



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 5 Márta 2025

Wednesday, 5 March 2025

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

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

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 Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the lack of school places and school building projects in Kildare.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the need to reopen the Allenwood daycare centre, County Kildare.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the difficulties in mental health services in the Louth-Meath area.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the introduction of a youth culture card.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the need for extra mainstream primary school places in Dunshaughlin, County Meath.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need to open the new community nursing home in Nenagh, County Tipperary.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for access to reliable broadband in Dublin Fingal West.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss overcrowding and capacity at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the exclusion of mainstream classes in Holy Child pre-school on Seán MacDermott Street, Dublin 1 from special educational needs support.

Deputy Seamus Healy - To discuss an application by St. Mary's CBS primary school, Clonmel, County Tipperary for an emergency works grant.

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Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the increase in the number of families and children in homeless hubs.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon - To discuss the provision of transport for cancer patients in the north west.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the system whereby the Passport Office seeks confirmation from An Garda Síochána about individual passport signatures.

Deputy Duncan Smith - To discuss the need for an increased provision of primary care centres in Fingal.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the sale of Bord na Móna recycling.

Deputy William Aird - To discuss protecting peat soil farmers.

Deputy Peter Roche - To discuss information and support for parents of children receiving special education who are transitioning from primary to post-primary education.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss ongoing community safety issues in County Clare.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the need for additional accommodation in St. Francis Special School, Portlaoise.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the implementation of the Taoiseach's taskforce for Dublin.

Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss the removal of 24-7 advanced paramedic cover at Roscommon.

Deputy David Cullinane - To discuss persistent water outages in Lismore, County Waterford.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the continued operation of the Wombles pre-school from Scoil Mhuire National School, Airlie Heights, Lucan.

Deputies Thomas Gould and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the lack of special school places in Cork and to discuss the current shortage of school places, particularly for children with additional needs.

The matters raised by Deputies Alan Kelly, Séamus McGrath, William Aird and Claire Kerrane have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Nursing Homes

Deputy Alan Kelly: A year ago, a commitment was given by the former Minister, Stephen Donnelly, when he wrote to me to say that the new nursing home in Nenagh would be opened as

a nursing home after completion of the 12-month contract signed with a private operator to take over the nursing home in order for it to be used as a step-down facility for UHL. I fought for this nursing home. The Minister of State knows it is badly needed in the mid-west as he is also from the mid-west. I fought for it for years because HIQA stated the old St. Conlon's home was not fit for purpose and I accepted that. We found a site and, as part of the Government I was in, we got funding of €25 million. It was built, fair play to the HSE and those who fought to get it.

Last April, the town of Nenagh and its surrounds were shocked when the HSE announced that, effectively, it would be taken over as a step-down facility and run by a private company. Nenagh had been screwed when a Fianna Fáil Government closed our emergency department and put our hospital down to a different level. The people felt they were being screwed again with regard to the nursing home and went out on the streets to protest it. As a TD and public representative for 20 years based in Nenagh I know of so many families who cannot find elderly care. They cannot find rehab or respite. Here was a 50-bed state-of-the-art nursing home, the best built in Ireland, and it was being taken over. It was a disgrace.

To compound this disgrace it was privatised. Residents in St. Conlon's have never got to transfer to the facility and many of them have passed away since. The staff never got to transfer. Recruitment never happened for local staff. I have had to fight to get people into nursing homes throughout the mid-west and further afield, in Galway, Laois and everywhere, you name it. We have had to fight to get people even though we have a 50-bed state-of-the-art unit, which is the best in Ireland, sitting right beside the hospital and our new primary care centre in the middle of the town. It is not acceptable.

What the former Minister said, and what the regional executive officer, REO, of the HSE said, was that it would be used as a step-down facility for one year to get us over the winter. The winter is gone and we are now into spring. We were told it would be handed back as a residential facility by this summer. Then it was linked to the 96-bed block in Limerick. This is the famous block for which the Minister of State and I both fought for many years, and which is being built at rapid speed to be fair.

On Tipp FM a week or so ago, Dr. Hennessy, the new clinical lead in UHL, was asked whether it would honour opening the nursing home in the summer of this year. He said he had been assured by the REO before he went on the show that it would be open this year. That was all fine until I received a reply to a parliamentary question asking the exact same thing. In his correspondence to me, Ian Carter, CEO of mid-west acute and older people services, referred to my correspondence dated 21 February 2025 and told me no date for the initiative has been agreed at this time. This contradicts what the clinical lead said a week before.

Will the Minister of State answer to the people of Nenagh and its surrounds, and all the residents, their families and all the workers, on whether our nursing home will be open this summer as committed to by the HSE, the previous Government and this Government? Are we in a situation whereby it will be reneged on and we will not be in a position to trust the HSE or this Government on elderly care in Nenagh?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Kelly for raising this important matter. By way of overview, long-term residential care is a crucial part of the overall continuum of care throughout the country. Our HSE community nursing units and community hospitals play a vital role in the provision of long-term care and other services. I am also very conscious of the importance of strengthening the capacity and re-

silience of our health system through the delivery of health and social care infrastructure. This Government is committed to continued investment in healthcare infrastructure which supports the highest quality care for our older population.

On the specific point raised by Deputy Kelly, this investment includes the community nursing unit capital programme, which was launched in 2016 to ensure that up to 90 of our public community nursing units and community hospitals would be refurbished or replaced to ensure the best quality for our older people. As part of this capital programme, older person services in the north Tipperary area are being enhanced by the opening of a new state-of-the-art 50-bed community nursing unit in Nenagh, replacing the St. Conlon's community nursing unit, to which Deputy Kelly referred. A significant investment of €22 million was allocated to this project. The new Nenagh community nursing unit will have a complement of 50 beds, as Deputy Kelly has stated, providing long-stay care, respite care and palliative care services. The unit will provide a high-quality living environment, which will be in line with all regulatory requirements.

As Deputy Kelly is aware, in order to alleviate the significant pressures at UHL, a decision was made to utilise the new Nenagh community nursing unit building, on an interim basis, as a step-down sub-acute and rehabilitation facility for UHL. As Deputy Kelly has said, it is run by a private provider with expertise in such services. The interim use of the unit in Nenagh has provided highly valuable support to the region pending the completion of the first of two 96-bed blocks for UHL, scheduled to be completed in mid-2025. It has always been the intention that this temporary arrangement would be reviewed within one year and that the unit in Nenagh would open for long-term residential care services 12 months after the contract commenced with the private provider. This is still the case. I have followed up on this and it is still the case.

I wish to inform Deputy Kelly that HSE mid-west is working towards a HSE-led model of service delivery at Nenagh community nursing unit. This will include long-term residential care services, commencing in quarter three this year, for the current St. Conlon's residents. I also assure the Deputy that I am committed to working alongside the HSE to address all concerns in respect of residential care for older people in Nenagh and north Tipperary, now and into the future.

I reiterate the particular point the Deputy raised, which is that the HSE is working towards moving the residents from St. Conlon's to the new community nursing facility in Nenagh within 12 months of the contract being signed with the private provider. That is still the case. Obviously, it arose because of the huge pressures in UHL and I appreciate what this means for the residents of St. Conlon's and their families. I will be working to ensure the residents of St. Conlon's are transferred to the new state-of-the-art facility in Nenagh within 12 months of the contract being signed with the private provider to provide the services for the alleviation of pressures on UHL with that 50-bed unit in the community nursing facility in Nenagh.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I accept the Minister of State's honesty and directness in this and I appreciate his response. I have to ask, though, why did the HSE send me this response to a parliamentary question within the past few days saying it did not have a date and did not know? If the Minister of State can confirm to the House that it is happening after 12 months, which is this summer, what is going on? Why are parliamentary questions not answered honestly? The Minister of State has stated on the record of the Dáil - and I accept it - that it will be within 12 months, which is this summer.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The intention is this summer and that continues to be the case.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I take his word that will happen. I must point out to the Minister of State that the company, Bartra, is advertising 12-month contracts for clinical nurses in Nenagh. If it is advertising for clinical nurses in Nenagh for 12 months, it must expect it is going to stay there a bit longer. By the way, at the end of this I want to see the total amount Bartra was paid for doing this because I expect it will be colossal. Why is it advertising for multiple posts in Nenagh on 12-month contracts if, as the Minister of State says, this will be handed back to the people of Nenagh and surrounds this summer?

I have huge affection for the people involved here. St. Conlon's, the saving of St. Conlon's and the creation of this new CNU are central to everything I believe in politically and everything for which I have fought for years. I fought for this for years. The people of Nenagh have huge affection for this. People who were residents and who have passed away had fought for this unit and wanted to move across to it. Their families have been left without ever getting their loved ones across to this unit.

There is an inherent contradiction here. I take the Minister of State's word. He is an honourable Member and an honourable Minister of State. I take his word that this is happening this summer and what the HSE have responded to in my parliamentary question will not happen but that it will do what he says and that moreover, the issue of Bartra looking for people for 12 months also will not affect the movement of the residents by this summer and all the staff will be in place.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Kelly for raising that matter. He might provide me with the correspondence he has received.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will indeed, that is no problem.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I will repeat particular clarifications on a number of points. First, the decision to utilise the Nenagh community nursing home building on an interim basis as a step-down sub-acute and rehabilitative facility was taken to alleviate the significant pressures at UHL. It is about the pressures and that is a fact. I also reiterate the HSE is working towards a HSE-led model of delivery at Nenagh community nursing unit with long-term residential care services, commencing in quarter 3 this year, for the current St. Conlon's residents. The cohort that I want to have significantly transferred, obviously, is that cohort of people who currently are residents in St. Conlon's and they will move to the new facility in quarter 3 of this year.

The current community nursing unit in St. Conlon's, Nenagh, continues to provide excellent care to its residents during the interim period. The new Nenagh community nursing unit will ultimately replace St. Conlon's community nursing unit. I also reiterate that older person services in the north Tipperary area ultimately will be enhanced by the opening of a new state-of-the-art 50 bed community nursing unit in Nenagh, following a significant intervention to help alleviate significant pressure on University Hospital Limerick.

They are the facts as I understand them as of today. Ultimately, my concern, as a Minister of State, is to ensure those residents in St. Conlon's move across and assure their families that they will move across to the new facility in quarter 3 of this year.

Agriculture Industry

Deputy William Aird: It is a great honour for me to be here today and speak for the first time in this Chamber. As a representative for the people of Laois, I thank my constituents for their trust and my family, friends and supporters for their unwavering encouragement. I waited a long time to get here. I was first elected in 1979, the then youngest person ever elected to public life at 19 years of age. As an admirer of Nelson Mandela who said “A winner is a dreamer who never gives up”, I am the dreamer. I never gave up and I am a winner speaking here this morning representing the people of Laois.

I wish to ensure that County Laois gets its fair share of investment and opportunity. Our county is at the heart of Ireland, yet too often it has been overlooked. We need real investment and infrastructure; better roads, reliable public transport and broadband to support businesses and communities. Housing remains a huge challenge. Too many young people in Laois are struggling to buy or rent a home. We must cut the red tape, build more houses and ensure that rural families can build in their own communities.

Supporting working families is essential. The cost of living is putting people under pressure and we must ease that burden, whether through lower childcare costs, better healthcare access or tax relief for those who work hard. Safer communities must be a priority. Crime and anti-social behaviour are on the rise and we need more gardaí and stronger protections for our towns and villages.

I came here to deliver for Laois and for our country and to fight for investment, fairness and opportunity. I will work every day to ensure my county's voice is heard loud and clear. A strong message from rural Ireland means strong long local services, schools and Garda stations. Agriculture is the backbone of rural Ireland and farmers need fair prices, practical supports and policies that work with them, not against them.

On the proposals for peat soils, it is unacceptable that an important issue, one that will directly impact the livelihood of thousands of farmers, has been discussed behind closed doors without any farmer representation at the table. Farmers' representatives have rightly pointed out that these proposals, which include the rewetting of 80,000 ha of peat land, were discussed at a meeting of so-called invited stakeholders; a meeting from which farmers were absent. How can the Government justify this? How can we claim to support engagement and co-operation when the very people affected by these decisions were excluded from the discussion?

Let us be clear; the top-down approach that is taken by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is completely out of touch with the principles of fairness and transparency. If we are serious about tackling climate change and enhancing sustainability in agriculture, we should be serious then. We must also be serious about working with farmers and not against them. Imposing decisions without consultation will only lead to resistance and resentment, which serves no one's interests. Farmers are the custodians of the land and understand better than anyone how to manage and care for it, yet farmers are repeatedly facing increasing regulations, restrictions and bureaucracy. Farmers feel abandoned and disrespected by those in power.

The Government is committed to the principles of engagement and co-operation and we must start by listening to farmers. I call for immediate transparency regarding these proposals. The Department must engage with farming representatives to hear their concerns and ensure that any future decisions regarding peat soils are made in full consultation with those who

actually work the land. We cannot allow a situation where farmers are simply dictated to by bureaucrats and policymakers who will never experience the economic and emotional burden of changes that decide their future.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I acknowledge Deputy Aird's first contribution in the Dáil. It is a great honour and privilege to have him as a colleague here. We first served together on a regional health forum with the HSE back when we were councillors. To be serving with the Deputy here now is a great honour and I look forward to working with him. I do not doubt his passion in representing the people of Laois but also representing those in the agricultural community, which he has raised here as well.

I am absolutely committed to working to improve the economic, social and environmental sustainability of family farms. The issue Deputy Aird has raised is an emotive one, and I want to reassure farmers who work with peat soils. Land use has a key role to play in the achievement of our climate targets. As custodians of the land, farmers will be central to delivering on those targets. Nothing will be achieved in this area without their buy-in and support. I reassure Deputy Aird that farmers will not be dictated to while I am in this position. There will absolutely be engagement and transparency all along the way.

Ultimately, my Department is examining the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through reduced management intensity of grasslands on drained organic soils. This work is at an early stage and any potential future actions from this analysis will be entirely voluntary. I cannot be any clearer than that. Anything farmers want to do here, they will only do it if they want to and if they are financially incentivised to do it. It is voluntary. It is in the programme for Government, and it is a commitment which Deputy Aird voted for and I will uphold. He has my word on that. I want to be clear from the outset that my two guiding principles are the voluntary and well-funded elements of this. If some farmers decide to adopt measures that involve low-intensity management of their ground, it will be because they have chosen to do so, and that will be fine too.

There are also initiatives at different levels. Deputy Aird talked about the workshop that was referenced in media reports last week. There was an exploratory workshop that happened to consider this. That meeting was about the experience of practitioners who had worked directly with farmers on the likes of EIPs and locally led projects. It is absolutely appropriate that those meetings happen. There are 4,000 people working in the Department of agriculture. Meetings happen every day of the week and farmers' organisations are not always at them. They are about scoping out and getting key learnings to inform an approach that is taken and to ensure that when I am looking to make financial decisions and put proposals to farm organisations and engage with them on it, I will have clear information on what the experiences have been on the ground.

There is nothing sinister here. There is nothing untoward. It is absolutely the type of work that should be happening with my officials and key practitioners who are engaging and working with farmers and getting their experience back in order that we can make informed decisions when the time comes. Proposals would never be agreed without being put to farm organisations for consultation and engagement. Ultimately, I am the senior Minister in the Department of agriculture and I will make decisions after that consultation and taking on board all those points. That will not happen without having engaged with the farm organisations, the environmental pillar and all the key stakeholders who have skin in the game. I will work with them but I will make sure we are making an informed decision. That is what these workshops are about. It

is making sure that any decisions we make are informed. It was always intended that, as this work progressed, there would be opportunities for engagement, discussion and input by farmers, farm organisations, the environmental pillars and all other stakeholders.

I reassure Deputy Aird that I understand the concerns he has highlighted. They are valid concerns, particularly in the light of media reports. I reassure him that this is a process that is absolutely as he would expect it to be, as we scope out and get the learning from farmers' experiences of previous locally led projects. This will help inform any key discussions we have with all the key stakeholders.

Deputy William Aird: I am delighted the Minister said everything will be voluntary from the farmers' point of view but he must accept where I am coming from as well. At that meeting where there were no farmers involved, it was announced that 80,000 ha of land were going to be rewetted. Whether we like it or not, a lot of soils throughout this country are peat-nature soils, so it will affect probably every county in the Twenty-six Counties of Ireland. Farmers need support, not mandates. They need incentives, not penalties. Above all, farmers need to be respected as equal partners in shaping agriculture and environmental policy.

If our Government fails to address these concerns, it risks isolating the entire agricultural sector, a sector which is vital to our economy and rural communities and to our national identity. I urge the Minister and all relevant authorities to take immediate action to engage with farmers, include them in decision-making, and ensure that no policy is imposed without farmer input. Anything less would be an insult to the hard-working food producers - I am one of them myself - who feed this nation and many more.

While I have the Minister, I wish to talk to him about the ACRES payments. In County Laois, the number of people being paid under the scheme is 427 but the active participants on day one for ACRES were 599. That means that 172 people, or 29% of the applicants in County Laois, have not yet been paid. All my life, I have been in discussions with the Department of agriculture to the effect that no matter what in an application has to be referred back to the person, a minimum of 85% of the money owed to the farmers should be paid out, with 15% held back.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta.

Deputy William Aird: Could the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach imagine anyone in this building being told on a Wednesday that they would not be getting paid? That is what is happening to us in the farming community.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy. The climate action plan has provided a pathway for reducing our land use, land use change and forestry emissions since 2021 and commits to the implementation of reduced management intensity on a portion of Ireland's drained organic soils. This is a relatively new area of work in Ireland, with much uncertainty and complexity. If we are to reduce emissions from drained peat soils, it is important we consider how this might be achieved.

Those at the workshop referenced by Deputy Aird included people involved in projects with expertise of working with farmers in this area, including the European Innovation Partnership programmes, ACRES co-operation and the LIFE projects. There is no question of imposing solutions on farmers. Addressing this challenge will require a national approach involving all

stakeholders. I am fully committed to working with farmers, farm organisations, the environmental pillar and other stakeholders to develop a pathway forward that is based on the principles of it being voluntary and well-funded, as I have outlined.

I believe farmers have a positive role to play in this space, and I know the Deputy thinks so too. They have already demonstrated their real commitment to action and 2024 is expected to deliver a third year in a row of reductions in agricultural emissions. Farmers have turned the trend and changed the narrative. I am confident we will do the same in the area of water quality, where we have seen positive early indications from the EPA for the first half of last year. That is what can be achieved when we back farmers and work with them in a spirit of co-operation rather than confrontation. That is the point the Deputy is highlighting. The role that our farmers play in producing safe, quality food is recognised at home and abroad but they also have a role in protecting biodiversity and water quality. Farmers can do more than one thing at the same time. They are up for that challenge, as well as contributing to climate action, and that must be acknowledged and adequately supported. I am really clear on that. It is only fair that, for measures which go beyond baseline requirements, farmers receive adequate financial support if they voluntarily agree to take them on. Farmers cannot go green if they are in the red.

On the point about ACRES, we are making progress. I was down in Wexford last week visiting the officials in Johnstown Castle. We cleared almost 1,700 last week and we are down to 10,400. I am determined that we will improve communication, clear the backlog as quickly as possible and provide long-term solutions that are not just a quick fix for this year but will mean we will not face these problems again next year.

Passport Services

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for being here. At the outset, I acknowledge the great work done by the passport service and the staff. By and large, they provide a very good service. I wish to raise an issue relating to how passports are processed, and in particular, the verification with An Garda Síochána.

All in this House are aware that the Passport Office contacts Garda stations by telephone to verify that a passport has been stamped in the Garda station. I understand that is not done for every passport but, rather, is done on a selective basis. That has presented significant difficulties. As a public representative, I have come across dozens of cases where applications have been cancelled because the Passport Office has not been able to make contact with the Garda station.

We understand that Garda stations are busy places and unfortunately, the phone is often not answered. We would like to change this but it is the reality of the situation at present. Very often, these passport applications are in the system for many weeks before this happens and they are then cancelled with a short period left for the individuals' or the families' travel requirements. What has sparked me to raise this issue is a case I recently came across where it happened twice in the context of the same application. The application for a new passport for one of the children in the family was cancelled for the second time only a week before travelling for a family holiday. I think we would all agree that this is not an acceptable situation and there is a very obvious solution to this. The system of phoning a Garda station is clearly archaic, inefficient and outdated. It needs to be changed urgently, as part of this process. I am not suggesting anything radical but I suggest that we change it to an email system. This would be far more ef-

ficient. It would provide a clear, written record of the communication between the Passport Office and the Garda stations and it would give gardaí the opportunity to come back within a day or so to the Passport Office. It would be a far better and more efficient system of verification, I would argue. I ask the Minister to take this issue back to the Department, to make this change. It would avoid families having the significant stress and anxiety of passport applications being cancelled with a short period left to rectify the situation before they travel. As in all other cases, the applicants in this particular case did nothing wrong. The family went to the district Garda HQ and they did everything they could to have their passport in the best shape possible but unfortunately, this issue arose. As I have said, I have come across this numerous times over the years and it finally needs to be addressed. Verbal communication is open to misinterpretation, miscommunication and so on. It is important that there is a clear record of the communication of the verification. We can debate in the House whether it is necessary for gardaí to verify a passport application but that is a debate for another day. I think that needs to be looked at as well but that can be reviewed at another point. For now, it is important that the system is updated and brought into the 21st century so that we do not have families going through this unnecessary anxiety and stress when trying to get a passport application completed.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an ábhar seo a ardú. I thank Deputy McGrath for raising the matter. Like the Deputy I want to pay tribute to the staff in the Passport Office and to acknowledge the work that they do. The passport service is currently experiencing a high level of demand for passports, as citizens prepare for upcoming summer travel. The Department of Foreign Affairs has operational and staffing plans in place and the Passport Office is successfully responding to the current level of demand, and has issued almost 200,000 passports to date this year. Virtually all complete passport applications are being processed within or before advertised turnaround times. The Irish passport has a strong international reputation and currently ranks third in the Henley global passport index, as it provides our citizens with visa-free access to 189 countries. As such, the passport service takes its responsibility to protect the integrity of the Irish passport very seriously. Since the introduction of online passport applications in 2017, adults renewing their passports through the Passport Office online are not required to submit a witnessed identity form. Online child renewal applications can be witnessed by members of a wide range of professions, including school teachers, doctors, elected representatives and gardaí. Deputy McGrath raised the issue of the application that was cancelled twice. I will bring that back to the Department. The Deputy raised a very important point that many families are genuinely frustrated and worried, despite their organisational abilities. There are certain passport applications for applicants resident in Ireland that require forms to be witnessed by a member of An Garda Síochána. These include: all passport applications sent by post; first-time adult online applications and first-time child online applications. The witnessing of these forms is an important element of the identity verification process for the passport service, as it provides initial assurance that the person in the photograph is the same person presenting to submit the passport application form.

