** Is the Taoiseach aware that women in Dublin are struggling to find childcare before they return to work? They are spending endless hours ringing around crèches and on childcare websites instead of spending quality time with their new babies. Some mothers delay their return to work not because it is the best option for their families but because it is the only option. There are 262 childcare services in receipt of core funding in Fingal and there have been at least 62 fee adjustments, impacting hundreds of parents, since December. Those fee increases are coming out of the enhanced childcare subsidies that were implemented in September. Smaller local providers still feel they are more likely to drop out of core funding. Will the Government move immediately on commitments to increase capacity through State-led and private childcare services and fix core funding for parents and providers?

**The Taoiseach:** We are well aware of the pressures on childcare services across the country and in Dublin. The last Government, in particular, introduced a number of initiatives on the

childcare front, such that the investment in childcare is now approximately €1.37 billion. The data shows that more children have places, more services are operating and more parents are benefiting from State subsidies. Between 2021 and 2023, the number of enrolments increased by 8%. That said, we have to do more. We must start by stabilising and creating proper career pathways and income supports, and improving the pay and conditions, for people working in childcare services. The first ever pay agreement was arrived at with the unions and was facilitated by Government funding. We froze the increase in fees through significant allocations. There is, however, an issue in respect of smaller providers, which have been impacted by the changes.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Will the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health join me in my constituency to visit Beaumont Hospital? It is a fantastic hospital that does amazing work but it is in need of further capital support. I and many other local TDs saw the unveiling of a new theatre in the hospital. It has amazing potential and uses AI and many other new technologies. Some key areas, such as critical care, the emergency department and the new 95-bed unit, are still within the capital programme. We would welcome that investment and its progress through the capital programme system.

**The Taoiseach:** I will, of course, visit Beaumont Hospital. I would be delighted to do so. Perhaps the Minister wants to take it from there.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** The Taoiseach and I might go together. It is an excellent hospital that needs more investment. I am happy to speak to the Deputy about the capital plan for the coming year. I will be opening a new lung care research facility in the hospital shortly and I ask the Deputy to come along. It is an excellent hospital that is deserving of continued investment.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** The Taoiseach and Minister are welcome.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The hardworking staff at University Hospital Kerry in Tralee, all of whom have the best interests of the people of Kerry at heart, have been contacting me because they are frustrated with the situation there. It is at breaking point. The average waiting time in the accident and emergency department is now ten hours, which is the second highest in the country. One woman told me that she was waiting with her son for 19 hours before he was finally put on a drip. Some 390 people were waiting on trolleys in January, which was a 10% increase on last year's figure. That is a bad start to the year.

Year after year for the past five years, elective surgeries have been cancelled. They have been cancelled in University Hospital Kerry since 19 December 2024, which was a full two months ago.

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

**Deputy Pa Daly:** What is the Government doing?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** We need a minor injuries clinic close to where-----

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

**Deputy Pa Daly:** -----the people who attend the accident and emergency department are.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is in other Members' time.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** We also need a modular day unit.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I thank the Deputy. I am more than happy to sit down with him about the provision for Kerry more generally in the capital plan. He is right to highlight the trolley situation. At 8 a.m. on Saturday, 1 February, for example, there were only four people on trolleys in University Hospital Kerry. By Tuesday morning, that number had risen to 18. There were 24 the following day and 28 thereafter. The number then fell to two the following Saturday. It moved to six before going back up to 20 on Monday and Tuesday, following the weekend. I am happy to speak to the Deputy about the underlying issues in respect of capacity but there is a weekend issue in University Hospital Kerry, as much as there is in other hospitals, and we must get to the bottom of that. It is not acceptable that the Deputy's constituents are more likely to wait on a trolley on a Sunday or Monday than on a Wednesday. That is not okay.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Taoiseach faoi rud éigin a bhí sa Teach an tseachtain seo caite. Will he outline a timeline for when we expect to see the Occupied Territories Bill brought back into the House with the necessary legal changes? The Bill, when brought back, needs to preserve the original intention. I want this to be done. Will the Taoiseach outline the timeline for the Irish people?

**The Taoiseach:** Go raibh maith ag an Teachta as an gceist agus ní dóigh liom go mbeidh sé ag tarlú roimh an gCáisc. The Minister for Foreign Affairs is progressing the Bill and looking at amendments that must be included, as I have been clear about from the outset, in a new Bill. It will not happen in the spring session because most of the Bills we have put on the Order Paper are drafted and ready to go. It is a short session between now and Easter. I hope in the aftermath of that-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Vital bus routes and public transport services should not only run if a private company can make a profit out of them. A private company, Aircoach, has just announced that it is going to cut several routes, including one that goes through my area. The cut means there will no longer be a route going from Shankill, Ballybrack and Loughlinstown to Dublin Airport. Bus drivers in my area are telling me that the No. 7 route is possibly to be handed over to Go-Ahead Ireland. That is a company that made losses last year and is failing to fulfil its contract to provide routes all over the place. Incredibly, it will be rewarded with one of the best routes that Dublin Bus has. This stuff has to stop. Privatisation of public transport is a failure. We need to put in place a service to the airport because it is a necessary public good. Similarly, we should not be privatising more Dublin Bus routes.

**The Taoiseach:** We continue to invest in public service transport, and will continue to do so. In respect of the specific issue, approximately €660 million has been assigned for the public service obligation, PSO, and Transport for Ireland Local Link services. That is a significant increase on previous budgets. It also covers various fare initiatives, such as the young adult card and the 90-minute fare, until the end of 2025.

The Airport Hopper bus services that the Deputy has identified-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is an Aircoach route.

**The Taoiseach:** -----between Maynooth and Tallaght and Dublin Airport were withdrawn by the operator. If there is a withdrawal, it is a matter for the Minister, and the NTA in the first instance. Decisions will be made as to whether we can resume with the help of the PSO and whatever else, but an evaluation has to take place first.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I again raise the issue of hormone replacement therapy, HRT, which I raised a couple of weeks ago. Free HRT was promised in the most recent budget and was due to begin in January. We have not yet seen it happen. I know the Minister has inherited this problem, but does she have a timeline for when it will be available to women who are experiencing the menopause? There are also issues in respect of the different menopausal products. Has the Minister sought to identify the supply chain issues?

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I am aware of the issue and am beginning to examine that. It is a pan-European problem so perhaps I can come back to the Deputy on it. I am very aware of it. On the cost of HRT, provision was made in the budget for HRT products but not for the dispensing fee. That is covered in parliamentary questions going back to October and November last year and that position has not changed. The Government set aside money to pay for the products but not the dispensing fee for pharmacists. I have met the pharmaceutical union. I am engaging with it to see if there is something we can do but the reality is we do not have the budget to carry the dispensing fees. Patients are being charged €48 or €62 or whatever the fee is, but you do not see the breakdown of the cost. If a woman is getting two HRT products, for example, she is paying two dispensing fees, which might be €7, €8, €9 or €10 per product. We intend to cover the cost of the medication. If we were to extend the budgetary allowance for that, I would have to take that from somewhere else and that would mean we would not be able to do something else. I am trying to find a resolution. I ask the Deputy to please allow me a couple of weeks to do that. I hope the pharmaceutical union will come back with something we can work on.

*1 o'clock*

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I wish to ask the Taoiseach about yesterday's top story in the *Irish Examiner*. Once again, it was news about the Redbarn Quality Hotel, where approximately 370 people going through the asylum seeker process have been based. This was done without consultation. As a local Government TD in the constituency, I only learned this was happening, and the number of people who have been placed in the hotel, from the report in the *Irish Examiner*. The community is wondering whether this is coming at the detriment of the 450 or so community members from Ukraine who are there under the BOTP system. If the Government is planning a change in use of this building, will it return it for tourism, give the hotel back to the people of Youghal, a tourist town, and restore about 70% of the tourist accommodation that has been stripped from the community by the Government?

**The Taoiseach:** On the issues in respect of Youghal, our view, and I have been very clear about this, is that we need to bring hotels back for tourism purposes. I do not believe that Ukrainians should be treated in an unfavourable manner. If they are part of the local schools and have been in a given location for quite some time, I do not approve of their being summarily turfed out and moved on to locations far away. I will discuss this with the new Minister for children in terms of the need to be conscious of the needs of children, Ukrainian children in particular, because of the trauma they have already experienced through having to flee their country because of war. We do not want to add to that trauma.

I will come back to the Deputy on the issues around the development of the Redbarn facility. In some instances, as the Deputy will know himself, the owners have come forward and made

their facilities available. There is huge pressure on the system but Youghal has done more than its share in respect of facilitating both Ukrainians and IPAS.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** I was delighted to see in the programme for Government a commitment to develop a long-term strategy to address gender inequality in sport. In particular, we have an issue with retention rates among young people once they get to those teenage years. This is particularly acute among young women. What specific measures is the Taoiseach planning to take to address gender inequality and increase retention in sport among young women?

**The Taoiseach:** One of the more significant measures taken by the outgoing Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy Thomas Byrne, was to make it very clear that failure to have gender equality on the boards of sporting organisations, for example, would result in the withdrawal of funding and a reduction in funding. He made that very clear.

We will continue to support women's participation in sport, young girls in particular, through funding but also through a variety of other initiatives. Retention, as the Deputy rightly said, is a key issue. Retention of young people generally beyond 18 years is a big issue in sport today. It is essential for the health of the nation. The growth of other sports has helped enormously. I have seen a tremendous growth in rowing, women's soccer, football, rugby and so on. We need to continue to support all of those sports and many more as well.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Yesterday, the Taoiseach told Deputy McDonald there was a robust legal framework to deal with knife crime, suggesting there were no gaps in the powers that gardaí have to address this serious crime. Nor did the Minister for Justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, suggest there were any gaps in the legislation until last night, when he indicated new laws would need to be introduced to give gardaí greater powers to stop and search people they suspect of carrying knives. Can the Taoiseach or the Minister tell the Dáil when the Government became aware that existing knife crime powers were not adequate to deal with the issue? Was the issue raised with them by members of the Garda or was the Government aware of this deficiency when it championed its previous legislation that it told us addressed this issue? Will the Government now accept that no amount of new laws will cover up for the fact that we simply do not have enough gardaí on the streets of our cities and towns?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** There must be a multifaceted response to knife crime. One of the responses has to be ensuring that we have greater numbers of gardaí on the streets to seize knives. Last year, over 2,100 knives were seized by An Garda Síochána. That is part of the solution.

Another part has to be powers for An Garda Síochána in order that gardaí can stop and search people so that they can seize knives from them if they suspect they are carrying knives. The Deputy will be aware of the Garda powers Bill, the heads of which were published last year. I will bring that legislation forward to this House. I hope Deputy Carthy and Sinn Féin will support that legislation and that all members of the Opposition will support it. It is clear we need a strong, clear statutory basis in order for gardaí to seize knives which we all admit are a dangerous threat to people in our community.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** What about the question I asked?

## Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2025: Motion

**Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2025,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 12th February, 2025.

Question put and declared carried.

## Ainmniú Iarrthóirí agus Leas-Cheann Comhairle a thoghadh - Selection of Candidate and Election of Leas-Cheann Comhairle

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now proceed to the selection of a candidate for the position of Leas-Cheann Comhairle by way of secret ballot. I call upon the Clerk of the Dáil, Mr. Peter Finnegan, to conduct the proceedings.

**Cléireach na Dála:** I must inform the House that having received and examined nominations for the position of Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the following is the list of validly nominated candidates: Deputy John McGuinness and Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

As there is more than one candidate, the candidate who will be proposed for election by the House will be selected by secret ballot. Before proceeding to the secret ballot, I will in alphabetical order call on each candidate to speak on their own behalf or, where the candidate has nominated another Member to speak on their behalf, I will call on that Member. Each speaker will have five minutes. I now call on Deputy John McGuinness.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** First, I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle on her election. I have not spoken in the Chamber since then. While I was a candidate in that election, she was the chosen one and I wish her well in her term of office. I want to thank the people of Carlow-Kilkenny for giving me the opportunity to represent them here once again and the fact that they gave me such a strong mandate. To all those who signed my nomination paper, and my own party, Fianna Fáil, I thank them for that support. I look forward to the contest here today.

I wish to avail of the few minutes we have to put before the House some of the things that I stand for and have stood for since my first election to local government in 1979 and, thereafter, my election to the Dáil in 1997. I believe the *status quo* has to be challenged at all times for the better. I believe disruptors in the system are necessary because we cannot become complacent in the work we do on behalf of the people who elect us. Along with reform, that has been the cornerstone of my contribution to public life, always with an emphasis on public service. That is necessary for all of us to understand.

This Dáil has a serious obligation and responsibility because of the changes that are taking place in the world to bring forward the reforms that are necessary and to put in place the type

of Administration that will best deliver to the people whom all of us represent. It needs to deliver on value for money, supporting front-line workers, gardaí and the Army, and making sure that the marginalised, the sick and the elderly are central to all of what we do. Of course, this Chamber has an obligation to ensure the Government lives up to its first obligation, which is to keep its people safe. All of this has a lot to do with the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the Ceann Comhairle and the different cathaoirligh who are there to support the Ceann Comhairle in her role because all of these issues need to be debated in constructive way in this House. All of the Members deserve the right to have the time to have the necessary forum available to them to bring forward their own views and to bring forward what is of concern to them and their constituents. The rights of Members must be defended all of the time. We must always consider those whom we represent in terms of priority to them. As they look in at the debates in the Dáil, we have to use those debates and the various events in the course of our time here in Leinster House to instil confidence in the public.

I would say to Members that there is a need for all of us to be respectful of each other and of what we say here in the Dáil and to ensure we do not insult one another and, thereby, send out wrong messages, nor indeed misbehave to the extent that people lose faith in democracy itself. To do that, I would say to Members that all of us have the time to contribute. All of us are equal here in this House and we should all be listened to. That goes for Government as well, because I have often seen arguments start because of a lack of direct information coming from Government in terms of parliamentary questions and in terms of response times for the agencies of the State as they respond to the queries of Members as put forward in this House through written or oral parliamentary questions. I have seen great debates in this House where lots has been said and yet some of the key points made by Opposition and by Government back benchers have not been included in the policy or legislation that was being discussed. If we are all equal, if we all recognise and are respectful of each other and know the job, we have to do, I believe that we can bring about the type of reform that is absolutely necessary as we move into a different world.

I mention the Gaeilge versus Béarla debate that has gone on in this House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up, Deputy.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** It clearly states in Standing Orders that the language is English and Irish, and while I may not be a fluent Gaeilgeoir, I can tell Members I have a great love for the Irish language and will use it occasionally as best I can. I would say to all of the Members here that there is no embarrassment about not being able to speak the Irish language fluently and we should try it every time we get the opportunity. To be respectful to everyone, however, if you do say something in Irish in the middle of a heated debate, it might be no harm if you repeated it in English thereafter. It might avoid a lot of work on committees and debate in this House.

**Cléireach na Dála:** I now call Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** B'fhéidir go raibh an méid a chuala muid ansin níos spéisiúla ná an méid atá le rá agam. Smaoiním siar fadó fadó, dhá mhí go leith ó shin, nuair a tháinig muid le chéile ar dtús báire tar éis an toghcháin. Bhí gliondar inár gcroíthe ag an am agus sceitimíní orthu siúd a bhí tofa den chéad uair. Bhí sceitimíní orm féin agus ar dhaoine eile a bhí san iomaíocht don phost mór, post an Cheann Comhairle, ag an am. Agus é sin ráite, níor éirigh liom. Ní raibh an lá liom. Ba mhaith liom cur i gcuimhne don Teach rud a dúirt mé ar an lá sin. B'fhéidir go bhfuil tábhacht bhreise leis i ndiaidh na seachtaine atá tar éis a bheith

ann. Dúirt mé an méid seo ag an am: "in a bilingual House with two official languages we need a Chair who can monitor and, if necessary, step in and apply the rules and protections of this House equally to everyone, whether it be as Gaeilge nó as Béarla." That might not mean much to many here who operate exclusively in English but I ask them to put themselves in my shoes and those of other Deputies here in this House who are Gaeilgeoirí, who were raised as Gaeilge or who have learnt Irish and operate wholly as Gaeilge at this stage or who are rearing their kids le Gaeilge.

I was raised in this city. Gaeilge was my first language. I could not speak English properly until I was seven, and most people say I cannot speak it properly still, but I am most comfortable speaking Irish. I work in Irish, I think in Irish; what is the saying: "work, rest and play". I was privileged in the previous two Dáileanna to be the Chair of the committee here which operates wholly as Gaeilge. It translates nothing, except for whatever the translators translate to English in the background. That was a move which was welcomed by us who are Gaeilgeoirí and those in the Irish society outside.

I am happy I am not the only Teachta Dála who grew up speaking Gaeilge. Many of the new TDs elected to this Dáil did so and are, in fact, raising their children and the families le Gaeilge. One of the first things an Irish-speaking child learns is "ná hinis bréag". Every Irish speaker, and most English speakers, also know what this means by second nature because Irish is a living language, not just a mysterious museum exhibit that needs to be discussed in academic terms with erroneous references to dictionary entries. If I am elected, I pledge not to inis bréag to the Ceann Comhairle or as Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I will operate in all the languages I have, which is Irish and English, and I will treat everybody here equally in both of those languages.

I do not doubt the good intentions of both the Ceann Comhairle and my fellow candidate today for the position of Leas-Cheann Comhairle to brush up on their cúpla focal, and I welcome them. Más féidir liom aon chabhair in aon chor a thabhairt, táim sásta é sin a dhéanamh d'aon duine sa Teach seo nó lasmuigh de. Cuideoidh mé leo teacht ar an nGaeilge atá acu. I believe everybody has Irish. They have learnt Irish. It is sitting in the back of your brain. Sometimes it needs to be stimulated, whether by a pint or by only conversation, I do not know. Many an Irish person has more Irish when they are abroad than they do when they are at home. It is there and needs to be stimulated and I think we should go that way. We should listen to the former Fine Gael Minister, Joe McHugh, and his new book, *Beidh Tú Alright*. People should look at the journey he took in terms of learning the Irish language when he got landed with a job that he was delighted to take. He put his heart and soul into relearning the Irish language. In many cases, that is what it is.

This job is not just about the Irish language. it is about ensuring all of the Members are represented. In the Chair, we have an eminent and, as has been proven so far, quite able Ceann Comhairle but there are times when the Ceann Comhairle will not be here and it is the job of a Leas-Cheann Comhairle to step in and represent her and represent the Members' interests, which, if you want, are all individually packaged. This is not a party-political position. This is a position where you have independence once you sit into that chair. You have to apply the rules and regulations equally.

I have been on the Dáil reform committee for more than two decades. It keeps changing its name. It had always been the CPP and it is now called the CPPO or something. I have been a member of those and I have worked diligently over those years to try to promote better working in this House in the interests of the TDs, in the interests of us in here being able to do our

work as fairly, as positively and, sometimes, as quickly as we can to ensure we are representing not only the interests of our constituents, our constituency and our political parties but also the democracy that has elected us here in the first place.

I urge Members to use the opportunity to remember that this is a secret ballot. It is not in the gift of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste or any political party leader or group leader. It is in their interests to look at that again and think about who would best represent them as Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

**Cléireach na Dála:** Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta Ó Snodaigh. That concludes the contributions from candidates. We will now ring the bells for six minutes, and when they stop, we will proceed to the secret ballot. When the bells have stopped, I ask all Members to retake their seats and we will direct them, row by row, to the division lobby.

The ushers will shortly direct Members to proceed to the voting lobby at the back of the Chamber to cast their ballots. I ask that Members remain in their seats until directed by the ushers.

Before the voting begins I call on the Head Usher and deputy head usher to confirm the ballot boxes, to my left and right in the voting lobby are empty. The Head Usher and deputy head usher have confirmed the ballot boxes are empty and both boxes are locked. We are now ready to start the ballot.

Voting will proceed, row by row, starting with the first row to my left, and moving to the right, as directed by the ushers. To reach the voting lobby, Members should use the central staircase immediately in front of me. For health and safety reasons, I ask Members not to queue on the staircase as the stairs are very steep. The ushers will direct you to ascend when the staircase is clear. When directed to do so, please proceed by the central staircase to be issued with your ballot paper. Officials in the voting lobby will ask you to confirm your name. They will cross your name off the register and issue you with a stamped and embossed ballot paper. There are eight voting booths in total; four each on the left and right at the top of the stairs. Members with surnames beginning A to H should go to the left at the top of the stairs and members with surnames beginning I to Z should go to the right. The ballot will be counted under the proportional representation single transferable vote, PRSTV, system. Accordingly, you may number the candidates in the order of your choice. If you inadvertently spoil your ballot paper, you should present it to me. I will inspect the ballot paper and may decide to allow a replacement paper to be issued. In such cases, I will retain the original ballot paper and issue a certificate in order that another ballot paper can be issued from the officials in the division lobby.

The ballot will remain open for 60 minutes or until all Members intending to vote have cast their votes, whichever is the earlier. Once the ballot is closed, the House will stand suspended until 4 p.m. The ushers will now direct Members row by row to the voting lobby. I ask Members to please wait until called forward by the ushers. When you have finished casting your vote, please come back to the floor of the House via the side stairs and exit the Chamber by way of the doors behind me.

*Chaith Teachtaí vótaí ansin i mballóid rúnda san ord leagtha síos ag Cléireach na Dála. Members proceeded to vote in a secret ballot in the order directed by the Clerk of the Dáil.*

**Cléireach na Dála:** As 60 minutes has now elapsed, the ballot is concluded. The counting of votes will take place at 3 p.m. in room 003/004 in the basement of Leinster House, which is open to everyone who wishes to attend, space permitting.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.32 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.01 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 2.32 p.m. and resumed at 4.01 p.m.*

## Maximising Artificial Intelligence: Statements

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Tá muid réidh le tosú le ráitis maidir le hintleacht shaorga, IS, a bharrfheabhsú don mhaith choitianta sa ghnó, sa gheilleagar agus sa tsochaí i gcoitinne. We are now moving on to statements on maximising AI for our greater good in business, in the economy and in wider society. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, to make the opening statement.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth):** I am pleased to take the floor of the House today as Ireland's first Minister of State who has artificial intelligence, AI, in their title. We are living in a time of great change, unpredictability and opportunity. I am determined that my mandate as Minister of State in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will deliver and maximise the benefits of AI for our businesses, the economy and society more broadly. The opportunities presented by AI are not like previous technological advances. The speed and pace of progress is completely unprecedented. The potential for transformative impacts on our society and economy for our collective good is unparalleled. AI's ability to analyse data, recognise patterns and provide insights has reshaped the way we work and live.

The use of AI in smartphone technology has grown rapidly in recent years and is an example to most of us of how we can relate to it. AI-powered personal assistants such as Siri and Google Assistant have become a staple diet of many people's daily lives. In my few short weeks as Minister of State, I have already learned there are massive opportunities for using AI to benefit the economy and wider society across various sectors. AI presents opportunities for beneficial impacts including in the delivery of public services, weather forecasting, healthcare, scientific discovery, sustainability, agriculture, transport and mobility.

I will take a minute to emphasise some of these opportunities. First, the use and application of AI technology has great potential to help to solve challenges in healthcare. We are seeing exciting strides in areas such as robotic surgery, the diagnosing of blood diseases and cancers and the analysing of medical images. Second, AI is being used to improve energy efficiency and predict energy demands and can, therefore, help us to address sustainability and climate action. AI is being deployed to monitor and reduce carbon emissions. AI contributes significantly to climate action by enabling data-driven environmental monitoring, optimising energy and consumption and supporting sustainable practices across industries. Smart grids powered by AI can balance energy demand and supply in real time, increasing energy efficiency and contributing to the fight against climate change.

Another important use of AI is in agriculture, which is an area in which there are incredible applications, such as predicting disease outbreaks in herds through AI-enabled data analytics. AI tools are being used to monitor crop health and optimise farming practices. The potential efficiencies are huge.

Improving delivery of public sector services for our citizens is another important opportunity. Strong digital government brings significant public value benefits to the wider economy as well as to the communities and businesses with which the public service engages. These are just a few examples of the opportunities and benefits. Its potential reach is vast. That is why the Government developed a national AI strategy in 2021 called AI - Here for Good. The strategy serves as a roadmap for how Ireland can leverage the potential of AI for unlocking productivity, addressing societal changes and delivering public services. It envisages a future for Ireland as an international leader in using AI to the benefit of businesses, public services and, most importantly, for people through a human-centred, ethical approach to AI development, adoption and use.

A refresh of the AI strategy was published in November 2024 by my predecessor, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, when he was the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The refresh takes account of the significant developments in AI technology and regulation, namely, the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 which predicted a massive acceleration in AI technologies that are available to consumers and businesses. Second, the AI Act was enacted in August 2024 and therefore, the parameters of the regulation of the use of AI in the EU are now clear. The refresh of the national AI strategy builds on the solid foundations in place and aims to balance innovation with proportionate regulation and trust-building measures.

While the benefits of AI are clear, there are also important ethical and societal implications that must be considered. Issues such as privacy, security and job displacement are just a few of the challenges that are coming with the increasing use of AI. It is crucial we address these concerns proactively and work to ensure AI is used for the betterment of society. That is why building public trust and putting appropriate guardrails in place is a priority focus of the Government's AI strategy.

In respect of the Government's ambition for enterprise, embracing AI and digital technologies is crucial for our continued economic growth and prosperity. A competitive, innovative and resilient enterprise base is essential to provide high-quality jobs and employment opportunities for people to live and prosper in all regions. Obviously, that will hopefully help to bring better regional development throughout the country on the island of Ireland. AI will help business to achieve this. We have clear goals in this regard. We want at least 75% of enterprises in Ireland to be using the cloud, AI and data analytics by 2030. According to the statistics published by the CSO last Friday, AI adaptation in Ireland rose from 8% of enterprises in 2023 to 14.9% in 2024. While these figures are promising and growing, it is not enough. We need to encourage more businesses to adopt AI by ensuring the necessary enablers are in place.

Strand 3 of the refresh of the national AI strategy sets out our appropriate approach to drive AI in Irish enterprises. One of the biggest opportunities around AI deployment is in the bridging of the productivity gap in our indigenous SMEs. Generative AI and AI assistants offer huge opportunities to drive efficiencies, particularly in the context of micro-enterprises and SMEs. To support the adoption of AI by micro-enterprises and small businesses, my Department has developed and launched the grow digital portal, which is now available at *growdigital.gov.ie*. We want all businesses to get on board with technology. To put it simply, if we can encourage more AI adoption, it will help to save business owners time and money and make them more competitive. That is why eligibility for the grow digital vouchers offered by the local enterprise offices, LEOs, has been widened, expanding eligible expenditure and doubling the grant to €5,000, or 50% of expenditure. It is being extended to all businesses, regardless of their export status, with up to 50 employees.

The LEOs have introduced the digital for business consultancy scheme that provides expert digital consultants to help businesses with up to 50 employees to explore technology adoption opportunities. While technology companies are obviously readily adopting new technologies, most of my focus and the Department's focus is on driving increased usage of AI in the non-tech sectors and in domestically trading businesses. They are obviously the ones that will need the most help and support. These include showcasing potential benefits to their businesses. The use of role models and case studies that business owners can relate to is a good way of encouraging business owners to consider technology that is good and fit for purpose. The grow digital portal has a case study catalogue with digital success stories showcasing how different non-tech businesses have embraced digital solutions to boost their operations. We are promoting these case studies across social media to reach as many businesses as we can on LEOs' websites and the Department's website. The enterprise agencies will also continue to provide and enhance a level of targeted support, training and advice to businesses to drive the adoption and deployment of AI systems across all sectors. I emphasise that businesses have a very important role to play in showing we can use AI to develop better, trustworthy, more efficient products and services and increased values for consumers.

Another important support is CeADAR, Ireland's centre for applied AI, which is based in UCD. It is a key part of our ecosystem as our European digital innovation hub for AI and as an Enterprise Ireland and IDA technology centre. It acts as the bridge between the worlds of applied research in AI and data analytics and their commercial deployment by businesses. I encourage all my colleagues across the House to look at the upskilling and training opportunities available through CeADAR. It recently launched an online course, AI for You: Introduction to AI and the EU AI Act, which will increase awareness of AI and support adoption of AI by both the public and private sectors.

While I have described how this technology can be deployed in every business and across our regions, it is important to recall that we connect to a wider, rapidly changing economic landscape. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has set a goal for the EU to become a global leader in AI innovation as an AI continent. I know our guests in the Visitors Gallery will be delighted to hear that. Our national approach is strongly aligned with this ambition. Ireland's excellent research and innovation ecosystem is a key driver for our economic development and international competitiveness.

The Government is committed to maintaining a good balance of investment across the spectrum from fundamental to market-oriented research. A strong ecosystem for fundamental AI research through collaborations between universities, research institutions and industry is an essential foundation for breakthroughs in AI technologies and a healthy AI sector. Equally important is a research ecosystem which supports applied AI and the rapid deployment and commercialisation of AI technologies. This includes support for startups, incubators and accelerators that bring AI solutions to the market. Ireland has a number of excellent AI research facilities. The Government provides a range of funding programmes to support collaboration between industry, research and academia through which AI-related projects are funded. These include Enterprise Ireland innovation vouchers, innovation partnerships, technology centres and gateways, Knowledge Transfer Ireland and the Technology Transfer Office Network. Despite this, the ecosystem would benefit from greater coherence. Our strategy commits to unifying the goals of the various AI research centres and creating a centralised national AI research nexus.

The intention is to increase the potential of Ireland's research community to deliver serious and significant impact in the global AI landscape. I also want to mention skills because every

significant technology advancement brings changes to the labour market and the demand for skills - this is probably where the most concern and resistance may occur - and AI is no different in that regard. With AI set to transform a wide range of industries and occupations, skills will play an important part in our success. Our range of digital upskilling and reskilling initiatives, including those available via Skillnet Ireland, SpringBoard+ and future human capital initiatives, will be expanded as part of the refresh AI strategy. Enterprise will need to be proactive in upskilling its workforce to develop AI skills and knowledge necessary to leverage the technology. By continuing to invest in upskilling opportunities, we can unlock the true potential of Ireland's workforce and ensure we remain a highly active location to do business well into the future.

Our ambition is that the adoption of AI will result in safer, more productive workplaces where workers are empowered but not replaced by AI tools. For example, AI will be able to take over repetitive and dangerous tasks for workers. The development of a whole-of-government approach to skills policy, including through the establishment of a new national skills council, is under way. The Government will also update the 2022 study on AI skills for the expert group on future skills needs as part of the programme on technology skills.

Safety and security are central to trust. For this reason, the landmark EU AI Act, which is the world's first comprehensive regulation establishing guardrails for the safe use of AI, will play a critical role in providing reassurance and unlocking the benefit of AI. The EU AI Act is designed to achieve this by introducing clear and proportionate rules and guardrails for the development and use of safe, ethical and humancentric AI systems. My Department will lead on the national implementation of the Act. We are currently working closely with other Departments to devise the optimal configuration of competent authorities to ensure comprehensive and robust implementation of the Act. The Minister, Deputy Burke, will bring a memorandum to the Government over the coming weeks setting out the proposed approach.

The AI Act's risk-based approach means that only those systems which could pose high risks in areas such as health, safety and fundamental rights will be subject to its rules and obligations. The vast majority of AI systems will not be subject to any regulation systems under the AI Act. In parallel with the rules to mitigate the risks of harm from AI systems, the AI Act contains measures to support innovation with a particular focus on the needs and constraints of SMEs, including startups. The Act provides simplified ways of compliance for SMEs. The interests of SMEs will be represented in the development of standards under the Act. The European Commission must regularly assess the certification and compliance costs for SMEs and work with member states to lower such costs. Member states must be provided priority access to the AI regulatory sandboxes for SMEs. Member states must establish dedicated channels for communication to support SMEs throughout their development by providing guidance and responding to queries during the implementation of this regulation. Penalties for infringements of the AI Act must take into account the interests of SMEs and their economic viability. These are all the ways that the needs of SMEs have been given priority in the Act.

I wish to conclude on a note of empowerment. AI technology is developing rapidly but it is not something that is happening to us passively. AI is a horizontal general-purpose technology that is widely applicable to a range of sectors. As such, it is for us to consider the impact on our own interests and priorities. We can ensure AI continues to play a positive role in our world by improving lives and creating a better future for generations to come. AI is here and it is here for good.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I wonder whether AI could help us to get a copy of the Minister of State's speech.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I am sure it can. My apologies.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** That would be very helpful.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Comhghairdeas to the Minister of State. I wish her the best of luck in her new role. I also congratulate the Minister, Deputy Calleary, for the work he has done in this area. I know the Minister of State will acknowledge that we are still behind the curve. I welcome some of the initiatives she has put forward and made us aware of today. I would also like a copy of her speech. It is very important that we all work together on this. It is a huge challenge but also a huge opportunity for us. In respect of the Oireachtas and how we could use AI ourselves, can the Minister of State ensure we are not blocked from using it in any way? Can this be facilitated? We all need to be up to speed on how it works, what it can do and how we can access training courses online if we need to do so. If our technology prevents us from doing that, this is a barrier. It is incumbent on the Irish Government to explore strategies for maximising the potential of artificial intelligence to benefit businesses, the economy and society at large, as the Minister of State has said.

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties has recommended that Ireland should establish an advisory forum consisting of civil society organisations with fundamental rights and expertise in trade unions, as well as people who are often at the receiving end of AI deployment, such as teachers, artists and actors. Has the Government taken this on board?

AI has transformative potential but to truly harness it for the greater good, its integration must be thoughtfully managed, equitably distributed and aligned with broader social goals. It is imperative that this Government builds up in-house expertise on AI. Otherwise we will be exposed to external influences, sometimes with contrary agendas. We talk all the time about the damage that has been done in contracting out. The Minister of State has probably read *The Big Con: How the Consulting Industry Weakens our Businesses, Infantilizes our Governments and Warps our Economies*, which is about how we have contracted out so much decision making and expertise that used to be within Government but no longer is there. AI is an area where we really need to build up expertise. Have we initiated a recruitment drive to get the brightest and the best to work for Government in maximising opportunities and mitigating risks involved with AI? That is really important.

I also have a question about access to the national training fund and the great mystery of where this fund is - I think it is about €1.5 billion - and how we can tap into that. Will the Minister of State find out whether the national training fund can be used because I can think of no better area than this one to make a major investment into AI so that we are ahead of the curve? Will she come back to us on that because it seems to have eluded us all for many years? I do not think it is fair that businesses are contributing to the national training fund and building it up when they cannot get access to it. It is important that it be made accessible to businesses and for training.

AI technologies such as automation, predictive analytics and machine learning can streamline business operations and reduce costs. We need to very much enable that when we talk about the geopolitical situation and the threats to businesses. We must be able to facilitate busi-

ness to be able to access things and we must be mindful of smaller businesses that do not have time. I have just met with the Small Firms Association. Let us not make it complicated, let us get rid of bureaucracy and let us make it accessible to businesses that are already time-poor and are struggling to survive.

AI also enables more precise decision making through data analysis and helping organisations to spot trends, forecast demand and optimise inventory management. There are significant possibilities. AI has significant potential to transform businesses and drive economic growth and it is awfully important that this be done on an all-island basis. Let us do this to enable all of our island to prosper regardless of whatever tradition one is - IBEC operates on an all-island basis as does Tourism Ireland - to enhance prosperity and equality of opportunity across the island. I have a lot more to say on AI but my time is up.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Tá AI linn agus cé go bhfuil leas le baint as, tá baoil ag baint leis freisin. Ar aon chaoi, tá sé ag tarlúint agus caithfimid cinnte a dhéanamh de go bhfuil ár bpolasaithe réidh le déileáil leis ó thaobh cúrsaí oideachais agus fostaíochta de agus ó thaobh seirbhísí poiblí agus go leor gnéithe eile. AI is a reality. It is pushing forward at a relentless pace. There are areas about which we would be concerned but there are also significant opportunities and potential for improving the quality of our public services as well as delivering economic growth so it must be carefully managed. We need a strategy for it. We are probably a bit behind the curve in that regard.

There is a need for the State to get ahead of developments in the AI space, to shape its direction of travel at a national and European level, to exploit the economic opportunities of AI, to harness its positive power and to legislate, where necessary, to protect workers and society. AI is not brand new. It is a technology which has existed for some time. However, the pace, scale and nature of its growth is close to being exponential. The speed of breakthroughs seems to surprise even those involved in the sector and the industries working with it.

The job of politicians is to keep pace with the technology and where it is going. It was for this reason that Sinn Féin previously called for the establishment of a forum on AI with a specific focus on the technological surveillance of workers using artificial intelligence and machine learning to establish the benefits and risks of it. When she was spokesperson in this area, Deputy Louise O'Reilly said that the national risk assessment highlights the need to focus on securing future economic opportunities in emerging knowledge-intensive sectors. The national risk assessment for Ireland 2024 makes clear the delicate balance of opportunities and threats due to technological advancement. The report states that while emerging technology will bring many opportunities, they also bring threats in terms of social cohesion and inequality. It is essential that State agencies such as the Advisory Council on Artificial Intelligence analyse, investigate and navigate the risks that accompany emerging technologies. This will also include the trade union movement. If one is talking about reducing the amount of labour that is involved in a process, that has implications for employees. While there is benefit from productivity, there are issues in terms of displacement of jobs and this needs to be reckoned with. We cannot adopt a position that this must be rejected and the rest of the world is going to march on in any event but we need to give clear consideration as to how we ensure that jobs are insulated to the greatest extent possible and that new opportunities are created off the back of this as well.

There are also significant social and economic opportunities to be gained from emerging technologies. State economic agencies like IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, and local enterprise offices need to seize on the opportunities that exist, particularly in knowledge-intensive

sectors such as decarbonisation, clean tech, renewables, AI, machine learning, quantum computing, cell and gene therapy and other forms of advanced personalised medicine. Through doing this, we believe the State can minimise risk, maximise opportunity and put the economy on the front foot for the coming decades. There is a need for the State to get ahead of this, to exploit the economic opportunities that exist and to legislate, where necessary, to protect workers and society.

The direction of travel in education in recent years requires a certain amount of consideration. The playing pitch has changed. Many of the things we would have been examining still require examination but there is potential for discrepancies between our primary and secondary system and universities in terms of what is and is not permitted. We need a serious conversation about the skills we are trying to learn and whether we want people emerging from our education system who are the best at being able to manage AI or whether there are other types of skills. I am not being prescriptive in terms of solutions but it is a consideration. The other consideration is energy usage. Data centres need to be considered.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** There is no doubt that AI is developing at a rapid pace and the technology has the potential to change the way we live, engage with each other, work and play. AI will affect different facets of our lives and has the potential to bring a number of benefits. I have seen programmes about how AI has improved the speed of the development of new medicines saving lives and costing less in development. Other areas include life-saving technology such as vehicle and airline safety. AI is found in most of our electrical household items. People are using AI in so many positive ways. Students, teachers, academics and even we as public representatives are using it on a regular basis outside the technology we have in Leinster House. No, I did not use it to write this speech. I did it myself through old-fashioned research.

In business, the list of opportunities for AI will be endless. Its use in shops, manufacturing, sales, insurance, finance and law is happening as we speak. Like all developing technology, it also poses a number of risks. We simply do not know all the risks at this stage, however, we can be fairly sure that jobs that are here now will be gone. They will be consigned to the history books like those of the coopers about whom we now sing who used to work in Guinness and other breweries. Their jobs have now been consigned to history. I am originally from the north inner city, an area that was destroyed by containerisation. Thousands of jobs were destroyed overnight. That led to decades of mass unemployment, poverty and deprivation, and into the heroin epidemic of the 1980s. These are the things we have to consider and we must be careful when we look at technology like this.

In recent years, there has been a movement to address AI through various policy initiatives and regulation in different jurisdictions, including in Ireland. Significantly, there has been an important move towards regulating AI within the European Union in the form of the EU AI Act, which entered into force on 1 August 2024. The precise impact of this Act on AI in Ireland remains to be seen but, as a binding regulation, the EU AI Act will have important implications for Ireland as it will shape our country's approach to AI in the future.

I today came across the following three questions that I think are important. How can we massively develop artificial intelligence technologies and uses across the world? How can we ensure nobody is left behind and preserve freedoms in the AI revolution? How can we ensure that uses of artificial intelligence respect our humanist values and the technology serves society and the public interest? The simplest and soundest answer I came up with was regulation, regulation, regulation.

Professor Gregory O'Hare is a professor of AI and the head of the school of computer science and statistics in Trinity College Dublin, TCD. He has acknowledged the difficulty of legislating for such a vast evolving area. He said at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment:

> I do not think the legislative framework we have at the moment is in a position to be able to respond with the speed that we need. Things are starting to present themselves that have not previously been considered because they did not need to be considered.
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> [...]
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> It is difficult to legislate for something that is so difficult to even define. We need to move rapidly. Even the speed at which we are moving at a European level is not sufficient. The boundaries around this technology are not governed by political or geographic barriers.

In an interview with *The Irish Times* in February last year, Dr. Patricia Scanlon said:

> We all admit how powerful this technology is and anything that powerful needs to be regulated. I think anybody arguing against that doesn't really have very strong legs to stand on because the "it's for the benefit of society" argument and that "trust us" attitude didn't really work very well with social media.

We all know the positives of social media, which include the connections that people make. However, we also know the dangers of social media and the harm it is causing, particularly to the mental health of our younger generation.

I will touch on the impact on the environment, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire mentioned. The processing of data is very resource-intensive. I will give the House two statistics. Each MWh of energy requires the consumption of 7,100 l of water. A simple request for a 100-word email generated by an AI chatbot using GPT-4 requires 0.14 kWh of electricity. That is equal to the electricity required to light 14 LED lightbulbs for one hour. That is for a 100-word email.

AI is important. It is coming; in fact, it is here. It is something we need to regulate. We must look after our society.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** I am sharing time with Deputy Ahern. I am delighted to contribute to this important debate, which is one that my county colleague, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, has been seeking for some time. I am delighted to be a part of the discussion on a topic that is reshaping our world at an unprecedented pace. As we navigate this transformative era, it is crucial that we harness the power of AI not just for profit but for the greater good of our businesses, economy and society as a whole.

We in the Labour Party recognise the potential benefits of AI and believe that new technology should be embraced. Crucially, though, AI must be seen to be used as a tool to improve people's working lives and not just to replace them. A robust regulatory framework is crucial. It is essential that regulators are well-resoured to handle compliance efficiently and to establish Ireland as a leader in AI governance. We must ensure that workers benefit from each new technological breakthrough. One of the key challenges will be to ensure that a system is in place to allow the gains of AI advancement and proliferation to be fairly distributed rather than being concentrated at the top.