In the case of an application for a minor, the witnessing of this form provides evidence that guardians have given their consent for a passport to be issued to the child. In order to protect the rights of parents or guardians and children, it is important that forms are correctly completed. As I mentioned previously, it is important to note that not all children's passport applications must be witnessed by a garda. Child online renewal applications can be witnessed by a range of professions. When a garda does witness an application, it is the responsibility of the garda to ensure that the signature is correctly recorded in the logbook, so that when the passport service

calls, the signature can be verified.

In the limited category of applications that require a garda witness, the passport service calls the relevant Garda station to confirm that the garda recorded the form in the station logbook. There is no requirement for the passport service to speak to the witnessing garda directly. Passport service staff will call the Garda station up to three times to verify the garda's signature. Where the passport service cannot reach the Garda station after three attempts, there is a system in place whereby the relevant superintendent's office can be contacted to verify the details. If the passport service is unable to verify the witness after these steps have been taken, a new witnessed form will be requested from the applicant. Deputy McGrath made reference to the 21st century and the passport service is continuously looking at ways to make the application process easier for applicants, including the enhancement of digital services. The Department of Foreign Affairs would welcome the digitisation of the records maintained by An Garda Síochána when witnessing applications.

The policy on the use of witnesses is currently under review, as part of a general update of passport service policies. The witnessing policy is also being reviewed in the context of the ongoing programme of passport service reform. This reform programme focuses on the future of service delivery by implementing projects that enhance the customer experience while maintaining the integrity of the Irish passport. Elements of the reform programme being rolled out later this year and early next year, will introduce updates to the witnessing process, which will further enhance the service for customers. I will bring back the Deputy's remarks to the Department, because they are valid. All of us here who have experienced passport issues know how frustrating it can be.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the fact that the process is under review and that it is being considered in the wider context. The Minister of State mentioned that 200,000 applications are being processed per annum, which is a huge volume. I acknowledge the great work done by the staff of the passport service. We all value our Irish passport. It is our most important document in many respects. The process of verification needs to be reviewed. The Minister of State's response outlined that there are three attempts made to try to contact the Garda station. That is the case but unfortunately, Garda stations are extremely busy places. We know An Garda Síochána is underresourced. It does not have the manpower in place. An email system would be a far more efficient service. I have discussed this with members and management of An Garda Síochána. They seem to be in favour of an email system being put in place. A review is under way. I thank the Minister of State for taking on board my points. Hopefully, the review will result in a more modern and efficient system, which would prevent families from suffering unnecessary stress, anxiety and heartache. In the particular case I referred to, the family got the passport within hours of their travel. That is not acceptable when the family had applied in good time, a number of months beforehand. They used the online system and they did everything as they should have but unfortunately, the system let them down. That needs to change. I thank the Minister of State for taking my comments on board.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy again for raising this important issue. As we all know in this Chamber, passports are an important topic for us in our offices, especially as we approach the Easter and summer holidays. I assure Members of the commitment of the passport service and which I think we all agree is an excellent service. It is in an excellent position to deliver the demand forecasted for the rest of the year. Last week alone, 35,000 passports were issued, which is a staggering amount. In the context of the Deputy's comments, the passport

service maintains a very close working relationship with An Garda Síochána. It offers guidance to gardaí on the correct completions required for identity and consent forms. It is important to recognise that the Passport Office will continue this engagement to discuss how we can work together to improve the situation and the service for citizens. I will bring back to the Department the Deputy's point regarding digitisation and the email system. In addition, we should all take to our social media channels to urge anyone travelling overseas this year, especially families with young children, to check the validity of their passport before booking travel and to apply online in plenty of time and not wait until the last minute. We are all probably guilty of that as citizens and people.

Online passport renewal applications do not require a Garda signature for adults and children. Passport online is the best option for all our citizens. It is the quickest, most convenient and most cost-effective way to apply for a passport.

I thank the Passport Office and the Passport Office staff for the work they do on our behalf. They have a very good system. A couple tweaks could perhaps be made but we are very well served by them.

I will bring back the comments Deputy McGrath made to the Minister, Deputy Harris.

Ambulance Service

Deputy Claire Kerrane: First, by way of background, the accident and emergency department in Roscommon was closed in 2011. On the back of that, a commitment was made that there would need to be much better ambulance cover for Roscommon because we are farther away from the next nearest emergency department. Both Fine Gael, which was in office at the time, and the HSE committed to ensure there would be advanced life support. It would always be provided given the accident and emergency was no longer there. At that time, a separate roster for advanced paramedics on the rapid response vehicle was put in place. Until 2023, that had been in place for 12 years. In 2015, Leo Varadkar, the then health Minister, restated that a rapid response vehicle crewed by an advanced paramedic providing 24-7 cover in Roscommon was one of the significant improvements made in Roscommon because of the closure of the accident and emergency department. He went on to state his intention that there would be further improvements because we had no accident and emergency department and we were farther away from the next emergency department.

Instead what has happened, and I have been raising this for about a year, is that the advanced paramedic roster on the rapid response vehicle has been filled by a paramedic instead of an advanced paramedic. On the roster that was full with advanced paramedics, one advanced paramedic is missing, meaning that when calls are made, sometimes there is no advanced paramedic when there should be.

I recall last year a further reply from the HSE telling me that paramedics and advanced paramedics were the same thing, and that paramedics had been upskilled and could carry out duties similar to that of advanced paramedics. Of course, that simply is not true. Advanced paramedics can administer an additional 23 medications for acute emergency medical and traumatic conditions like a cardiac arrest. They are the only paramedics in the National Ambulance Service who provide the advanced life support that is needed quickly in very urgent cases.

We started with the use of a paramedic filling the AP roster and now, in the past week, it has been said that the rapid response vehicle – I have confirmed this with management in the National Ambulance Service – is being taken off the road in Roscommon on Thursdays, further downgrading that commitment and breaking that promise to the people of Roscommon. That shift had been filled by overtime. I understand it is a saving to the National Ambulance Service of about €350 a week. It is detrimental to the people of Roscommon should an urgent call come in and there is no advanced paramedic.

We have also had the situation in Roscommon where the air ambulance was relocated to Dublin in November arising from works in Athlone. It was due to come back in January. It is March now, and we are still waiting. I note the majority of calls for the air ambulance come from County Roscommon. We are without the advanced paramedic 24-7 cover, the promised rapid response vehicle and now the air ambulance.

I wish to make a point I have made a number of times in the House. I am concerned with the direction in which the National Ambulance Service is taking the service. It appears to be dismantling entirely the role of the advanced paramedic. It is the policy of the director to go in a different direction. It is looking at establishing something else, which is not even up and running yet. It has not been and is not training advanced paramedics anymore. It also has not been doing the privileging courses. We have about 14 or 15 people in the National Ambulance Service working as paramedics who are fully qualified APs but did not qualify here. The privileging course to make them APs and allow them to work here has been suspended. It is said it will be rolled out in May, but there is no guarantee they will manage to do a privileging course for 14 to 15 people, which is ridiculous.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: On behalf of Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, I thank Deputy Kerrane for the opportunity to update the House on the delivery of pre-hospital emergency care in County Roscommon and the important emergency response role delivered by our National Ambulance Service.

The National Ambulance Service serves the county of Roscommon out of three bases located in Roscommon, Boyle and Loughlinn, which all operate on a 24-7 basis. All three bases are staffed by a highly skilled workforce of pre-hospital emergency care practitioners, including paramedics, advanced paramedics and emergency medical technicians. In addition, the National Ambulance Service operates a fleet of modern emergency ambulances, intermediate care vehicles and rapid response vehicles from these bases. I acknowledge the engagement by the Deputy on the establishment of the national ambulance base in Loughlinn.

Ambulance resources in the Roscommon region are deployed by the National Ambulance Service dynamically in line with international best practice. This means the National Ambulance Service prioritises resource allocation to the highest acuity calls that require an immediate emergency response, in direct response to patient needs.

On the specific issue raised by Deputy Kerrane, I am informed that the National Ambulance Service currently operates two rosters at its Roscommon base. One is for the operation of a rapid response vehicle and the other for the emergency ambulances. The rapid response vehicle roster has four paramedic posts and, in February 2025, had two vacancies. I understand an offer has been made for one of these posts through the National Ambulance Service national transfer process and that options for the filling of the second post are being examined.

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The rapid response vehicle had been delivered in Roscommon through a combination of basic pay and overtime, but I understand that the rapid response vehicle is not currently rostered for daytime services on Thursday, which the Deputy alluded to. However, the National Ambulance Service operation of dynamic deployment means that Roscommon continues to be served by neighbouring National Ambulance Service bases for both emergency ambulance and rapid response vehicles.

As well as front-line urgent and emergency care, the National Ambulance Service is also a vital partner in the development and expansion of a range of clinically appropriate alternative care pathways to improve patient flow and reduce pressure on emergency departments. I particularly welcome two alternative care pathway developments in Roscommon in recent years involving the implementation of medical assessment unit and local injuries unit patient pathways for 112 and 999 patients. This means patients who are deemed clinically appropriate and do not require treatment in a busy hospital ED can be better looked after in an alternative care setting such as a medical assessment unit or a local injuries unit.

Patient demand for national ambulance services continues to rise, with nearly 430,000 urgent and emergency calls received last year, a year-on-year rise in volume of 8%. The further development and expansion of alternative care initiatives are vital, therefore, in transforming the delivery of urgent and emergency care, improving patient access to care and enhancing patient healthcare experiences and outcomes. I know the National Ambulance Service is committed to the continuing development of these alternative pathways.

I extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to the staff of the National Ambulance Service and to the staff of all our ambulance services for their commitment and dedication to patient care, both in County Roscommon and throughout the country.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: If patient demand for NAS services continues to rise, with nearly 430,000 urgent and emergency calls received last year, representing a year-on-year rise in volume of 8%, why then has the National Ambulance Service stopped training advanced paramedics? Why has it stopped the privileging courses? Fully qualified advanced paramedics who have trained elsewhere, some I understand in the Defence Forces, can only work as paramedics. That privileging course the National Ambulance Service eventually agreed to run in May of this year might not be able to manage the 14 or 15 people. How can it not run a course for 14 or 15 people and allow them to be advanced paramedics?

I am concerned about an acknowledgement that we have more urgent and emergency calls but the only paramedics in the National Ambulance Service who provide advanced life support are not being trained. They are not being respected or recognised either. In fact, I believe they are being dismantled entirely, and Roscommon is a case in point. Management keeps saying they cannot fill the roster in Roscommon. They will not fill it when they are not doing privileging courses and they are not training APs. I am also aware there are advanced paramedics in Roscommon willing to take up a full-time role on that roster but they are stopping themselves from doing it because they are constantly being pulled to cover. If someone became the AP on that roster, they are put off doing that because they are constantly being pulled to cover elsewhere.

10 o'clock

We need that roster in place and that decision needs to be reversed. We are not near an ac-

cident and emergency department. That is why we got the air ambulance, which is available but further away; it is based in Dublin. An AP can be the difference between life and death. I do not say that to scare people. It is the absolute reality. Nowhere in the Minister of State's response did he acknowledge that a commitment was made to the people of Roscommon and that commitment has been broken. I acknowledge the Minister of State's comments about Loughglynn, where I was lucky enough to be able to deliver a 24-7 service because the previous director Martin Dunne was excellent at engaging and doing what was right. That is also an issue now because we have no engagement at all, unfortunately, with the new director.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I note the points the Deputy raised in respect of Roscommon and the roster. There are currently two vacancies. I understand an offer has been made for one of the posts through the National Ambulance Service national transfer process and options for the filling of the second post are being examined. I have asked my Department to follow up on that issue with the NAS and to look at the particular issue of rostering for daytime services on a Thursday. I understand the needs of the people of Roscommon.

The Deputy raised other issues, including the AP courses. My Department will follow up with the HSE on that matter as well. She also referred to the air ambulance service, which was supposed to be in place in January. We will also follow up on that point. However, with respect to the key element the Deputy raised - the removal of 24-7 advanced paramedic cover in Roscommon - she is effectively speaking about the roster for daytime services on Thursdays. I have been led to understand that an offer has been made for one of the two vacant posts through the NAS transfer process and that the options for filling the second post are being examined. We will be following up with the NAS on those particular two vacant posts in the context of providing a roster for the daytime services on Thursdays.

Waste in Public Expenditure: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Michael Collins: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— overspending and waste within the public sector not only erodes trust in Government but also diverts resources from essential services; and

— as members of Dáil Éireann, and therefore custodians of the public purse, we have a duty to the people of Ireland to be committed to ensuring that taxpayers' money is managed responsibly, efficiently, and transparently;

acknowledges that there have been numerous ongoing failures by Governments past and present to properly manage cost control on Government funded projects, such as:

— the €808,000 Dáil printer scandal, where a printer was purchased but could not fit into the print room, leading to over €230,000 in modifications;

— the €725 million RTÉ bailout;

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- the Office of Public Works (OPW) Government Buildings security hut at a final cost of €1.43 million;

- the National Children’s Hospital overrun which has surpassed €2.5 billion;

- the €22 million on covid ventilators, that never worked, with another €50,000 spent on storing them;

- the €2.5 billion paid out in medical compensation over ten years, by the Health Service Executive;

- the OPW Leinster House bike shed at a cost of €336,000;

- the OPW Iveagh House refurbishment at a cost of €825,000;

- the National Transport Authority spend on Metro North, in the region of €300 million with nothing built;

- the OPW wall at the Workplace Relations Commission’s Dublin headquarters escalated from an initial estimate of €200,000 to over €490,000;

- the electric buses, that sat idle for a year and a half because there were no chargers;

- the €7 million by the Arts Council on an Information Technology system that has never been used;

- the National Gallery scanner, purchased at €120,000, but never used because no suitable room was found; and

calls on the Government to:

- acknowledge that the historical record indicates that there is systemic dysfunction across Government in public expenditure control and oversight;

- establish within the first year of this current Government, an Independent Watchdog for Government Spending; “The Department of Efficiency and Reform”:

- to be an independent entity recruited from the private sector, dedicated to monitoring and improving public sector spending;

- to operate similar to Revenue Commissioners or Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), with a regional scope, assigned to geographic areas;

- to appoint commissioners through a competitive tender process targeting qualified private professionals, such as private sector efficiency consultants, solicitors, auditors, accountants, actuaries, tasked to address procurement and tendering processes to streamline and improve efficiency with implementation of timelines and goals for delivery of projects, with powers codified in legislation and authority similar to HIQA’s inspection framework;

- to conduct unannounced audits and inspections of public bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations and agencies;

- to investigate waste, inefficiencies, or mismanagement of funds; and
- to issue recommendations or corrective measures, escalating unresolved issues to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

On behalf of Independent Ireland, I stand here to fully support this motion and demand action, not excuses. We did not come into politics to play the insider game. Independent Ireland stands outside the cosy circle where one party covers for the other and waste and scandal get buried under spin and public relations. We came into politics to fight for ordinary people, especially those in rural Ireland who are being bled dry by taxes and squeezed by rising costs while the Government wastes money hand over fist. Let us be crystal clear: waste is not only an issue of money; it is also about respect for the people who get up early, work hard and pay their taxes. They expect basic fairness in return, but what do they get? They get printer scandals and security huts that cost more than houses. It is a slap in the face to every hardworking family.

Speaking plainly, real people feel this waste every day. In west Cork and across rural Ireland, waste means cuts to rural services. It means people wait hours for ambulances because the money to fund proper ambulance cover has been wasted on golden contracts and vanity projects. It means elderly people are afraid to turn on the heat while the Government hands out contracts for IT systems that never get used. It means farmers are asked to jump through environmental hoops while the Department cannot even manage a tender process without doubling the cost.

Independent Ireland was founded to stop this nonsense, to stand up for the people who follow the rules and demand that the Government follow the rules too. This is a rotten culture of no accountability. A printer that could not fit in the room cost €808,000, but you cannot get a home help visit for a housebound pensioner in west Cork. It cost €725 million to bail out RTÉ, but try to get funding for a rural broadband scheme. A security hut cost €1.43 million. That is the price of multiple family homes in rural Ireland. The national children's hospital has cost €2.5 billion and counting. If any small builder ran a project like that, they would be in court, not in receipt of another cheque. They would probably be in jail to be quite honest. Some €22 million was wasted on ventilators that never worked and then €50,000 was paid to store them. That is waste on top of waste. Some €2.5 billion has been paid in medical compensation because the health service keeps getting it wrong, but instead of fixing the system, the Government budgets for the payouts. Some €336,000 was spent on a bike shed and we cannot get proper rural bus routes into our communities. Some €300 million has been spent on metro north with nothing built, yet rural roads crumble year after year. Electric buses were left idle for 18 months because no one thought about chargers - you could not make some of this up - and €7 million was spent on an Arts Council IT system that has never been used. That is not just incompetence; it is complete and utter disrespect.

Why does Independent Ireland stand for reform? This is not about the left or the right; it is about right and wrong. Independent Ireland stands for straight-talking common sense. Every cent wasted by the Government is stolen from essential services such as health, housing, rural transport and support for carers, farmers and fishermen. We were founded to break the culture of cover-ups and excuses, to force real accountability and put honest representation ahead of party loyalty. This motion calls for a Department of efficiency and reform. This is exactly the kind of practical, no-nonsense measure Independent Ireland stands for and what real oversight should look like. We need independent auditors, not political appointees. We need experts from the private sector, people who know how to run a business, manage costs and keep proj-

ects on time and on budget. This new watchdog should have real power, including the power to arrive unannounced, dig through the books and expose waste in real time. There should be no more soft reports, no more lessons learned. If waste is found, heads should roll and the public should know exactly who is responsible. Crucially, this body must be independent of Ministers and politics. Departments should not be investigating themselves any more. The public is not fooled by that any more.

I turn to fixing procurement, funding the golden circle. Procurement is a rigged game, a golden circle of insiders who know how to play the system. Tenders balloon from €200,000 to €500,000 and no one bats an eyelid. Independent Ireland demands a complete reset of public procurement with fixed price contracts, proper penalties for overruns and a ban on serial offenders getting further contracts. We need to treat public money like it is our own money, because that is transparency. Real time, real numbers. Every cent of public money should be traceable online in plain English for everyone to see. If you can track a package from China to Cork, you should be able to track where your tax money goes. Community groups when applying for €5,000 have to account for every biscuit. I am involved in 26 community groups. I know exactly the crises and problems they go through and the accountability they have to put before people. They have to account for every biscuit, but the Government can lose millions and no one bats an eyelid. They are the double standards we are here to end.

This motion matters because it is about restoring trust. That is the problem. The trust of the public is being broken. We ask why such a high percentage of people do not vote. The Government knows why they do not vote. They see this and they do not see accountability. They feel we are all dishonest. We are all tarred with one brush. The Irish people do not expect miracles. They expect basic competence and honesty. When Independent Ireland was founded, we said we would stand for accountability, respect for taxpayers and fairness for rural Ireland. This motion is about all three. It states that waste is not just bad management; it is a breach of trust. We have to rebuild that trust from the ground up. Independent Ireland's message to the Government is that if it opposes this motion, it will be defending waste, endorsing scandal and telling the people that waste is fine as long as it is not our money being wasted. However, it is your money and my money. It is the money of every worker, farmer, carer, pensioner and small business owner who pays taxes in good faith to the country. If the Government thinks that we in Independent Ireland will stand quietly by while the Government squanders it, it has another think coming. We need to stand with the people. This motion is a line in the sand. The Government should support it and show respect to the people who sent them here. If they vote it down, it will show nothing has changed and the insider still runs the show.

Independent Ireland stands with the people. We demand honesty, accountability and respect for taxpayers' money. Every TD in this Dáil knows of projects for which money is not available and yet the Government has spent €300 million on metro north, with nothing built. How many wastewater treatment plants would that have built? Councillor Daniel Sexton and I attended an Irish Water briefing last Thursday evening in west Cork in relation to a wastewater treatment plant for Dunmanway. I could have said Shannonvale, Goleen, Rosscarbery or Ballydehob, all of which have been waiting for 26 or 27 years for funding for wastewater treatment plants. It is astonishing. We were told they might have to wait until 2032, 2033 or even 2034. It is pie in the sky stuff. It will never happen and they know it now. The people of Dunmanway are rightly angered. They cannot build one house because there is no money for a wastewater treatment plant, but at the same time there is €300 million for a metro in Dublin with no metro on the line. There is €7 million for the Arts Council for IT but nothing for a wastewater treatment plant for

Dunmanway. What do I say to the people of Dunmanway who desperately want to develop their town and the surrounding area? They want to build an autism centre with CoAction and have funding for it but all of these projects could be in jeopardy because the State has wasted hard-earned taxpayers' money and let vital projects collapse because of this waste.

What would the Minister advise me to say to the Canty family who let RTÉ use a vital piece of ground to provide a television service to their community many years ago but who, to this day, have not received one brown cent? Since then RTÉ has erected several phone company masts on its own one in Rosscarbery, making a handsome profit for itself from another person's ground. I raised this issue with the previous Minister, who spent a number of years ducking and weaving and not giving credible answers. Today the Canty family can see quite clearly why they cannot get paid. It is because we have to keep €7 million for IT for the Arts Council, €825,000 for the refurbishment of Iveagh House, and €336,000 for a bike shed, the money for which could have built a lovely home for someone. There is all of this waste, with no accountability and no heads rolling, and still the Canty family will be left without a single cent or one bit of respect. Something here stinks to the high heavens. This has to end here and now.

What do I say to the 30 students in the greater Bantry area who are looking for a bus service to Schull Community College but are denied it, leaving their parents to drive back and forth on a 45-minute to one-hour journey each way every day? Do I tell them there is no money for the bus service the Minister keeps denying them when they tell me the children's hospital is costing between €2 and €3 billion and is running millions over budget? They will point out to me the €22 million wasted on Covid ventilators that were never used and the €120,000 for the National Gallery scanner. We have all of this unaccountable waste while these people are being denied a simple school bus. Something is wrong somewhere. I ask the Minister to support this motion today and to put the taxpayers, the hardworking people of this country, first.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I wish the Minister well in his new role but I want him to do something different. I also wish the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, and others well in their roles but I am asking them, as business people, to do one thing. There are some on the Government benches who are business people and I want them to make their Departments accountable. In saying that, I want to make them accountable for delivery. It is very simple. I have been in business all of my life. I am self-employed. If I make a mistake, I am accountable. Come the end of the month, if Revenue is not paid online, I am accountable. If VAT payments are not made, I am accountable. When Ministers go into their positions in Departments, they are often told they are welcome but that this is how things are done. That has to change now. I want Ministers to stand up to their Departments and tell them that they are in charge, that the Department is going to do things and deliver for this country. Things are not going to continue to be done the way they have been for years.