Al in the workplace must benefit workers as much as it benefits businesses. It cannot be

treated simply as a tool to increase margins. A human-centric, rights-based approach must be adopted. A recent OECD report found that workers are more likely to report positive impacts of Al in the workplace if there has been a consultation process through their trade unions. Workers' voices must be heard as Al increasingly permeates our workplaces. We must be cognisant of the fact that Al is already creating technological displacement, where workers' jobs are becoming automated, and will inevitably continue to become so. Investment in continuous professional development, lifelong learning and a strong social protection system will be key to mitigating the negative effects. It is absolutely vital that the human in control principle is incorporated into law at the EU level.

We must also harness the enormous benefits and opportunities provided by Al, such as in speeding up diagnosis and treatment in healthcare settings and in liberating workers from mundane or unpleasant tasks. We in the Labour Party are concerned about the growth in monitoring through Al applications and in work surveillance. The use of Al and algorithmic management must be regulated and its use in recruitment, remuneration and day-to-day supervision must be limited. Statutory protections against such practices must be introduced.

Whether it is ordering a takeaway, getting shopping delivered or a taxi home from a night out, online platforms have transformed the way we live. Platform work must be regulated in line with the EU platform work directive, and gig and platform workers must have access to information about their pay. The Government must legislate to ensure transparency in algorithmic management and to recognise platform workers as full employees, not contractors, and afford them all the associated benefits and protections.

The inclusive transformation of our public services and economy through the benefits of digitalisation and Al are vital. The removal of the digital divide and the embedding of AI skills and innovation to position Ireland as a global leader are also vital. We proposed and believe there should be a stand-alone Department of digital and communications, to include AI, initially paired with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science under one Minister. We must strive to position Ireland as a leader in all aspects of the digital transformation, from skills to chips, cloud computing to Al. It is our belief that the State must proactively invest in artificial intelligence applications through the strategic investment and development bank. The rights of creators and copyright must be respected as provided for in the EU Al Act and controls must be placed on the creation and use of deepfakes, and the protection of the democratic process from the abuse and misuse of Al in the electoral process is absolutely imperative. Maintaining online trust in all digital processes is essential to our social, political and economic futures. Safeguarding our information in a world where AI is ever-growing is of vital concern and we believe that an independent review of the Data Protection Commission to investigate the measures needed to strengthen and reform its functions, and ensure it is adequately resourced and proactive in enforcing EU AI rules, is essential.

There is little doubt that maximising Al for our greater good requires a collective effort. To ensure this happens, it is imperative that we embrace the transformative power of Al in business, the economy and society. Strengthening these areas will also underpin future growth in areas such as financial services and intellectual property management, which rely on a strong technological framework and secure networks. Let us decide to prioritise ethical practices, invest in education and reskilling, and use and leverage Al to solve complex challenges. If we do this, we can ensure that Al serves as a tool for progress, innovation and equity. It is up to all of us to shape artificial intelligence in a way that benefits everyone.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I welcome this debate. Now and in the years to come, AI and how we effectively use and regulate it will be one of the key challenges we face as legislators. As my colleague, Deputy Lawlor, has said, there is enormous potential for Al to have a really transformative and positive impact for workers if it is applied in a fair manner and everyone can benefit from it. It is crucial that Al does not just become another way for big businesses to bump up their profits. I echo Deputy Lawlor's point that we must take a human-centred approach to all this.

I will focus my remarks on the climate element in the debate on Al. It has been suggested by some in the tech sector that Al has a massive role to play in helping us to address the climate crisis and that the positives of Al will outweigh the negatives. I do not doubt that it certainly can have some impact in helping us with things like tracking extreme weather events or identifying areas of environmental or biodiversity concern, but I am not sold on the argument that Al is the answer to all our climate problems. The core issue right now is whether these potentially positive applications of Al outweigh the negatives in terms of the level of energy it consumes. The reality is that using an Al tool like ChatGPT takes an enormous amount of energy. A search on ChatGPT uses around ten times more energy than a Google search. AI is proliferating rapidly and, with it, the ever-growing need for data centres. We really do need to concern ourselves with the amount of energy it uses and how this affects not just our energy security and the cost of electricity for ordinary people, but also our climate ambitions. It is in this context that I was extremely concerned by the proposed new rules regarding data centres published by the CRU yesterday. Quite frankly, the new rules fly in the face of our climate goals. Ideally, and this is something we in the Labour Party have called for consistently, we would have a moratorium on new data centres, at least until we can be sure that they will not pose a threat to or put pressure on our grid or pose a threat to our climate targets.

Nonetheless, the Government seems content to plough ahead with them. It it is welcome that data centres will be required to power themselves rather than taking power from the national grid but it is hugely concerning that there is nothing in the proposed rules to state that their power sources must be clean, renewable, sustainable sources. We know that data centres consume enormous amounts of energy. Currently 50% of electricity produced in Dublin and Meath is going to data centres and more than a fifth of the total amount of electricity used in Ireland is going to data centres. The latter percentage is projected to grow to up to 30% over the next few years. That is more electricity usage than all the homes in the country, yet there is nothing in the draft rules to state that data centres must be powered with clean energy. What is stopping data centres from importing and using more dirty fuel at precisely the time we should be moving away from this? The CRU must clarify in the finalised rules that data centres have to power themselves using sustainable, renewable sources. The growth in Al use will inevitably mean that the already high consumption of energy in data centres grows further, so proper regulatory and legislative frameworks must be put in place now to ensure that they do not impact on our vital climate targets.

Given that the Government seems intent on green-lighting more data centres, we need to start looking seriously at using the waste heat they generate. The Tallaght district heating scheme in my own constituency of Dublin South-West uses waste heat from a nearby data centre to heat council buildings and the TU Dublin Tallaght campus. It has been hugely successful. The model is already there. It is welcome that plans are in place in South Dublin County Council to roll out district heating in more areas and to start heating affordable homes elsewhere in the constituency. We need to see more of that, and I urge the Government to use the Tallaght

model to roll out district heating and heat capture from data centres to other areas.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** I thank the Minister of State for giving us time to discuss this very important issue. AI is something that is constantly talked about but I always find when I discuss it with constituents, there tends to be a mix of attitudes. Some people think it will be great and we will be able to save lots of time, while among others there is a mixture of fear and mostly uncertainty about how it will impact them and, as other speakers have highlighted, how it will impact people's industries and jobs and their children's futures. What should children study to deal with this future and totally uncertain world? That is one reason I wanted to speak on this topic today. During my time as a lecturer in TU Dublin we encountered the dramatic impact that the arrival of ChatGPT had on us and our students. My colleagues and I were suddenly faced with a situation whereby assignments that would normally take a couple of hours, days or even weeks to research, prepare and write could be done with a few clicks through some online interface. In those early iterations, it was quite easy for me and my colleagues to identify the use of things like ChatGPT. Other artificial intelligence providers are available, as my students discovered. We were able to identify this quite clearly. We have heard about the hallucinations, where it was just completely making stuff up. We could spot those things quite quickly, being experts in our fields. In addition, in the early iterations the language was quite clunky. It struggled, and still struggles – which is why my fellow Deputy wrote his own speech – because they are not very good at Irish English at all and one certainly could not rely on that. However, these tools are increasing in sophistication all the time and that was continuing to be a challenge for us. I welcome, therefore, that the programme for Government includes a plan to develop a policy for dealing with artificial intelligence in the area of education. That is very welcome.

I would also like to highlight the positives. Our students are actually quite smart. After a while, they figured out that they could not just put the stuff in, get it and submit it because we are smart too and could spot it, so they learned how to use the tool. Like many other tools we have and all the new technologies that have come along, it has become a tool that students can use effectively. As many other speakers have noted, our challenge is how we will use this tool effectively in order that we can spend more time focusing on the human tasks and get rid of much of the drudgery, which is effectively what ChatGPT was able to do for so many people.

Obviously education is not the only area of public service in which artificial intelligence can assist us. I see huge potential for increased efficiencies in other areas of the public sector. Something that affects my area in Dublin Rathdown is mobility and movement, which the Minister of State mentioned. It came up at a meeting I held in Mount Merrion last night, where people talked about traffic light sequencing and the frustration with that. It is a big issue because not only are people trying to move around Dublin Rathdown itself but there is also the N11 and the M50 so, in effect, we are a travel-through county. There are many challenges there relating to how we move people around. The frustration expressed by residents last night, which I am sure everyone here has experienced, is that whether one walks, cycles or is in a car or bus, we have all been stopped at junctions where no one seems to be moving at all. As a pedestrian, I have found myself at traffic lights many times and while they say that the lights change automatically when a pedestrian pushes them, that is not the case. It is one of those frustrations. A pilot programme was conducted in the UK to try to use artificial intelligence specifically to improve traffic light sequencing. That is an area where AI could benefit all those who use our roads.

As other Members have pointed out, however, there are also negative consequences and there are concerns. The EU Act is attempting to create a framework around all that for the posi-

tive development of technology. I am concerned about the misuse of that technology, such as deepfakes, which put words into someone's mouth, or misusing people's images. A piece of legislation that comes to mind, probably because of its name, is the Ensuring Likeness Voice and Image Security, ELVIS, Act which was passed in Tennessee. It attempted to introduce penalties for misuse. Obviously we could not introduce an ELVIS Act - I presume it would have to be the Bono Act - but it is an indicator of the direction of travel we need to take to enhance the positives while at the same time trying to address the potential negative outcomes as well.

I ask the Minister of State, particularly in the area of public service provision, what sort of framework will be developed in order to deliver those public services using AI.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I congratulate my good friend and colleague, Deputy Niamh Smyth, on her appointment and wish her well. Right throughout the programme for Government, the increased emphasis on artificial intelligence and digitalisation is very positive. However, it is essential that it does not just fall on the Minister of State's shoulders. It is critical that we have a whole-of-government approach to unlock the potential of new technology. As the Taoiseach has said, in many ways what we are experiencing with AI is the 21st century's Industrial Revolution. It will transform everything we do. I am an optimist by nature and I believe that we should be focusing on the opportunities as to how tech can improve our lives, our health outcomes and, indeed, workplace efficiencies.

We cannot have innovation without safety, as a number of colleagues have said. I totally agree with Deputy Donnelly when he said that we have to address the digital divide and ensure that citizens are not left behind.

As the Minister of State said, AI is not a new concept but the speed at which the change is happening, notwithstanding some of the hype, really is breathtaking. Indeed, Dario Amodei, the co-founder and CEO of Anthropic, said recently that we may achieve artificial general intelligence by 2027. That may be a little optimistic but I would be quite certain over the lifetime of this Oireachtas that we will see very significant changes.

What I would like to focus on today is the State's response and some of the things I believe we need to do. I have long called for Oireachtas hearings - indeed, a special committee on AI and new tech - to stimulate public debate on issues related to artificial intelligence. I totally agree with the Minister of State about training for all TDs and Senators on the use of AI. The national artificial intelligence strategy, AI - Here for Good, is an excellent document, but one of our problems with these is that quite often we say the right things and we do not follow through. The Minister of State will be aware I tabled a parliamentary question last month to all Departments and agencies on their use of AI and, to be honest, with some notable exceptions in health, Revenue and the cross-Border Loughs Agency, there was not a lot of proactivity. There was limited engagement beyond acting on the advice of the NCSE and some training that was happening. Indeed, the opening line from the Department of enterprise in response was, "A policy document on the use of Generative AI was issued to all staff in my Department setting out the risks of using such technologies and the mitigations they must adopt to avoid those risks." That was not, in my view, a proactive approach.

During Ireland's EU Presidency, we need to talk about artificial intelligence and digital leadership in Europe. It is critical those themes are front and centre. We need to indicate that earlier. While there has to be a strong emphasis on safety in EU regulation, it cannot be overly burdensome. We have to continue to encourage innovation in this space.

On the broader debate, which I agree with my Labour Party colleagues needs to be linked with the debate on renewable energy, data centres are critical. We have to have the debate on renewable energy, data centres and powering the grid. They are all interrelated. If the Labour Party wants a moratorium on data centres, we can take more seriously some of its calls in this space when it also has a moratorium on its use of social media. Data centres are critical drivers. I would encourage the party to look at Echelon, for instance, and some of the plans it has for new data centres just outside Arklow.

The Department has a number of responsibilities in The Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2024. The Department has been challenged to commission research on the impact of AI and key technologies on the Irish economy and to engage in a campaign of AI adoption for SMEs. It is important we hear more about the responses in those areas.

As we have said and we have been talking about, this will be transformative. There is a critical role for all Departments, particularly, I believe and as has been mentioned, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which cannot only be an administrative Department. Robots will not replace workers but the reality is workers who use artificial intelligence will replace workers who do not. In those circumstances, it is critical we upskill everybody in our society and that we have that debate.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I might have been better had I used ChatGPT or something else to write a speech for me. I did not and I will go for a more traditional method of dealing with this.

In fairness, and I might never say this again over the next four years, I agree with the previous speaker from the opposite bench, especially on the need to look at holding special hearings. We definitely need to look at having a special committee to deal with the issue of AI.

When talking about the idea of digital literacy, there would be an issue in this House in dealing with the concepts. We will be talking about something that absolutely is changing.

While 2027 might not exactly be the date on which Skynet becomes aware, and we have the disaster scenarios from "Terminator" that people fear, we have seen significant moves from simply neural networks right through to where quantum computing is at present, and it is probably only at an intermediate stage. The advantages are that you will have capacity. As this intelligence and technology improves, the idea would be that you would get a lot more bang for buck which could also deal with some of the issues we have with data centres. I also accept data centres are not going anywhere. Some of the issues we have in this State have been our failure to deal with the grid and with renewables. We really need to get everything together.

We all know the benefits that can exist, that exist in improving medical outcomes and that can happen in education. That is also to accept we may have to change the way by which students currently are graded or assessed. We have to teach people how to use tools, particularly when we are talking about generative AI, rather than make up and ensure they do not have to do anything. Members know what I mean, because that is not of any great benefit. While we need a regulatory framework, it would not make sense for us to miss out from an enterprise point of view on the productivity, innovation and necessary economic drivers they can be. We need to make sure we are absolutely on top of this in any way, shape or form.

I know we all have a fear. Some of the fear is not quite what I spoke about earlier, rather that we have seen the relationship between the tech bros and Donald Trump and we know these peo-

ple want to ensure there is no regulation whatsoever on their ability to make money and wield power. We needs to make sure the Digital Services Act deals with some of the issues that exist regarding the absolute freedom they want for people to put up content so that they can maintain profits. When we are talking about artificial intelligence, it is a facility that can really benefit but it needs to be universal benefit. There is a huge amount of work that needs to be done.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I congratulate Deputy Smyth on her role, as she said at the beginning of today's discussion, as the first Minister of State with intleacht shaorga in her title.

I welcome today's discussion. This is such an important topic in society right now. It will dominate our term of office for the next five years. There is no question that it will be an important part of so many areas of life and it is important we facilitate this type of discussion.

I would question the framing of it because even the order the discussion is going in in terms of how technology or AI is specifically used for the public good, in business, the economy and for wider society is demonstrative of what we, unfortunately, have seen in policymaking in this area, which is an emphasis on industry, business, economy and a failure to take into account the wider implications of AI in society.

I am excited about artificial intelligence. I am a techie. I worked in the tech sector for eight years. I am a technophile but my excitement about AI is tempered right now because we are not keeping up. The politics and the legal framework we need to harness AI for good does not exist and the actors with all the power right now are big business. I cannot be excited. I cannot be positive about the impact of AI until I am secure in that regulatory framework, until I feel that the right safeguards and the right controls are in place for us to use AI without the dangers it presents.

Dúirt an Taoiseach inné go raibh rogha idir dul i ngleic le hathrú aeráide agus poist a chosaint. Is drochshampla é sin. Ní rogha idir ceann amháin nó ceann eile í. Níl poist á gcosaint againn trí easpa rialacháin. The Taoiseach, yesterday, positioned it as a choice between regulation and protection of jobs, which is problematic. That is not how we need to think about it. We have to introduce regulations, not in a way to prevent jobs or job creation but in a way to protect against the precarity we will see otherwise.

Again, it speaks to that imbalance between industry and societal interests.

I will speak briefly about regulation before I talk about some of those challenges that really keep me awake at night. We have regulation at domestic and EU level. We have started to see the legislating of this space in terms of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act and the Digital Services Act. Both of those are good steps but nowhere near where we need to be. Similar to the legislation we have seen in the EU with the Digital Services Act and the AI Act, both were watered down to a point where I believe that, once again, we are seeing this industry emphasis and not the impact we know AI will have on society. In a parliamentary question response I received this week I discovered it seems we will be opting out of the section in the AI Act on law enforcement's use of AI. I would love to hear more about whether that is the case.

*5 o'clock*

We have heard that displacement of labour is one of the big challenges. I find it interesting that the last Government speaker agreed with what the Taoiseach said yesterday that AI will bring about the fourth industrial revolution. We will see labour displacement at a rate we have not seen in generations and yet he said that robots will not take our jobs. Robots will take our

jobs. Any jobs that are text-based, such as middle class professions like solicitors, journalists and so on, will be impacted as generative AI develops over the coming five, ten or 20 years. There is no question about that. We have to deal with that head on. We have to deal with it in the most positive way we can by saying that these efficiencies actually should allow us more time as a society for leisure. We should look at really big societal questions such as the identity we have with labour. We should look at a reduction of working time, for example, working towards four-day weeks. We should look at universal basic income and tools that will allow that safety net for us to transition because otherwise we will see a continued erosion and precarity of labour because of the displacement we are experiencing from this.

The next thing I want to call out is algorithmic decision-making. Another Government speaker spoke about this issue but I have huge problems with it. We have seen cases emerge in both the UK and the Netherlands where algorithmic decision-making is used in the provision of public services and it leads to bias and discrimination. We know this. We know the tools are not there yet to deal with this efficiently. It also removes access to justice for people because if there is no human behind the decision being made it is very difficult for people who feel they have been wrongly decided against to find accountability for those decisions. Those safeguards are not there and the structures are not in place to actually deploy this in a way I believe is yet safe.

Disinformation, misinformation and malinformation are huge threats to our democracy, rule of law and political stability as a country and as a globe. We all know this as elected representatives. We all have experienced some of this. It will only worsen with deepfakes becoming more and more sophisticated and we have to be really live to it. Underlying all of this is digital literacy. As I mentioned earlier, I am a techie. I love using technology but I do not love surveillance so I make sure I deploy my technology in a way that I am not surveilled. Most people do not have that level of sophistication so digital literacy has to keep up as we rely on AI.

I will touch briefly on some of the recommendations the Social Democrats set out in our general election manifesto. I would be delighted to speak to the Minister of State about these in more detail as she gets going on her brief. An AI committee must be established to deal with this because it is such a cross-Government issue. There needs to be more honest conversation about labour displacement plans and really thinking about the massive scale of retraining that will be required. Ireland needs to play into its unique position where most tech giants are headquartered here; we need to have honest conversations about them as publishers and about their use of AI and technology more broadly to drive polarisation in society.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I listened to the previous Government speaker who repeated something said yesterday. It is almost as if you cannot talk about regulation if you have a social media account. What a banal and boring analysis of the situation.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Yes, get rid of your phone and computer. I wish I could.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** It is the equivalent of saying you are not allowed talk about banking regulation if you have a bank account. The only person I remember in the Chamber who could meet that standard was the former leader of Fianna Fáil. What a weird analogy.

For years we were sold the dream that automation and AI would free people from drudgery, allowing society to prosper and with fewer working hours and more leisure. Any of us who watched the inauguration of Trump saw the tech billionaires lined up behind him have only one

purpose in mind - the erosion of workers' rights and the deployment of wealth to their own ends. We cannot step away from that reality. Of course,there are opportunities here to build a new system but what the tech billionaires aspire to is a system where power is concentrated, where automation would serve the few while the rest of us are expected to adapt, and a scramble for security in an economy that no longer values human labour.

We cannot afford to sleepwalk into that future. Of course we have to be bold in accepting the reality of AI. It is happening whether we like it or not. We cannot put that milk back into the bottle even if we would like to. That does not mean we just have to be subservient to it. If we accept the fact there will be increased automation and AI that does not mean we have to have increased electricity bills for consumers. That does not mean we have to just hand over our legitimacy to these tech oligarchs and allow them in many ways to not only dictate the pace of our economy but also the pace of our foreign policy. When it comes to some of the decisions we are taking with regard to Gaza and occupied territories Bill, it was all designed to plamás these same figures.

The first and foremost challenge is an assurance that AI serves workers. That same previous Fianna Fáil speaker said that AI will not replace jobs. That is just clearly not true. On a very basic level I represent the north inner city community where containerisation down in the docks created a huge displacement of workers. That void still has not been filled so to say that is simply not true.

The Taoiseach spoke yesterday about a fourth industrial revolution. In every revolution new technology has created wealth but the distribution of that wealth has always been a political choice. AI will of course be no different. If companies automate jobs and increase profits then we should not shy away from demanding they contribute back whether through taxation, social investment, or policies to ensure job retraining and redeployment and bring the conversation of a universal basic income of a very real standard to the table. We are clearly nearly at that point and this is not a distant concern.

As we are well-informed, Ireland's tech sector employs more than 150,000 people. If AI is used recklessly those jobs will be at risk. Let us not pretend this is just about tech companies.

AI is used frequently in finance, legal services and customer support. AI is even being used in creative industries. We absolutely need regulation to ensure AI complements human work rather than undermines it. To simply say that should not be seen as us being fearful or not understanding the possibilities. That is just acknowledging the reality and seeking to do what we are supposed to do in this Chamber which is to legislate for it and not be beholden to those same interests.

There is another immediate challenge, one Ireland cannot afford to ignore. AI is not just about data and algorithms, it is also about energy. Training large AI models consumes staggering amounts of electricity. Running them requires large amounts of it. Many of them are right here in Ireland. We know that. We should have these conversations. We should not be just talking pie in the sky about how great it will be. We should seek to regulate to ensure that everybody benefits and not just a few.

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** I welcome the Minister of State to her new role. Having witnessed her handling of RTÉ, her response to the AI revolution will be child's play in comparison to the challenges she faced as Chair of that committee. I welcome her appointment to this post

and it is a very good decision by the Government to have a Minister of State dedicated to this important issue.

I welcome this debate on how we can harness AI for the greater good in business, the economy and society. Let us be clear, this is not a speculative conversation. It is not on the horizon, it is here right now. As the Taoiseach rightly stated, the AI revolution is the most profound economic shift since the industrial revolution. We heard pithy remarks and saw eyerolls during Leaders' Questions when that statement was made but let us look at the facts. In healthcare, AI is diagnosing cancer, tuberculosis, and diabetes faster and more accurately than ever before. During the Covid-19 pandemic, AI accelerated drug discovery and patient management, saving lives. In finance AI-powered algorithims by Visa and MasterCard are detecting fraudulent transactions in real time. In agriculture, AI-driven drones are optimising crop yields and soil health. In my own field in the legal sector, AI is expediting justice by automating document review which is cutting costs and delays.

These are not projections, they are realities. PwC estimates that AI will add €1.8 trillion in value to northern Europe while Accenture predicts €148 billion could be added to Ireland's GDP by 2038. Ireland is uniquely placed to lead. We are home to 16 of the world's top 20 tech companies. We have the highest number of STEM graduates *per capita* in Europe and more than 40 companies developing AI technologies. Two thirds of Ireland's 2,200 indigenous tech startups employ more than 52,000 people, so when AI sceptics shrug their shoulders, I say that turning our backs on AI is turning our backs on Ireland's future. It does nothing for the tens of thousands of people whose jobs depend on the tech sector or for the millions of Irish citizens who will be impacted by AI's advancement.

As many Deputies have already said during this debate, we cannot separate AI from energy, but unlike what I heard from the Labour Party speaker, in my view data centres are the backbone of AI infrastructure. They are vilified, as we heard earlier this afternoon, in a way that is filled with much whataboutery. The Labour Party spoke earlier about having a moratorium on data centres. That is a Trumpian policy. It is essentially saying to stop funding something altogether because we have a concern about it and that we will worry about all the problems when we have decided what the solutions should give. To add to that whataboutery, it was highlighted how, in the constituency of the Deputy who made that contribution, there are benefits from data centres in the form of district heating that can flow from data centres.

We need to have an honest and clear debate about data centres. There are jokes about people having mobile phones meaning they do not have a right to debate. I do not accept that contention. If you own a mobile phone, you can still criticise data centres. We have to be honest and acknowledge that the technological advancement that we all rely on day-to-day is fuelled by data centres. We cannot have this approach where data centres should just be somewhere else. That is the negative philosophy of NIMBYism that prevents homes from being built in all our constituencies across the country. We have to be honest and truthful about that.

In the same way that we should not be fearful about AI when it comes to the innovations that it will bring, while ensuring that we regulate it in an appropriate and balanced manner, it is not just one side of the equation where data centres consume and sap so much energy and therefore we must oppose them at all costs, but that data centres create and fuel demand. That type of demand can in turn drive the type of investment that we need to see in renewable energy in this country. We need to see improvements in the amount of offshore wind that we will develop over the next five, ten or 15 years. Data centres have a role to play in fuelling AI and innovation

but also in contributing to the investment that we need to see in the renewable energy sector. This is not a zero-sum game. The debate has complexity. We have to be honest about that and reflect that.

As Mario Draghi's recent report highlighted, Europe is falling behind the USA and China on AI due to over-regulation. The former ECB governor warned that Europe has effectively imposed tariffs on itself.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I am sorry to interrupt the Deputy. That is five minutes. I call Deputy Shay Brennan.

**Deputy Shay Brennan:** Today, we are addressing a matter of critical national importance, which is the transformative power of artificial intelligence and the significant opportunity for Ireland to establish itself as a global leader in this field. The decision we make now will impact not only our economic future but also the way we work, live and interact as a society for decades to come. As we embark into 2025, it is clear that AI is no longer a distant prospect but a present reality reshaping our economy and society. The potential of AI to drive growth and innovation in Ireland is immense, with some projections even suggesting it could boost GDP by tens of millions over the next decade. To seize this opportunity, we must build upon the refreshed AI - Here for Good: National Artificial Intelligence Strategy. The strategy emphasises our commitment to a humancentric, ethical approach to AI development, adoption and use. We must position Ireland at the forefront of implementing the EU AI Act, participate constructively in the EU AI board, and foster public trust through transparency and engagement.

Our Government must increase investment in AI. While we are set to increase spending on AI research projects by over 50% to €1.8 million in 2025, we must go further. We must guide the development of data centre infrastructure crucial for AI growth, focusing on renewable energy sources and energy-efficient technology. We must also invest in nationwide 5G and other critical digital infrastructure to support AI development.

Education and skills development are crucial. We are proud that Ireland was one of the first countries in the world to develop an industry-driven, postgraduate MSc in artificial intelligence, but we have to do more. We have to implement comprehensive AI education programmes at all levels, from primary schools to professional development. We must expand digital upskilling and reskilling initiatives, including those available via Skillnet and Springboard+.

The impact of AI on our job market is already evident. While up to 160,000 jobs in Ireland could see more than half of their work activities automated by AI, the majority of Irish employers believe that AI adoption will ultimately result in more jobs, not fewer. In fact, 51% of employers report that AI introduction will create more roles than it replaces. We are seeing this trend in action. The demand for AI professionals in Ireland has skyrocketed, with a 142% increase in the past six months alone. An additional 8,000 AI-related jobs are expected to be created this year. In my constituency, Dublin Rathdown, we are witnessing this growth first-hand. Our area is home to several global companies that have already announced hundreds of new local AI-related jobs. This is a testament to Ireland's growing reputation as a hub for AI innovation and talent.

To drive AI adoption across our economy, we must develop a national campaign to raise awareness among small and medium enterprises of the benefits of AI adoption and the available supports. The Government can and should lead by example. We must use AI to transform

online public services, making them more efficient and effective. We must also develop AI strategies for key sectors such as healthcare, leveraging AI to improve patient access, experience and outcomes.

Innovation and research are key to our success. We have to continue to support and expand initiatives like the national AI hub, increase funding for AI research and development and establish an AI regulatory testbed to foster innovation while ensuring responsible developments. On the international stage, we have a clear opportunity to strengthen Ireland's position in global AI initiatives and collaborations. We must leverage our unique position as an EU member with a strong foothold in the tech sector to play a key role in global AI development, roll-out and governance discussions. To ensure ethical and responsible AI governance, we must strengthen the role of the AI Advisory Council in providing independent advice on emerging AI challenges. We need to roll out AI standards and certifications aligned with the EU AI Act and deliver transparency and accountability in public service AI deployments.

AI is not some far-off concept. It is the present reality and is transforming our world. From the innovation tech hubs in Dublin to the enterprising communities right across rural Ireland, AI offers us the tools to enhance our quality of life, fuel economic growth and cement Ireland's position as a technological powerhouse on the global stage. We should embrace this challenge with the spirit of innovation and determination that has always been the hallmark of Irish ingenuity. We must work together in government, industry and academia to ensure the benefits of AI are maximised for all our citizens.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I congratulate the Minister of State on her new role. The opportunity to speak about artificial intelligence is apt at this point in time. At no age in our society has technology had a bigger role, particularly considering social media and the impact that has had on so many people across the globe, particularly across Ireland. It is clear that there is significant power in all of that. The previous speaker spoke of the power that AI has. The difficulty with it is that people have to make decisions as to how that power is employed. Will it be employed for the good or for the bad? We think of social media and the number of people whose lives have been destroyed by it because that power was used negatively, and the number of other people whose lives were enhanced by it because it was used positively.

It is down to that decision that has to be made. That is why regulation is so important in all of this. The opportunities that were spoken of by so many Deputies are absolutely real, including the opportunities in the health service, in education and even in our bus timetables. No matter what we look at, whether transport or whatever else, AI has a role to play which can be positive and enhancing for everyone in society. There are certainly opportunities in employment and so on. Possibly, in the future, it could create opportunities to create more new and different energy sources which will supply the energy which will be needed for it.

In the end, it comes back to how we regulate this. There are very big vested interests ensuring that there is little or no regulation. We heard what Mr. Vance had to say with regard to that when he went to the European convention recently in Munich. These are world players and they dominate, and that is the difficulty we have. One of the examples I often think about is Adam Smith. He wrote a book many years ago called *The Wealth of Nations.* He was, of course, the hero of capitalism, but he was also a very strong proponent for strong regulation, and that the strong hand of government had to be there to ensure there was fair play. Toward the end of that book there is a piece that states that never is there a time when two or more merchants come together for the most casual of conversation but the conversation turns to fix the

market to their benefit.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Absolutely.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** That is why we must have firm regulation. That is why we have to ensure regulation is in place. Even the heroes of capitalism recognise the difficulty with it and the flaw in it, which is that the most powerful can use it for the negative and for their own benefit. That is why we have to ensure that artificial intelligence is used in a way which will be positive for people. That can only happen if Government, the people in these Houses, and particularly in the European Union - a lot of it will be governed from there - do so in a positive way to ensure we protect our citizens and enhance their lives rather than allow it to be used, as much of this technology has been used to date, for the negative. That is the point we need to focus on as we move forward in embracing this technology for the public good.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment and wish her well in the new role. I welcome this opportunity for us to have an informed debate on the positive implications of AI across our society, as well as the new risks it brings. As with any evolution in technological capability that has a widespread application, the public debate on this has been intense. In this environment the public requires clear and trustworthy information about how AI is being used in their daily lives, and in particular to ensure that the public interest is served, that individual rights and freedoms are protected from exploitation, and that the adoption of this technology is used within the boundary of our climate commitments. It is also important to establish some fundamental principles about what AI should be used for. AI has really innovative potential to bring hugely positive enhancement in our lives, but it has to work for the benefit of people and society. I very much welcome the EU''s AI Act in that line. That regulation sets down critically important limitations on the use of AI, and I am proud of the strong influence the green group in the European Parliament had in ensuring there were guardrails placed in that regulation. Practices like biometric mass surveillance, AI systems that recognise gender or sexual orientation and AI-based predictive policing are among the most undemocratic and unethical practices that AI systems can be put to. Where an individual's rights and freedoms can be so effectively undermined at scale without that person being aware, that raises really worrying and fundamental questions.

We also have to be clear about the identification of fake content. I will use a crude example. There is an image of me going around X at the moment saying that in an interview I leaked a secret of wealth generation. I did not, because I do not know that particular secret.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Adam Smith knew.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** That image is so crude that it can be easily spotted, but we have to be ready for the time when that content is absolutely indistinguishable from reality. We must also be upfront about the huge energy use that AI technology necessitates. As a country that already expends a disproportionate percentage of our energy generation on data centres, we need to acknowledge that the growth in AI use has huge potential to pressure the ability to achieve carbon reduction targets in Ireland and internationally. While acknowledging the role that data centres play in the wider IT sector, which is an important employer in Ireland, we have to be honest about the trade-offs in terms of less capacity for housing connections and in eating up new renewable energy capacity rather than allowing that new renewable energy capacity replace existing fossil fuel sources. We have to be honest that there are trade-offs to the new Government's stated policy of liberalising the granting of planning for additional data centres

that will entail from that new policy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I have to say it has been a pretty depressing debate so far, with a few honourable exceptions. Most of the Deputies have swallowed and then regurgitated the spin from big tech. I find it incredible that we had a speech from the new Minister of State with responsibility for AI and its only reference to climate change is about AI being used to help us address sustainability and climate action. There is no mention of the suggestion by many, including Donald Trump, that it will result in a doubling of our power need. Trump envisages that will be filled by coal. The Irish Government clearly envisages that it will be filled a fuel even dirtier than coal, by importing LNG from America.

What is AI going to do for workers? The Taoiseach claimed yesterday that if we do not enable data centres to massively expand fossil fuel usage, it will damage workers. However, in many cases it will put them out of a job. The Government's own research has found that 30% of Irish workers are in danger of being replaced by AI. Women and people in administrative and creative roles are disproportionately at risk. The World Economic Forum estimates that 85 million workers will lose their jobs to AI in the coming years. We need less of this capture by big tech and more cop-on and the asking of basic questions, like where the massive amounts of rare earth minerals are going to come from. Where is the water going to come from? Where is the energy going to come from? Is it worth trashing our planet and throwing millions of people out of work for the sake of AI-generated slop? Do we want crappy paraphrases from ChatGPT taking over the Internet? Do we want uncanny valley videos of people with six hands walking down? Is that the way we want to spend our energy? Is that how we want to use our water? Do we want more far-right content with AI-generated fake videos fomenting hate? Is that what we want?

I think we need to look back in time to a previous movement that engaged with new technology and said, "Yes, we want technology, but we want it for the benefit of people. We want it in the control of society, not big corporations." I am reading a book at the moment about the Luddites. The Luddites must be the most maligned movement in history. If you look up the definition of the word Luddite, it means someone who is opposed to technology. The Luddites were not opposed to technology. They were skilled workers confronted with the implementation of new technology that was used to impoverish their communities, to lower the quality of the products they were producing, to take away the autonomy they had previously and to drive child labour. They started off not by breaking machines, but by petitions to the king and the government that fell on deaf ears. They were then forced to resort to insurrectionary practices. They were ultimately crushed by massive state repression, occupation and thousands and thousands of soldiers, but basically the Luddites were right, and we could do with applying the lessons today when it comes to big tech.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Most technology can be used either to benefit human beings or for malign purposes. I do not trust the people who control this technology, or the people who dominate the political scene in most of the world, to use this technology to the benefit of society. One of the best films ever made in my opinion - if you have not watched it, you should - is Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times", in which he brilliantly satirises the impact of Fordist industrial technology to deepen the exploitation of human beings, and turn human beings into machines purely to be exploited by greedy capitalists. The danger he alluded to in that brilliant film remains with us today. There is a Deputy elected to this House who had to be suspended from his party because he was associated with, and a shareholder in, a company called Palantir that was providing digital technology to kill people and identify so-called terrorists for the US

and Israeli militaries. One of the things I thought people should consider about this company is its name. We know digital technology can benefit people but, in this case, it was used to target people and kill them, including during the genocide in Palestine over the past year and a half. The name of the company, Palantir, which should have rung a few alarm bells, comes from *The Lord of the Rings*. It is the seeing stone of the dark lord Sauron, who is the evil character. It is used to see everything and manipulate people to the benefit of the dark lord. Imagine the people who set up that company using that name for the company. When setting up that company, they knew what they were doing and that it was for evil purposes. Why else would they name the company after the all-seeing eye of the dark lord Sauron? Unfortunately, there are a lot of these people in the world. They do not care about the benefits to society. They certainly do not care about workers. Artists, performers, writers, directors and so on are rightly very worried about what is already happening in the arts industry. Essentially, copies of them are being made. They are being moved out of the process and replaced with machines that use their avatars to produce art, writing and so on. While this technology is controlled by people who are only interested in profit, I will be deeply suspicious about it. Control of this technology must be used to benefit ordinary working people and we must not have a government led by people who are making vast profits out of this technology and who do not give a damn about the future of our planet or about working people.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth. How wonderful to say "Minister" before her name. I am delighted to see her elevated to this position. This is a proud time for her family and for County Cavan. I believe she is from Bailieborough. I often see it on her social media. It is a proud day for her community to have one of their own not just in the ministerial ranks but holding the seat of Government during this session. It is a proud day and I am delighted to see her in that position.

I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this debate. It is really important that Ireland has a stronger position insofar as artificial intelligence is concerned. Whenever we see the Head of State of the most powerful and richest nation in the world, America, he is surrounded by the so-called tech brothers. They are dictating policy on AI and all things digital at this time. It is important that this debate is happening not just in Ireland, but across the European Union, that we are keeping pace and that we are doing so in a safe fashion.

There are great advantages to AI and I will speak to them in a moment. However, there are also some risks. One of these is the risk to citizens' rights. There are very fine lines to be drawn here and balances to be struck. There is also a digital divide. There is an advertisement on TV at the moment in which a walrus rides in a speedboat. I was doing an advice clinic in a bar the other day and this came on. I was meeting an elderly person and helping with an issue and this person asked how that was done. I said it was AI. There are all sorts of distorted content and information going out there already. We have only scratched the surface with AI. It is going to get deeper and deeper. This is the best and worst time to be a young person in this country. The opportunities are immense but the distortion of what is real and what is fake or artificially generated poses a risk. I also think about job security. This Government and the previous Government have a proud record. This country is doing well with job creation and retention. It is important that we do not foster a culture in which jobs are displaced by artificial intelligence but we do have to move with the times. It is very important to strike a balance. There is a national strategy on artificial intelligence.

The programme for Government commits to a national strategy on the use of artificial intelligence in healthcare. That is absolutely crucial. It could be transformative. There is a compa-

ny in Shannon, MeiraGTx, that takes tiny vials of DNA and alters the genetic path of a person. Some women will unfortunately have a genetic predisposition towards breast cancer. Others may be predisposed to bowel cancer or have another family medical history. This company has a way of detecting that early on and providing genetic treatment for those people. I would love to get us into that sphere, where not all drugs are generic but some are actually tailored to one's family history and propensity to develop certain illnesses and diseases. That is important. However, before we get to the 21st century of AI in healthcare, we first need a digital records system for all patients. More is known about the health of my car than about my own personal health. If you go into the Department of Transport, you can scroll through screen after screen of NCT reports. These will tell you how much wear there is on the front bushes or rear axle of my car. They can tell you everything but there will be no record of my heart, lungs or whatever. If such records do exist, they will be in a paper file, with some in a GP practice filing cabinet, others in a local health clinic and some in the hospital. It is important that we develop a collated digital database so that, when we present anywhere, a digital file goes with us. It is also important to say that, where those digital files do exist - there are not many of them - they are specific to hospital groups. The Minister of State is from Bailieborough. If she were to come down to our region, the mid-west, and present to one of our hospitals, none of her digital files or patient information would be available. This should be a centralised national system.

In the little time I have left, I will speak on a slight tangent, although I am sure the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will give me a bit of liberty. I am hoping to bring in a Bill from the back benches relating to pornography. I recently met with a group of parents. They are all brought into school at this time of year to talk about Internet safety. I was a teacher myself for long enough. There is one thing that really bothers them. Pornography is there and probably will be there forever. I do not think anyone could really and fully control that. However, there are elements of pornography that are absolutely sick and disgusting. Rape and violence against women are depicted in pornography. As a country, we should follow the lead taken by other nations in banning that. Just as child pornography is absolutely banned across the world, we should be banning this type of pornography. There is nothing normal or mainstream about it. It is sick and anyone looking it up should get their head checked. An Garda Síochána would also be quite interested to see what kind of shady characters are looking this up. There is work to be done in that space and it is something I hope to do by way of a Bill.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** Guím gach rath ar mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Smyth, as ucht a ceapacháin mar Aire Stáit le freagracht as intleacht shaorga. Táim ag súil go mór le hobair léi amach anseo agus muid ag dul i ngleic leis an gclaochlú a chruthóidh an intleacht shaorga inár sochaí agus inár ngeilleagar. I look forward to working with the Minister of State in her new role. I congratulate her on her appointment.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate Dáil Éireann is having on the role of artificial intelligence, the advent of which has been rightly compared to the industrial revolution due to its transformative potential, as has been said by other Deputies. We live in an era when the word "efficiency" dominates political discourse at times. We often hear that the State must do more with less, streamline services and maximise output while minimising costs. While no one can doubt that efficiency is important, our ultimate goal should be an effective State, that is, one that does not just do things faster or more cheaply but that does them better. As other Deputies have referenced, AI will be crucial in achieving this effectiveness. Ireland must strategically position itself to harness AI for future prosperity. We have a strong foundation in last year's refreshed AI strategy. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the Minister, Deputy Calleary,

for their work on this important brief in the last Dáil.

The European Commission has identified this decade as the digital decade and Irish businesses are rising to that challenge, as highlighted in a recent report by Strand Partners and Amazon. According to that report, 54% of Irish businesses surveyed stated that AI had become more important for them. From 2022 to 2023, the number of Irish companies adopting AI increased by a quarter, reaching 34%. Notably, almost three quarters of those businesses are using what are called large language models or generative AI. That is well ahead of the European average. The share of AI talent in Ireland grew by a factor of five between 2016 and 2022 according to research led by the IDA in its labour market pulse. Our AI strategy should support and encourage this innovation.

In my first speech to this Chamber, I stated that the world of work is changing rapidly. The jobs that our children will do have not yet been conceived of. Before entering this House, I worked as a data scientist, an occupation that did not exist when I was filling out my CAO form. As we think of the impact of AI on the labour market, there are certainly some jobs that will be disrupted. However, there are also many roles that will be augmented and others that will be largely insulated. There is value in identifying these different types of roles, as was done in research carried out by LinkedIn, and in planning for how to respond positively to these disruptive effects.

Ireland's greatest asset has always been the talent of our people. As a State, we have excelled in skilling, training and educating our people. This role is even more crucial in today's labour market. Only a quarter of the businesses surveyed for the report I mentioned find it easy to hire staff with good digital skills. To address this, we must embed foundational digital skills in our population. This is an EU-wide challenge, as highlighted by Mario Draghi in his competitiveness report. Fortunately, Ireland has achieved 73% basic digital skills coverage, which can be compared with the EU average of 56%. The transformative impact of AI will also place a unique and important emphasis on the need for interpersonal and human skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork. We must not lose sight of that.