Let us look at Uisce Éireann and what it delivers for the money it is getting. It is not value for money. How do I know this? I know because I look at business plans across Europe and see other international companies delivering projects for half the price charged by Uisce Éireann. That is not accountability. That is a waste of funds. I look at Askeaton in County Limerick. Fianna Fáil promised 45 years ago that the wastewater treatment plant would be updated. A Fianna Fáil councillor said, on his election, that a wastewater treatment plant would be delivered in Limerick. I have said this to the Minister previously but he has not been listening. He is laughing now with the Minister beside him about the fact this has been brought up previously. I am talking about 45 years of disappointment from the Government. The Minister is new to the job. I urge him to stand up and be counted and get his Department to be accountable.

Let us look at the HSE in Limerick. In my first contribution in the Dáil I said the management in UHL was wrong. The management changed five years later. How many lives were lost because of bad management? It took the Government five years to correct it and now it is trying to rebuild. That is accountability. That is what I am talking about. People sniggering, laughing and chuckling because the Government has a majority in the Dáil is not acceptable. I will hold the Government to account in this Chamber and outside but I will also be respectful to the Government when it delivers. Delivery has to be in relation to Departments and the waste of funds.

Statistics show that there is an urban-rural divide when it comes to infrastructure which discriminates against young people who want to live in the area they grew up in, who want to see it grow and who want to see infrastructure like buses or a rail network being provided. They want basic infrastructure so that towns and villages can be rebuilt, can grow and can be repurposed. If we starve areas of infrastructure, they cannot grow. The Government wants to push everything into the cities which are already bursting at the seams. The Government is going to counties like Limerick looking for water to come to Dublin. It is projecting that it will cost €400 million to bring water to Dublin. I talked to representatives of Uisce Éireann recently. They said I should visit one of their plants in Dublin but I said they should come down and look at one in Limerick. The LDA was set up to deal with a site 15 minutes from Limerick city that takes out two thirds of County Limerick from infrastructure. Every town and village needs to have infrastructure. Departments need to be held accountable. If they make a mistake, they should be demoted, not promoted. They should not just be put to one side and told “listen lads, you’re okay, we’ll shove you over here”. The same business model that Revenue uses should be used in Departments. If people lose money, they must get out. They must be made accountable and never get into a position again where they can have funding at their fingertips and lose it. We want infrastructure delivered. We want to make sure there is accountability within the Departments and a body watching over every penny that is spent on behalf of every business person and every worker in this country who is paying for this Dáil today. That is what we want.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: Today I stand before the House representing the voice of the Irish taxpayer who is rightly appalled by the flagrant waste of public money on this and the previous Government’s watch. Where is the accountability? Where are the checks and balances in the public procurement process? The buck stops with the Minister and his Government. Today my party has shone a light on what is an embarrassing lack of fiscal responsibility. It has become the hallmark of this Administration and the previous one, in which the Minister also served.

In fairness, let us begin by recalling what was a good idea, namely, the €6 million spent on the setting up of Benefacts, which had a very short lifespan. It provided unprecedented transparency and oversight of non-profit funding. However, instead of building on the success of that, the Government chose to shut it down, investing a further €250,000 on the wind-up process. Why? It was because Benefacts dared to expose the wasteful practice that is rampant in the public sector. It allowed taxpayers to follow the money. It was a tool to enable Members of this House and the press to track where money was being spent. One thing we know for certain is that money is being spent on 372 quangos and 32,000 NGOs. That is one NGO for every 155 people in the State. The National Gallery of Ireland, for example, spent €125,000 on a scanner which was never to see the light of day because there was not a room suitable and it could not be accommodated. This is a stunning example of neglect and mismanagement, and a perfect example of two departments - procurement and facilities - not speaking to one another. Yet, nobody is to blame. In 2018 the Government purchased a printer in the Oireachtas for a whopping €800,000. This printer lay idle for ten months. It was another example of a purchase

not being fit for the building. In addition, €230,000 of taxpayers' money was spent modifying the building to accommodate the equipment. Yet, nobody is to blame. We must ask how many essential services could have been funded for that money. As we look out from Leinster House we cannot overlook the €366,000 spent on the bicycle shed. Yet, nobody is to blame. There was €1.4 million spent on a security hut, yet nobody is to blame. There was €250,000 spent on car charging points on the grounds of this House. Yet, nobody is to blame.

Am I the only one seeing a pattern here? Let us not even start with the €9 million spent on phone pouches or the €500,000 spent by the OPW on a perimeter wall. The OPW has now affectionately been coined a new name by the general public in the pubs, clubs, restaurants and bars and on the streets of Cork: the "office of public waste". Let us remember the Hill of Tara project, with €124,160 spent on that since 2014 yielding no results. Yet again, nobody is to blame. The Arts Council spent a staggering €6.7 million on an IT system, which was wasted. This taxpayers' money could have been spent on education, as my colleague said, or on infrastructure, healthcare, helping the elderly, helping communities and building more houses for the people that badly need them. Yet, nobody is to blame.

The additional insult is the national children's hospital project, the cost of which is now €2.2 billion to €2.5 billion and counting. This was meant to be developed for €800 million. This project has been mismanaged by the Minister's Government from the start. The Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, refused to take responsibility prior to the election, saying that although he signed the document he had nothing to do with it. Again, it is a prime example of somebody who had nobody to blame. The big question that is coming, and which the Government is deflecting, is this: how we will staff this hospital with the rents and the prices there? Who will work in this hospital?

Today I call on the Government to implement the necessary reforms of accountability in the public procurement processes. The Irish people deserve to know where their hard-earned money is going and how it is being spent. They need to have it tracked. We need to reopen a type of Benefacts that clearly provides comprehensive transparency and improves Government accountability.

The other thing I want to bring to the Minister's attention is that local authorities are not available to come before the Committee of Public Accounts. They must be answerable to the Committee of Public Accounts. For example, Cork City Council spent €400,000 on the restoration of a fireman's hut the size of a garden shed. It spent nearly €5,000 on scaffolding for a hut that is just a little bit taller than myself. It is ridiculous.

Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move amendment No.1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

— the Government condemns the waste of any public money and notes that significant sums have been spent on providing better public services in recent years with the additional funding allocated towards improving and expanding the public services provided to our people;

— Government expenditure has provided, and continues to provide, a robust

response to the challenges and needs facing the Irish nation, through continued investment, leadership, and value for money in the delivery of public services and important infrastructure projects with this investment making significant positive impacts, including:

- since 2021, completion of almost 53,000 new local authority scheme dwellings and delivery of hundreds of projects under the Rural and Urban Regeneration and Development Funds;

- significant reductions in outpatient waiting lists and improved health facilities, such as the National Forensic Mental Hospital in Portrane, hospital extensions and new primary care centres and community nursing units across the country;

- a reduction of approximately 48 per cent in the weighted average waiting time for outpatient appointments, down from just over 13 months in September 2021 to 6.8 months at the end of December 2024;

- cost barriers associated with healthcare being reduced through the abolition of inpatient charges, the introduction of the free contraception scheme, and the expansion of access to free general practitioner care to over 670,000 people, making healthcare more affordable for individuals and families;

- Ireland performing well on treatable and preventable causes of mortality and making significant improvements over the past decade, including reductions in the mortality rate for all cancers;

- Ireland being among a small group of seven European Union (EU) countries where life expectancy at birth is above 82;

- significant upgrades to Ireland's national road network and improvements to the public transport system, including BusConnects;

- high-quality cultural and sporting amenities delivered, such as the Sport Ireland Campus in Blanchardstown;

- continued progress under the National Broadband Plan, such that over 330,000 homes have now been passed and can avail of the high-quality connectivity offered by this plan;

- free schoolbooks Scheme; and

- early years childcare cost assistance to our families;

- all five budgets under the previous Government term successfully balanced the dual challenge of remaining responsive to economic and social developments, while seeking to ensure both value for money and fiscal sustainability of the public finances and this Government will continue to manage the demand for better public services and fiscal sustainability;

- Accounting Officers and accountable persons operate under high standards of administrative accountability that ensures value for money is achieved and

that this accountability is fundamental to good governance, which in turn is vital to ensuring trust in public administration;

— in carrying out their duties, Accounting Officers and accountable persons operate within a range of frameworks continually developed by the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in areas such as corporate governance, risk management, internal audit, infrastructure investment, current expenditure appraisal, standards in public office, freedom of information and financial reporting and that these frameworks have ensured both accountability and value for money through the huge expansion of public services over the last decade and have ensured that there has been and will continue to be a focus on value for money at the heart of expenditure decisions across the public sector;—

the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform will carry out a review of Public Financial Procedures with a view to further enhancing its accountability requirements in terms of providing value for money;

— over the last decade, the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform has led on the development of expenditure appraisal expertise across Government Departments through the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service, which provides a network of analysts across Government to review the effectiveness of policies and programmes and to make proposals for improvements;

— the Office of Government Procurement provides expert guidance and advice to public bodies as to the optimisation and efficiency of their procurement function, and to provide a clear understanding of compliance obligations with National and EU law in this complex function as well as continually working with stakeholders in the public and private sectors to develop more efficient and effective procurement procedures;

— the size of Ireland's public service and expenditure is lean and efficient and provides value for money when compared to many other states with a similar economic and social model;

further notes that:

— under Budget 2025, the Government continues to invest in important public services and provides value for money, including through the expansion of health services, increases in core social welfare allowances; increased investment in housing, expansion of the School Meals Scheme;

— investment in infrastructure is a critical component in supporting Ireland's growth and in delivering better, fit-for-purpose public services, and the increased capital spend in Budget 2025 continues the delivery of a NDP that is providing the vital infrastructure we need to support our future economic and social requirements, as well as our climate change commitments;

— the delivery of capital projects has been challenged by a number of significant factors in recent years, including the continued impact of construction inflation on projects, labour shortages, particularly in the construction sector, and

the ongoing delays in getting projects through the planning system;

— the Government has approved a number of priority actions to improve delivery of NDP projects, including the introduction of the Infrastructure Guidelines in December 2023, to reduce the administrative burden on Departments charged with infrastructure delivery, the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform also chairs the reconstituted Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board, which is charged with driving the delivery of the NDP, and these actions will boost the delivery of critical infrastructure in a sustainable and cost-effective manner, such as approximately 300 school building projects annually and Bus-Connects;

— the Office of Public Works has introduced new governance measures and revisions to project approval thresholds to ensure the Management Board has oversight and approval of all works above €200,000;

— the expansion of the mandatory Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies over the last decade and that it stipulates that ‘State bodies should serve the interests of Government as a shareholder, the taxpayer and all other stakeholders, and pursue value for money in their endeavours’, and that the Code is a critical framework for the application of best practice in corporate governance of both non-commercial and commercial public bodies under the aegis of Government Departments;

— international private sector internal audit standards are in effect across the Civil and Public Service bodies through their adoption of the Institute of Internal Auditors’, ‘2024 Global Internal Audit standards’ that came into effect worldwide on 9th January, 2025, and that the adoption of these standards ensures that Central Government’s internal audit framework is the same framework as for private sector entities, albeit with some clarifications pertaining to the different public sector governance arrangements; and

— the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform is currently rolling out a major financial reporting reform that is improving and modernising Central Government’s system of administrative accountability; and

acknowledges:

— the diligent, tenacious, and comprehensive investigations by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) and his staff in fulfilling his Constitutional duties and notes the high-quality of his annual Report on the Public Services based on his office’s investigations into economy and efficiency of public expenditure under section 9 of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993; and

— taking into account the governance frameworks already in place, ongoing work to make improvements in these frameworks, and the constitutionally independent oversight provided by the OCAG, there is no requirement for the establishment of a new body that would duplicate this work and that also would not have the same constitutionally independent and impartial role of the OCAG. “.

I thank the Deputies for tabling this motion. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the focus of achieving value for money across the public services provided by the State. The past five years have seen an unprecedented expansion in the investment and delivery of public services. The Government and I absolutely condemn the waste of any public money. I am deeply disappointed with some of the cases that have come to light in recent weeks and months. Those examples of waste are unacceptable.

The Government amendment sets out the many actions that are currently under way to strengthen the value-for-money component of the work undertaken by my Department and across government. I will speak to some of those actions today. Building up and improving public services for our growing population requires significant investment in infrastructure now and into the future. Government expenditure has provided, and continues to provide, a robust response to the challenges and needs facing the Irish nation through continued investment, leadership and value for money in the delivery of public services and important infrastructure projects. This investment is making significant positive impacts including: almost 53,000 new local authority scheme dwellings and the delivery of hundreds of projects under the rural and urban regeneration and development funds; significant reductions in outpatient waiting lists and improved health facilities such as hospital extensions, new primary care centres and community nursing units across the country; the abolition of inpatient charges, the introduction of the free contraception scheme and the expansion of access to free GP care to more than 670,000 people; significant upgrades to Ireland's national road network and improvements to the public transport system; continued progress under the national broadband plan such that over 330,000 homes have now been passed by fibre; the free schoolbook scheme; and the early years child-care cost assistance to our families. There are also many more areas where there have been interventions, investment and support, and improvement in public services.

It is unfair that the Deputies have not reflected and acknowledged that a lot of the investment that is being made is having a positive impact in communities. It is having a positive impact for the people the Deputies represent.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: But it is not coming in on budget. It is not coming in on budget.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I can reference, for example, the sports capital programme and many other areas of capital investment that are valued by the Deputies in areas for which they advocate. The motion is not balanced in the context of the significant investment and impact that is being made in public services. I acknowledge the work and the dedication of many public and civil servants across the system who are helping to support all of the broader objectives in achieving these milestones. I recognise the work they do every day to try to achieve value for money across our public services.

The Government has in place a range of oversight mechanisms pertaining to public expenditure. I would like to put examples of these frameworks on the Dáil record this morning. They include the various budgetary processes and reforms which are in place to support oversight in the delivery of policy; guidelines, such as the recently reformed national infrastructure guidelines; the public spending code for current expenditure; the code of practice of the governance of State bodies; public financial procedures; public procurement guidelines; arrangements for oversight of digital and IT projects and initiatives; and internal and external audit processes that provide validation of public expenditure. It is the legal responsibility of Departments to ensure that they, and the bodies under their aegis, comply with the governance and value-for-money principles and requirements, as their annual sanction to spend public money stipulates

that Departments and Accounting Officers must have in place appropriate measures to operate in full compliance.

The public financial procedures set out the rules and underpinning legal framework for the appropriate use of public money. They are based on the Constitution and legislation as well as the institutional and financial relationships between the Oireachtas, the Government, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform. The detailed procedures of this framework are required to be observed by Government Departments in their consumption of public funds to provide public services and develop the capital infrastructure of our country. I would like to inform the House that my Department will carry out a full review of public financial procedures. This review will specifically examine the accountability requirements in terms of providing value for money.

I want to be very clear that it is my view and the view of everyone in the Government that there simply has to be accountability and value for money for State spending, especially where there are specific questions over value for money considerations. Accountability must permeate through every level of the public service, including State agencies. Reviewing the public financial procedures is an effective way of ensuring this and the review will inform whatever steps are required in this regard.

I also would like to bring to the attention of the House the work of my Department in the recent introduction of the updated 2024 internal audit standards, as well as the financial reporting reform for the Civil Service, as evidence that this Government and my Department continue to raise accountability standards in the public service using best international practice. This is how these have been developed in the context of global standards. These rules are required to be adhered to by all public bodies. The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General relies on and refers to these frameworks during its investigations and cites them in its reports, particularly such frameworks as the code of practice for the governance of State bodies and the public financial procedures. Furthermore, Article 33 of the Constitution establishes the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which is a key institution in the checks and balances of our democracy. It continues to serve the State well and its reports are considered and held in high regard by the Committee of Public Accounts. Taking into account the governance frameworks already in place, ongoing work to make improvements in these frameworks, and the constitutionally independent oversight provided by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, there is no requirement for the establishment of a new body that would duplicate the important work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and that would not have the same constitutionally independent and impartial role of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Government has put in place frameworks to ensure that value for money is achieved and my Department actively continues to develop these frameworks in the areas of governance, accountability and public expenditure management. Budget 2025 is continuing to deliver improvements and expansion across our public services for our growing population, continuing to invest in our young people and prioritising the need to address our infrastructure gap in the economy. We are committed to delivering value for money in the roll-out of new services as well as in the execution of the national development plan that provides housing, public transport, strong and reliable public utilities, healthcare and schools now and for the future. The ambition of this Government is to support the delivery of the right public services and infrastructure in a manner that provides value for money.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “notes that:” and substitute the following:

“— there needs to be a disciplinary process for senior civil servants for instances of repeated waste of public funds;

— accountability needs to be written into the contracts of senior civil servants; and

— there should be a Minister of State for Accountability, nominated and located within the Department of the Taoiseach, to track live procurement and infrastructural projects to ensure they do not go over budget and are delivered on time, to report to the Taoiseach on a weekly basis in terms of accountability.”.

I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this motion. Waste in government has been a major issue for Aontú in recent years. Waste and the lack of Government accountability is one of the most important issues facing the Dáil over the last five to ten years. There is no doubt. Aontú has made it our goal to cut Government waste and to create efficiency in the delivery of public services and public infrastructure. We will not stop until we achieve that.

This is one of the most useless and inefficient Governments in the history of the State in terms of minding the public purse. It is a Government that is allergic to accountability. The Minister for Finance talks about accountability. The Government does not know what accountability means. It thinks accountability is that the Minister comes in here and speaks in measured tones and shock about the latest example of millions of euro lost in an investment or it may even have a committee meeting to look into it and then it moves on to the next situation. That is not accountability. If we continue on this route we will continue to wake up morning after morning to the latest iteration of Government waste and millions or billions of euro.

To show the incompetency of this Government, we are 100 days after the election. Where are the committees? No committees have yet been formed in this Legislature. All week we are having statements on housing, health and justice. We are putting in the time because the Legislature cannot even legislate. We cannot bring legislation through the Dáil given the incompetency of the Government. The democratic legislation system is grinding to a halt. The first responsibility of this Government, to legislate for the country, is not happening at the moment because 100 days after the election we cannot even get it together. I could easily spend the next ten minutes rhyming off all the examples of Government waste from the Gucci bicycle shed to the National Children’s Hospital and the Government spending €2.5 billion on compensation for mistakes that happened in hospitals over the last ten years. There is a never-ending supply of this. Unfortunately, there is not even enough embarrassment on Government faces over these issues to make a change. It is having a significant effect on Irish society in several ways. First, the Government is incinerating billions of euro of taxpayers’ money. A large portion of the taxes the Government takes from the men and women who get up early in the morning and burst themselves, who commute two and three hours a day and work hard to get home to their families and spend half an hour with their kids before they go to bed are being incinerated by the Government in terms of waste.

The other aspect of Government incompetency and uselessness is how so many infrastructural projects are grinding to a halt. The National Children’s Hospital was meant to be open in 2020 at a cost of €700 million, save an asteroid hitting the planet. So said Leo Varadkar. This Government has proved to be more damaging than even an asteroid hitting the planet because

here we are in 2025 without even a date for the opening of that children's hospital and the cost is heading towards €2.5 billion.

I will tell the Minister what accountability is, if he will just listen and stop looking at his mobile phone for two seconds. Accountability happens in the real world. There are hundreds of thousands of people who work in the tens of thousands of small businesses around the country. If they do not do their jobs properly and reach a standard or if they continue to waste money or have a situation where they burn through their business's money, there will be a cost to them. That cost might be a disciplinary procedure, moving sideways or a lack of promotion or it could be losing their job. However, nobody ever loses their job at the top ends of the Civil Service no matter how much money they lose and nothing will change until that changes.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Deputy Tóibín did not want to give too many examples but it is important to keep ramming the examples home. Just over the past three years, there have been several instances which have highlighted concerns regarding the mismanagement and waste of public funds by the Irish Government bodies and agencies. There was a seven-year inquiry into NAMA's €1.6 billion Project Eagle which resulted in €14.4 million being spent primarily on legal fees and administrative costs. The new X-ray scanner at the National Gallery cost €124,000 and the Arts Council's failed IT system cost €6.675 million. We had the OPW overpriced bike shed construction, the €7,000 retirement party expenses and the Office of Public Works €1.4 million security hut. Need I say more? We had a debate recently on the need for the Road Safety Authority to have a structural overhaul. The reason for that is because of massive inefficiencies and mismanagement in the agency which is costing the taxpayer money. There is also mismanagement in the HSE. The HSE has faced multiple instances where projects were delayed or went over budget which impacted service delivery. Obviously, there have to be agency nurses but we have seen an over-reliance on agency staff in administration. It is not good economics. It is not very efficient. There has been delayed utilisation of medical equipment worth millions. It remains unused due to infrastructural delays reflecting poor planning and resource management. There have been overruns in public housing projects. Several projects exceeded budgets by millions. Inefficient public transportation investment and funds allocated for transportation projects were under-utilised and mismanaged leading to increased congestion and annoyance to the public. There is a strike today which is affecting my constituency of Dublin Mid West which has left thousands stranded because the buses did not turn up. That was because of dissatisfaction over how the bus service is operating. There were 300 electric buses which could have saved a fortune in fuel left idle because of gross ineptitude and bureaucratic incompetence. School construction projects frequently exceed budgets. I was listening to the "Path to Power" podcast and heard of where schools were going to put in 12 solar panels. That should be much more. Schools should be multi-use facilities so there can be a pre-school on site and rooms which can be used in the evening. I called that integrated public partnership 20 years ago. We are wasting school buildings. We should be feeding that solar panel energy back to the grid rather than adding to our costs.

Also on costs there has been the delayed implementation of the digital government e-services. Then there is the over-expansion of consultancy contracts with the excessive reliance on external consultants leading to inflated costs. The mismanagement of subsidy programmes leading to the unequal distribution of funds and a minimal impact on agricultural development. The big one that came out yesterday was the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the climate change body report that said we would get between €8 billion and €26 billion in fines for not investing in areas that can save people money, protect our environment and do our bit on climate

change. It is a no-brainer to put in that investment, but instead we are hoping the EU will go lax and that we will not have to pay those fines. We will have to pay something. In six years' time, are we going to be saying this was another example of gross Government ineptitude? We need to invest in water to provide housing and in housing itself to avoid costing people a lot more in inflated rents.

On the contracts for construction, consistently in this country we have no checks and balances for companies that are considered dodgy and that do shoddy work and end up costing the taxpayer more over a period. BAM, for example, has had massive cost overruns with the children's hospital but it had issues with schools in the past. Why should a company that has been shown not to adhere to best practice then be awarded a contract because it has given the cheapest tender? We know the cheapest is not always the best quality or the best way to spend public money. We should be going down like a hammer on all these contracts to make sure they are delivering proper value for money.