B'ábhar dóchais dom a fheiceáil go raibh sé beartaithe ag Údarás na Gaeltachta tograí a chur ar fáil a bhainfidh leas as AI. Ina meas siúd beidh ardáin agus uirlisí a chuirfidh seirbhísí agus comhairle ar ardchaighdeán ar fáil as Gaeilge, cúrsaí oiliúna maidir le hintleacht shaorga agus an Ghaeilge agus fiontraíocht in earnáil na hintleachta saorga sa Ghaeltacht a spreagadh. As other Deputies mentioned, all this needs to be built on a robust regulatory bedrock of transparency, accountability and inclusivity. Global standards, as proposed by the Global Partnership on AI and the OECD, and initiatives that come from industry such as those taken by Inspec.ai, a start-up company supported and funded by the NDRC in Ireland, are crucial for responsible AI development and adoption. Inclusion needs to be at the top of our minds. Studies show that women are 20% less likely to have used ChatGPT compared with men in similar occupations. We need to ensure there is no gender gap in the adoption and use of AI. We also need to consider older people who may not be as familiar with digital technologies.

Like all technologies, AI should be our servant rather than our master. We need to support our businesses as they continue to embrace innovation. We need to set our people up for success by equipping them with the skills they need to harness the potential of AI and we need to build this approach on a robust foundation of transparency, accountability and inclusivity. I look forward to being part of that debate.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. AI is an incredibly powerful technology. I welcome the appointment of a Minister of State with responsibility for it. It requires a whole-of-government approach and response because this technology has incredible potential but needs to be managed in the right way. There are real risks. We are trying to get our heads around the potential of this technology. We know it is moving far more quickly than was envisaged.

I will focus on AI and the risks associated with it as they may apply to the leaving cert, our senior cycle and senior cycle reform. I ask the Minister of State to pick up on this with the Minister for Education. I share the concerns of school leaders throughout the country that the Minister for Education is rushing ahead with accelerated senior cycle reforms, not under the original timeline but the accelerated timeline indicated by her predecessor. Real concerns have been articulated. We will all be familiar with the demonstrations relating to this that took place outside schools throughout the State in November. For example, in the area of the impact of the proposals on the examination assessment system, a claim has been made that the State Examinations Commission needs adequate time to design, evaluate and implement assessment methods aligned with the redeveloped curriculum, ensuring fairness and reliability and, importantly, taking full account of AI.

School leaders say that there are increasing concerns around AI and its impact on the academic integrity of senior cycle reform. They further say that the Minister announced research into AI and how it may impact additional assessment components, which are an important part of the proposed reforms, but despite this research not being published, the Department is continuing with the policy of accelerating the introduction of senior cycle redevelopment. These school leaders state there are inherent dangers with this strategy, which could have a disastrous effect on their students. That is a very serious statement from vastly experienced school leaders. In addition, the use of AI research in written projects has not been adequately researched and could have a major impact on some of the proposed augmentative and alternative communication, AAC. There is a red flag in this regard. That is not saying this cannot be managed but what school leaders, teacher trade unions and schoolteachers are saying loudly and clearly to us is that we need time to prepare and plan for this. Rushing and accelerating the senior cycle reform is not the way to do it. I ask the Minister of State to take that up with the Minister for Education.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Three weeks ago, I asked the Taoiseach to set up an Oireachtas committee on the issue of AI. He said "No" and that he has no responsibility for the issue. This is a big mistake because this issue is of such importance that we need the whole of the Oireachtas working towards it. We talk about minute procedural issues, which affect nobody, forever and a day in this House, yet the biggest issue looming in society at the moment is AI and we just have this debate on it. While I welcome it, it is not nearly enough.

The Minister of State's speech was so pro AI you would think it was generated by AI. That might sought outlandish, but it is interesting that in the previous Dáil I received a reply on retrofitting from the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, in ancient Greek. You can bet your bottom dollar that he did not generate that particular answer himself. AI obviously offers solutions but there are significant threats to society in relation to it. The Minister of State mentioned that it can potentially help in climate change but there is no doubt that AI will be a significant element in making climate change worse. It is an extremely energy-thirsty sector that will radically increase the number of data centres that have to be created throughout the country.

AI is also a threat to democracy. It will enhance the manipulation of people. Deepfakes and misinformation will significantly distort the operation of a democracy. It will be impossible for people to know what is real and what is not real in democracies in future. It is not an equal opportunities technology. It is only in the hands of those who can afford it. The Internet has already radically transformed the way our society runs. For example, a fire was lit under the Arab Spring by social media, which led to large wars and large movements of people. Social media is already rewiring the brains of children and young people alike and driving people's emotions through algorithms. We have no idea what AI will do in terms of all of that. It is a significant threat to the labour force. It will wipe out many jobs in an uncontrolled manner. Music, art, creativity and education are all under significant threat.

AI is not being driven by democratic needs but by commercial needs. It does not have a moral compass. It is like nuclear power in many ways. It depends on the hands of the people it is in. Like nuclear power, it has a significant increase in severity in respect of humanity. We are treating it as a *fait accompli*. This is a mistake. We need to put AI under the democratic control of nation states.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I welcome the Minister of State to her new position. I wish her the very best of luck.

Artificial intelligence is no longer a concept for the future. It is here and it is already transforming businesses across every sector. From automating routine tasks to analysing vast amounts of data in seconds, AI is driving efficiency, reducing costs and enabling businesses to innovate like never before. However, with change comes challenge. AI will have a massive impact on the workforce. It is our responsibility to ensure that this transition benefits everyone and not just a select few. We must embrace AI's potential while protecting workers wherever possible. The reality is that some jobs will change and some will even disappear, but history shows us that every industrial revolution, whether it involved the steam engine, electricity or the Internet, has led to new opportunities, new industries and new ways of working. AI will be no different. Rather than trying to resist this new technology, we must focus on harnessing its benefits, streamlining operations, improving productivity and allowing businesses to grow. At the same time, we must negotiate the challenges, ensuring that workers are retrained, supported and given the tools to adapt to an evolving workplace.

We firmly believe that AI can improve and enhance efficiency and potential. We know that businesses that embrace AI responsibly will lead the way in ensuring both economic growth and new ways of working. The future of AI business is not something to fear. I firmly believe that human endeavour, kindness and creativity is something that AI will never replace. In the areas of the arts and creativity, hospitality and healthcare, it will remain the case that a human touch will be essential. AI will not replace carers, nurses, domestic staff or those in hospitality. They cannot be replaced by AI. In politics, AI cannot replace a handshake or a chat at a clinic or doorstep. If we get this right, we will build an economy that is smarter, more efficient and ultimately more prosperous for everyone.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** I rise to welcome the Minister of State to her new role. I worked with her previously with some county councillors when we were councillors together. I know she is a lady of integrity and decency. I wish her the very best of success.

I have to admit that, unlike others in the House, I am not a techie, but I am very fortunate that an eight-year-old member of my family – her name is Alissia O'Flynn – who is able to turn

on my television and fix my phone for me at every opportunity. Unlike the Member who is able to hide her stuff online and what she has done a deep dive into, as mentioned earlier, I do not have the talents.

Having listened to this debate – I have been here for the majority of it – and to the concerns of the Members, I realise there are genuine concerns over jobs, but I regard AI as a benefit with massive potential. This was brought to my attention. I do not believe John McCarthy, who coined the phrase "artificial intelligence" at the Dartmouth conference in 1952, ever imagined AI would be at its current level. I recently visited the Jiao Tong medical hospice in Shanghai and saw the works and training of AI, its benefits, how it can improve people's studies, the amazing way the people work, and technology.

Equally, we have to accept that AI has its challenges, including for jobs. Jobs will change. The Government has to start training young people to code from a very early age and making moneys available. People from five years up should be learning coding. We have seen many coding clubs in my constituency, Cork North-Central. I am very proud of the one that works in Blackpool and of seeing innovative young people able to do things.

I welcome AI. It has to be regulated and smartly approached, but there is great potential for us in government, particularly in the Department of Social Protection. Decision-making in that Department takes so long. Constituents ring me asking me whether I have any news or update on whether forms they have filled out have been checked. Of course, there has to be a human being double-checking and human judgment, but there is great potential for us in government to work far more efficiently and give value for money.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Honourable Members of Dáil Eireann, we stand at the dawn of a transformative age, one driven by the power of artificial intelligence. In business, AI offers unparalleled potential to boost productivity, streamline operations and foster innovation. Our economy can harness AI to enhance sectors like manufacturing, healthcare and finance, positioning Ireland as a global leader in technological advancements. However, with great power comes great responsibility. AI's rapid growth presents challenges: job displacement, ethical concerns and data privacy issues. It is crucial we manage these risks while embracing innovation. Ireland must ensure its workforce is equipped with the skills to thrive in an AI-driven economy while also safeguarding the interests of workers and consumers.

From an EU perspective, co-operation is key. We must develop and enforce regulations that promote responsible AI usage and ensure it serves the common good while protecting our values of fairness and privacy. Together, let us lead the way in harnessing AI for a brighter future. Thank you.

On a point of information, this speech was entirely written by AI, for better or worse, with parameters I set. It is important we have a little bit of control over it.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** In some ways, this debate is incredibly refreshing. While we are dealing with an incredibly new technology, there is nothing new about the debate we are having. We could replace the word "AI" with the word "steam", "electricity", "computers" or "Internet". All of them are just technological developments and it is up to us as a society to decide how we react to them.

Having listened to the debate, I believe we have three options: one, pull the plug, hunker down and pretend AI is not happening; two, take no risks and let somebody else do it; and three,

try to be at the forefront and shape AI ourselves. In my view, we should be taking the third option. It is what we have done with other technological developments in this country. It has brought us challenges, but also significant benefits.

Like Deputy Gogarty's speech, mine is entirely written by AI, but it is my speech because I am the one who is going to read it. AI is not reading it into the record of this House; I am. It is my speech because I am the one who prompted it. I fed in not only one prompt but prompts concerning several external sources I trust and wanted to reference. It is my speech because I put in a prompt that was nearly as long as the output. That is the difference between one-line use of ChatGPT and how AI will be used. Large language models like ChatGPT are only the thin veneer of how AI will be used. In some ways, it is the thing that is most accessible to all of us. It will demonstrate how we can use the technology. In Beaumont Hospital, where I was only four weeks ago, they were using AI to carry out operations on patients. The surgeon logs in from the United States and carries out the surgery here in Beaumont.

As with any of the things we have talked about, there will be huge challenges. The issues of data, energy and regulation are all important and there is no way we should go into this without checks and believing the technology should have no limits. In fact, it should be the very opposite. When we consider the social media revolution, many of us wish we had intervened far earlier. By not intervening, we have limited our own ability to respond in society.

I wish the Minister of State the best of luck. I look forward to working with her in this area. I am not a tech expert either but I want to learn about AI and the societal challenges we face. AI will drive the consumption of water and energy, including wind energy in Ireland. Ireland has and will have the potential to be one of the leading exporters of wind energy in western Europe. That energy can power data centres as well as other areas. The prediction is we will be a net exporter of renewable energy. Let data centres be part of it, not for their sake but for that of all the benefits we have talked about.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** There has been a lot of hype and hot air over AI in general in recent years. Often, this has to do with consultants, sectors and groups trying to hype it up for commercial reasons. Many hope to make lots of money rolling out AI, implementing it and dealing with queries.

If, like me, you buy into AI – it is a fact of life we are going to have to deal and work with – you will realise that, in reality, it just involves the analysis of a whole lot of data, requiring a lot more computing power. That is where computing power comes in. It presents an opportunity for regional development in a way we have not had before. Deputy McAuliffe just mentioned energy. Onshore wind energy along the west coast is in surplus, and I hope this will eventually be the case for offshore wind energy. It will get better and better. Down the years, there has been great difficulty in having industrial development on that side of the country. As Lord Mayor, I did dog and pony shows with companies coming into the Dublin region. They wanted to invest only in Dublin. It was not a case of investing in Donegal or Dublin; it was Dublin or nowhere. We should now be considering an industrial development strategy to put the data centres on the west coast, not in Dublin. The grid in Dublin is at capacity. The generation of power is at capacity and it is difficult to do more in the Dublin region. However, the west coast and western region, from Mayo all the way up to Donegal, is ripe for development because of wind energy. For data, you need good links or connections. All the transatlantic cables come ashore in the region. The workforce requirements are limited enough but of high value once the infrastructure is in place and there is power. Power is the key. While there would be data centres

on this side of the country importing power from the UK and farther afield, there could be data centres the other side of the country working off renewables. Moving wind-generated power from one side of the country to the other, from west to east, is expensive and requires a lot of infrastructure, so why do we not use the data centres needed for AI to rebalance development in favour of the western region? It is an opportunity and we should really look into it a lot more.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** Artificial intelligence is not something coming down the tracks; it is already here. We are shaping how we do business, how our economy functions and how we interact as a society. The question is not whether we adopt AI but how we harness its potential for the greater good, ensuring that the risks are properly managed. In business and the economy, AI has the power to transform industries, improve productivity and create new opportunities. For Irish businesses, whether it is a global tech company in Dublin or a small enterprise in rural Galway, AI can automate routine tasks, drive efficiency and open up new possibilities for growth. If we embrace AI in the right way, it will not replace but will enhance jobs, freeing up people to focus on innovation and higher value work. To make this happen, however, we need the right supports in place. Small and medium-sized businesses must have access to funding, training and clear guidance to ensure they can adopt AI effectively rather than being left behind.

*6 o'clock*

AI also has huge potential to improve society. In healthcare, it is already helping to diagnose illnesses earlier and improve patient care. In education, it can support personalised learning, making sure every student gets the help they need. In agriculture, AI can assist farmers in making better decisions, improving efficiency while reducing environmental impact. These are real, practical benefits that can improve people's lives if we use AI in the right way.

Crucially, the Government must lead by example. Our public services are under immense pressure, there can be no doubt, and AI can help drive efficiencies that will improve service delivery for people across the country. AI-powered chatbots and automation could streamline application processes for everything from passport renewals to planning permission considerations. It could cut down waiting times and reduce backlogs. In healthcare, AI could assist with administrative tasks like appointment scheduling and patient triaging, freeing up our front-line staff to focus on patient care. Even in policing, AI could be used to analyse crime patterns, helping gardaí allocate resources more effectively where they are needed.

These are not futuristic ideas; they are real solutions that other countries are already adopting. We must not fall behind but we also have to be clear-eyed about the risks. AI can lead to job displacement, misinformation and concerns about privacy and bias. If we do not have the right regulations in place, we risk undermining the trust in this technology. That is why Ireland must take a proactive approach, working with our European partners to shape AI policy that fosters innovation while protecting workers, consumers and society as a whole.

AI is a tool, and how we use it is up to us. We have a real opportunity to shape its development in a way that benefits Irish businesses, strengthens our economy and improves public services, but we need to act now, making sure the right supports, safeguards and policies are in place. AI should work for us, not the other way around.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** We are talking about AI and the future of technology in the State. The reality is that while technology has moved forward in leaps and bounds in some areas, we still have large portions of our public service operating off systems that are from the last century. The bus app in Cork that is run by Bus Éireann and the NTA is one of the most unreliable

and useless pieces of technology or apps that people could have on their phones. This is because instead of using real-time information, the app operates on paper-based timetables. These timetables tell us the bus on Ballyhooly Road, in my constituency, will be three minutes. It has to do four stops in rush-hour traffic. If the driver were driving a jet, they could not do it in three minutes. I checked it on Google Maps. It says it is a minimum of eight minutes, and possibly longer, and that is without any congestion. When the bus gets to the bottom of the road, the app tells people three minutes. That is not the truth. That is not the reality. Drivers cannot feed into the app, the control room in Capwell cannot feed into the app, and what we have is a bus service run by Bus Éireann and an app run by the NTA that is virtually useless.

We talk about technology. How can we genuinely talk about the future of technology when people in the second largest city in this State are using an app that belongs in the Stone Age? In 2007, Google introduced real-time information on Google Maps. Seventeen years later, we are not using it to deliver reliable information on public transport. Fixing the app will not fix the crisis in the bus service in Cork but it will at least give people the information they need to know if they will get a bus or if a bus will be there, whether a bus will be five minutes or 20 minutes or will not come at all, one of these famous ghost buses. We have a Minister of State with responsibility for digitalisation and a Minister of State with responsibility for digital transformation, and this in itself shows the issues in our public service. Some hospitals are still operating on paper files in 2025 and with the technology that is out there, and we are talking about AI. If we cannot get our hospitals, which are a vital sector, right, then this all needs to be looked at and delivered on. People need to be able to depend on their information and vulnerable services need to be updated.

I will make one final point. A Deputy spoke a minute ago about pushing data centres out to the west coast. The west coast has been without power for weeks. They cannot get people in their homes, their schools or their colleges and we have Deputies here talking about sending data centres out there.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Guím gach rath ar an Aire Stáit ina post nua. Yesterday, I heard a Member of this House - I will not name anyone who is not here - speak and use his fake outrage for his little clip online about how he is annoyed that big tech will dominate this industry. As a recently qualified mechanical engineer who did my thesis on data centres and the waste heat potential they have, that is absolute codswallop. What does he suppose that we do when the countries around us develop this technology? Are we just going to sit back in the Iron Age and do nothing? In about five years' time, when the next election is on, what is he going to do then? Give out that everyone is emigrating? Of course they are emigrating. There are no jobs here because they are not being allowed to develop. I have just qualified from DCU and I have seen the amount of change. We have new courses for AI, data centres and data analysts. What are we going to do when these people qualify? Tell them, "Sorry, data centres are not allowed in Ireland. Go over to the UK or France."? It is ridiculous and no solutions are offered. It is just people giving out for their little audience. What are we going to do? Abandon technology in Ireland and turn our backs on progress? It is ridiculous. Let us be clear - and I know this from my thesis - that data centres and AI are not just tools. They are fundamental for the future of Ireland and for the wider economy as a whole. At the moment, there are 53,000 jobs in Ireland directly or indirectly linked to data centres. That is one in 50 people. What are we going to do when they get further stuff onto the State? It is absolute codswallop. I am sick of it. As I have already seen first-hand, and as I have just mentioned, the universities and technical universities are training this next generation. I have a degree in this, all my friends have degrees in this

and there is not enough in Ireland already. Loads of my friends have emigrated. Let us jump and seize on this potential that we have in our climate. AI-powered automation is expected to increase by up to 20% by 2030, and the global AI market is projected to grow to €1.7 trillion by 2030. Ireland, due to our climate, is ideal for data centres. What are we going to do? My whole life I have seen us throw away our fossil fuels. Are we going to throw away another potential to benefit the Irish people? It is absolutely appalling.

I am happy to see that in the programme for Government there is an important restriction and it is stated that we want on-site renewable energy. I was not too delighted yesterday when I saw the CRU implement new rules that did not really focus on this. We need to put in these advancements and lean towards developments that create on-site renewable energy and, in the programme for Government on private wires legislation, allow the data centres to create their own energy, supplying other business parks. At the moment, yes, 20% of our electricity is being used by data centres. Great. Are we going to give out about it or are we going to give solutions? We should allow them to build their own solar panels, their own on-site energy, but not allow them to use greenwashing tactics for diesel generators and have it off-grid. That really needs to be done particularly well. There are brilliant people in all the universities of engineering who can come in and guide us through this, and I really encourage that to be done. I know AI can be dangerous. I have seen videos of me online saying something I never said. However, the EU AI Act sets an important precedent for regulating the high risk of AI applications and I am delighted to see that. There needs to be data centre governance, as I have said, to demonstrate that big corporations need to do their part and commit to our grid and not just leach off it.

We have a choice to lead in our AI future, thereby ensuring our country and everyone here benefits from what is coming and ensuring it works with us rather than against us. This is not about Ireland's place. It is about ensuring we are going to be securing jobs for the future of Ireland. In short, there is a boom coming. Are we going to grab it and benefit the Irish people, following the programme for Government, and make sure we force multinationals to ensure they create green on-site energy and not allow them to use diesel generators? We have so much potential in this country. As I have already mentioned, for the future generations of Ireland, do not let us throw this away.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth):** I thank everybody who took part in a very frank, honest and open debate. I really appreciate it. Everybody has pointed to aspects of its potential and the opportunity in democracy, healthcare, education and down to the everyday. You do not need to be a tech expert to get the benefit when we think about public transport, as Deputy Gould said. Deputy Conway-Walsh has been here for all the debate and had a very specific question around the National Training Fund. We will come back to her on that. There was another point too. What was it?

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** It was about the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and the board that was recommended.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Okay. The Government has had the AI advisory council *in situ* since 2024.

I thank everybody for their contributions. They were very thought-out and passionate. I am on all sides because AI can be groundbreaking and has huge potential for the country. There is nobody in this Chamber who is uncaring or inconsiderate where climate and global effects are concerned. We will do it in a green way. That is what we have to do. We have got to get the

balance right.

I emphasise that a key part of ensuring AI is widely adopted in the economy and in society more broadly is building public trust. Having such trust was a theme that came through today. It is at the heart of our national AI strategy. The Government has prioritised putting in place the appropriate governance mechanisms or guardrails to ensure AI is used responsibly in Ireland. Responsible use is another important aspect everybody has raised in this debate. However, it is also important there is a strong ecosystem of independent sources of expertise who will participate in building an evidence-based understanding of AI among the public.

Speaking of independent sources of expertise, this brings me to the AI advisory council. I had the opportunity to speak to Dr. Patricia Scanlon and several members of the Government's AI advisory council with the Minister, Deputy Burke, last week. These are incredibly bright, smart people who are advising the Department and the Government at a very high level. They have presented a paper to the incoming Government that I will review and consider. We had a very good discussion and all of them are giving their time and services for free. That must be acknowledged too. Their advice paper outlines key opportunities and strategic policy recommendations to accelerate AI adoption in Ireland while safeguarding our economy, our competitiveness, our workforce and our society. The paper examines six critical areas, including the future of skills and work; the development of a robust AI ecosystem; enhancements in AI literacy and education, which Deputy McAuliffe spoke about; strategies in AI sovereignty and infrastructure; the responsibility of using biometrics in public services; and the transformative impact of AI on Ireland's creative sector. As someone who came through the NCAD, I am very mindful of where this leaves artists and intellectual property in the creative industries that are out there. It must be a very difficult time as we make our way through this. The report will be considered by the relevant Government Departments over the coming weeks. The council has given freely of its time and advice and it is very much appreciated by me and all my colleagues in the Dáil, I am sure.

A number of AI advisory council members were in Paris last week at the AI Action Summit, which was hosted by President Macron and attended by the Taoiseach. There was much talk and coverage of the EU approach to regulation at the Paris summit. From Ireland's perspective, the closest possible regulatory convergence between the EU and the US on AI and digital technologies is in our interest. This includes advancing a transatlantic digital marketplace as set out in the Draghi report. Ensuring that Ireland's voice is heard in international forums on the governance of AI and that Ireland is a leader in the implementation of the EU AI Act are key elements of our focus. Ireland is a trustworthy voice for small economies and a constructive international partner in international AI discussions at a time when there are risks to the rules-based order. We intend to emphasise this through our role as a guest country at the G20 in 2025, at the invitation of South Africa.

The Government strongly supports the commitment in the European Commission's competitive compass to "simpler, lighter, faster". This will ensure EU regulation is fit for competitiveness. In keeping with the EU approach, the new programme for Government commits to "Simplify and modernise our regulatory framework to ensure Ireland remains competitive within the EU and globally, facilitating continued investment". That is really important. We will update the National Digital Strategy to bring together digital policy and regulatory responsibilities and to invest to make Ireland an EU centre of expertise in digital and data regulation and a regulatory hub for companies operating across the EU Digital Single Market. With 15 of the 25 very large online platforms and search engines under the Digital Services Act established

in Ireland, it is and was a priority for the Government to put in place a well resourced and efficient digital services co-ordinator in Coimisiún na Meán. Ireland will deliver an equally well resourced and efficient implementation of the EU AI Act to provide certainty and transparency along the AI supply chain. Ireland recognises that general purpose AI, GPAI, models are the engines of AI innovation and is working through the European Artificial Intelligence Board and bilaterally with the European Commission's AI office to ensure the EU remains competitive for GPAI investment and innovation.

I will conclude on a note of empowerment. This technology is developing rapidly but it is not something we can allow to happen passively, as I said in my earlier remarks. It is not for other people like technologists and computer scientists, but for us all to educate ourselves and to understand what technology transition means. The choices made by people, government, businesses, researchers, workers and the elected representatives in this House will determine its future. We are all responsible for AI. I will ask my Department to try to bring the CeADAR scheme, which is available to everybody, into the Houses of the Oireachtas to make it accessible for Members to bring themselves up to speed as much as possible. We will ensure AI continues to play a positive role in the world by improving our lives and creating a better future for generations to come. As I said, AI is here to stay, it is here for good and we have to embrace it but also recognise the challenges.

## Merchant Shipping (Investigation of Marine Accidents) Bill 2024: Report and Final Stages

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe):** For the information of Members, it is proposed to group amendments Nos. 2 to 5, inclusive, and amendments Nos. 6 and 7 for the purpose of the debate.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney):** I move amendment No. 1:

> In page 24, line 12, after "in" to insert "civil or".

this section was amended on Committee Stage to ensure accident investigation reports of the marine accident investigation unit, MAIU, are prohibited from being used in criminal proceedings. I wish to further amend this section to also prohibit their use in civil proceedings. It is a strict requirement of the EU directive that investigations of the MAIU must be independent of criminal investigations or other parallel investigations held to determine liability or apportion blame. This amendment makes this distinction clear in respect of the use of evidence. This amendment will also reduce the risk of a chilling effect by ensuring witnesses and those involved in marine accidents can provide information without fear of this information being used in litigation. It is also important to note this amendment would not preclude a coroner from referring to a report of the MAIU in a coroner's inquest as questions of liability, whether criminal or civil, are not part of the coronial process.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** This amendment amends section 32 and inserts "civil or", with regard to reports of the marine safety investigation unit in order that they shall not be admissible in civil proceedings. When the Minister of State was speaking to the amendment, I was glad to hear

him stress the importance of the independence of the investigation. When the general scheme was published in 2022 and the Government had approved the drafting of the Merchant Shipping (Investigation of Marine Accidents) Bill to provide for, in full time, the establishment of the MAIU as the permanent body to replace the Marine Casualty Investigation Board, MCIB, the briefing document stated that the main focus of the Bill was to provide the MAIU with the necessary framework to ensure it can, in its organisation, legal structure and as decision-maker, operate independently of any party whose interest could conflict with the task entrusted to the unit. The general scheme also provided rule-making power for the Minister to make the necessary secondary legislation. That is a separate point, however.

Moving along to when the Bill was published and the various sections, Part 2 dealt with the setting-up of the marine investigation unit, marine accident and reporting was dealt with in Part 3, the dissolution of the previous MCIB was in Part 4, and the offshore service vehicles were then dealt with in Part 5. While we welcome the intent repeated again by the Minister of State, unfortunately, the Government ultimately has failed to produce legislation that is fit for purpose. Despite repeated warnings from multiple parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael declined to make the necessary changes because, time and again, they ignored the expert opinions and recommendations. This remains a source of deep disappointment to many and a serious blow to the families who have lost loved ones and expect and hope for higher a standard of care for people into the future, such as people who have campaigned for many years, like Michael Kingston, who lost his father in the Whiddy Island tragedy in 1979. We all accept tragedies can happen despite everyone's best efforts. The point, however, is to learn from them. Unfortunately, the Government has failed in this regard. Under its stewardship, Ireland has fallen below acceptable standards when it comes to marine safety.

We have also fallen behind when it comes to the regulation of offshore vehicles, which is dealt with in Part 5, especially with regard to wind energy. This is of particular interest and importance to the future development of offshore renewable energy projects, which the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will no doubt be encouraging, particularly in the Shannon Estuary. Therefore, no one is disputing that we must change. It is not a question if Ireland's approach to marine safety needs to be modernised but rather how these changes are fit for purpose and in line with international best practice. As it stands, the Government's proposals are inadequate and incomplete.

The history of this type of legislation is that the State has been woeful at implementing the Cape Town Agreement. There are multiple examples to point to this. First, this legislation, as I said, has discounted expert opinions, such as those from Mr. Kingston, who is in the Public Gallery, Mr. Ciaran McCarthy and the Donegal coroner, about whom I am sure my colleague, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, will speak. During pre-legislative scrutiny, the transport committee took on many of their recommendations. Regrettably, however, this expert knowledge was not taken on board. According to the experts, this Bill fails to deal with basic things such as training, education about the importance of VHF radios and wearing life jackets. There is also no mandated update to the code of practice. It seems obvious to everyone except the Government that it should be accessible to those who are using it.

Similarly, the Government has failed to be transparent and accountable when it comes to this issue. The Lacey report, which suggested a national accident investigation officer, has not been published, nor has the Clinch report, despite the Oireachtas committee advocating for their full publication to assist legislators. We are still in the dark, and how is that right? The absence of this knowledge from the public domain has created a vacuum and the legislative process, which

was dealt with in a rushed manner towards the end of last year, has been a mess. Pre-legislative scrutiny was completed a full year and a half before it progressed to Second Stage last October, when the election was hanging over us. It was then guillotined and rushed through on the eve of the election. Despite many of the flaws, the Government did not provide the Opposition with the adequate time to scrutinise the Bill and proper democratic processes were disregarded.

I have a number of questions for the Minister of State. It is important to reference Wind Energy Ireland. It has commented on the text of the Bill. With regard to section 8 in particular, which sets out the functions and responsibilities of the marine accident investigation unit, Wind Energy Ireland is querying whether some clarity should be given as to the division of responsibility between the unit and the Health and Safety Authority. It asks whether there is a risk that, in the case of an accident involving the crew of a vessel and construction personnel, perhaps working on an offshore wind turbine installation, there could be confusion as to which agency is involved. It, and we, need clarity in this regard. Is a different approach going to be taken if an accident on a vessel occurs when it is tied up, for example? If one agency should have primacy and would take the lead in investigations, which agency would it be?

We need to protect rescue services who are going out in defective vehicles. All the families say that. Lives will be saved, not only in the waters around Ireland but around the world if proper implementation is afforded. Will the Minister of State also confirm that, in accordance with the Lacey report, the envisaged independent marine unit will not have any Government officials on it? Is it the case that the panel, which will be interviewing for a new chief inspector, must be completely independent and that officials should not be involved? As far as I know, that was in the original Bill but it seems to have been omitted at this stage.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** It has been a long, sorry journey to get to this point. It is such a pity this is a missed opportunity in many respects. The eminent maritime safety expert, Michael Kingston, has come before the Oireachtas committees, as well as other experts, and they have given their analysis and views. It appears that not much has been taken on board. In the case of Michael Kingston, as mentioned by my colleague, Deputy Daly, his father lost his life in the Whiddy Island disaster. That has clearly motivated him to try to stop other families from enduring the same cruelty, unnecessary cruelty in many instances. It is about learning the lessons of tragedies and ensuring they are not repeated. It is about ensuring the necessary awareness and training is available for people who are sent out and put in harm's way to save lives.

I am visualising the movie "The Perfect Storm". Deputies might recall it is about fishermen and a terrible weather occurrence on the east coast of the United States. I remember how the search and rescue team was sent out. It was an incredible movie in how it conveyed the unbelievable danger people endure when they are sent out to save lives. This issue is huge. It could be argued that many people in Ireland have lost their lives unnecessarily in recent decades because lessons have not been learned. That is the importance of what we are dealing with.

I made a Second Stage speech on the Bill and identified a range of areas where changes were needed. None of that has been listened to. There will be an opportunity to do so. I appreciate the Minister of State is new to his role but I ask him to take on board what myself, Deputy Daly and other Deputies have said here tonight. The Bill will have to go before the Seanad and I ask the Minister of State to please listen and maybe make some changes in the Seanad to make this Bill work. Sadly, we cannot support this Bill as it is presented tonight. It is a missed opportunity. It is not what it should be. We hope that if we are listened to, we will be able to support

the Bill when it comes before the Seanad and it will be a Bill we can embrace when that time comes.

I should point out the history. Neither of the reports from Róisín Lacey or Captain Clinch have been acted upon. They were brought in as experts to talk to the stakeholders and make recommendations, but those reports were not acted upon. Incredibly, the Clinch report has been withheld. It would have been crucial to us as legislators in contributing to this Bill and tabling amendments but it was withheld. The Oireachtas committee supported the call for it to be published but that did not happen. I ask the Minister of State to look at the Lacey report and ask why the Clinch report is not being published. Perhaps it could be published now, in advance of the Bill going to the Seanad.

As the Minister of State is aware, the intermingling of the Department of Transport overreaching and not ensuring we had independent investigative procedures, led to the European Court of Justice ruling against us. That is why we are here tonight. The Cape Town Agreement is the international framework relating to the safety of fishing vessels. While much of it is applicable to some European directives, the State needs to embrace the agreement. I have repeatedly raised this issue in parliamentary questions, and repeatedly the Government has not embraced it. Why has it not done so? This is going to happen. It is an international agreement to which more and more states are signing up. Why is it not being embraced? Why is the spirit of the Cape Town Agreement not at the heart of this legislation? Why, after our State has been called out in the international scene, do we continue to make mistakes and not handle this properly?

I wish to deal with the whole issue of an accident and investigation office which would examine and encompass aviation, rail and marine. Everything would be under the one roof. It was one of the recommendations put forward by Róisín Lacey in her report. Why has the Government not gone down that road and considered that? Why was that recommendation ignored?

I have referred to the Captain Clinch report. I again request that the Minister of State ask why it is not being released. Why are we being denied access to that report which would assist us to do our job as legislators? My understanding is it is an eminent report and the recommendations are important.

I am the Sinn Féin spokesperson on fisheries and the marine. When a person loses their life in a fishing accident - a fisherman - it is very important that lessons are learned in order that another family does not have to endure loss. There was a recent tragic loss in Carlingford, County Louth, when Gearóid McMahon sadly lost his life. Is the MCIB investigating that matter? I do not know whether it is. I appreciate the Minister of State cannot answer that question tonight but I ask him to come back to me on it. Has the MCIB - the current body - investigated that death? My understanding is there have been 15 or 16 deaths among fishermen in the past 15 years. Has the MCIB investigated every single one of those deaths, whether they happened at a pier or harbour or at sea, or whether they were work-related? Has every single death been investigated? Are lessons being learned? I ask the Minister of State to provide clarification on that point, either now or after the debate.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** First, I congratulate the Minister of State on his new brief. It is the first time I have had the opportunity to do so in the Dáil. I wish him the best. When he held a ministerial role previously, we worked together very closely and I hope we can again work closely together on issues going forward.

I have serious concerns with this Bill going forward. Lessons have not been learned. We need to go back before we go ahead. We need to talk about and look at areas where lessons have not been learned.

The Whiddy Island disaster is the most important lesson anyone in this country could have learned, with 50 people dying off the coast of Bantry on 8 January 1979. I have brought it up on numerous occasions. I welcome Michael Kingston to the Visitors Gallery. He has spearheaded the campaign on this and other marine tragedies through the years, and no better person to do so. I pleaded with the Government to at least have the decency and respect to give an apology to the families affected by the Whiddy Island disaster. I have spoken not only to Michael but also to other family members. A lady in Drimoleague - I will not mention names, though I do not think she would mind if I did - asked me recently why nothing was ever done and they never got justice for their families. This is something that hurts people. The Bill as it stands could leave us in a similar situation to that we have visited before.

I am surrounded by water and quite often bring up fishery issues in the Dáil because not many TDs want to speak about it, but there are fishing tragedies out there. There are fishermen who have lost their lives and a lot of mystery surrounds their losses. In speaking about the Bill, we need to concentrate on the past before we go forward. I ask the Minister of State to give some time and consideration to this. He might meet with the Bantry Whiddy Island group led by Michael to discuss the issues that need to be put to bed and resolved. The State needs to recognise that but it has not done so. It has refused to recognise this for the past 40 or 50 years. It is not good enough. It has hurt the relatives of innocent people who lost their lives, including a relation of mine who lost his life that night on Whiddy Island, as did Michael's father and many more.

I ask the Minister of State to look again at the Bill going forward and, while doing so, to work with us to at least bring about an apology from the State to the families of those who died in the Whiddy Island disaster, the 47 French and seven Irish individuals who lost their lives on that terrible night in Bantry. It is something the families have sought and pleaded for. They put their case as strongly as they could but they have been neglected and forgotten by the State. The Minister of State might be the person to make that change. We have a new Government. I pleaded with the former and present taoisigh to make that apology but it has not been made. I again ask the Minister of State to sit down with us going forward to, at least, bring about that apology. It will not bring much solace to the people who lost their loved ones but it would certainly be a move in the right direction. They deserve that and their families deserve that, regardless of whether they are French or Irish. I ask the Minister to consider this going forward.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Many issues were raised and many reports were mentioned. Ireland intends to ratify the Cape Town agreement. However, important matters relating to the implementation of the agreement have been raised at the IMO. The Sub-Committee on Implementation of IMO Instruments developed interim guidelines to assist in the implementation of that agreement, which was adopted in December 2024. The formal resolution is awaited and Ireland is fully engaged with the process at the IMO. We have a higher standard than what is being set out in the Cape Town agreement.

The recommendations and observations of the Clinch report have been published and have been or are being implemented. This Bill is put in place to enhance the safety regime and bring accident investigation into line with best international practice. It is also there to regulate offshore service vehicles.

The Lacey report was not a report on marine accident investigation. It was a report of a previous government looking at the possibility of setting up a multi-modal accident investigation unit. This Bill only concerns marine accidents. There is nothing precluding us from introducing a multi-modal approach in the future but we need this Bill now to improve safety.

There is no confusion about the agencies and what they will investigate. The agency will operate on a statutory remit. At present, all work on investigations work within their statutory remit with no issues - gardaí, Marine Survey offices, etc. If a vehicle is tied up, there is still no difference. It is investigated.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I want to revisit the Clinch report. My clear understanding is that this report has not been published and is not available. If it has been published in full, perhaps it could be emailed to the Deputies who are here at the moment - myself and Deputies Pa Daly and Michael Collins - but I am not aware of it being published. Regarding excerpts, we are talking about the report. The Oireachtas committee, which was an all-party committee, called for this report to be released because it was crucial to us as legislators in terms of making sure that this Bill was fit for purpose and it has been withheld. I am seeking clarification on that matter. Has the report been published in its entirety? If so, where can we find it? Will it be emailed to us?

The Lacey report is very relevant because Government has chosen to not take that recommendation and to go with this model. We will bring forward amendments in the Seanad and I hope the Minister of State will engage with us on the matter.

I also want to follow up on something Deputy Michael Collins said about Michael Kingston. I ask the Minister of State to meet Mr. Kingston as soon as possible to discuss not only this matter, which will be before the Seanad soon, but also his representation with honour at an international level based on his own tragedy. As he has gone on to have a significant impact internationally, this country should be proud of him and we should be working with in partnership. We should not be threatened by anybody who calls out practices that need to change.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I have one further question about the interview process for the chief inspector. It seems that this recruitment process has already been completed before the Bill has been passed. Why has it already taken place? Is the Minister of State fully satisfied that the interview panel was completely independent as was recommended previously?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** In his reply, the Minister of State did not refer to the Whiddy Island disaster in any way, shape or form. I agree fully with Deputy Mac Lochlainn and I ask the Minister of State to consider meeting Michael Kingston, who is in the Public Gallery, at his earliest convenience to discuss the work he has been doing down through the years regarding Whiddy Island and other merchant shipping investigations. His expertise is renowned throughout the world. The families involved in the Whiddy Island disaster deserve someone to sit around the table and talk to them and Michael Kingston and others are best placed to do that. The Minister of State might give us an answer here today.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** What I said was that the report has not been published in full but the recommendations and observations have been published. Recruitment is at clearance stage but no appointments have been made and will not be made until this Bill is enacted. Recruitment has gone through the Public Appointments Service process. I am new to this position. I have no problem meeting people and my officials will come back to the Deputies about that. That is

part of what I will do.

Amendment put and declared carried.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 2 to 5, inclusive, are related and will be discussed together.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I move amendment No. 2:

In page 47, line 10, to delete "1994" and substitute "2000".

Amendments Nos. 2 to 5, inclusive, are technical textual amendments for defining the high-speed craft code of 2000. This section deals with consequential amendments required to other merchant shipping Acts on foot of the new requirements for offshore service vessels. The amendments proposed are technical amendments to correct typographical errors in the definition of the high-speed craft code of 2000.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I move amendment No. 3:

In page 47, line 11, after "MSC.97(73)," to insert "and any amendments made to it".

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I move amendment No. 4:

In page 47, line 12, to delete "on 28 April 2022".

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I move amendment No. 5:

In page 47, line 13, to delete "28th" and substitute "28".

Amendment agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 are related and may discussed together by agreement.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I move amendment No. 6:

In page 49, line 19, to delete "107th session" and substitute "110th session".

Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 will allow for the updating of the definition of the Maritime Labour Convention to take into account amendments adopted in 2022 that came into force in December 2024. This section deals with consequential amendments required to other merchant shipping Acts on foot of the new requirements for offshore service vessels. The proposed amendments update the definition of the Maritime Labour Convention to take into account amendments adopted in 2022 that came into force in 2024. This will allow for regulation to be made to give effect to the 2022 amendments.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I welcome this legislation, including amendments Nos. 6 and 7, because it is long overdue. It relates to many families going back to the Whiddy Island di-

saster in Bantry Bay all those years ago. I came across a case in Tipperary about which I have spoken previously. I have raised it with several Ministers. It was bizarre that we had a Marine Casualty Investigation Board populated by people with no seagoing experience. One case I dealt with involved two young men losing their lives off Heilbhic Head some years ago. I first brought up the issue in the Chamber in 2017. This legislation is badly wanting, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I know that Michael Kingston, a maritime lawyer, engaged with the committee. I pay tribute to former Deputy Joe Carey, who was the chair of the committee, and I wish him well with his health. He was very understanding and engaging at the committee. There was significant resistance to the changes that are necessary. I do not know if this amended Bill will suffice, but it gives some hope to the many families all over the country who were left with no answers.

As I said, former members of the MCIB are protected in this Bill when they should not have been on the board. We must have full transparency and accountability. A board is there to do a job and the vast majority of boards do. The fact that some members had no seagoing experience was a complete misfit. I am terrified of water because I nearly drowned when I was a buachaill óg, but I think anyone on the MCIB should have seagoing experience. That is a basic prerequisite. Board members in other jurisdictions have that experience. That is especially the case across the pond.