The Wombles preschool in Scoil Mhuire, Airlie Heights, is facing closure because the Government is putting in an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit, which is welcome, but the reason the Government is putting it in is that it is not opening the other schools that should be opened. We are talking about 66 childcare places going nowhere else. That is going to cost the State a fortune down the line to try to find alternatives. We need to think smarter.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this motion, which speaks to the real and justified anger that is out there. It is anger at the blatant waste of people's money by this Government and the previous one. In the dying days of the latter, we had a constant drip feed of shocking levels of wasted money, such as €336,000 on a bike shed, €1.4 million on a security hut, €9 million on phone pouches and the biggest one of all, €1.5 billion on a children's hospital. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have become synonymous with the waste of public money. When we talk about €1.4 million on a security hut or more than €300,000 for a bike shed at the back of this building, we are talking about people's money, which they have paid in through taxes and which they entrust to the Government to spend in their best interest and that of this State.

At the same time, while people see this blatant waste of money, they are looking at their children waiting for an assessment of need, at their older parents waiting on hospital trolleys or at carers in their community struggling just to get by. It is clear from people that enough is enough when it comes to this kind of wastage of public money. The public deserve to know the extent to which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are burning through their money and what it is being spent on.

The waste of money, however, is not just about the money itself that has been wasted. It is also about the opportunity cost. When we look at the bike shed we have to pass at the back of this building, which cost well over €300,000, I think about the fact it would cost €300,000 to deliver an ambulance on Inis Oírr. Is rud fíorbhunúsach é go mbeadh otharcharr ag ceantar, ach níl otharcharr ar Inis Oírr. Chosnódh sé sin €300,000. Bhí costas €336,000 ar an bike shed. Tá sé scannalach an bealach a bhfuil Fianna Fáil is Fine Gael ag caitheamh le hairgead na ndaoine. Caithfear athrú a dhéanamh ar an gceist sin láithreach. Teastaíonn otharcharr ó Inis Oírr láithreach.

For most people, the real worry is that this is just the tip of the iceberg and that we do not really know what is going on. Is it just because an investigative journalist puts in a freedom of

information, FOI, request and tells us what is happening that we discover it? What we need to hear from the Opposition, as we have done today, but also from the Government, is what exactly we can do to stop this waste of money. First, we in Sinn Féin have said there needs to be a full audit, completely and utterly transparent across Departments and State agencies, in order that we can get under the bonnet of the scandalous waste of money under the watch of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Second, we need to look at how public money is spent in the procurement process. It is absolutely obvious that we should have data on how our money is being spent. I brought forward a Bill in the previous Dáil, which I will reintroduce in this Dáil, called the Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill. It will create greater transparency, oversight and accountability in procurement spending in order that the Minister will know exactly what is happening to the public money that is being spent but also that the public will know how it is spent. The data will be used to look at the type of procurement procedures used and the performance of the contractor, as we heard in the context of contractors, including details on cost overruns, information on non-compliant expenditure, the use and type of social clauses in contracts, which are so important, and details on contracts awarded to small and medium sized enterprises. This will allow contracting authorities to see what has worked well, because obviously plenty of spending works well and we need to see that, but we also need to see what does not work well. The Bill makes sense and I hope the Minister will be able to support it when I bring it forward.

The third thing we need to do is reform the freedom of information process. There has been some reform but we need far more such that it will not be the case that an investigative journalist puts in an FOI request, is refused and submits an appeal that is then granted. If that happens, what we should do is reimburse the sum that was spent on the appeal. Again, I will bring forward legislation on freedom of information, but this motion is about the scandalous waste of money and we need to do something about that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There was €4,500 for the door, €13,200 for the plinth and steps and €141,000 for site works. You would think we were talking about building a mansion, but instead we are talking about fixing up a small fireman's hut in Cork City Council. A total of €361,000 has been spent on repairing this hut and it is not finished yet. I have spoken to contractors about this and they told me these prices are exorbitant. They said it is unbelievable the sums that have been spent and wasted. The hut is 8 ft high and the scaffolding to put around it costs nearly €5,000. This came from money that had been set aside for the decade of centenaries to commemorate our history and educate people about it. It was intended to commemorate and remember the Kilmichael ambush and Tom Barry, Tomás Mac Curtain, Terence and Mary MacSwiney, the Delaney brothers, the Ballycannon boys and so on, but instead it was siphoned off for this fireman's hut. Now Cork has a glorified shed. It is an insult to their memory but it is an even bigger insult to ordinary people who are struggling every day with the cost of living.

The Government is going to blame Cork City Council, the OPW, the National Gallery, RTÉ and the Arts Council, but the buck stops with the Government. It is in charge and it is allowing this unbelievable waste of money. The first item of legislation it passed when it got into the Dáil gave expenses to Ministers of State across the board. That was the Government's priority. As another example, in Cork, a total of €335,000 was spent on robot trees. It is unbelievable. Another €20,000 is being spent to maintain them. They are glorified seats and benches. There is no accountability. Who is being taken to task? Who is explaining how this happened? More important, who is going to say it will never happen again?

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are so out of touch. Last week, figures on homelessness were released. There were 10,683 people homeless, including 4,603 children. The Government is wasting millions while people are stuck in emergency accommodation. On Saturday, there will be a march in Cork for parents whose children do not have school places in special classes or ASD units. How can the Government explain the waste to those parents? Their children have nowhere to go in September. They are crying out for help and all the Government wants to do is give more Ministers of State more expenses and waste our money.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Other Deputies have outlined the level of waste of public money on various projects, such as the national children's hospital, the Dáil printer that did not fit into a room, the art scanner that was bought for €125,000 without anyone thinking about where to put it, the bike shelter, the security hut and so on. The list of these projects goes on.

What drives people mad is that there are local projects desperately looking for funding to stay open or enhance their services. Last week I raised the issue of the Blanchardstown Centre for Independent Living. Its funding has increased by just €2,000 since 2018 despite the number of people looked after there trebling. The Genesis counselling service could provide an extra 4,000 hours of counselling in Dublin 15 for €200,000. Imagine that. That is value for money in my eyes. When we talk about value for money, the Departments that scrutinise community projects should learn from them and share with those who are wasting millions of euro the experience of how community projects are well-run on a shoestring, providing genuine value for money.

Today, many TDs will raise the issue of the money that has been spent but I want to look at an issue brought up by An Taisce with regard to MetroLink and the Tara Street section of that project. The Markievicz leisure centre, located close to here, is home to the only remaining swimming pool in the south inner city. An apartment block named College Gate will also be demolished during this project. Reports have estimated it will cost up to €60 million extra to buy and demolish those apartments and relocate their occupants. As we stand here now, that will cost €60 million extra compared with a cut and cover tunnel. There are different methods that can be used but the choice that has been made is to knock down the apartments and relocate them. We are in the middle of a housing crisis and the cost of housing has gone up year on year. The figure of €60 million is the estimated cost today. Imagine what the cost will be in five or ten years' time if the MetroLink project is ever started. I urge the Minister of State to look at this project and its funding, and the Tara Street section in particular. We do not to be standing here in three, five or six years' time saying, "My God, what an absolutely shocking waste of money." Being forewarned and forearmed, I do not think we want to see that waste of money here.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this very important motion. The staggering list of financial mismanagement across multiple Government Departments and agencies is downright disgraceful. I think the Minister of State will agree with me on this. We can give him all kinds of examples. People are really angry. They know the cases being made public are only the tiniest tip of the iceberg. We all know of the other cases. The cases that have been made public include: the €9 million mobile phone pouch project; the €360,000 bike rack; the OPW wall; relentless overspending on the national children's hospital; modular homes with a price tag of €442,000; and the scanner from the National Gallery that cost €125,000. They are only a tiny portion of the absolute waste of public money. Is it any wonder that what we hear most from people is that this Government is a shower of wasters? I do not say that in a derogatory way but the waste of taxpayers' hard-earned money is absolutely disgraceful.

I refer to the lack of transparency and the hiding behind commercial sensitivity. Going back to JobPath, we spent years trying to find out about the original contracts that were given. We were told we would not be allowed to see them because they were commercially sensitive. That is not good enough and it has to stop. Looking at that instance, there was also the displacement of the services that were already there. The local employment services were displaced by JobPath. It makes no sense whatsoever. People are not stupid.

We heard the Department of Social Protection was spending €1.4 million per week on IT consultancy. That is one Department. What is the total cost? What is going on in our Civil Service and our public service and who is in charge? I thought the Department of public expenditure had a grip on this. I was previously Sinn Féin spokesperson on public and expenditure and reform. Deputy Farrell now holds that portfolio. I was absolutely shocked at the lack of oversight, and I remain shocked by it. Deputy Farrell has put forward a number of solutions, as Sinn Féin has done continuously, for how all of this can be tackled.

In the few seconds I have remaining, I want to talk about contracting out and consultancy. This country is being run by consultants. That is how Government policy is made - by consultants. That has to stop. We have to bring that expertise into Government to make it properly accountable.

We can contrast the overspending and waste of money with people being scrutinised to within an inch of their lives and sometimes being scrutinised beyond the grave in trying to get every cent back from them. There is an inherent unfairness within the system and it has to be put right.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Government needs to simply stop wasting public money. It is as simple as that. What hurts people the most is that they know that money could be spent on things that would really benefit them. For example, the €9 million spent on mobile phone pouches, which were spun as being a mental health support, could have been spent in schools on face-to-face mental health supports that children really need. There is a lack of those supports in the country at the moment.

We have seen other examples, such as the never-ending amount of money being spent on the children's hospital. How can a project go €1 billion over budget? There will have to be a tribunal on this in future. There was €336,000 spent on a bike shed and €1.4 million on a security hut. The list goes on and on. What we have seen from successive Governments is the mismanagement of public money. This money belongs to our communities and our people and could be invested in our local areas.

In my own area there are local services on their knees. I was at a meeting last night with a local horse project that is on its knees trying to keep its operation going. This money could be spent on something like that. My community knows the value of a euro and it is an insult that the Government does not. Who is being held to account? I have not seen anyone being held to account.

I will raise an issue that has not received much attention. Does the Minister of State know how much the HSE gets fined for not paying its bills on time? Every time the HSE does not pay a bill on time - it could be for cleaning products or toilet rolls or something as simple that - it is fined. In the past two years the HSE has been fined €4.3 million for not paying its bills on time. We have seen embargoes in the health service, the lack of recruitment and the lack of

investment, and this is €4.3 million that was not spent on anything.

Before the Minister of State came into the Chamber, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, spoke about value for money and accountability. Who is accountable for this? Who is responsible for this dereliction of duty? Who is responsible for this waste of public money? It stops with the Government. It stops with the Minister of State. The Government has created a culture of wasting public money. Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and the Independents in government are now responsible for this. With each scandal the public's confidence goes down. The public is losing respect for public representatives. Sinn Féin will restore this respect and confidence. Deputy Farrell outlined a number of measures we will bring in to have accountability and transparency when it comes to spending public money. We need those measures to be implemented as soon as possible.

Deputy Pa Daly: Tá an Rialtas ag magadh faoi na ndaoine, ag cruthú scannail i ndiaidh scannail agus ag cur ár gcuid airgid amú. The sense of anger and frustration felt by people is palpable but the disillusionment and apathy is more worrying as they see their hard-earned money and public money going down the drain. Despite the promises made at election time, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the rural Independent TDs have shown no intention of reversing the culture of waste and incompetence. Despite expressing horror and outrage at the cost of the bike sheds and having serious questions about the millions of euro spent on mobile phone pouches and the Arts Council money, these same TDs have now gone very quiet as more and more scandals arise.

I wonder whether the outrageous waste of public money is one of the reasons the Government-supporting rural Independent TDs remain so steadfastly determined to keep up the charade of being in opposition in order that they can wash their hands of these public scandals. The list of scandalous wastes of money is as long as your arm yet nobody, not a single person, has been held to account. Where are the checks and balances? Unsurprisingly, the Government has repeatedly attempted to shirk responsibility and blame somebody else, but the responsibility lies squarely with the Government. It is about much more than a waste of taxpayer's money.

11 o'clock

It is about all the projects not progressed because there was not enough money in the pot. Think of all the schools that could have been built or the Garda stations that could have been kept open. Think, for example, of the money needed for the refurbishment of the courthouse in Tralee, which is vital for the town centre. In University Hospital Kerry, elective surgeries have not taken place since 19 December because the emergency room is overwhelmed and there are not enough beds in the hospital. The hospital needs another modular day unit and a minor injuries clinic. Instead, the Government would rather focus on purchasing scanners that lie idle while sick people are left on waiting lists for months and sometimes years.

Unlike the Government, Sinn Féin has a plan and the political will to get to grips with the issue. We would urgently conduct a waste audit of all Departments and State bodies. People deserve to know how their money is being spent or how it is being squandered. Sinn Féin would reform and expand the Freedom of Information Act so the public could more easily track how the Government is directing taxpayers' money. We have called for new legislation for transparency and procurement and to regulate tenders to stop massive cost overruns in capital projects. The scandalous waste of public money must stop. I therefore urge the Government to support and adopt Sinn Féin's proposals. I thank the Independent Group for tabling the motion.

Deputy Ged Nash: I, too, thank the Independent Group-----

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland.

Deputy Ged Nash: -----for tabling this motion. It is not appropriate that we merely have discussions on Government expenditure occasionally when an Opposition group tables a motion. This matter must concern us all the time if we as a Parliament are doing our job responsibly and effectively.

There is no need for me to rehearse the various overspends on OPW and other projects that have been interrogated to death in the media and on the floor of the House in recent weeks and which have led to this motion. I know from experience and the Minister of State knows very well from his experience that the OPW is a proud organisation with a long track record of achievement throughout the history of this State. I, for one, do not want to see the OPW, given the value of the work it and its staff do, become a watchword for waste and inefficiency. There has been a fair degree of opportunism displayed in this House and elsewhere in recent times in respect of various headline-grabbing projects, but that does not mean criticism and critique are not warranted or that these overspends do not need to be addressed and debated. On the contrary, the public has a right to feel Departments and State bodies always treat public money with respect and ensure value for money.

We are all well aware of the degree of public disquiet over this issue. In recent weeks, we had a national Sunday newspaper outline a litany of what it described as overspends on OPW projects. The Dáil bike shed on steroids is how the *Irish Mail on Sunday* framed a series of projects costing, it says, €50 million that failed to comply with the State's procurement rules. The Minister of State was quoted in that article as saying he wanted to rebuild the brand of the OPW. He has a job on his hands and I wish him well because the hard-working people of the OPW do not deserve to become a byword for waste in the media or in this House. This is not just a people problem; it is a process problem. The processes by which the State and its agencies go about capital spending clearly need an overhaul. This is where our focus needs to be, instead of demanding heads on plates like some people on these benches will inevitably try to do.

We were all out knocking on doors a few weeks ago and there is nobody in this House who did not have a constituent raise with them the bike shed or the security pavilion when we were canvassing. Few things irritate members of the public more than the feeling their money is being wasted on trinkets or lost through bad practice. It is up to the new Government to get to grips with this issue quickly. All of us in the political system have responsibility to do that. Heads rolling without processes changing leaves us nowhere. There must be a root-and-branch examination of how Government spends money, particularly at a time when there is a lot of money to spend. At a time when coffers are full, the potential for waste is at its highest and the Government must be at its most vigilant. Unfortunately, we only seem to do reform and be interested in reform in this country in the context of a crisis. We should always be vigilant about the spending of public money and focused on transparency in decision-making, responsibility and accountability, not just at a time of fiscal crisis.

A number of weeks ago I had an exchange with the Minister of State on the floor of the House during oral questions. We had an engagement on oversight and governance of OPW projects. The Minister of State mentioned some changes he was initiating with his officials. I welcomed this move at the time. He referred to the term "guidance" and said new guidance would be issued for the spending and management of projects. I would rather talk of rules,

regulations and compliance than of guidance, which, for too many people, sounds woolly.

I would rather talk, as well, of culture shifts in institutions and real accountability and making that happen. The way we do accountability in this country is not acceptable in this day and age. It needs to be modernised. The idea a Minister is accountable, literally, for every box of paper clips his or her Department uses is fanciful and outrageous. What we need is wholesale reform of the anachronistic Ministers and Secretaries Act and changes to the Carltona doctrine to usher in a modern form of governance and ensure those actually making decisions are made accountable. That is a modern form of accountability. The kind of accountability we do in this House, where hard-working public servants, some of whom may make mistakes, are hauled in front of the Committee of Public Accounts or the line committee for their Department, made an example of and publicly humiliated, is not accountability. Nothing changes. There is an innate unfairness there. That is not to say that if we ascribe more responsibility to civil servants and expect them to put their hands up and acknowledge mistakes, we are letting a Minister off the hook. There needs to be a proper balance and a modern form of accountability that makes sense in 21st century Ireland, not in the 1920s.

In recent weeks, overspend stories from the Arts Council and the National Gallery have dominated the headlines, but these are symptomatic of a wider problem across the system. This motion suggests there is a systematic dysfunction across government in public expenditure control. It is a very generalised and sweeping statement. I do not believe that is the case at all. There are some egregious examples that point to serious problems but fixing those problems should not be beyond us.

A solution proposed by the motion is the establishment of an independent watchdog for Government spending. I have no objection in principle to exploring this but I have some concerns. Arguably, if the Department of public expenditure and reform, the Office of Government Procurement and the relevant individuals and divisions in Departments and agencies were doing their job properly, we would not be discussing this at all. We would not need that kind of suggestion. The solution is there already. There is oversight of this kind built into our system and my question to the movers of the motion is this: who would watch the watchdog? Would it be accountable to the Dáil? We are the people who hold Departments, Ministers and officials to account, and that is a principle we need to protect. We do not want this new body to become some kind of Musk-inspired DOGE-like entity that sees the solution to every spending problem in the firing of the nearest available public servant. That will create more problems than it will solve. The danger here is that this is often viewed through the lens of an anti-public service and anti-public sector reactionary agenda. That should not be the case. With that said, it is a fact we do not do accountability properly in this country, and this has been shown in the way issues around overspends and lack of compliance have been handled to date.

If we were in any doubt whatsoever about this Government's allergy to accountability, we need only have watched the election campaign debates. On one occasion our new Tánaiste, then Taoiseach, who was once our Minister for Health, tried to distance himself from by far the greatest overspend in the Government's budget, which is the money-eating national children's hospital. I was amused to hear the Tánaiste opine last week on the issue of the X-ray machine in the National Gallery. He said he was furious. Somebody needs to remind him of the role he played in signing off on the national children's hospital initiative and the lack of oversight there.

I say to the movers of the motion that if they look at the make-up of the board of the national children's hospital, there is probably a majority of people from high-profile business

backgrounds on that board. That is something worth mentioning. Some of the same people who said back in the 2000s that we should have Michael O’Leary as Minister for Transport and Seán FitzPatrick as Minister for Finance are the same people saying that business has the solution to all of our oversight and governance problems. It does not. There is certainly expertise in the business community that could be introduced to the public sector, and that has happened, to help us do things better, but it is not a panacea for all our ills.

In the context of my response and that of the Labour Party to this motion, I do not want to feed into any kind of anti-public sector agenda that is out there. I would be the last person to do that. Ultimately, if we are to protect the hard-working public servants in these State bodies, we have to give them the systems and tools to allow them to deliver their work in a way that is efficient and gives not only value for money but also great service to the public, as most people in the public sector do and strive to do every day. That is something that everyone in this House should strive to do. I am not interested at all in going down a cul-de-sac as part of a blame game, but we clearly have a problem here, so let us work together to fix it once and for all.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this motion. While there are elements of it that I also do not agree with, it is an important topic to discuss. I will call out those components of it that I have an issue with, particularly the idea of an Irish version of the DOGE. I do not think that is an appropriate way to go forward. Nor do I appreciate the condemnation of NGOs when NGOs in this country provide a crucial service in areas where I believe the State should be stepping in to provide those services.

Before I go into detail on some examples of Government waste and solutions we put forward as Social Democrats, I want to talk about social democracy. In a modern social democratic country with a modern governance system, what we have is a system where we pay our taxes and, in return, receive quality public services such as housing, healthcare, education, childcare and disability services, all of which create a floor in society below which we cannot fall. It provides confidence in the public that their taxes are being spent in ways that benefit them. In this country, unfortunately, we have a disconnect because people are paying their taxes and are not getting in return the public services they expect. Instead, we hear report after report of Government spending that is resulting in waste, and people are frustrated at this stage that their tax money is not going in the right direction.

I have a theory about this. As proponents of social democracy and as people who believe in a progressive left governance model for this country, we are concerned about that issue of public spending. Perhaps it is the Government’s own ideological underpinning, however, which defaults to the private sector and relies heavily on the market, that means it is not as concerned about public spending. It has been pushed into a system of increasing public spending over the past decade because of the windfalls we have seen, the public pressure it is under, and the shortfall in those public services. Unfortunately, without that belief in State reach into public spending, we are seeing waste manifest again and again.

I will get into some examples, and of course there is a litany of them. Gach cúpla mí bíonn scéal eile sna nuachtáin faoi na milliúin curtha amú. I will touch on some of them, starting with the Arts Council most recently. I feel this is a particular example where, for reasons of cybersecurity, cost, upskilling and that we have a talent pool in this country when it comes to IT and cyber skills, we actually should be insourcing rather than outsourcing our IT procurement across the public sector. I will also touch on RTÉ. When we saw the issues there, one of the things most affected has been workers’ rights within RTÉ. That is something we are really

concerned about as a party. Then there is the national children's hospital, which has been raised many times already this morning.

One thing I will call out within that is that, even when we know there is overspend, there does not seem to be any ability to pull back on that. Even when it is being identified, we are not seeing the steps required to address it. Let us run through a short timeline, a whistle-stop tour of what happened. In 2016, BAM was initially awarded the contract. In 2017, a year later, the first concerns were raised about cost overruns, but nothing essentially changed. In 2019, two separate Oireachtas committees investigated the overspend and, yet again, nothing changed. In 2022, our current Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, declared that the hospital was 80% complete, and yet it is still not open. That is at the cost of €2.2 billion. There does not seem to be any ability in real time to learn or to rectify the systems allowing this to happen.

Another component I point out is that with many of these overspends we are seeing we are again outsourcing all of this expertise. We are outsourcing governance and accountability. That is when we see we have nothing to show for it. Even at the end of all of this overspend, we have so little to show for it as a State. MetroLink is an example of that, with €300 million spent before we have even broken ground. On this project, when it comes to outsourcing, of course private contractors are going to take our money, but the State has to step up and deliver that infrastructure. We get massive public spending going to private contractors on projects that are not fit for purpose while people in the public sector are under immense pressure, having funding released to them and being told to use it or lose it within unreasonable timeframes.