As I said, families are still waiting. The O'Brien and Esmonde families in Tipperary are still waiting for answers. They lost sons and brothers in a cavalier fashion. In fairness to former Deputy Shane Ross, he visited the family with me when he was Minister for Transport. Others have been waiting for much longer. This was 11, 12 or 13 years ago. There were no proper answers or investigations. We must have this legislation but it must be fit for purpose. If it is not, it is not worth the paper it is written on. There are accidents and tragedies, and even deliberate cases where a boat is capsized by a bow wave, which happened in the case to which I am referring. There was no proper investigation. There was nothing. No evidence was secured and saved, as would happen in any crime scene. If there is a fatality as the result of an accident on a road, the road is rightly closed off. The technical bureau is brought in and evidence is secured and stored. In the case in question, even the engine of the boat disappeared from Dungarvan Garda station. It was in safekeeping in a 24-hour compound but it disappeared. This was a bizarre incident. I will talk to the Minister of State about it another time. I hope that this legislation will bring some solace to the families of those two young men who went out on a rib for a day's fishing off Helvick Head. They went safely, but a bow wave from a big vessel turned them upside down. A whale watcher, who was 600 yards away, could hear them screaming for help. They were left in the water to drown.

I am grateful for the work on this Bill and I thank the Minister of State for finishing it. Anne-Marie O'Brien and her dad have been up here several times. The lives of those they lost cannot be brought back, but they want a situation whereby if fatalities occur, proper, meaningful, well-resourced and qualified personnel will carry out investigations so other families will not have to go through what the O'Brien family has gone through for over a decade. I salute Ms O'Brien's tenacity and the way in which she has done all the research and fought for justice.

Meetings with the Garda are still awaited. People who were on the sea and affected by the same bow wave came forward a year later. They volunteered to come forward to give evidence but the Garda never took that evidence. That is unacceptable. We need proper, robust legislation, and it will be a big pity if this legislation is not up to scratch. There are many other affected families and there will be more. There obviously will be more accidents as the result of

weather and everything else. The incident I am talking about was no accident. I hope the Bill will bring some solace.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank Deputy McGrath for his contribution. I will meet him to discuss the issue he has raised. He can bring it to my attention after the debate.

Will I give my closing remarks now?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I think so.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Is everybody happy? I thank all Deputies for their contributions this evening. I know their hearts are in the right place. I thank the House for facilitating Report and Final Stages today.

The important thing is that this Bill is to enhance the safety regime and bring accident investigation in line with international best practice and standards. We also need to regulate offshore service vessels because they are required if we are to take full advantage of offshore wind energy.

We have made progress towards achieving two important policy objectives with this Bill. As I said, this Bill is about enhancing our maritime safety regime and marine accident investigation. It also provides for the necessary regulation-making power to cater for the vessels being used in the offshore service sector and the carriage of industrial personnel on those vessels.

I thank the MCIB, its board, investigators and staff members for their ongoing work. The new unit will build on the important contribution they have made. I again thank Deputies for their contributions. I look forward to the Bill being referred to the Seanad for its next Stages.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Ceann Comhairle might formally put amendments Nos. 6 and 7.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 6 and 7.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** She might put those amendments individually.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That probably should have happened before the final remarks. I apologise to the Minister of State and Deputies.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I move amendment No. 7:

In page 49, line 20, to delete "5 June 2018" and substitute "6 June 2022".

Amendment agreed to.

Bill, as amended, received for final consideration.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

*7 o'clock*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I welcome the group in the Gallery. I extend a warm welcome to Oswaldo Bentancort, president of Cabildo of Lanzarote, and his delegation from Lanzarote, an island with which the Irish people have a long-lasting friendship. The delegation is led by former Senator Catherine Noone, who is also in the Gallery. They are all welcome.

Question put:

| *The Dáil divided: Tá, 101; Níl, 55; Staon, 0.* | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Tá*** | ***Níl*** | ***Staon*** |
| ***Aird, William.*** | ***Ahern, Ciarán.*** | |
| ***Ardagh, Catherine.*** | ***Bacik, Ivana.*** | |
| ***Boland, Grace.*** | ***Bennett, Cathy.*** | |
| ***Brabazon, Tom.*** | ***Boyd Barrett, Richard.*** | |
| ***Brennan, Brian.*** | ***Brady, John.*** | |
| ***Brennan, Shay.*** | ***Buckley, Pat.*** | |
| ***Brophy, Colm.*** | ***Byrne, Joanna.*** | |
| ***Browne, James.*** | ***Carthy, Matt.*** | |
| ***Burke, Colm.*** | ***Clarke, Sorca.*** | |
| ***Burke, Peter.*** | ***Connolly, Catherine.*** | |
| ***Butler, Mary.*** | ***Conway-Walsh, Rose.*** | |
| ***Butterly, Paula.*** | ***Cronin, Réada.*** | |
| ***Buttimer, Jerry.*** | ***Crowe, Seán.*** | |
| ***Byrne, Malcolm.*** | ***Cullinane, David.*** | |
| ***Byrne, Thomas.*** | ***Daly, Pa.*** | |
| ***Cahill, Michael.*** | ***Devine, Máire.*** | |
| ***Callaghan, Catherine.*** | ***Doherty, Pearse.*** | |
| ***Calleary, Dara.*** | ***Donnelly, Paul.*** | |
| ***Canney, Seán.*** | ***Ellis, Dessie.*** | |
| ***Carrigy, Micheál.*** | ***Farrell, Mairéad.*** | |
| ***Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.*** | ***Gould, Thomas.*** | |
| ***Chambers, Jack.*** | ***Graves, Ann.*** | |
| ***Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.*** | ***Healy, Seamus.*** | |
| ***Clendennen, John.*** | ***Kelly, Alan.*** | |
| ***Collins, Michael.*** | ***Kenny, Eoghan.*** | |
| ***Collins, Niall.*** | ***Kenny, Martin.*** | |
| ***Connolly, John.*** | ***Kerrane, Claire.*** | |
| ***Cooney, Joe.*** | ***Lawless, Paul.*** | |
| ***Crowe, Cathal.*** | ***Lawlor, George.*** | |
| ***Cummins, Jen.*** | ***Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.*** | |
| ***Cummins, John.*** | ***McGettigan, Donna.*** | |
| ***Currie, Emer.*** | ***McGrath, Mattie.*** | |
| ***Daly, Martin.*** | ***McGuinness, Conor D.*** | |
| ***Dempsey, Aisling.*** | ***Mitchell, Denise.*** | |
| ***Devlin, Cormac.*** | ***Mythen, Johnny.*** | |
| ***Dillon, Alan.*** | ***Nash, Ged.*** | |
| ***Dolan, Albert.*** | ***Newsome Drennan, Natasha.*** | |
| ***Dooley, Timmy.*** | ***Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.*** | |

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|---|---|---|
| ***Farrelly, Aidan.*** | ***Nolan, Carol.*** | |
| ***Feighan, Frankie.*** | ***O'Donoghue, Robert.*** | |
| ***Fitzmaurice, Michael.*** | ***O'Hara, Louis.*** | |
| ***Fleming, Seán.*** | ***O'Reilly, Louise.*** | |
| ***Gallagher, Pat the Cope.*** | ***O'Rourke, Darren.*** | |
| ***Gannon, Gary.*** | ***Ó Broin, Eoin.*** | |
| ***Geoghegan, James.*** | ***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.*** | |
| ***Gibney, Sinéad.*** | ***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.*** | |
| ***Grealish, Noel.*** | ***Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.*** | |
| ***Harkin, Marian.*** | ***Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.*** | |
| ***Hayes, Eoin.*** | ***Quinlivan, Maurice.*** | |
| ***Healy-Rae, Danny.*** | ***Sheehan, Conor.*** | |
| ***Healy-Rae, Michael.*** | ***Smith, Duncan.*** | |
| ***Hearne, Rory.*** | ***Stanley, Brian.*** | |
| ***Heneghan, Barry.*** | ***Tóibín, Peadar.*** | |
| ***Heydon, Martin.*** | ***Wall, Mark.*** | |
| ***Higgins, Emer.*** | ***Ward, Mark.*** | |
| ***Keogh, Keira.*** | | |
| ***Lahart, John.*** | | |
| ***Lowry, Michael.*** | | |
| ***Martin, Micheál.*** | | |
| ***Maxwell, David.*** | | |
| ***McAuliffe, Paul.*** | | |
| ***McCarthy, Noel.*** | | |
| ***McConalogue, Charlie.*** | | |
| ***McCormack, Tony.*** | | |
| ***McEntee, Helen.*** | | |
| ***McGrath, Séamus.*** | | |
| ***McGreehan, Erin.*** | | |
| ***McGuinness, John.*** | | |
| ***Moran, Kevin Boxer.*** | | |
| ***Moynihan, Aindrias.*** | | |
| ***Moynihan, Michael.*** | | |
| ***Moynihan, Shane.*** | | |
| ***Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.*** | | |
| ***Murphy, Michael.*** | | |
| ***Naughton, Hildegarde.*** | | |
| ***Neville, Joe.*** | | |
| ***O'Brien, Darragh.*** | | |
| ***O'Callaghan, Cian.*** | | |
| ***O'Callaghan, Jim.*** | | |
| ***O'Connell, Maeve.*** | | |

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|---|---|---|
| ***O'Connor, James.*** | | |
| ***O'Donnell, Kieran.*** | | |
| ***O'Donoghue, Richard.*** | | |
| ***O'Flynn, Ken.*** | | |
| ***O'Meara, Ryan.*** | | |
| ***O'Shea, John Paul.*** | | |
| ***O'Sullivan, Christopher.*** | | |
| ***Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.*** | | |
| ***Ó Muirí, Naoise.*** | | |
| ***Quaide, Liam.*** | | |
| ***Rice, Pádraig.*** | | |
| ***Richmond, Neale.*** | | |
| ***Roche, Peter.*** | | |
| ***Scanlon, Eamon.*** | | |
| ***Smith, Brendan.*** | | |
| ***Smyth, Niamh.*** | | |
| ***Timmins, Edward.*** | | |
| ***Toole, Gillian.*** | | |
| ***Troy, Robert.*** | | |
| ***Ward, Barry.*** | | |
| ***Whitmore, Jennifer.*** | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Pa Daly.

Question declared carried.

## Ainmniú Iarrthóirí agus Leas-Cheann Comhairle a thoghadh (Atógáil) - Selection of Candidate and Election of Leas-Cheann Comhairle (Resumed)

**Cléireach na Dála:** In accordance with Standing Order 11(1)(d), I inform the House that Deputy John McGuinness is the successful candidate selected by the secret ballot for the position of Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I now put the question: "That Deputy John McGuinness, who is the successful candidate duly selected by secret ballot by the Members of Dáil Éireann, be elected as Leas-Cheann Comhairle of the 34th Dáil."

Question put and agreed to.

**Cléireach na Dála:** I call on the newly elected Leas-Cheann Comhairle to come forward

and make his declarations.

*Leis sin, sheas Teachtaí ina n-áiteanna agus d'fhan siad ina seasamh agus an Leas-Cheann Comhairle ag dul i dtreo an Dáis.*

*An Chathaoir lena ais, labhair an Leas-Cheann Comhairle leis an Dáil agus dúirt:*

*Whereupon Members rose in their places and remained standing while the Leas-Cheann Comhairle proceeded to the Dais.*

*Standing beside the Chair, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, addressing the Dáil, said:*

Here is the test, Deputy Ó Snodaigh.

A Cheann Comhairle agus a Theachtaí, dearbhaím go sollúnta go ndéanfaidh mé go cuí agus go dílis, agus a mhéid is eol agus is cumas dom, oifig Leas-Cheann Comhairle Dháil Éireann a fheidhmiú gan scáth gan fabhar, na rialacha mar atá siad leagtha síos ag an Teach seo a chur i bhfeidhm go cothrom neamhchlaonta, ord a choimeád agus cearta agus pribhléidí comhaltaí a chaomhnú de réir an Bhunreachta agus Bhuan-Orduithe Dháil Éireann.

I do solemnly declare that I will duly and faithfully and to the best of my knowledge and ability execute the office of Leas-Cheann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann without fear or favour, apply the rules as laid down by this House in an impartial and fair manner, and maintain order and uphold the rights and privileges of Members in accordance with the Constitution and the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** May I take the opportunity to thank everyone for their support today in the election of Leas-Cheann Comhairle? I look forward to doing my job, as Leas-Cheann Comhairle, with plenty of support from the Ceann Comhairle, and with Members' support, I will be able to fulfil this part of the declaration – maintain order and uphold the rights and privileges of Members.

As I did this morning, I would appeal to you all for respect for each other in this House, respect for the Ceann Comhairle and for me, who, after all, are just doing what we are elected to do, which is to keep order. I think that we would make a far better contribution and give more time to Members if we were to use that time wisely without rancour or argument.

I will finish by saying I am not an overnight success. I was elected to Kilkenny Corporation in 1979 and it took me 15 years to convince them to elect me as Mayor of Kilkenny City. I was elected here in 1997 and it has taken me this length of time to convince you to elect me as Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I am really proud of the fact that I have been elected by the Members. It is a great privilege and an honour. It is a job that I will do to the very best, as I said, of my ability and in a very impartial way.

I want to conclude by thanking my family who are in the Gallery because without them, you do not succeed. They have been with me since my first election in 1979. In fact, I got elected in 1979 and then immediately got married afterwards, and both have endured. I do not know how Margaret has endured, but anyway.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I had a great chat downstairs at the count, a very friendly conversa-

tion. I understand full well what he means about the Irish language. It is great to have that sort of comraderie here that, even after a vote like this, we can all get together and do the business of the House.

I should thank the Opposition, particularly all the Sinn Féin guys who came to me and said, "Don't worry, John. We gave you number two." We are all familiar with the story at the doorsteps where we are told, "I gave you a stroke."

Thank you all very much. Thank you, Ceann Comhairle.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If I could just introduce the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's family, as he said, his long-suffering wife, Margaret, his son, Andrew, and some family friends, Sandra Thomas, Mary Keely and Joe Malone, intern, Ewan Morris, and John's other long-suffering wife, parliamentary assistant Muireann O'Neill.

It is an honour for me to be the first to congratulate our Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I want to assure John that I am going to teach him Irish. He will not have to worry about that anyway.

On that note, congratulations are in order and we will move on.

Before we move to the voting block I wish to pay tribute to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle of the Thirty-third Dáil, Deputy Catherine Connolly. I thank her for her service.

## Provision of Special Education: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Darren O'Rourke on Tuesday, 18 Feburary 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises:

— the fundamental right of every child to access the education system;

— the current and projected demand for special education placements is growing;

— the current shortage of special classes and appropriate school places, leaving children, particularly those with additional needs, without access to suitable education;

— the trauma and absolute heartbreak endured by parents and families due to the lack of suitable school places;

— the failure of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments to adequately plan for, and invest in, the expansion of special education;

— the lack of coordination between the Department of Education, the National Council for Special Education and schools, resulting in a fragmented and inefficient system;

— the disproportionate impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face even greater barriers to accessing appropriate education; and

— the current state of special education is unacceptable and fails to uphold the rights of children with additional needs; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately expand the number of special school places, special classes and special education teaching hours across the State;

— ensure every child currently without a suitable school place, and all those due to start Primary or Post-Primary Schools in September, 2025, have access to a suitable school place within a reasonable distance from their home;

— enact the Education (Inclusion of Persons) Bill 2023, and the Education (Amendment) Bill 2024, to identify demand, gaps in provision, and to develop a long-term strategy for special education;

— ensure meaningful consultation and greater collaboration between education authorities and school leaders in special education planning and delivery, and to address the shortage in special schools and special class placements;

— streamline the process for opening new special classes and provide additional funding and resources for schools opening new special classes;

— invest in recruitment and continuous professional development for teachers and Special Needs Assistants to ensure they are supported to meet the diverse needs of students in special classes, and this must include addressing the root causes of the recruitment and retention crisis in the education and disability sectors; and

— expand the Educational Therapy Support Service, to help build the capacity of school communities to meet student's needs.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

- a child's right to education is enshrined in the Constitution and, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, must be accessible on an equal basis with others in the community in which they live; and

- the Government is committed to ensuring that each child with a special educational need has an appropriate school place, in line with their Constitutional right and Programme for Government commitments;

further notes:

- the continued significant State investment of €2.9 billion in supporting the provision of special education, a 48 per cent increase since 2020;

- the increase in the allocation of Special Education Teachers and Special

Needs Assistants (SNAs) to support children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in our schools;

- the strategic initiatives introduced to provide for the continued accelerated delivery of special class places in mainstream schools and special school places, with the number of special classes having doubled over the last five years and 16 new special schools being established;

- the work being progressed to provide up to another 400 new special classes and 300 additional special school places for the coming school year, to ensure that every child known to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has an appropriate school place;

- the significant investment in the expansion of staffing at the NCSE to assist families of children with SEN in all aspects of their educational journey, including accessing a placement appropriate to their needs;

- the ongoing engagement between the NCSE, the Department of Education, school patron bodies, school management bodies and schools, in relation to the forward planning of special education provision, which has yielded additional classes in every county at primary- and post-primary level in recent years;

- the enactment of the Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Needs) Act 2022, which provides a power to compel schools to make additional provision for children with SEN and for the NCSE to direct schools to admit children with SEN;

- the establishment of the D15 Taskforce to support forward planning for special education provision in the area, and to support the trial of a common application system for special classes;

- the introduction of a new pilot to reinstate therapy services onsite in special schools, and the commitment in the Programme for Government to provide for an education led therapy service for special schools;

- the funding provided for the training and upskilling of teachers and SNAs who support children with SEN;

- the expansion of the Summer Programme, which has seen the number of children participating increase by 150 per cent since 2020;

- that the extensive review by the Department of Education of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 is nearing completion;

- the establishment of a new SNA Workforce Development Unit by the Department of Education;

- the ongoing investment in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools programme, to support schools and students at risk of educational disadvantage; and

- the renewed focus of the Government on the area of disability services, with

a particular focus on improving the delivery of services for children with disabilities; and

calls on the Government to:

- take any necessary steps to ensure that every child who needs a special educational place has access to one in a timely manner;

- continue to expand the number of special school places, special classes and special education teaching hours as required across the State;

- improve communication and outreach to parents of children with SEN, to streamline the process by which parents apply for specialist school places, reducing the burden on them and improving the timelines, including the introduction of a common application procedure;

- continue to increase investment into the area of Special Education, to ensure that every child can reach their full potential;

- support additional schools and students to benefit from the Summer Programme; and

- ensure the NCSE will continue to engage intensively with parents and all educational partners to continue to increase capacity.".

-(Minister for Education)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding special education provision. On Tuesday, 18 February 2025, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| ***The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.*** | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Tá*** | ***Níl*** | ***Staon*** |
| ***Aird, William.*** | ***Ahern, Ciarán.*** | |
| ***Ardagh, Catherine.*** | ***Bacik, Ivana.*** | |
| ***Boland, Grace.*** | ***Bennett, Cathy.*** | |
| ***Brabazon, Tom.*** | ***Boyd Barrett, Richard.*** | |
| ***Brennan, Brian.*** | ***Brady, John.*** | |
| ***Brennan, Shay.*** | ***Buckley, Pat.*** | |
| ***Brophy, Colm.*** | ***Byrne, Joanna.*** | |
| ***Browne, James.*** | ***Carthy, Matt.*** | |
| ***Burke, Colm.*** | ***Clarke, Sorca.*** | |
| ***Burke, Peter.*** | ***Collins, Michael.*** | |
| ***Butler, Mary.*** | ***Connolly, Catherine.*** | |
| ***Butterly, Paula.*** | ***Conway-Walsh, Rose.*** | |
| ***Buttimer, Jerry.*** | ***Cronin, Réada.*** | |

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|---|---|---|
| *Byrne, Malcolm.* | *Crowe, Seán.* | |
| *Byrne, Thomas.* | *Cullinane, David.* | |
| *Cahill, Michael.* | *Cummins, Jen.* | |
| *Callaghan, Catherine.* | *Daly, Pa.* | |
| *Calleary, Dara.* | *Devine, Máire.* | |
| *Canney, Seán.* | *Doherty, Pearse.* | |
| *Carrigy, Micheál.* | *Donnelly, Paul.* | |
| *Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.* | *Ellis, Dessie.* | |
| *Chambers, Jack.* | *Farrelly, Aidan.* | |
| *Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.* | *Farrell, Mairéad.* | |
| *Clendennen, John.* | *Gannon, Gary.* | |
| *Collins, Niall.* | *Gibney, Sinéad.* | |
| *Connolly, John.* | *Gould, Thomas.* | |
| *Cooney, Joe.* | *Graves, Ann.* | |
| *Crowe, Cathal.* | *Hayes, Eoin.* | |
| *Cummins, John.* | *Healy, Seamus.* | |
| *Currie, Emer.* | *Hearne, Rory.* | |
| *Daly, Martin.* | *Kelly, Alan.* | |
| *Dempsey, Aisling.* | *Kenny, Eoghan.* | |
| *Devlin, Cormac.* | *Kenny, Martin.* | |
| *Dillon, Alan.* | *Kerrane, Claire.* | |
| *Dolan, Albert.* | *Lawless, Paul.* | |
| *Dooley, Timmy.* | *Lawlor, George.* | |
| *Feighan, Frankie.* | *Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.* | |
| *Fleming, Seán.* | *McGettigan, Donna.* | |
| *Gallagher, Pat the Cope.* | *McGrath, Mattie.* | |
| *Geoghegan, James.* | *McGuinness, Conor D.* | |
| *Grealish, Noel.* | *Mitchell, Denise.* | |
| *Harkin, Marian.* | *Mythen, Johnny.* | |
| *Healy-Rae, Danny.* | *Nash, Ged.* | |
| *Healy-Rae, Michael.* | *Newsome Drennan, Natasha.* | |
| *Heneghan, Barry.* | *Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.* | |
| *Heydon, Martin.* | *Nolan, Carol.* | |
| *Higgins, Emer.* | *O'Callaghan, Cian.* | |
| *Keogh, Keira.* | *O'Donoghue, Richard.* | |
| *Lahart, John.* | *O'Donoghue, Robert.* | |
| *Lowry, Michael.* | *O'Flynn, Ken.* | |
| *Martin, Micheál.* | *O'Gorman, Roderic.* | |
| *Maxwell, David.* | *O'Hara, Louis.* | |
| *McAuliffe, Paul.* | *O'Reilly, Louise.* | |
| *McCarthy, Noel.* | *O'Rourke, Darren.* | |
| *McConalogue, Charlie.* | *Ó Broin, Eoin.* | |

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|---|---|---|
| ***McCormack, Tony.*** | ***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.*** | |
| ***McEntee, Helen.*** | ***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.*** | |
| ***McGrath, Séamus.*** | ***Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.*** | |
| ***McGreehan, Erin.*** | ***Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.*** | |
| ***McGuinness, John.*** | ***Quaide, Liam.*** | |
| ***Moran, Kevin Boxer.*** | ***Quinlivan, Maurice.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Aindrias.*** | ***Rice, Pádraig.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Michael.*** | ***Sheehan, Conor.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Shane.*** | ***Smith, Duncan.*** | |
| ***Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.*** | ***Stanley, Brian.*** | |
| ***Murphy, Michael.*** | ***Tóibín, Peadar.*** | |
| ***Naughton, Hildegarde.*** | ***Wall, Mark.*** | |
| ***Neville, Joe.*** | ***Ward, Mark.*** | |
| ***O'Brien, Darragh.*** | ***Whitmore, Jennifer.*** | |
| ***O'Callaghan, Jim.*** | | |
| ***O'Connell, Maeve.*** | | |
| ***O'Connor, James.*** | | |
| ***O'Donnell, Kieran.*** | | |
| ***O'Meara, Ryan.*** | | |
| ***O'Shea, John Paul.*** | | |
| ***O'Sullivan, Christopher.*** | | |
| ***Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.*** | | |
| ***Ó Muirí, Naoise.*** | | |
| ***Richmond, Neale.*** | | |
| ***Roche, Peter.*** | | |
| ***Scanlon, Eamon.*** | | |
| ***Smith, Brendan.*** | | |
| ***Smyth, Niamh.*** | | |
| ***Timmins, Edward.*** | | |
| ***Toole, Gillian.*** | | |
| ***Troy, Robert.*** | | |
| ***Ward, Barry.*** | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

| *The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.* | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Tá*** | ***Níl*** | ***Staon*** |
| ***Aird, William.*** | ***Ahern, Ciarán.*** | |
| ***Ardagh, Catherine.*** | ***Bacik, Ivana.*** | |
| ***Boland, Grace.*** | ***Bennett, Cathy.*** | |
| ***Brabazon, Tom.*** | ***Boyd Barrett, Richard.*** | |
| ***Brennan, Brian.*** | ***Brady, John.*** | |
| ***Brennan, Shay.*** | ***Buckley, Pat.*** | |
| ***Brophy, Colm.*** | ***Byrne, Joanna.*** | |
| ***Browne, James.*** | ***Carthy, Matt.*** | |
| ***Burke, Colm.*** | ***Clarke, Sorca.*** | |
| ***Burke, Peter.*** | ***Collins, Michael.*** | |
| ***Butler, Mary.*** | ***Connolly, Catherine.*** | |
| ***Butterly, Paula.*** | ***Conway-Walsh, Rose.*** | |
| ***Buttimer, Jerry.*** | ***Cronin, Réada.*** | |
| ***Byrne, Malcolm.*** | ***Crowe, Seán.*** | |
| ***Byrne, Thomas.*** | ***Cullinane, David.*** | |
| ***Cahill, Michael.*** | ***Cummins, Jen.*** | |
| ***Callaghan, Catherine.*** | ***Daly, Pa.*** | |
| ***Calleary, Dara.*** | ***Devine, Máire.*** | |
| ***Canney, Seán.*** | ***Doherty, Pearse.*** | |
| ***Carrigy, Micheál.*** | ***Donnelly, Paul.*** | |
| ***Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.*** | ***Ellis, Dessie.*** | |
| ***Chambers, Jack.*** | ***Farrelly, Aidan.*** | |
| ***Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.*** | ***Farrell, Mairéad.*** | |
| ***Clendennen, John.*** | ***Fitzmaurice, Michael.*** | |
| ***Collins, Niall.*** | ***Gannon, Gary.*** | |
| ***Connolly, John.*** | ***Gibney, Sinéad.*** | |
| ***Cooney, Joe.*** | ***Gould, Thomas.*** | |
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| ***Daly, Martin.*** | ***Hearne, Rory.*** | |
| ***Dempsey, Aisling.*** | ***Kelly, Alan.*** | |
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| ***Feighan, Frankie.*** | ***Lawlor, George.*** | |
| ***Fleming, Seán.*** | ***Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.*** | |
| ***Gallagher, Pat the Cope.*** | ***McGettigan, Donna.*** | |
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| ***Harkin, Marian.*** | ***Mitchell, Denise.*** | |
| ***Healy-Rae, Danny.*** | ***Mythen, Johnny.*** | |
| ***Healy-Rae, Michael.*** | ***Nash, Ged.*** | |
| ***Heneghan, Barry.*** | ***Newsome Drennan, Natasha.*** | |
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| ***McGreehan, Erin.*** | ***Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.*** | |
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| ***Moran, Kevin Boxer.*** | ***Quaide, Liam.*** | |
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| ***Moynihan, Michael.*** | ***Rice, Pádraig.*** | |
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| ***Naughton, Hildegarde.*** | ***Tóibín, Peadar.*** | |
| ***Neville, Joe.*** | ***Wall, Mark.*** | |
| ***O'Brien, Darragh.*** | ***Ward, Mark.*** | |
| ***O'Callaghan, Jim.*** | ***Whitmore, Jennifer.*** | |
| ***O'Connell, Maeve.*** | | |
| ***O'Connor, James.*** | | |
| ***O'Donnell, Kieran.*** | | |
| ***O'Meara, Ryan.*** | | |
| ***O'Shea, John Paul.*** | | |
| ***O'Sullivan, Christopher.*** | | |
| ***Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.*** | | |
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| ***Smyth, Niamh.*** | | |
| ***Timmins, Edward.*** | | |
| ***Toole, Gillian.*** | | |
| ***Troy, Robert.*** | | |
| ***Ward, Barry.*** | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

## Housing Crisis: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Rory Hearne on Wednesday, 19 February 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and former Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, repeatedly promised to deliver 40,000 homes last year but spectacularly failed, with just 30,330 homes delivered;

- housing delivery is not just slowing down, it is reducing, with a drop in housing delivery of nearly 7 per cent between 2024 and 2023;

- members of the Government have briefed the media that without a dramatic reset of housing policy, there is virtually no chance of reaching their own housing targets;

- the Taoiseach has stated this reset will involve "very politically difficult decisions" and said the Government needs to "pivot more strongly to the private sector";

- in an interview on RTÉ radio on 9th February, 2025, the Taoiseach signalled the imminent end of Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs), saying the Government could replace them at the end of this year;

- within 24 hours of these remarks being made, the share price of the State's largest private landlord, Irish Residential Real Estate Investment Trust (IRES REIT), soared to its highest level in eight months;

- rents are already at record highs, having more than doubled in a decade, and

increased by 34 per cent in the lifetime of the last Government; and

- 83 per cent of private tenancies in the country are in RPZs;

acknowledges that:

- a report published last year by the Central Bank of Ireland entitled "Institutional Investment and Residential Rental Market Dynamics", found that 78 per cent of the homes owned by investment funds were bought as existing properties;

- the same report found that institutional landlords increase monthly rents by about 4.1 per cent more than other landlords;

- since 2021, when the previous Government introduced a 10 per cent stamp duty levy on the bulk purchase of homes, investors have bulk bought half a billion euros worth of residential property; and

- in Budget 2025, the Government increased the stamp duty levy, which does not apply to apartments, from 10 per cent to 15 per cent;

further notes that:

- in 2020, then Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe TD, said investment funds were engaging in "aggressive behaviour to avoid tax" and said the Revenue Commissioners were investigating and compiling a report;

- the report from the Revenue Commissioners was never published, with the Finance Minister claiming in the Dáil on 13th February, 2025, that "tax compliance issues" had been dealt with via legislation;

- however, since 2020, investment funds controlling more than €28 billion worth of Irish property have reduced their tax payments by half, from €74 million to €32 million;

- the proportion of new housing available for sale has nearly halved in the last six years;

- in Dublin city in 2023, 94 per cent of all new housing was apartments, 98 per cent of which was solely available to rent; and

- first time buyers bought just 75 new homes in Dublin City in that year; and

calls on Government to:

- close loopholes which allow investment funds aggressively avoid tax;

- increase the stamp duty levy on the bulk purchase of homes to 100 per cent, and extend it to apartments;

- instead of introducing further tax breaks for developers and vulture funds, access European Union streams of finance like InvestEU and the European Regional Development Fund;

- introduce a savings scheme like the French Livret A model, to leverage some of

the €160 billion in Irish household savings, to invest in affordable housing;

- provide increased and early-stage finance to approved housing bodies and local authorities, so they can ramp up the delivery of genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy; and

- retain RPZs, until there is an alternate system ready to put in place which can protect renters.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"acknowledges that:

— Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland, sets out an ambitious multi-annual programme that seeks to deliver more than 300,000 new homes between 2022 and 2030;

— since Housing for All was published in September 2021, almost 120,000 homes have been added to the National Housing Stock, with delivery of 92,500 new homes in the three years from 2022 to 2024, representing a considerable 49 per cent increase on the quantum delivered in the previous three-year period;

— while the policy aim is to reach, if not exceed, the target in each successive year, the primary goal is to maintain an upward trajectory in supply and in line with or ahead of the overall target over the longer-term;

— delivery of affordable housing supports will significantly exceed 2023 outturn, while the supply of new build social homes continues to be at a level higher than it has been for many years;

— the development finance required to deliver 50,000 homes per year is in the region of €20 billion annually, and capital is needed from a range of sources to ensure the provision of private, social, and affordable homes; and

— the Housing for All Action Plan Update, published in November 2022, included a commitment to 'Review the operation of the private rental sector and report on policy considerations', and the housing Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) have played a key role in protecting renters during a period of historic inflation, and that is why they are remaining in place during the review;

further notes that:

— the Irish Real Estate Fund (IREF) legislation was introduced in 2016, to address concerns regarding the use of collective investment vehicles by non-residents to invest in Irish property;

— on 22nd October, 2024, following Government approval, the then Minister for Finance, Jack Chambers TD, published the Funds Sector 2030: A Framework for Open, Resilient & Developing Markets', a wide-ranging review of the funds and asset management sector, and this review fulfilled a recommendation of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare 2022 report, which called for 'an examination of

the regimes for Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) the IREFs and their role in the property sector, including how they support housing policy objectives';

— European Union funding streams are already accessed in the context of housing delivery in Ireland, and in this regard, European multilateral banks, such as the European Investment Bank Group, and the Council of Europe Development Bank have already played a role in delivering affordable and social homes in Ireland, and provided financing to bodies such as the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) and the Housing Finance Agency (HFA);

— under the term of the last Government, a number of measures were taken to restrict the bulk buying of homes by institutional investors, such as:

— a higher rate of Stamp Duty on the acquisition of houses situated in the State, where a person acquires at least 10 such houses during any 12-month period, was implemented in October 2024, and this rate was increased to 15 per cent from 2nd October, 2024;

— the Section 28 Guidelines for Planning Authorities 'Regulation of Commercial Institutional Investment in Housing', issued in May 2021, aimed to prevent multiple housing and duplex units being sold to a single buyer, providing an 'owner-occupier' guarantee, by ensuring that new 'own-door' houses and duplex units in lower-density housing developments can no longer be bulk-purchased by institutional investors in a manner that causes the displacement of individual purchasers or social and affordable housing, including cost-rental, and initial estimates for this period indicate that these Section 28 guidelines have continued to be impactful and have led to a further increase in home ownership through the use of planning conditions; and

— from May 2021 to November 2024, a combined total of 55,684 residential units were estimated to have received planning permission with conditions restricting the bulk buying or multiple sales to a single purchaser; and

— the Housing Agency is currently undertaking a review of RPZs and the expected timeline for a completed review is Q1 2025, and the review will consider whether RPZs should be continued as is, removed, modified, or replaced, and the extension to the Residential Tenancies Act in May last year, ensures predictability for tenants while this review takes place;

recognises that:

— the Housing Commission have advised that in order to create a housing system that functions across tenures and for all people, we need diverse and stable sources of financing;

— this capital is needed to ensure the provision of private, social, and affordable homes, homes of all tenures for families across the country at all price points;

— following on from a review of the rental market in July 2024, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, has requested the Housing Agency to undertake a review which will assess the operation of RPZs and it is expected that

this review will be completed by end of Q1 2025, and any potential future policy options that arise from this review will be fully considered by the Government and implemented as required; and

— the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is continuing to deliver accelerated funding schemes across the affordable and social programmes which have the potential to unlock delivery of schemes in good locations, while enabling additional supply, with over 60 per cent of active approved projects under the Cost Rental Equity Loan being accelerated projects scheduled for completion between 2025 – 2028; and

affirms Government efforts to:

— diversify sources of investment, noting the level of investment required in the long term cannot be solely the responsibility of the State, it will also require a very significant level of private investment, including appropriate institutional capital investment which is essential for the delivery of critically needed private rented stock;

— engage with domestic lenders to ensure that the banking sector is appropriately using its lending capacity to support the development of new housing nationwide;

— develop new financing sources, especially for brownfield sites and small builders, with support from Home Building Finance Ireland, the HFA and domestic banks, as well as State support of equity investment;

— enhance protections for tenants, while appropriately vindicating landlords' constitutionally protected property rights, through measures introduced by successive recent Governments via the Residential Tenancies Acts;

— build on the significant number of social and affordable homes provided in 2024, expanding State investment, with almost €5 billion available for the delivery of social, affordable and cost-rental homes in 2025, supplemented by Land Development Agency investment and HFA lending, which will bring the overall capital provision to over €6 billion; and

— deliver on the far-ranging commitments in the Programme for Government and informed by the Housing Commission's proposals for the long-term reform of the housing system, accepting this is an appropriate response to the current housing challenges which Ireland is now facing.".

- (Minister of State at the Department of Finance)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the housing crisis. On Wednesday, 19 February 2025, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| ***The Dáil divided: Tá, 88; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.*** | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Tá*** | ***Níl*** | ***Staon*** |

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|---|---|---|
| *Aird, William.* | *Ahern, Ciarán.* | |
| *Ardagh, Catherine.* | *Bacik, Ivana.* | |
| *Boland, Grace.* | *Bennett, Cathy.* | |
| *Brabazon, Tom.* | *Boyd Barrett, Richard.* | |
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| *Brennan, Shay.* | *Buckley, Pat.* | |
| *Brophy, Colm.* | *Byrne, Joanna.* | |
| *Browne, James.* | *Carthy, Matt.* | |
| *Burke, Colm.* | *Clarke, Sorca.* | |
| *Burke, Peter.* | *Collins, Michael.* | |
| *Butler, Mary.* | *Connolly, Catherine.* | |
| *Butterly, Paula.* | *Conway-Walsh, Rose.* | |
| *Buttimer, Jerry.* | *Cronin, Réada.* | |
| *Byrne, Malcolm.* | *Crowe, Seán.* | |
| *Byrne, Thomas.* | *Cullinane, David.* | |
| *Cahill, Michael.* | *Cummins, Jen.* | |
| *Callaghan, Catherine.* | *Daly, Pa.* | |
| *Calleary, Dara.* | *Devine, Máire.* | |
| *Canney, Seán.* | *Doherty, Pearse.* | |
| *Carrigy, Micheál.* | *Donnelly, Paul.* | |
| *Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.* | *Ellis, Dessie.* | |
| *Chambers, Jack.* | *Farrelly, Aidan.* | |
| *Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.* | *Farrell, Mairéad.* | |
| *Clendennen, John.* | *Fitzmaurice, Michael.* | |
| *Collins, Niall.* | *Gannon, Gary.* | |
| *Connolly, John.* | *Gibney, Sinéad.* | |
| *Cooney, Joe.* | *Gould, Thomas.* | |
| *Crowe, Cathal.* | *Graves, Ann.* | |
| *Cummins, John.* | *Hayes, Eoin.* | |
| *Currie, Emer.* | *Healy, Seamus.* | |
| *Daly, Martin.* | *Hearne, Rory.* | |
| *Dempsey, Aisling.* | *Kelly, Alan.* | |
| *Devlin, Cormac.* | *Kenny, Eoghan.* | |
| *Dillon, Alan.* | *Kenny, Martin.* | |
| *Dolan, Albert.* | *Kerrane, Claire.* | |
| *Dooley, Timmy.* | *Lawless, Paul.* | |
| *Feighan, Frankie.* | *Lawlor, George.* | |
| *Fleming, Seán.* | *Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.* | |
| *Gallagher, Pat the Cope.* | *McGettigan, Donna.* | |
| *Geoghegan, James.* | *McGuinness, Conor D.* | |
| *Grealish, Noel.* | *Mitchell, Denise.* | |
| *Harkin, Marian.* | *Mythen, Johnny.* | |
| *Healy-Rae, Danny.* | *Nash, Ged.* | |

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| ***Healy-Rae, Michael.*** | ***Newsome Drennan, Natasha.*** | |
| ***Heneghan, Barry.*** | ***Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.*** | |
| ***Heydon, Martin.*** | ***Nolan, Carol.*** | |
| ***Higgins, Emer.*** | ***O'Callaghan, Cian.*** | |
| ***Keogh, Keira.*** | ***O'Donoghue, Richard.*** | |
| ***Lahart, John.*** | ***O'Donoghue, Robert.*** | |
| ***Lowry, Michael.*** | ***O'Flynn, Ken.*** | |
| ***Martin, Micheál.*** | ***O'Gorman, Roderic.*** | |
| ***Maxwell, David.*** | ***O'Hara, Louis.*** | |
| ***McAuliffe, Paul.*** | ***O'Reilly, Louise.*** | |
| ***McCarthy, Noel.*** | ***O'Rourke, Darren.*** | |
| ***McConalogue, Charlie.*** | ***Ó Broin, Eoin.*** | |
| ***McCormack, Tony.*** | ***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.*** | |
| ***McEntee, Helen.*** | ***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.*** | |
| ***McGrath, Mattie.*** | ***Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.*** | |
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| ***Moran, Kevin Boxer.*** | ***Rice, Pádraig.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Aindrias.*** | ***Sheehan, Conor.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Michael.*** | ***Smith, Duncan.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Shane.*** | ***Stanley, Brian.*** | |
| ***Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.*** | ***Tóibín, Peadar.*** | |
| ***Murphy, Michael.*** | ***Wall, Mark.*** | |
| ***Naughton, Hildegarde.*** | ***Ward, Mark.*** | |
| ***Neville, Joe.*** | ***Whitmore, Jennifer.*** | |
| ***O'Brien, Darragh.*** | | |
| ***O'Callaghan, Jim.*** | | |
| ***O'Connell, Maeve.*** | | |
| ***O'Connor, James.*** | | |
| ***O'Donnell, Kieran.*** | | |
| ***O'Meara, Ryan.*** | | |
| ***O'Shea, John Paul.*** | | |
| ***O'Sullivan, Christopher.*** | | |
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| ***Timmins, Edward.*** | | |
| ***Toole, Gillian.*** | | |
| ***Troy, Robert.*** | | |
| ***Ward, Barry.*** | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Rory Hearne and Jennifer Whitmore.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

| ***The Dáil divided: Tá, 88; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.*** | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Tá*** | ***Níl*** | ***Staon*** |
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| ***Moynihan, Aindrias.*** | ***Sheehan, Conor.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Michael.*** | ***Smith, Duncan.*** | |
| ***Moynihan, Shane.*** | ***Stanley, Brian.*** | |
| ***Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.*** | ***Tóibín, Peadar.*** | |
| ***Murphy, Michael.*** | ***Wall, Mark.*** | |

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|---|---|---|
| ***Naughton, Hildegarde.*** | ***Ward, Mark.*** | |
| ***Neville, Joe.*** | ***Whitmore, Jennifer.*** | |
| ***O'Brien, Darragh.*** | | |
| ***O'Callaghan, Jim.*** | | |
| ***O'Connell, Maeve.*** | | |
| ***O'Connor, James.*** | | |
| ***O'Donnell, Kieran.*** | | |
| ***O'Meara, Ryan.*** | | |
| ***O'Shea, John Paul.*** | | |
| ***O'Sullivan, Christopher.*** | | |
| ***Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.*** | | |
| ***Ó Muirí, Naoise.*** | | |
| ***Richmond, Neale.*** | | |
| ***Roche, Peter.*** | | |
| ***Scanlon, Eamon.*** | | |
| ***Smith, Brendan.*** | | |
| ***Smyth, Niamh.*** | | |
| ***Timmins, Edward.*** | | |
| ***Toole, Gillian.*** | | |
| ***Troy, Robert.*** | | |
| ***Ward, Barry.*** | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Rory Hearne and Jennifer Whitmore.

Question declared carried.

*Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.*

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.50 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Déardaoin, an 20 Feabhra 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.50 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 20 February 2025.