One of the most concerning aspects of this is the impact it has on public confidence. As I say, people pay their taxes and expect public services in return. What they do not expect and do not want is public waste instead. We are starting to see people resenting paying those taxes. My constituents have told me on the doors that they do not mind taxation when and if they see value for it. What we are seeing is a lack of action on waste, transparency and accountability, and it is resulting in a distrust of the State and its ability to spend public money. It undermines faith in democracy and allows this false narrative that it is impossible for the State to practise value for money, whereas that is actually a political choice. Ba chóir go mbeadh muid ag cruthú sochaí ina mbeadh dlúthpháirtíocht fite fuaite inár bpobal agus áit a bhfaighimis luach ár gcuid airgid dár gcáin.

I will mention some of the solutions we put forward in our election manifesto last year and on which we will be working over this term of Government. First is a real-time mechanism to monitor spending in order that we can understand those issues in real time and do not get the information six months after the fact when it is too late to do anything. The Government needs to actively engage with civil servants and Accounting Officers to ensure compliance with the public spending code, procurement guidelines and so on is actually happening. Again, this must happen in real time. We do not need to create a new body to do this, particularly one run by private sector experts. The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General is a reputable organisation with the facilities and competence to deal with this. It needs to be effectively resourced to do so and it needs to be given that real-time mechanism to allow it to do it properly. I heard the Minister list some of the practices that are in place to ensure accountability and oversight but they need adjustment because, as we have heard all morning, they are obviously not working. We need to adjust those codes and that procurement framework as required and bring about greater transparency and conflict of interest prevention across the system. Modern well-resourced governments can deliver projects on time and on budget. Broken systems cannot.

I recognise there are many people within the public service working to deliver value for money for the taxpayer. I have been an Accounting Officer myself and I know how dearly public servants hold the idea of value for public money. They appreciate their responsibility to the public purse. I recognise that and once again say that, if they are given the framework to operate within, they will be able to do this. Ní fadhb é a bheith flaithiúil má tá tú ag fáil luach as ach tá an Rialtas flaithiúil le rudaí fánacha. Ciallaíonn sé sin nach bhfuil muid ag fáil na seirbhísí agus an infreastruchtúir chuí. This is an issue it is important to raise and to address. It is truly disappointing the Government amendment fails to do so.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an group for bringing forward this motion. It is very important we focus on this issue. Similarly to my colleague, I also have differences with some of this motion. We need to understand why there is such frustration among the public regarding the issue of waste in public expenditure. It is because people are lacking basic access to services, especially access to appropriate school places for those with special needs and access to disability services. People are really struggling. They do not feel or see the State delivering for them. That is why, when they see the likes of the bike shed, they are absolutely bursting with anger and frustration, as we saw on the doorsteps during the election. It is understandable.

I will look at an issue in my constituency, that of metro north. This was first promised in 2005. It has now been 20 years since the metro was promised. What happened to it? It was ditched by Fine Gael in 2010 and by Leo Varadkar of Fine Gael in 2011 because it was not considered economically viable at the time the austerity cuts were implemented. It was picked up again and has stuttered along. We need to see genuine commitment to delivering key public infrastructure.

We also need to understand why there has not been this commitment. It is because we have never had a social democratic government, that is, one that values and believes in public services and believes in the State's responsibility to deliver in the key areas of infrastructure, health, housing and transport. What we have had is successive governments led by Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, parties that have this mixed and confused ideology. They are not sure whether they believe in the State or the private sector for delivery. You can look through a litany of examples over the past 30 years. I have written books on it. I refer to public private partnerships, leasing schemes and outsourcing. There is a confused approach as to whether to deliver public services through the private sector or the public sector. These governments have fallen down the middle.

In some areas, we do things very well. To back up my colleague, it is really important we see the areas in which the public sector is delivering. I refer to the area of education in our schools in particular. Our teachers work so hard. We also see our nurses and doctors. There are public servants and civil servants throughout this country who are struggling in their own ways as they work really hard to deliver public services. They are being held back by our State and how it fails to take that social democratic approach to valuing public services and to see their key role. With all due respect to the proposers of the motion, I have heard them criticise local authorities. We have also heard from the Government that local authorities are not delivering enough. Why are they not delivering? They are not delivering because they have been underfunded for 30 years. They have been cut back and their resources have been decimated.

I would also like the proposers of the motion to consider their language around NGOs. NGOs deliver vital services across the country. I refer to the likes of Women's Aid and Bar-

nardos. I was out in Finglas West visiting a local service delivered by Barnardos. It is a family resource centre that is doing incredible work in very challenging situations. It is supporting parents and children. These NGOs are doing vital work. We must be very careful about criticising that sector. It is important to value it. We need to defend NGOs. They are being squeezed by the State as regards what they are expected to deliver.

I will talk about the issue of social housing. We are continuing to deliver social housing through leasing. We pay private sector bodies, often investor funds, a set income for 25 years approximating to or just below the market rent and, at the end of those 25 years, we get nothing. When talking about waste of taxpayers' money, the social housing leasing schemes are one of the biggest wastes of public money there is. Why is the Government continuing to deliver social housing through leasing despite its commitment to end the use of social housing leasing? One in five of all new social houses delivered this year and next year will be acquired through leasing, where the State gets no asset at the end. We need to reconsider that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The motion is right that there has been a lot of waste by this Government so far and by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments down through the years. The motion and the analysis and speeches we have heard from the proposers, however, fail to look under the bonnet and figure out why this waste is happening. The solutions proposed would actually make things even worse. The motion seeks to double down on a neoliberal rip-off republic where public services are outsourced to the private sector leaving behind an empty shell of a state that cannot do basic common-sense things like building public housing, providing bike sheds or building walls. Instead, all of those things are outsourced to a profiteering private sector.

Independent Ireland is so blinded by its right-wing neoliberal ideology that it wants to ape Trump and Musk and set up an Irish version of DOGE, this so-called department of efficiency and reform. We have all seen the horror of what is happening in the US. Staff and funding for cancer research, nuclear safety and public health are all being slashed. Public sector workers are being fired by email. We can be thankful that workers and unions in his country have fought for stronger rights than those in the US. It is not possible to fire thousands of public sector workers at will by email. We know from this motion, however, what Independent Ireland would do if it had that chance. Public sector workers beware; laying waste to the public sector is Independent Ireland's agenda.

Let us lift up the bonnet and figure out why Government waste is happening. Is it because we are not outsourcing enough to the private sector? No, the opposite is true. When you dig into any of the infamous examples of Government waste, including the bike shed, in every single case you will find examples of well-connected private companies ripping off the State and the public. Sensori, the company that built the bike shed, was founded by Michael Stone, a big political supporter and a donor to Deputy Donohoe, the man who got his posters up for free. Sensori got more than €21 million in Government contracts in the past two years alone. Charging €336,000 for a bike shed has had no effect on the company continuing to be awarded massive State contracts. Their vans can be seen at this building today.

It is the same story with housing. The State has agreed to pay €3.4 billion in rent to vulture funds to lease 9,000 social homes for the next 25 years. When the 25 years are up, those funds will still own the properties and can do whatever they like with them. That is on top of €10 billion in Government handouts to landlords since 2011. That is waste on a colossal scale. The Government could have used that money to directly build public housing and provide perma-

nent social and affordable housing for upwards of 50,000 families. None of that, or the €26 billion set to be wasted on fines for climate inaction, tends to be mentioned in debates on Government waste because it does not fit the right-wing narrative that the public are being fed on this.

The cause of Government waste is not public sector workers, hard-working teachers, nurses or firefighters; it is the profit-seeking vultures circling the State that are always on the lookout for ways to inflate the cost of Government contracts and to slash the wages and conditions of workers. That is what BAM has done with the national children's hospital. It is that neoliberal, rip-off republic that we need to get away from, not get deeper into, if we want to stop waste.

Deputy Charles Ward: It is shocking to see the examples of overspending and waste in the public sector, as outlined in the motion. Public trust in Government decisions and Government spending is at an all-time low. It is sickening for people to watch the Government spend public money so wastefully. It is a slap in the face to families impacted by the defective concrete crisis that hundreds of thousands is being dished out on bike sheds, security huts and printers - you name it.

I will highlight the staggering waste, inefficiency and fiscal irresponsibility of this Government's handling of the defective concrete crisis, not to mention that the very creation of the crisis in the first place is due to its complete failure to provide proper oversight. Thousands of families in County Donegal and beyond are affected. Twenty counties are currently affected by defective concrete. People are trapped in their homes. Public money is squandered on projects to serve the optics over the people. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence that iron sulphites, not mica, are causing homes to collapse, the Government persists in offering remediation when only full demolition will do. Even last week, families were subject to remediation offers that were half-measures ensuring future failures at taxpayers' expense. This is just a waste of public money. It is scandalous.

Micheál Martin spoke yesterday about the generous redress scheme. While the scheme could be worth €50 billion on paper, it is still meaningless when institutional barriers will prevent thousands of homeowners from ever getting on the scheme. There is no scrutiny and the hypocrisy is staggering. How did we get here? Nothing has changed in respect of defective concrete in the 14 years since this started. No meaningful market surveillance exists. No independent oversight is being conducted. Defective materials continue to reach the market and these counties continue to be affected. This scheme will again fail homeowners who have poured their life savings into rebuilding their homes because it does not cover foundations. It is scandalous. The scheme is riddled with waste. Homeowners are buried in bureaucracy and are required to document every single cent while the Government spends €490,000 replacing a 70 m wall outside a Dublin office, which is great work if you can get it.

It is clear that the Government prioritises optics over ordinary people and political projects over real human suffering. How can this Government justify unchecked spending on vanity projects while people in Donegal and the other counties are fighting to rebuild their lives? There is no doubt that there is a stark contrast between Dublin and Donegal in how public funds are allocated. At every level, the Government operates under a double standard. A teacher in this country can barely order a pencil without navigating an exhaustive procurement process, yet when it comes to hundreds of millions of taxpayers' money, there is absolutely no oversight, accountability or scrutiny. Homeowners who are also taxpayers are being held to an impossible standard, yet there is waste and mismanagement of money at the highest level of government which continues to go unchecked.

Enough is enough. The people of Donegal and affected counties deserve a full redress scheme. They deserve a Government that values family over facades, and emphasises fairness and fiscal responsibility. They deserve accountability. This is not just a housing crisis; it is now a moral crisis. Until there is accountability at the highest level, the cycle of waste will continue for years and years to come. It is time for the Government to bridge the divide. There needs to be a more equal approach to funding. We must start with those who need help the most. That includes the families affected by defective concrete.

Deputy Brian Stanley: This debate is welcome. However, the motion has a whiff of populism about it. As somebody who comes from a left, republican position, I believe in good public services, but I also believe in spending public money very well. We need to stop waste. Although those of us on the left advocate spending public money and creating good public services, it does not mean that we support wasting public money. That is the difference. Every euro of taxpayers' money has to be spent well. However, bringing in an Elon Musk or Michael O'Leary to run the show and oversee it will bring chaos. We are watching that in one of the largest economies in the world, never mind the chaos it would cause in our small country.

The examples of waste are shocking. We can list off a dozen, including the security hut. Some of the stuff I saw during my time as chairperson of the Committee of Public Accounts was absolutely shocking. There were open-ended, Wild West-type contracts in respect of the national children's hospital, which were wide open to exploitation, and thousands of claims by the contractor for more money, in addition to arbitration, court cases, etc. On metro north and the metro projects in Dublin, and this is one that defies me, how can hundreds of millions of euro be spent on a project when not even a shovel has been stuck in the ground? That money went to the private sector. This is astronomical stuff. Projects are being held up in the Minister of State's constituency of Longford-Westmeath, and in the constituency of Laois, because money is wasted on stuff relating to the national children's hospital. We need new health centres all over the place. We do not even have a primary care centre in Portlaoise, which is a town with a population bigger than Kilkenny city, because of this kind of waste of money and incompetence.

We should have good public services and we should spend money on them. The public will back that. The public generally has no problem paying tax. I do not want to speak for all of them, but certainly the people I come across and those who vote for me do not mind paying taxes. However, they want to see that they have health services, school places for their child who has autism, and affordable housing for their children to buy. That is what we need.

The debate is welcome but it cannot just be a debate where we get up and say, "That is grand. We had a good discussion here today." There has to be action. The Minister of State credits himself with getting things done. I will hold him to that, which I mean in a positive way. We need to get things done. The Minister of State has a role in respect of the OPW. There is some scandalous waste of money at the OPW but I also acknowledge the good work it does. I can list some of the projects in County Laois that the OPW oversees, including Heywood Gardens and Emo Demesne. I could list many more, including oversight of monuments, etc., and the good work that is done there. Good work is done but there are deficiencies that need to be fixed.

I will focus on the HSE. This is a very important issue. As I understand it, all parties in the House signed up to Sláintecare, which is the creation of a national health system for the first time in the more than 100 years of the State's existence. We have a mixture of voluntary, private and public in health - a mishmash. Again, I watched what was going on at the HSE over

the past five years through the Committee of Public Accounts and tried to make some sense of it. This country puts more than €5,000 per person into the public health system annually. That is fine and we should do that. If we include the cost of what people pay privately, it is heading for €7,000 per head of population. There are countries in Europe with good economies and a high quality of living that have walk-in health systems, which do not have the years of waiting lists we have. It is four years for a hearing test or hearing treatment and four years for an eye test. I could go on and on, for example, it is two and a half to three years for a hip replacement. These countries have good public health systems. We do not, despite the fact that we pump in more money. One of the reasons is the layers of bureaucracy and management. The system was created by the then Minister for Health, Micheál Martin, but we cannot go backwards. We have to move forward.

The other thing is that private companies are milking money out of the system left, right and centre. There was an agency secretary employed for almost seven years by the HSE. As we know, agency staff cost more. Eventually, the secretary was employed as a direct employee. That is just one example of where direct employment was cheaper. We need action. We do not need another Department. We have the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform and the Office of Government Procurement. It is clear that they need reform, and we need to hold people to account at a senior level.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): I thank the Deputies for their contributions to the important debate on value for money in public expenditure. I agree that there has been a comprehensive and robust discussion. I thank the Deputies for proposing this debate and giving me the opportunity to assure the people of Ireland that the Government has put value for money at the heart of decisions on public expenditure by listing out some of the comprehensive frameworks that public bodies are obliged to follow and implement.

Following on from the Minister's remarks, I would like to emphasise again, on behalf of the Government, that the Government condemns the waste of public money and ensures frameworks are in place to provide the necessary accountability and oversight in respect of public spending. The Government amendment counteracts the narrative being put forward by the Opposition that the Government, over recent years, has not been putting oversight and accountability at the heart of expenditure and management. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is a wide range of frameworks that public bodies must follow to ensure value for money and accountability at the highest level.

The Government, in its expenditure, has provided a robust response to the challenges faced by our country, including ensuring value for money is achieved in delivering on the expansion of services. This is a priority of the Government. In order to protect our economy and people, sensible choices were made in budget 2025, allowing growth in a sustainable way, investing in a better future and providing a sustainable approach to the environment.

As mentioned by the Minister in his contribution to the debate, the Government continues to invest in important public services and provides value for money, including through the expansion of health services, increases in core social welfare allowances, increased investment in housing, and the expansion of the hot school meals programme.

Investing in infrastructure is a critical component in supporting Ireland's growth and delivering better, fit-for-purpose public services. The increased capital expenditure in budget 2025

continues to deliver on the national development plan, which provides the vital infrastructure we need to support the future economy and meet social requirements and our climate change commitments. As Minister of State in the office of the OPW, I know of the benefits to communities and the relief felt by people in local rural communities across Ireland regarding flood works. On Friday, I look forward to meeting the people of Crossmolina, County Mayo, to mark the beginning of the construction of long-awaited €13.5 million flood works for the River Deel. This will protect the town from the effects of climate change.

That said, I recognise the delivery of capital projects has been challenged by a number of significant factors in recent years, including the continued impact of construction inflation on projects; labour shortages, particularly in the construction sector; and the ongoing delays in getting projects through the planning system. The Government approved a number of priority actions to improve the delivery of the national development plan projects, including the introduction of infrastructural guidelines in December 2023, and to reduce the administrative burden on Departments charged with infrastructure delivery. These actions will boost the delivery of critical infrastructure in a sustainable and cost-effective manner. Examples are the approximately 300 schools building projects annually and BusConnects. In my constituency, I welcomed recently developments in relation to the upgrading of the N4 for the people of Longford-Westmeath.

I acknowledge the diligent, comprehensive investigation by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and its staff in fulfilling its constitutional duty to provide annual reports on public services of the highest quality, based on the office's investigation into the efficiency of public expenditure under section 9 of the Comptroller and Auditor General Act 1993. It would be an unnecessary waste of public moneys to duplicate this work of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General by using the private sector.

The Government has put in place a framework over many years to ensure value for money is achieved, as well as a number of public sector professional services to assist public bodies in delivering value for money. However, agreements and guidelines are required to be developed as a result of the investigations by the Comptroller and Auditor General and continue to be developed where there has been a waste of public money.

A lot has come up today. The debate started off with a critique of the public sector from Independent Ireland. During the general election campaign, which is not that long ago, they talked about a Luas for every town in Ireland. They came in here today and established an Elon Musk-type approach of killing the system and the people, the very people who are providing for this country. A lot of the talk about the OPW refers to the Hill of Tara. People love social media, love to go out, and love to stand and take pictures of themselves. They talk about a wall having been built for the past 12 years. The OPW is not building a wall at the Hill of Tara; it is carrying out maintenance work on a wall at the Hill of Tara. It might have gone on for 12 years and it might go on for another 12, but the Hill of Tara never closed. It was open to business for everybody to enjoy-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It opened-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Excuse me, I did not interfere with Deputy Tóibín. He stood there and portrayed everything we are doing on this side of the House as wrong. Shame on him for portraying that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The people feel that.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Excuse me, Deputy. Everyone in this House had a chance to stand where I am. Every single one did but they all failed. They went to the rung of the ladder, went out on social media, went on radio and television, and talked about government but they failed to go into government. I went in because I believe I can make changes. I believe I can deliver-----

Deputy Michael Collins: You went in-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I can deliver. In my Department, we will work tirelessly to make sure we do that. I was the first one to admit-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I was the first one to apologise to people for mistakes made. However, when people come in here and talk about bike sheds, they should get it right. Bike shelters is what they are. This is a listed building. This is a building that is cherished by people all over the world, including the people of Ireland, and we cannot just dig up, throw in and do what you bloody well like, which is what the Deputies opposite are suggesting. They talk about the security hut-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister of State is digging.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Excuse me. They talk about the security hut. Let me remind everyone in the House, some of whom sit on the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, that nothing can happen around the Houses without the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission knowing. It in the framing of the House. Nobody asked a question about security. The hut cost €300,000 but what goes on as part of security to protect the people in this institution?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It cost €1.4 million. The Minister of State should get his facts right.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: These are necessary things that had to be put in place. We have to protect the people who work here.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Check the record.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Is the Deputy telling me that we should not protect the people who work here? Doing so is totally wrong. It is unfair that the Deputies would come in criticising every element of what we do when we are all elected by the people and doing our best to serve them. We will continue to do so.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Minister of State just said it cost €300,000. He should correct the record. It cost €1.4 million.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Sorry, it cost €300,000, and the auxiliary works attached to that-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Auxiliary works-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Sorry, but the security element of that cost the rest. I am sorry to say that, but that has to be done.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: To correct the record, we went in to meet the Taoiseach and Tánaiste and put a policy document in front of them. When we talked about trying to save the agricultural sector from a carbon tax, others decided to sign up to it. We talked about freezing it and perhaps putting it on aeroplane travel. People can decide whether to go on holidays but cannot decide whether to go to work 30 or 40 miles from where they live. Others decided they would let people suffer in that way. That was the reason we were not brought into government, just to put the record straight.

Everyone in the Opposition and the Government believes that the better and more efficiently we can do something, the more services, social housing and buildings we can supply around this country for the people who need them. Those people are our constituents around the country.

I welcome the announcement in respect of Crossmolina. The Minister of State and I were there in 2015 or 2016. I am sure he will agree. He and I went down there between 2016 and 2020 and that is too long for those people to live at risk. There are stumbling blocks to getting a job done efficiently. I am sure the Minister of State will agree that is a major problem in this country when compared with other countries. Why does it cost €3,000 or €4,000 per sq. m to build an apartment in Ireland when it costs €1,000 in Spain? The apartment might not be as fancy or particular, but there is a woeful difference in that price if you are trying to get value for money. That is what we are on about.

A few speakers referred to Elon Musk. He must be watching Irish television. In January 2024, which is 14 months ago, that lad had never been heard of. He was building cars at the time. We had these proposals in our document of what we were on about. It is not about scrapping every NGO. The first thing we said was that those working in the health service do great work. Should anybody have a problem if they are being reviewed to see if they are getting enough money or too much money? Take the housing sector. How many housing bodies do we have in this country? The Government had to go into its arse pocket and pull out €14 million or €15 million when a housing body was getting enough money. Are we saying that everything is hunky-dory? We are saying it is not hunky-dory that there is no accountability. We need the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Department of public expenditure and reform to do their jobs. There are great civil servants and no one is criticising them. However, if they were doing their jobs, would we have a children's hospital going the way it is going? We need the hospital and no one is denying that, but it is an open book. Ironically enough, everyone is asking if we are having a go at civil servants when it would be a private company that would get less money if we were looking at it and things were done more efficiently.

Do we not agree that every builder who is building houses should be able to tender for social housing? The fact is that if you did not build a social house in the past five years, you cannot tender for a State job. Is that the right way of doing things or should we be allowing more builders to tender? Are we saying that the people who lay thousands of kilometres of pipes with the county council in group water schemes are not fit to lay an Irish Water pipe? Should they be allowed? Would that make things better? Should they be allowed to tender? My God, I think they should. That is how we get more efficiency around the country. Ministers cannot micro-watch or micromanage smaller projects. This is about having trust. It is about having balances and checks. That is why we are seeking an oversight body with expertise to watch the situation. We are not calling for cut after cut. We are seeking better value for money for all the different people around the country.

I ask this Government to look at what we are on about. Everyone refers to America, NGOs

and whatever else. We need to do an overview. Do you know what? I do not think anyone who is doing a job efficiently would have anything to worry about. All Deputies are aware that if county councils have not spent their budgets towards the end of the year, they have to get rid of it or they get less money the following year. Why do we not look at value per kilometre for roads they do and give them more if they are very efficient? Those are the things we need to do under the likes of this motion.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have listened to all the speakers. I am disappointed with some of the parties here. I am not pointing the finger at Sinn Féin but at the Labour Party and the Social Democrats. They continue to count out waste in this Dáil. We put forward a working solution and I do not think those parties proposed an amendment but came in and criticised it. That is outrageous. The Social Democrats do not believe in this new body. Will we continue with the waste going on at the moment? That is outrageous. How do they face their electorate talking like that? They are talking out of the two sides of the same mouth. The Deputy from the Social Democrats said we do not need to cut NGOs. We certainly need to look at the money that is spent. Some NGOs are doing brilliant work but there is a huge amount of wastage. I am starting to wonder if people have another agenda. Were they working in NGOs before they came into the Dáil and want to protect that service?

The People Before Profit Deputy referred to the US Department of Government Efficiency. We came up with this idea well before any of the US officials. In January of last year, we included it in our proposals, on our website and in our policies, and we stand over it. We were ahead of the pack and let others, whether in America or England, follow suit. We were well ahead of the pack.

The People Before Profit Deputy said we should look under the bonnet. Even though he criticised our proposal, he said we should look under the bonnet. The same Deputy said last week that we should not have fossil fuel cars, electric cars or sports utility vehicles, SUVs. He wants no bonnets. It is the mudguard of a bike he wants to look under. That will tell you how far from reality that Deputy is.

The Labour Party asked who would want a watchdog. We are the watchdog. What have we, as politicians, achieved? We have not achieved anything in respect of expenditure and the money being blown left, right and centre in this country.

The Government amendment is scandalous. It is not in any way, shape or form going to address the waste in this country. In his contribution, the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, said:

Furthermore, Article 33 of the Constitution establishes the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which is a key institution in the checks and balances of our democracy. It continues to serve the State well and its reports are considered and held in high regard by the Committee of Public Accounts.

How can it continue to serve the State well with the absolute scandalous waste that is going on? The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, stood up and defended that. He should be ashamed to do that.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I would defend it all day.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State is a man I respect-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I respect the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----but I will not respect him for that, if he does not mind me saying that now.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Do not come in here-----

Deputy Michael Collins: How can the Minister of State defend any Government or previous government that spent €808,000 on a Dáil printer and wasted the money? It spent €1.43 million on a security hut. It spent €2.5 billion, heading to €3 billion, on a children's hospital. It spent €22 million on a Covid ventilator that was never used. It spent €2.5 billion in medical compensation payouts. The Dáil bike shed cost €336,000. The Government wants to call it by some other name, the Dáil bike shelter. Come on to hell, it cost €336,000 of hard-earned taxpayers' money. These are people who get up in the morning and work their butts off for this country and the Government is robbing from their back pockets. That is not fair. The Minister of State stands there and tries to defend it. Some €825,000 was spent on the refurbishment of Iveagh House. Some €300 million was spent on the metro north link that was never built. Some €490,000 was spent on a wall at the Workplace Relations Commission. Some €7 million was spent by the Arts Council on an IT system. Some €120,000 was spent on a scanner for the National Gallery of Ireland. Electric buses were purchased and had no chargers for a year and a half. We need a Department of efficiency. We do not need to look at anywhere else across the world. We should stand on our own two feet and see the billions, not millions, that have been wasted. We should make ourselves accountable. The public out there are pointing the finger at every politician. Not every politician, civil servant and NGO is wrong, but there is wrong. We need to stand up and be strong in our voice to defend the taxpayers of this country, the ordinary, hardworking people, the people who worked hard and have now retired but are suffering in the cold because they cannot pay their oil or electricity bills.

It is a shame for this Government. I am ashamed for it. Another expenditure was €54.6 million on e-voting a number of years ago. Nobody's head rolls. It is pat-on-the-back time in this country. It is a Government investigating itself. I ask the Government to change its mind and accept that a Department of efficiency and reform is needed.

12 o'clock

It should be run by independent people-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----who have a mind to change this country and give the money back to the people so they can have services like wastewater treatment plants and public transport. The people of Ballinascarty have not had their rivers cleaned out and so their houses get flooded. That is where we are at. There is no money in the purse and no money announced yet.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The debate has now-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy should have gone into government. He has all the answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----and I put the question on Aontú's-----

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Deputy Michael Collins: I tried. I put our policies-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: He has all the answers.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----but all they took was a scrap of paper from ye.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: All the answers. I could list out hundreds of things.

Deputy Michael Collins: All they took was a scrap of paper off the back of an A4 page with a couple of old biro prints across it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: They signed up for the jobs.

Deputy Michael Collins: That is what they took into government and we are feeling the effects of it on my side of the country since.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. As the debate is concluded, I must deal with Aontú's amendment to the Minister's amendment.

Amendment to amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 5 March 2025.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Over the course of the next week the Taoiseach will engage in three crucially important meetings for Ireland's future. The first is a meeting with the British Prime Minister in which I hope the Taoiseach will press for a reset of relationships as equal partners. Then there is an EU Council meeting at a time when the European Commission has kickstarted an EU arms race, proposing a colossal €800 billion in military spending. Then the Taoiseach travels to the United States to meet the US President in the White House at a time when an outrageous threat of mass expulsion from Gaza hangs over 2 million Palestinians.

This year's St. Patrick's Day meeting comes at a time of conflict, challenge and deep uncertainty in the world. It also comes at a time of deep public concern regarding the Government's moves to dismantle the triple lock and undermine Ireland's neutrality. People ask why Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not bring that same urgency when dealing with housing, access to healthcare or the cost of living. It has never been more important for Ireland to protect and assert our long-standing neutrality fully intact. The meeting with the US President presents an opportunity to address Ireland's interests, but also a moment to speak honestly with him and voice Ireland's position clearly on pressing international affairs. I am certain the Taoiseach will impress upon President Trump the importance of continued US support for our peace process and the Good Friday Agreement, the need for a solution for the undocumented Irish and of course the real concerns regarding the impact tariffs could have on Ireland's economy, on jobs and on future prosperity. The message has to be that Ireland is a location of choice for American investment for very good reason, that the economic relationship between our two countries is a two-way street and that it must continue in the time ahead.

This will be the Taoiseach's last time taking Leaders' Questions before he makes that journey to the United States, so I ask him to set out for the Dáil very clearly what it is he will say to the US President regarding Ukraine and Gaza. Will he put it to President Trump that Ireland stands on the side of international law and diplomacy, that the sovereignty of Ukraine must be upheld, that the pressing and immediate priority now is to build peace through inclusive engagement and good faith dialogue? What will be the Taoiseach's message to the American President in standing with the Palestinian people? Will he express Ireland's strong view the US is catastrophically wrong on Gaza, that the proposal for the mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza is an absolutely unacceptable breach of international law and deeply destabilising for the Middle East and the wider world? Remember this view can be most powerfully delivered by an Ireland that is a military neutral. Remember it was the unaligned countries that spoke for Palestine's right to exist while those in powerful military alliances failed to stop the genocide and have in fact financed it and armed the Israeli war machine. Mar sin, caithfidh an teachtaireacht ó Éirinn sa Teach Bán a rá gur féidir agus gur gá dár dtíortha a bheith mar leathbhádóirí rathúla ar son na síochána, ar son an dul chun cinn, agus ar son rathúnas na cruinne. Ireland and America can be successful partners for peace, progress and prosperity, but only if we choose to be and only if we are determined to be. I ask the Taoiseach to set out clearly what his message is to the United States on Palestine and Gaza.

The Taoiseach: Tá an ceart ag an Teachta go bhfuil na cruinnithe a bheidh agam an tseachtain seo agus an tseachtain seo chugainn tábhachtach. Léiríonn siad an gaol láidir agus tábhachtach atá idir ár dtír agus an Bhreatain. Léiríonn siad cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an gaol idir na tíortha san Aontas Eorpach agus, gan amhras, an gaol an-láidir atá idir na Stáit Aontaithe agus ár dtír. Sa trí chás sin, tá cúrsaí eacnamaíochta ríthábhachtach. Ní aon amhras ach go mbraitheann forbairt cúrsaí geilleagair na tíre seo ar na gaolta sin idir na Stáit Aontaithe, an Bhreatain agus an tAontas Eorpach, ós rud é go bhfuilimid páirteach san Aontas Eorpach anois ó 1973 ar aghaidh.

Since I became Taoiseach I have identified a number of relationships that are key to Ireland's future and have been key to our success over the last 30 or 40 years. The Irish-United Kingdom relationship is an extremely important one. The UK is our closest neighbour and tonight we begin an annual summit that will now occur every year between the UK Government and the Irish Government. It is a relationship of family, a relationship of neighbours and a very strong economic relationship and we should not forget that, notwithstanding Brexit. Many Irish small- to medium-sized companies begin their export story in the British market. We will be seeking and working to see if we can ease the barriers that are in the way of trade between the United Kingdom and Ireland and indeed the EU more generally because economic growth in Britain will be good for Ireland and will help economic growth in Ireland. I am looking forward to that meeting along with my colleagues in government. A number of Ministers will be meeting their counterparts as part of this UK-Ireland Summit also.

The EU Council is a moment of huge importance. I am somewhat perplexed by the Deputy's reference to Europe kickstarting an arms race. She is, I think, missing the point. Many European countries are very fearful of the threat Russia poses to their very existence. Many of these countries have history with Russia, particularly the Baltics, Poland and many others. We should not forget that or, in our complacency in this part of the world, undermine or seek to dismiss very legitimate fears these countries have about their very survival – and it is real. Europe has to be self-reliant. This is in order to ensure peace and prosperity because Europe wants peace. President von der Leyen made that clear in her opening remarks. Europe is about

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peace, it is about prosperity and it is about quality of life for its citizens. No one wants war but the bottom line is Europe is exposed right now and EU member states need military capability and security capability across a lot of domains including cybersecurity, maritime security, energy security and so forth.

The relationship of the United States with Ireland is older than the State itself and is an extremely important one. We are going fundamentally of course to celebrate the historical links between Ireland and the US. St. Patrick's Day has always been the traditional day to do that, and St. Patrick's week as well, and to be there for our diaspora. Some 30 million people claim Irish descent.

In terms of the core issues, the economic relationship is very important. We are an open small economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We are pro-free trade and I will articulate that perspective. We will also articulate our views regarding Ukraine and the Middle East.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Gan dabht, tá na gaolta sin uilig an-tábhachtach ar fad. That is why I have raised the question with the Taoiseach. I am not in the least bit complacent. I am deeply concerned about the international order at this time and Ireland's place within it. Peace is not achieved by investing in and financing war. Every rule in the book is being set aside to enable Europe to invest €800 billion in weapons of war. That is patently not a peace strategy. This country is a neutral country and militarily unaligned, and that places us in the strongest position to advocate for international law, the UN system and real processes of dialogue and conflict resolution, which is where we need to be. Can the Taoiseach set out much more clearly what exactly he will say on Ukraine and, in particular, on Gaza and the Palestinian question?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I invite Deputy McDonald to talk to political parties in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. She should ask them if our position is somehow going to ease their concern and anxiety. I do not think she gets it and I think she needs to engage more widely in terms of the perspectives of others on the European Continent. They have bitter experience of what happened to their people over many decades and centuries. The one bright spot for them was that, with the collapse of the old Soviet Union, they got access to the European Union. That is where they want to be, and they want to be secure.

In respect of peace, we want a peace settlement that is durable and sustainable in Ukraine. President Trump wants a peace settlement in Ukraine. There are different perspectives on how to arrive at that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about Palestine and Gaza?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: In terms of Gaza and the Middle East, let us be clear. We want to consolidate the ceasefire and will be making that point very strongly. We want a surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza. The Arab peace initiative and the Arab proposals in respect of Gaza have come through, which have a lot to commend themselves.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to return to an issue I raised with the Taoiseach yesterday, namely, the crisis in special education. Last Friday, I joined a group of 50 parents, children and

family members who had to resort to a 24-hour sleep-out in front of the Department of Education in Dublin in order to highlight the crisis they are experiencing. I heard harrowing stories of experiences from desperate parents who are frustrated and in despair at the battle they had on behalf of their children. One mother told me of a long waiting list to achieve an assessment of need for her three-year-old daughter. A grandmother told me about her daughter's battle to get a place in a special school for her son who is six years old. A march will take place in Cork city this weekend to protest at the same issue because this is a nationwide crisis.

We in Labour offer our full support and solidarity, as I know we all do, to those families in these situations. Securing a diagnosis through the public system for children takes years. Even achieving a diagnosis is no longer the answer it once was because access to therapies, the necessary treatments and school places is so difficult.

Yesterday, I asked the Taoiseach how he would ensure that every child who needs a school place or therapy will have access to that. I asked when the 14,000 children now waiting for an assessment of need will be seen. In response, he said, "We are working to see if we can ensure places for children next September", which is not exactly a wrought iron guarantee.

I would like to give the Taoiseach the opportunity today to say something more substantive on this because every year we hear these watery commitments. When the school year draws to a close, every year parents are left scrambling because there are no places for their precious children. A child's right to education is protected by the Constitution, but at least 118 children with additional needs have not received an offer of a school place anywhere this year. We know many more have had to take up inappropriate places or be bussed out of their communities because there is nowhere local to go.

The Journal reports that 1,274 children were moved to reduced school days in the past school year. Of that group, more than 80% of primary school pupils had special educational needs. Families need to hear from the Taoiseach how the Government will achieve access to places for their children come this September and, in particular, to reassure them that there will be enough staff in place to meet the level of need.

Yesterday, my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, asked the Taoiseach whether the Department of Education had a recruitment freeze on special needs assistants, SNAs. We have received multiple reports indicating that this is the case. School principals have been informed that they cannot have an SNA sanctioned for their schools because it seems the Department has outlined that new SNA positions will not be filled until September at the earliest. One school we know of has been refused a second special educational needs room, despite having a classroom lying empty, and the principal suspects it is because the Department does not want to pay for staff. Is there a de facto recruitment freeze on SNAs? If not, how can the Department justify delays and refusals? I again ask the Taoiseach when every child will have access to the school places and therapies they need.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue because it is very important and one I am determined to deal with in the short term. I want to ensure there is a proper system in the years to come whereby parents will know in the previous academic year where their child will attend second level for the subsequent academic year. Parents are going through too much in terms of endeavouring to find a school place or navigating the therapy support services that children require.

I will deal with the school places issue. First, the population growth in the number of children with special needs is significant. Funding has significantly increased. The number of additional places, teachers and SNAs has increased dramatically. That is no comfort or consolation to those parents who do not have a place or access to services, but it needs to be said.

We have established about 11 new special schools since 2020. This is the first Government in a long time that began to establish new special schools. There had been moves against special schools for ideological reasons and people felt that perhaps mainstream schools were more appropriate, but that stopped in the past couple of years. This coming school year, five more special schools will open.

I have spoken to the NCSE and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, who has also been in touch with the ETB and the NCSE. There are problems in north and south Dublin and Cork county. There may be other problems outside of those areas, but there are particular issues in those locations. Suffice to say, we will have to increase the number of special schools and special classes.

There will be 400 extra special classes coming on board in the school year 2025-26. Some 218 have already been sanctioned in the past week alone and more will follow imminently. Staffing has increased by 27% since 2020. There are now 23,400 special needs assistants. There is no freeze on the recruitment of SNAs. There has been an increase of 32% in the number of SNAs since 2020. We have 20,800 special education teachers, an increase since 2020. I acknowledge that is poor consolation to those who do not have a school place. We will work flat out to ensure we do everything we possibly can to create spaces and new special schools between now and the end of this academic year to prepare for children coming in next September. No effort will be spared in securing places for children for whom places have not currently been identified.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: On the assessment of need, I said earlier that we are looking at the legislative framework. We will have to introduce legislation to deal with the issue around assessment of need.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for the response and saying so clearly that there is no freeze on SNAs. That is at odds with the experiences reported to us by principals. I would welcome a more detailed written response from the Taoiseach on that because we have been told there is a directive from the Department that amounts to an obstacle or blockage to the hiring by principals of the SNAs that are needed.

We all accept demographic change, but there is clearly a lack of planning from the Department because we know the numbers of children born each year and should be able to plan ahead for need. That is what is frustrating parents. We heard from a parent in the midlands who has applied to 16 schools for their son, aged six, who should be going into senior infants in September but is still in preschool because there are no places available. The SENO now says that parent must apply to mainstream schools despite having a diagnosis stating the child must have access to a special school place.

These are the stories of desperately frustrated parents. We need to hear from the Government that there will be forward planning put in place to ensure there will be enough staff hired and enough places made available-----

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to ensure every child who needs a special school or class will have access to that.

The Taoiseach: There will have to be forward planning and that will be made clear to the agencies and the Department. There will have to be proper preparation in the coming years, looking at the demographics and the need and making sure there is a much more seamless system for parents and children with additional needs. That is the bottom line as far as I am concerned. Every child is entitled to an education. No school can be saying, "No". There must be far more proactivity out there as well. The NCSE is conscious of this and I have made it clear. I will be convening ongoing meetings with the relevant Ministers and agencies to ensure we address the increased demographic issues that arise with our increasing population. The census is very clear. There has been quite a significant change between the past two censuses in respect of those indicating disability within the general population, but particularly children with additional needs. I am not satisfied with the way things are now. I will be very open with the Deputy in that regard. This is a key priority for us. It is fundamental to me and to the House as well.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach says there will have to be forward planning in the future. Why is that forward planning not taking place under this Government? Why did it not take place under the previous Government? The crisis in special education is simply getting worse under the Taoiseach's watch. There are now hundreds of parents who do not know if their children will have a school place in September. One mother in north Cork, Sheila Casey Jones, told the *Irish Examiner* that her son Patrick has received 29 rejections for a school place. The situation is now so desperate that Sheila is contacting schools as far away as Laois, Kilkenny and Donegal to find a place. How has the Taoiseach and the Government let a situation like this happen, whereby a family in Cork is desperately looking for school places as far away as Donegal?

I attended a protest outside the Department of Education on Friday where parents were sleeping out to try to get places for their children with additional needs. No one should have to do this. Speaking to families at the protest, their deep frustration was clear. Parents told me they had been cast into the role of project manager in trying to secure a place for their children. They are co-ordinating between school principals, boards of management, builders, the NCSE and the Department of Education. They are desperately trying to get classrooms delivered in time for their children to start school. Despite all their efforts, days, weeks and months go by without progress being made. This is incredibly frustrating for parents and families who are already facing huge pressures and responsibilities and it is grossly unfair on children who may not have the school places they need in September.

Where is the co-ordination on this? Where is the drive? Why are parents being left to try to sort this out? It is the Government's job to ensure every child receives an education. It is the Taoiseach's role to sort out this issue, whether it is a lack of co-ordination or a lack of drive .

Charlotte Cahill, one of the parents at the protest on Friday, summarised her experience as follows: "They designed the system so that a door closes at every opportunity." When will these doors start opening? Does the Taoiseach accept the Government is failing these families and their children? Can he guarantee that every child who needs one will have an appropriate place in school in September?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. To clarify, funding is not an issue here. The Deputy spoke about planning and so forth. I am aware of the case highlighted by Sheila Casey Jones in respect of her son Patrick. In Cork alone, we now have about 16 special schools, as well as Cork University Hospital School, educating approximately 1,000 children in the Cork area. Three of those schools, namely, Carrigaline, Rochestown and East Cork community special schools, were only established in the past two to three years.

I made the point earlier that in previous years people were promoting the idea that we should have full mainstream integration and there was less enthusiasm around special schools. This view emanated from UN sources. This was growing currency in the past decade and, in my view, that is wrong. When the last Government came in, we changed direction and said we wanted special schools established.

Ultimately, we need to move towards full campuses where there is a full continuum between mainstream, post-primary, special and integrated between the three. The ETB is the way forward. I initiated the special schools under ETBs with the Minister, Deputy Foley, in recent years. We have brought the ETB system into special education for the first time. Cork ETB is now the patron of Carrigaline Community Special School. That is the future and the State has to be proactive in providing special education places, new schools and new additional places and special classes. There will be 400 special classes established this year alone. Special needs education now accounts for 25% of the overall education budget, as is right and correct. With regard to the school in the north city area, I am awaiting further information on where that issue is for that school on the northside of Cork that could be acquired. This needs to happen quickly for parents like Sheila Casey Jones and their kids.

I take the point that these issues need to be accelerated but there has been much more happening on the special school front in recent years than might have been the case in the past decade. We need to do it much faster, however, because the population is growing. The demand and the numbers coming out of primary will increase; there is no question about that. Post-primary has been much slower than primary in terms of the special needs provision. We have legislation which can compel schools. The approach has always been to try to persuade schools and bring people with you so that the ethos and spirit is correct in facilitating special needs education. In my view, it is a fundamental issue in terms of rights and, therefore, no school should be refusing a child on the basis of the child having an additional special need. That relates more to the special classes issue but we do have to develop more special schools and we are determined to do that.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Does the Taoiseach see something wrong with parents who have a huge amount on their hands being cast into the role of project managing to try to get a school place for their child? There is something fundamentally wrong with that. What is the Taoiseach doing to sort this out? Parents should not be put in that situation. The Taoiseach said 400 special classes have been promised to be opened this year but he has also said that only 218 have been sanctioned. There is a huge gap between sanctioning places and classes for children and them actually being delivered. Parents are being told it will take between 12 and 18 months for modular classrooms to be delivered and they are trying to manage this process. Children have a right to education and it is the Taoiseach’s role to ensure they get the education they require. What is the Taoiseach doing to sort this out? It is not acceptable that parents have to protest again this Saturday in Cork to highlight this. What is the Taoiseach doing to sort this situation out?

The Taoiseach: It is wrong that parents have to be the proactive person in securing a place for their child. I believe the State should be doing that. The National Council for Special Education should have a proactive role in identifying the demand and need, and then agreeing the proper placement for a child. That is what I believe and it was the case before the establishment of the NCSE, when inspectors used to do this. When we stopped a lot of this in the late 90s, in 1998, decisions of that Government gave an automatic entitlement to children with special needs to a pupil-teacher ratio and to placements and so forth. The system then grew very big, however. It has grown exponentially due to mainstreaming and so forth. The figures are significant and tell another story, which is that there has been huge growth in special classes, SNAs and so on. That is no consolation to the parents who are currently protesting because they do not see any light at the end of the tunnel right now. They have no chink of light in terms of what the direction of travel is for their child or where their child is going to be. The NCSE, to be fair, has been working on this agenda of proactive engagement with parents. That is the key to the issue. The State should be saying, “We understand the needs of this child, we believe this is the best location for the child and we are going to facilitate the child being located there”. That is where we will get to.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: I rise to discuss an issue that is extremely important in my constituency and in the adjoining one, which is the Taoiseach’s constituency. It concerns an ongoing problem that I highlighted in 2021 with the help of the investigative journalism of Amy Nolan from *The Echo*. I refer to the condition of the water supply across the northside of Cork city and now into parts of the county as well. As the Taoiseach is well aware, the connection that was brought from Ballincollig to the old waterworks on the River Lee, which connected to the existing system, had too high a velocity. That started an ongoing problem. The pipes are rusting, breaking and are destroyed. There is a problem with flushing systems. Irish Water has continuously been flushing for the past four years on the northside. People are waking up on the northside of the city not knowing whether they can bathe their children, wash their hands, have a shower or put on a wash and leave. There are elderly and disadvantaged people in this community who are heavily reliant on others to know whether their tap water is brown or is running clear.

Nobody is concerned to address this issue four years after it was originally highlighted. Irish Water has come out with a statement that €500 million needs to be secured for Cork City Council. Working on the basis that the €500 million is provided, it would take 90 years, at the rate the work is being done, to replace the Victorian pipeline in Cork city. What Irish Water has done for the northside of the city is introduce two trunking systems that are continuously pumping out water. There are communities going three or four days without water, with householders unable to run a tap, take a shower, bathe a child or wash bedding. That is unacceptable. It is something we would see in an advertisement for an African charity asking for money to build a well. That is the way the people of the northside are being treated. There are people with pubs and other businesses that are reliant on the mains supply for their ice machines, dishwashers and steam ovens. They do not want know whether they can open their business on a given day because the water supply is not secure. The problem has now moved into a little bit of the southside of Cork city. The dermatology department in Cork University Hospital, CUH, is no longer providing baths for patients because the state of the water cannot be guaranteed. These are patients who attend CUH on a regular basis. It is an absolute scandal.

We have asked continuously about the funding but there is no mention of it in the programme for Government. Where is the €500 million that needs to be secured for the northside?

I say respectfully to the Taoiseach that I wonder whether this would be acceptable if it were happening in Turners Cross in his constituency. What is not good enough for the southside certainly should not be good enough for the northside. Yet again, we are being let down by him and his Government.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue, of which I am aware. As he knows, Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan has been raising it for quite some time, along with Deputy Gould and others. There have been ongoing issues with the quality of water in Cork, predominantly on the northside of the city. I have met with Irish Water on a wide range of issues and I have specifically raised this matter with its representatives. They indicated to me that some investments they have made will improve the situation. They are hoping for an improvement in the quality of water.

The Deputy is correct that there are huge issues with replacing the Victorian system of pipes. We will be allocating substantial additional capital to Irish Water. It must continue the replacement programme. It will also have to develop newer capacity to ensure that houses get built and we can get development going. I will continue to work with Irish Water to accelerate the work required to deal with this issue. It is a very serious issue for people's quality of life, as the Deputy said, in terms of bathing water and drinking water. Of that there is no doubt. There is a programme of work under way in this regard. It cannot wait 90 years; that is accepted. We will be allocating funding to Irish Water through the updated national development plan but it must come with certain commitments and guarantees as to how that money will be spent.

Some €100 million has been spent already on improving water supply in the Cork area more generally. As the Deputy knows, the Cork city water supply scheme is nearing completion. We have had the replacement of the Churchfield reservoir roof and the upgrade of the Glashaboy water treatment plant and the Lee Road water treatment system. The city now has a much more modernised water supply system. There are about 600 km of water mains pipes in the city, 50% to 60% of which are made from cast iron and go back to the 1920s, making them approximately 100 years old. That is one of the big issues. The system is prone to bursts and leakage. Sediment can become dislodged in the old mains pipes during repair or upgrade works. This has caused huge issues in terms of the browning and discolouring of water and so forth. There are ongoing issues. There is a programme under way by Uisce Éireann, which will continue, and there will be further investments.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is all very well what the Taoiseach has said and the commitment he has given. I am asking for a commitment in respect of the €500 million Irish Water has asked for to start developing the system. The Taoiseach will be aware of the news today that 33 samples of manganese have been found in water in Cork city. Manganese is at an unacceptable level there. I have just poured into the glass in front of me a sample of water from Cork city. This is what it looks like. That is what is coming out of the taps on the northside of the city. It is unacceptable to say the Government will try to do something to make it better. I challenge the Taoiseach or any other Member of this House to drink this water. I will not drink it. There are elderly people around Cork city who cannot see and do not know what is coming out of their tap. Consider trying to bathe a child in this water. What the Taoiseach is saying today might sound good but no action is being taken. My constituents - fellow Corkonians - are suffering.

The Taoiseach: As I said, Uisce Éireann is working proactively to address the issues with water supply in Cork. The planned flushing of the network took place in the first week of July last year in the Ballyvolane area, including Ballyvolane Shopping Centre, Ballyvolane new

road, Riverview Estate and Meadow Park Lawn, over a seven-week period. Those flushing works are part of Uisce Éireann's network improvement plan to address water discolouration issues. Uisce Éireann says it is seeing a positive trend in areas that have been flushed to date. It expects those works to lead to further improvements in water quality. Planned flushing has been completed at Spring Lane, Ballyvolane Road, Park Court, Meelick Park and Kempton Park. A substantial area of flushing in Cork North-Central, which encompasses areas off the Ballyvolane Road, commenced at the end of September last year and was set to take approximately two months to complete. Further works were to get under way on Wednesday, 30 October, with the planned flushing to take place at Mervue Crescent and so forth. The work is continuing and the investment is going to be allocated. Obviously, Uisce Éireann will programme that investment. Substantial billions of euro will be allocated to Irish Water in the context of the national development plan to deal with this issue and wider issues in terms of wastewater treatment plants and water supply for new housing developments.

Ceisteanna ar Pholasaí nó ar Reachtaíocht – Questions on Policy or Legislation

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to Questions on Policy or Legislation. I call the leader of the Sinn Féin Party, Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Figures were released this morning to our justice spokesperson, Deputy Carthy, that make for very shocking reading. They reveal that suspects in 40,348 crimes carried out in 2024 were out on bail. This is an issue we have raised repeatedly with the Government, and I am raising it again this morning. The 2024 figure represented an increase of 5,000 on the figure for 2022. Astonishingly, the combined figure for the past three years for suspects implicated in crime while out on bail amounted to 114,655. This situation cannot continue. The public will not tolerate a situation whereby people out on bail are at liberty to reoffend again and again. The bail laws need to be examined with urgency to ensure they are being properly applied. When will the Government finally acknowledge and get on top of this issue?

The Taoiseach: I have no difficulty engaging with the Deputy on this issue. There had been reforms of the bail laws. People are very intolerant of people who are awaiting trial, etc., and who then go out and commit crimes again. I do not know whether the Deputy is proposing wholesale internment of everybody who is a suspect because that is another side of the story. The point is, the figures are huge but that is a wide range of cases.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The figures are shocking.

The Taoiseach: We have to focus on those who have a history of crime and who are again brought before the system.

The bail laws have been reformed. They will be reformed further. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is looking at this, but there are limits to what can be done, as I am sure the Deputy would appreciate.

If you take the politics out of it, we have no issue. We want to stamp down on crime. We are very intolerant of people committing crime while out on bail but you cannot have a system

where everybody who is a suspect gets locked up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The figures do not tell that story.

The Taoiseach: I hope that is not what we are talking about.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yesterday, the Department of housing announced it had allocated €265 million for housing acquisitions but it is unclear how much of that will support the tenant *in situ* scheme. We know from announcements that there are some restrictions on who can access the scheme. It seems priority is going to families, older people and disabled people. Single renters slip into homelessness at a higher rate than any other group and already the scheme is failing to address real need, even for those who apparently would have priority. It is increasingly difficult to prevent renters who receive an eviction notice from falling into homelessness because so many of us are finding gaps and flaws in the tenant *in situ* scheme, even where landlords want to help and even where individuals might be able to become a social tenant. Will the Taoiseach reassure us that Government will provide sufficient resourcing to meet the real needs of those who are at risk of homelessness, who are receiving notices and who are desperate to see the tenant *in situ* scheme activated and that single people as well as families and others will be able to access the scheme?

The Taoiseach: That is why there is prioritisation in the tenant *in situ* scheme that has been announced by the Minister for housing with approximately €325 million allocated, which is a substantial sum. There should be prioritisation because the original idea of this was to prevent people from falling into homelessness. Additional to that, of course, there is significant investment under way in the Housing First programme, which is one of the more effective ways, working with the approved housing bodies involved and with the various organisations for the homeless, to look after people who are homeless or on the brink of homelessness. It is important because we have had a debate in the House about value for money, looking at schemes, reviewing them and whether we are targeting properly. There has been huge debate about that. We should have that too in terms of a scheme and see whether we are actually directing the money to where it is needed most. That is the focus of this particular scheme and why priorities are being identified.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It has come to light, thanks to *The Ditch*, that an audit has taken place into the hip surgeries on children in three hospitals. This follows serious concerns from a whistleblower that needless surgeries were taking place. The report, published by *The Ditch*, shows that, in the leaked report, in Cappagh, 79% of the surgeries did not meet the required threshold, in Temple Street, it was 60%, and in Crumlin, it was 2%. Will the Taoiseach publish this report? Will he confirm the contents of the report? Will the Taoiseach engage with the families and what other actions will he take? The public, children, their parents and their families need to have confidence in the system. We need transparency and accountability and we need to ensure the highest medical standards are upheld.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that a clinical audit is being conducted by an external international expert on surgery for children with developmental dysplasia of the hip across CHI and the National Orthopaedic Hospital at Cappagh. Development dysplasia of the hip is a problem with the way a baby's hip joint forms and some children with DDH may require surgery. The purpose of this audit is to assess that surgical practice was in line with international standards and practices. The audit process is now in its final stages. CHI and Cappagh, I understand, are committed, and should be committed, to sharing the findings of the audit once

it is completed and to communicate that, in particular, with the relevant families and patients in accordance with any recommendations from the final report. We have not seen the final report yet. It is awaited before any conclusions can be drawn on the matter.

Deputy Charles Ward: I have been speaking to parents and teachers from Little Angels Special School in Letterkenny. From the day the first block was ever laid in the new building, we knew the school would be too small to fulfil future demands. Some of the temporary solutions to this issue could be to use two rooms in the old school and transport the newest modular buildings to the new building. Why did this project start when the Department already knew it would be too small? Three classrooms in a neighbouring school had to be utilised to accommodate the demand.

According to *The Irish Times*, the numbers of children with autism in school systems has increased by 1.8% in the past three years but there has been no increase in places to reflect this. Now nine children with complex needs have to go to school in September. Their families are so worried that they are in distress. They have nowhere to go. They need to know if they will get into Little Angels in September. Will the Taoiseach do something to help them? It should not be that families are left in such distress. These are most vulnerable families, in society and in Donegal.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Doherty raised this yesterday and I answered it comprehensively in terms of the information that I had. There is a new school nearing completion, as the Deputy says, and there are some proposals in terms of additionality to try to facilitate children who need places there. It seems the new school is already at capacity. I can get the note to the Deputy on the up-to-date position.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to raise another example of Government waste. The Minister for Social Protection told Aontú yesterday that there were €100 million in overpayments on the PUP payments in the Covid period. A total of 42,400 PUP overpayments were made during that period of time. Some 1,400 PUP payments were made due to fraud during that time. Due to the cyberattack, we had a specific type of fraud that happened where the identity of HSE and Tusla's employees were stolen, accounts were set up and hundreds of thousands of euro were drawn down in fraud in that regard as well. The PUP payment was obviously an income safety net for people during Covid but it seems tens of thousands of people were allowed to abuse the system with the result that there were €100 million of overpayments. When will the billions of euro of waste under this Government come to an end, what steps will the Taoiseach take to safeguarding such systems in the future and how will he recoup that €100 million for the taxpayer?

The Taoiseach: I am disappointed with the Deputy's approach in the sense that the PUP was essential for people.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Nobody argues that.

The Taoiseach: You do, actually.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, you do. You are just playing it all ways.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: You are answering a different question.

The Taoiseach: I just want to make the point. I am not making a different point; it is a very

important point. If the State did not intervene in the emergency fashion that it intervened, businesses would have gone under and people would have been destitute and impoverished. That does not excuse fraud but if the State had been more cautious and slower and went through every single case, people would have been in deep trouble during the Covid.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some 42,000 overpayments; €100 million.

The Taoiseach: The State took people on trust. The State said we have to intervene comprehensively and decisively and help people in their hour of need. That is what we did.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: With safeguards.

The Taoiseach: You come back four years later and you say, “You are wasting money and you are full of it,” etc. That is just disingenuous distortion. That is what that is.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: You cannot set up payments without safeguards. That is what you are saying.

The Taoiseach: I want to say this: we will go after the overpayments.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: The Department will go after the overpayments.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Fraud must always be pursued and dealt with-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some €100 million.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----but there is always a balance in life. Let us give people credit. A lot of people did the right thing during Covid-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: -----particularly the Department of Social Protection.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: In light of the commitment made in the programme for Government to continue to significantly increase the income disregard for carer’s allowance in each budget and, ultimately, phase out the means test, will the Government reconsider cases of people whose carer’s allowance has been removed because they had to increase their income to provide private therapies for their children? I have a case of a family in Meath West, a couple who have fought for their daughter’s needs every step of the way. The mother continued to work despite her daughter’s complex needs and the father took on a second job, all to ensure their daughter could avail of private services as they felt they had waited too long publicly. I welcome the commitment to phase out the means test, but could we not freeze immediately the review of means test for carers currently in the system?

The Taoiseach: The Government is committed to dealing with the means test in respect of the carer’s allowance and it will be in the next budget that progress on that front will commence. We will have to wait until budget time and the lead-up to the budget on that issue. It is a very important issue that is in the programme for Government and all parties to the programme for

Government are very committed to doing this. It is very important.

More broadly, it is about how we can support families with children with special needs across the income spectrum and do everything we can to ease the financial pressures many of them are under. I take the Deputy's point that this year there are challenges but the budget last year was enormous. There was significant expenditure. We will do this on a programme basis and, on a number of fronts, we will endeavour to help people in the circumstances the Deputy identified.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I seek an update on the progress of the Gorey primary care centre which was first proposed in 2010 and is yet again back on the drawing board. Gorey is a thriving and fast-growing town with a population of more than 35,000 when Courtown and Riverchapel are included, but at the moment it is almost impossible to register with the GP or dentist. I welcome the programme for Government which clearly states this Government will open more primary care centres. However, the current operating lease model proposal on the table for the Gorey primary care centre is simply not viable to any developer or construction company. I ask that the HSE take direct control and deliver this project for the people of north Wexford.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I met the head of estates for Dublin south east which covers our particular area during the week on all things related to estates in that area. We discussed three primary care centres and Gorey was one, as well as another in Lismore in my area. It is going out to tender in the first quarter of this year. The Deputy is right about the model that is being used to do this. With the previous tender that was in place, the developer withdrew from it and therefore progress was lost, but it is going out to tender in the first quarter and we hope to make progress very quickly.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Today AIB announced a staggering profit of €2.8 billion. That comes a week after Bank of Ireland boasted €1.9 billion in profits. This is not the result of more productivity or innovation. It is the result of banks squeezing homeowners and short-changing savers. Financial institutions on the Government's watch have lumped workers and families with extortionate interest rates in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Ireland, if the Taoiseach does not know, has among the highest interest rates in the European Union. This has been going on for years. Just like with insurance companies and energy companies, the Government is standing idly by while banks are taking advantage of workers and families.

I will ask the Taoiseach three questions. Does he agree these profits have been made off the backs of ordinary workers and families? What will he do to bring an end to this and hold banks to account? Will he make sure banks pass on the benefit to customers instead of announcing bumper profits at their expense?

The Taoiseach: The economy has been extremely strong in recent years. That has helped the profitability of many companies, including banks. By the way, the Central Bank governs the supervision of banks, as the Deputy knows. However, I do believe that in the next while we should focus on finance available to building and house building in particular, that both the cost of that finance would be reduced and that the banks would engage much more on the single greatest priority facing this country, which is housing. That is where my focus is on engagement.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: So reduce for builders and screw the homeowners? Is that what

it is?

The Taoiseach: No. There have been huge mortgage drawdowns for first-time buyers in recent years and banks benefit from that, but we need more housing. If you talk to anyone about house building the cost of finance is a big inhibitor. It is a big problem. We need to look at the cost of finance to get to 50,000. I am interested in solutions not sloganeering or politicking and so on.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No, I am asking about mortgages. The Taoiseach is talking about builders.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. I call Deputy McAuliffe.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I raise the issue of special class places and the process for applying for them. For the past six or seven years I have been dealing with parents. Between October and the following June or July many of those parents go through a wasted process of applying to multiple schools. The programme for Government was quite strong in identifying a common application process for special classes. It would make a lot of sense. I have been in contact with the parents of Arlo, Zayn, Thomas, Malcolm, Daniel and Riley. Many parents have come to me. In previous years the list has been far longer. In part this is because nearly a third of the special classes that exist were put in place over the past four years. The last piece in the puzzle is to put in place a common application process so the parents do not have the difficulty of applying for multiple schools. That is the NCSE's job. It is not an advisory service. It should be the ones finding places and doing so over the period so that, when people leave primary school, there is a place in line at second level.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Michael Moynihan): We are moving to have a centralised portal to make sure there is a centralised system for application. On challenges parents have in finding places, particularly at primary level, and we have 218 sanctioned and huge work is ongoing at departmental level to sanction more, it is a key priority for me and the whole of the Government to make sure that stress of finding places is limited because parents have enough going on. We want to ensure there is a streamlined process. We will work with might and main to make sure that happens. We will work with parents, the NCSE and the Department of Education to ensure a streamlined process. What has happened heretofore is not acceptable into the future. We must also bring certainty to families in the earlier part of the school cycle so they know where their children are going in September eight or nine months to a year before that and not having a huge issue as is happening at the moment.

Deputy James O'Connor: I raise the issue of the Castlemartyr and Killeagh bypass with the announcement of national roads funding imminent. My question is on the appointment of a design consultant. We are due to see funding allocated shortly for national road projects but the appointment of a design consultant is necessary for this project to advance. I would appreciate if the Taoiseach could comment on this to see if the Government will support this to happen and to allow the project to progress.

The Taoiseach: Deputy O'Connor has been pursuing this issue for some time, to be fair to him. He has made some progress but he would like it to be faster. I mean that seriously. These things can take time. He has my support and that of Government in respect of this project. I will see to it if we can, through the various agencies, get a design consultant appointed.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It is very clear the people of Ireland stand with the Palestinian

people and oppose Israeli aggression and apartheid. There are groups holding events, protests, vigils and collecting signatures the length and breadth of Ireland to try to get the Government to finally pass the occupied territories Bill. The Drogheda Stands with Palestine group has mobilised in solidarity every Saturday since 7 October 2023, which is 17 months this Saturday. On 1 February, it ran a vibrant three-hour campaign and collected 1,002 physical signatures and 167 online, calling for the occupied territories Bill to be enacted without delay. These signatures have come from people of all ages and all walks of life. I understand the Taoiseach's party colleague, Deputy McGreehan, met the group last week and collected a petition pack to present to the Taoiseach. Will he confirm that he has received this? What response does he have to give to this group of activists who have asked me to raise this today?

The Taoiseach: Yes, Deputy McGreehan has spoken to me on this and I will talk to her again later. First, the Irish Government has been very proactive on the Middle East and the Palestinian question in recognising the State of Palestine and taking a very strong position in supporting UNWRA as the only viable UN agency that can enable education in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere as well as medical provision. We have also been very strongly involved in ensuring a surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza and working with Arab partners in respect of peace within Gaza itself. I have noticed that every time the Government takes a step, there are those in our political system who want to drive a wedge between the Government and the people on this question.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The question was on the occupied territories Bill.

The Taoiseach: I am coming to that. I know that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: This is the point I am making. Once this is done and the next thing is done, then it is something else and it is always used to denigrate the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Heneghan.

The Taoiseach: The Government is progressing that Bill and is progressing legislation.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Scandalous.

1 o'clock

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Céard atá an Rialtas ag déanamh leis an laghdú de 40% ar bhuiséad Fhoras na Gaeilge le 20 bliain anuas, nuair a thugtar boilsciú san áireamh, a chur i gceart agus cothrom na Féinne a thabhairt d'fhorbairt na Gaeilge fud fad na tíre? Sa tréimhse chéanna, d'éirigh buiséad an Chomhairle Ealaíon ó €40 milliún go €140 milliún. Cé mhéad airgead a chuirfidh an Rialtas ar fáil le buiséad Fhoras na Gaeilge a mhaoiniú i gceart?

The Taoiseach: Mar is eol don Teachta, tá deacracht ó thaobh Fhoras na Gaeilge faoi láthair. Níl aon amhras faoi sin. Níl an Rialtas anseo freagrach as an deacracht sin. Táimid ag déanamh gach aon iarracht an cheist sin a réiteach. Mar aon leis sin, táimid sásta níos mó infheistíocht a chur isteach i gcúrsaí Gaeilge i gcoitinne agus níos mó tacaíocht a thabhairt d'Fhoras na Gaeilge. I gcomhthéacs an clár Shared Island, táimid sásta níos mó a dhéanamh le Foras na Gaeilge agus leis an áisíneacht a bhaineann leis an Ultais. Beimid ag déileáil le Foras na Gaeilge. Tá an tAire, an Teachta Calleary, ag déanamh gach aon iarracht an cheist phráinneach atá ann faoi láthair a réiteach.

Deputy Alan Kelly: There was astonishment among serving and retired Garda members at the Taoiseach's comments on Garda vetting last week in response to a question I had asked. To put back on record what the Taoiseach said, he asked what vetting actually means and what it actually produces. He stated, "It is quite limited in what it actually does." I have been contacted by a number of serving Garda members who have been back in Templemore and are concerned about what is happening there. In light of the Taoiseach's comments last week, is this lack of full vetting of trainee gardaí going to continue? Is it now Government policy, across all Departments and State agencies, that there will be a *laissez-faire* approach to the full vetting of people before they gain employment in State agencies or Departments?

The Taoiseach: That is a misreading of my comments. Sometimes people get the impression that vetting is extremely comprehensive in terms of the background of a person. It is not as comprehensive as people might believe. The big cry in the House for quite a while now has been for more gardaí, getting more people into training and so on. I will ask the Minister for Justice to reply to the Deputy more comprehensively and specifically in respect of Templemore, but I think we need to reflect on things generally. That is the spirit of the rhetorical question I put back to the Deputy last week. I know people may say I am against this or that, but I am not. I am simply trying to have a reasonable discussion on issues of this kind. I remember during Covid when we were screaming to get people to do things in a public health emergency, and people were saying we could not do that because the vetting would take three months. We did not have three months during Covid. I have no issue with vetting - none - but we need more gardaí and more training places. I will ask the Minister to talk to the Deputy in respect of the specific issue in Templemore and where we are going forward.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Is the Taoiseach aware of the report into hip operations at Children's Health Ireland, which has been reported on in The Ditch? It suggests, incredibly, that nearly 80% of hip operations carried out on children in Cappagh hospital, and 60% of those operations in Temple Street, were unnecessary surgeries done on children. A whistleblower suggests they may have been done "purely for financial gain". Will this report be published? Were any further osteotomies carried out in Temple Street or Cappagh after the report was delivered? Is there any plan to extend the extent of the review? It only dealt with the past two years, whereas there may be a need to go back even further.

The Taoiseach: First, I dealt with that comprehensively earlier when Deputy Rice raised the exact same question, and I made the point that a clinical audit is being conducted by an external international expert on surgery for children with developmental dysplasia of the hip across CHI and the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh. Developmental dysplasia of the hip, as I said, is a problem with the way a baby's hip joint forms, and some children with DDH may require surgery. CHI and Cappagh hospital are committed to sharing the findings of the audit once it is completed, I understand, as they should, and importantly, to communicating with relevant families and patients in accordance with any recommendations from the final report. I do not have the report and my understanding is that it is still awaited. We need to await its presentation to the Minister.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The extended roll-out of the hot meals programme to schools has been welcomed, I think, by all schools. There might be questions about the quality on occasions but that is for another day. Baineann an cheist atá á cur os comhair na Dála agam inniu leis na costais bhreise atá i gceist chun na béilí a chur chuig na hoileáin. I understand that a school on the Aran Islands has incurred an extra cost of more than €100 per month - I understand it may be as much as €120 - because of transport and freight costs. It has written to the

Department of Social Protection, but there has been no move yet to deal with the matter. I know that the Government's policy is to roll out this programme so that all schools have it, but I do not think it was envisaged that island schools would incur extra costs in order to benefit from the scheme. I ask the Taoiseach to deal with this.

The Taoiseach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Beidh mé ag caint leis an Aire, an Teachta Calleary, faoi sin anois. Tá an Teachta ag rá go bhfuil sé i bhfad níos costasaí do na scoileanna ar na hoileáin a bheith páirteach sa scéim seo. Ní raibh sé sin i gceist againn. Le cúnamh Dé, beimid in ann é sin a réiteach sula i bhfad. Ardóidh mé an cheist leis an Aire, an Teachta Calleary.

Deputy Michael Collins: For the past two years, parents in Bantry and the surrounding areas have been advocating for a dedicated school bus service to transport over 30 children from Bantry to Schull. Despite numerous representations to the previous Minister for Education, this issue remains unresolved. Today I am appealing to the new Government to address this pressing need. Providing a school bus for these children is a modest request, especially considering the significant expenditure in other areas. These parents and children deserve reliable transport to attend school and we are simply asking for a bus to facilitate this. For two hours a day at the moment, or one hour in the morning and one in the evening, the total emissions would be approximately 480 kg of CO₂. After a week this adds up to 3,360 kg, or 336 tonnes, of CO₂. Reducing the number of cars on the road or switching to more sustainable transport options can help to lower this carbon footprint significantly. Will the Taoiseach work with the Minister for Education to provide this vital bus service to bring 30 children from Bantry to Schull Community College?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will discuss this with the Minister for Education. As the Deputy knows, the school transport system has its anomalies and complexities. I will see what we can do in respect of that. I fully share his view that public transport can reduce emissions through the replacement of cars, and his commitment to the climate change aspect of this is welcome. More fundamentally, however, I think he wants to get a bus for the kids. I will talk to the Minister. There are issues, as the Deputy knows, around school transport.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Representatives of the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association came up to Agriculture House yesterday. Their concerns are about proposals to rewet peat-type soils and to stop people draining peat-type soils that have not been drained yet or have had only a little drainage. This will greatly and adversely impact on farmers' ability to farm, especially on marginal farms in places like south Kerry, west Kerry and all along the western seaboard. I am glad the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, met this group. One of their asks is that mineral-type soils not be included and they say there should not be a compulsory order.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, to answer.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The group is saying that payment rules are going to be affected by these new GAEC 2 proposals. I am asking the Ministers and the Taoiseach to consider this. It looks as though this proposal came from the Greens. I want it to be stopped.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I reassure Deputy Healy-Rae that the GAEC 2 proposals will not have negative impacts for farmers.

These baseline elements were agreed as part of the CAP strategic plan in 2021. Ireland had a derogation in 2022 and 2023 while we put a proposal together. We are the last remaining country in Europe to make a proposal in this space. We would have been in breach since 1 January 2025 if we did not do that this year and I am not willing, as Minister for agriculture, to subject the State or our CAP funding to potential fines of €100 million per year. At the heart of the proposal we have put to the Commission and on which we consulted all of the farming bodies, including the INHFA and many others - I accept their points of concern but I disagree with them - is an approach that will allow farmers in the GAEC 2 area who have more than 50% of peat in their soil to continue their normal agricultural activity, continue to plough, reseed and maintain drains-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----and have new drainage in line with existing national planning legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Mythen is next.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Will you stop people from cutting turf, Minister?

Deputy Martin Heydon: It has nothing to do with that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Minister.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: There is a deep sense of frustration among section 39 workers, who are the backbone of many support services and help many individuals in need every single day. Despite their incredible dedication, they are often met with indifference by the Government. The Government claims to prioritise the protection of these vital services, but where is the action? Where is the fairness in pay and recognition? Workers are leaving these services in their droves because they cannot survive. With the continuing cost-of-living crisis, they are struggling financially. We need to see real, tangible support for our section 39 workers, who provide essential services to the most vulnerable people in Ireland. It is time for the Government to step up and honour its commitments. With pay talks to resume on Friday, what specific actions are being taken to ensure section 39 workers achieve pay parity with section 38 workers? These are promises the Taoiseach made to these workers before the election.

The Taoiseach: I accept fully that community and voluntary health and social care workers in section 39 organisations are the backbone of essential services. The State depends on them to deliver critical support to people across the country every day. I welcome the fact that talks reconvened through the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, yesterday for organisations funded under sections 39, 56, 10 and 40, with some progress having been made. As the Deputy referenced, these talks have been adjourned at the request of the WRC until tomorrow morning. A number of issues remain to be resolved, including the range of funding streams within the scope of any new agreement. We are anxious that there would be agreement and I hope the talks that will continue tomorrow can lead to a breakthrough on this issue.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: It is about pay parity.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I know what it is all about. The programme for Government commits to working with the voluntary sector to progress this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.13 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.13 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.13 p.m. and resumed at 2.13 p.m.

Policing and Community Safety: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Martin Daly: I would like to remember the late rural crime activist and Roscommon independent councillor, Tony Waldron of Ballintubber, as I make these comments. The safety and security of our rural communities must be a top priority. Across Roscommon-Galway, we are seeing a rise in serious criminal activity. There must be a response that matches the scale of the challenge. People in villages like Oran, Glinsk, Ballygar and Knockcroghery are living in fear of mobile crime groups. They deserve to feel safe in their homes and to be able to conduct their businesses. There have been raids by the Garda armed response unit, discharging of firearms and increased antisocial behaviour linked to organised crime in Ballinasloe in the past month alone.

Crime is evolving and so must our approach to tackling it. We need to strengthen our response in two key areas: enforcement and prevention. Criminals are more organised, exploiting gaps in policing and the lack of deterrence in rural areas. We must ensure An Garda Síochána has the resources to monitor key access routes, disrupt networks and prevent crime before it happens. Increased patrols on the roads over the Shannon into Roscommon-Galway would send a clear signal that law enforcement is proactive, supplemented by an intelligence-led approach. Equally, we must recognise the complex factors that contribute to crime. Community deprivation, lack of balanced development and lack of educational opportunities deepen the challenges faced by law enforcement.

Garda station closures remain a serious concern. Ballaghaderreen Garda station - in a town of 3,000 people with rapid population growth due to international protection applicants and vulnerable to mobile crime gangs - has closed. They have shouldered their responsibility; the State must shoulder its share. Their Garda station is more than just a building; it is a deterrent to crime and a reassurance to the community. It must be reopened.

Another trend is the increase in arson. These attacks are deliberate, targeted and designed to create fear. They threaten the stability of rural communities and even the will of the State. A strong forensic-led investigation strategy is required. Government has committed to recruiting 5,000 new gardaí in its term. Recognition must be given to rural communities left to manage with overstretched Garda units covering wide geographical areas. The people of Roscommon-Galway deserve an effective security strategy. Security should not be determined by geography.

Deputy Peter Roche: In his absence, I wish the Minister for Justice well in his role. The issue I wished to raise with the Minister concerns gardaí seeking transfers, particularly the case of a young garda based in Dublin city from my neck of the woods, Abbeyknockmoy, just outside Tuam. She is a married woman with a mortgage on a new property she and her husband built in the last few years. They are blessed with a young child of a couple of months and the plan is for her to return to work. She has been pleading since 2021 for a transfer from Dublin

back home to the west or as near it as possible. Within an hour's commute of her home with be great. The round trip from her home currently is 370 km per day. That is a big challenge. Having to find accommodation in Dublin while paying a mortgage in east Galway is not the most desirable situation.

We must not lose the experience we have in the force. Retention is an issue and we need to focus on retaining the experience of dedicated members and to look sympathetically on cases such as that young garda. She loves her job and the testimonials from her colleagues in Dublin about her experience and value to the force are very positive. I wish the system would look more favourably on her situation and afford her an opportunity to build her future in the Garda, commuting daily while still being able to care for her personal and professional business at home in east Galway.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I have had the privilege of working with some of the finest gardaí in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny in recent years as mayor of Kilkenny and chairman of Kilkenny County Council. My priority is that everyone has the right to feel safe and be safe in their community and home. Across the country, communities are dealing with the scourge of crime and antisocial behaviour. We need to build stronger, safer communities by strengthening An Garda Síochána, expanding resources and modernising support to tackle crime.

At present, there are 14,100 members of An Garda Síochána. It is simply not enough for a country of our size. There are only 312 in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, which is a 10% decrease in the past four years. This decrease has to stop. The programme for Government commits to providing funding for at least 5,000 Garda recruits in the next five years. These are badly needed in towns like Graigueenamanagh, Callan, Thomastown, Mullinavat, Mooncoin and Castlecomer. Lack of Garda resources is a huge issue.

The primary focus has to be to allow Garda to become more visible in our communities. They have to be visible on the beat and that is not felt in rural Ireland at the moment, including the constituency I represent. According to an *Irish Examiner*-Ipsos poll published recently, 70% of people living in rural Ireland do not believe there is a visible Garda presence in their area. Members of the public believe - and they are right - that improved visibility can deter crime. We have all these recruits coming out and I urge the Minister to make sure these recruits do not just stay in Dublin city. It is important that the city be looked after, but not by forgetting rural towns and villages around the country. We need to continue supporting our community alert and text alert schemes throughout the country and make necessary funding available. I have first-hand experience, having been chairman of my own text alert scheme, but the likes of Rosbercon, Glenmore, Goresbridge, Paulstown, Ballinkillen, Borris and St. Mullins, which the Ceann Comhairle is familiar with, worked at these text alert groups, and it was fantastic. They need to be supported.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The lack of Garda presence and visibility in our communities is having a serious impact. Many people in my constituency are living in fear, particularly elderly and vulnerable people and those in rural communities. People are having to take drastic measures to increase security in their homes. We know that burglaries are on the rise. There were 386 burglaries reported in Galway in 2023, an increase of 8%. The most recent figures published this week show levels of burglaries continuing to rise across the west and across the State. Antisocial behaviour is also a serious issue, and the lack of Garda visibility in our communities is contributing to this. We do not see gardaí on the beat and they do not have a

sufficient presence. Yet, in the Galway Garda division the number of gardaí actually decreased last year by 2% from 618 to 604. This does not include the number of gardaí not available for work due to career breaks, maternity leave and so on. A huge number of Garda stations have been closed, particularly rural stations, leaving no permanent presence in these areas. In my home town of Athenry, which has a population of 5,000 people, the Garda station is rarely open. It opens from time to time. There is no certainty as to when it will be open. People locally tell me that if you call the station, you are often transferred over to Clifden Garda station on the western edge of County Galway, about two hours' drive away. That is not good enough for a town of Athenry's size. This lack of gardaí and Garda visibility has serious consequences. It impacts on people's sense of safety, on deterrence and on crime prevention. There needs to be a particular focus on policing in rural communities and a rural Garda plan is needed to address those gaps where we have stations that have closed, or in areas where Garda numbers are down. We have a rising population, and we desperately need more gardaí in our communities. The intake capacity for Garda training must be increased to get to where we need to be in terms of numbers. We must also tackle the root causes of crime such as inequality, addiction, mental health issues and so on if we are to fully address these problems.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am delighted to speak on statements on policing and community safety, but if we are to be serious about this the outcome has to be that people actually feel safe in their own local communities. Unfortunately, a lot of them do not. In 2007 John Fitzgerald produced a report that led to the Limerick regeneration programme. In that report he stated that we needed a minimum of 100 extra gardaí for the four regeneration areas. That never materialised and we have had problems since then. I put on record that the gardaí in Limerick do a really good job. I deal with them on a continuous basis, but they cannot respond, they cannot do their work and they cannot deliver for the communities if they do not actually exist. Numbers decreased between 2023 and 2024, not significantly, but they should be going the other way. We did a survey recently and 547 people responded. Most of those were from regeneration areas but not exclusively and 57% of those people said they did not feel safe in their own communities. We need a focus on Limerick, and we need additional gardaí on the streets.

On other issues, I have raised previously in the Dáil particular problems in particular areas. The previous Minister for Justice organised for a Garda response in a particular part of Limerick with really good results, but there were only good results because we put extra resources in. We authorised overtime and we got additional staff and Operation Copóg was successful, but it has run out and the area is back to where it was before. I raised the issue of horses in urban areas in a Topical Issue question last week. The numbers of seizures are down dramatically and that is because there are no gardaí available to go out when the local authority is seizing horses. They need to have Garda protection when they are doing that because it is not safe. Unfortunately, and I hate to say this in the Dáil, but I have said on a number of occasions that crack cocaine is prevalent in Limerick city. It started off in Limerick city. It is available in Limerick city. It is cheaper to buy in Limerick city than anywhere else. People come from all over the country to buy their crack cocaine in Limerick city because it is cheaper. We obviously need to look at addressing not just the crime aspects of that but the health aspects, and funding groups that are supporting people in addiction. Other issues include the courts in Limerick. We have a brand new Courts Service facility with six courtrooms, but they are never fully operational. People are waiting for long times. As was raised earlier, the issue around bail needs to be looked at. People are entitled to bail - I have no problem with that - but continuously reoffending while on bail should be addressed.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The prevention of crime and antisocial behaviour requires a wide range of social, economic and community actions including education, employment, training, income, social inclusion, community facilities and community policing. I will say a few words on community policing. Over the past few years, community policing has effectively been dismantled, particularly since the introduction of the new Garda districts. I recall a briefing by Commissioner Harris, and it was immediately clear to me that community policing was going to take a huge hit and was not a priority any more. I was of course assured otherwise, but the figures do not lie. Nationally, in 2010 we had 1,182 community gardaí. In 2024 there are 700, a reduction of almost 50%. In County Tipperary it is even worse. In 2010 we had 108. In 2023 we had eight. Community policing is invaluable in building up relationships with communities. Local communities know their local garda. They will have his or her contact details, and they build up trust with the communities and individuals within them. Crucially, their relationship and trust and friendship with young people is built up through community policing. The community gardaí have in the past become involved in all sorts of local community activities such as youth clubs, sports clubs and residents' associations. In other words, they are seen and are active in their areas, and are available in their areas. As a result, crime and antisocial behaviour are reduced, and importantly, young people who might tend to stray are identified at an early age and supported. Unfortunately, all of those areas have been lost and the few community gardaí left work above and beyond the call of duty and are stretched and stressed to the limit. There needs to be a new priority given to community policing, with gardaí working from the ground up. This obviously requires additional recruitment specifically for gardaí. Visibility of gardaí on the beat is also vitally important. Too many of our towns and city centres are given over to actions of antisocial behaviour, drug use and drug dealing. Many of these people are known locally to the gardaí, but little or nothing appears to be done, so gardaí on the beat are vital for the safety of the public.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are in the midst of a manufactured moral panic. To divert attention from away from its failures on housing, health, disability and climate, the Government prefers to have endless statements on policing and to pass more laws that erode our civil liberties. The programme for Government contains a frightening litany of attacks on civil liberties, all under the guise of getting tough on crime. Of course, it is never white-collar crime that they mean, not when they negotiated the programme for Government with Ireland's best known white-collar criminal.

I will address one of the worst attacks on civil liberties in the programme for Government, which is the promise to enable the Garda to use AI and facial recognition technology. The Government is committed to legislate to provide for retrospective searching of images, using facial recognition technology before the end of this Dáil term. It goes even further, by promising to introduce live facial recognition technology supposedly only in cases of terrorism, national security - whatever that means - and missing persons. It also pledges to increase funding for CCTV and to ban the wearing of masks at protests.

This is dystopian surveillance state stuff. It is also a direct attack on the right of disabled people to protest. Many disabled people need to wear masks for medical reasons and would not be able to take part in protests if banned from wearing them. I have no doubt that this would suit this Government very well. The previous Government faced effective protests of overwhelmingly masked disabled people against the so-called Green Paper. The Government knows its record on disability is disgraceful and it is under great pressure from the disability rights movement.

I have spoken before about how facial recognition technology is universally opposed by human rights groups. According to the American Civil Liberties Union:

Face recognition massively expands the government's power to track our movements and target people based on their race, religion, political affiliation, or speech - and while everyone's rights are at stake, Black and Brown people are harmed the most when this racist technology collides with our racist systems.

There is very significant racial bias within FRT. Error rates are 60 times higher for west African women than they are for white men. AI reflects, regurgitates and accelerates the racial biases that exist in our society, which come from the top. Together with FRT, this will be used to accelerate racist profiling. The claim by the Garda that it is 99% accurate is terrifying. If the Garda really believes that, we are entering dangerous territory. Instead of going in this direction, we should be joining those many parts of the world that have banned the use of facial recognition technology. We should also ban the use of AI in policing.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will first register that we are again here, months after the general election, to make statements. We need to move on. The Government is complaining about a lack of Dáil business. We are making statements into a void and nothing will actually happen afterwards.

I live in a working class community where crime is an issue and I represent many communities where it is an issue. People certainly have the right to ring the Garda and get a response but we need a police force that is accountable and answerable to the community. This day last week, we had a debate on one of the biggest aspects of crime there is, violence against women, and there was very little interest from the Government benches. There are three Government Members here today. There was one here last week. Some 52% of women experience sexual violence. That is a very significant number of people in our community.

I also represent a very diverse electorate and, in many meetings I have had with people from migrant and minority backgrounds, the fear in which they live has been very noticeable. Contrary to what some in this Dáil might say, the people who are most at risk from crime are people from migrant backgrounds. I had a meeting with Pakistani taxi drivers in my community. They have lived and worked in Ireland for over 20 years. They registered the fear they are feeling because there is now so much racism in society that, if anyone says anything to them and they respond, the whole situation will escalate. This applies to health workers as well. Hate crime increased by 12% in 2023. Some 60% of people from migrant backgrounds report that they have experienced hate or harassment. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has said that one in four non-white people had experienced racism in the last 12 months while 31% had witnessed it happening to people they were with. More gardaí on the beat is not the answer because people from minority backgrounds have a real fear of how they are going to be treated by gardaí. The ICCL reports that 83% fear racial profiling or discrimination in their interactions with gardaí. In my own constituency, George Nkencho was the first black person to be shot and killed by gardaí. That is a real fear for a great many young black people in this society. That would not have happened and he would be alive today if he was white. There is absolutely no question that racial bias played a role in that and in the subsequent cover-up.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome this opportunity although I share the frustration of the previous speakers that we are again having statements on this issue. We have had statements over and over and no progress has been made. On the Policing, Security and Community

Safety Act 2024, I spent a short while on the justice committee and I had serious concerns about the Act. I put them aside because we were absolutely assured that community would form the major part of it and that we would have gardaí on the ground. That has not happened. It has not even been implemented, although we have been given a reason or two for that. It is worrying. I come from Galway and I believe there should be more gardaí in the city, although I acknowledge Deputy Coppinger's concerns about the interaction between gardaí on the ground and people from certain backgrounds. In theory, we all want to see more gardaí on the ground. I say that as someone whose introduction to the Garda was reading the O'Higgins report on Sergeant McCabe. That certainly opened my eyes to what was happening at a very high level in An Garda Síochána, which then filtered down. It is the same thing with the Morris tribunal, the Smithwick tribunal and others, the reports of which I read in my first few years in the Dáil. Notwithstanding that, it is a testament to the people of Ireland and the good gardaí on the ground that we actually want more of them. We feel safer having them but we have never got them.

Under the guise of community safety, we are talking about facial recognition. I absolutely tremble at the thought of this being pushed to make communities safer. In my experience in the Dáil, the ushers on the ground are absolutely fantastic in providing security by watching exactly what is happening in the Dáil. It is similar with gardaí on the ground who are part of the community. I do not like the word "embedded". A liaison or community garda whom you can call makes us all feel much safer. The Ceann Comhairle will know well that is being dismantled and is not to be seen on the ground despite all the wonderful words and that Act, which has not been implemented. All of the time, the push is towards technology to make us safer. It will not make us safer but it will certainly go a long way towards undermining social cohesion. We are going back to the Garda having enormous power, as it had in the past, and this power being unchecked, unsupervised and unmonitored. I say that with the greatest of respect for gardaí on the ground. I am asking for more gardaí on the ground. I believe they make us safer. However, I tremble at this technology and facial recognition. I note the concerns of human rights organisations that repeatedly go to great trouble to educate us in a very practical way. Here we are making more statements. I will go to Galway and watch out to see gardaí walking around or on bikes. I am thrilled when I do. That is one practical way to make words mean something.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. I am sharing time and will use three minutes, if that is okay. I have long represented the issue of suspended gardaí here in this Chamber. At the moment, a total of 112 gardaí are suspended. Some are suspended for very good reason and some may have done things that merit being kicked out of the force. However, many of them are suspended unnecessarily for very simple things like squaring road traffic fines. Imagine if some of those could be brought back into the force to fulfil the front-line service of An Garda Síochána. The number suspended at the moment equates to approximately half of the total Garda force in my own Garda division in County Clare. That helps to quantify the issue. Many of them are at home and being paid to fulfil this role. It is unheard of.

As Deputy Coppinger leaves the Chamber, I will make the point that she misrepresented how this part of our work functions. This is a statements session. She said that only three Government Members bothered to show up. She is now leaving when I am speaking. She should not misrepresent how statements work for the sake of a social media clip. Off she goes into the sunshine.

The new policing structures overly concentrate activities on Dublin to the detriment of counties like Clare. I will not name the date but there was one evening in the past month when there was only one garda covering the entirety of west Clare up to the Galway border. To look

at the fleet of vehicles, when An Garda Síochána Headquarters in the Phoenix Park buys new vehicles, they are nearly always concentrated in the city divisions. In a rural county like mine, some Garda fleet vehicles are ten or 12 years old. I have put down parliamentary questions to ascertain their service records and some of those vehicles have been off the road for six or seven weeks of the previous year because of malfunctions and not being up to date.

I will mention the programme for Government because it proposes to reintroduce electronic tagging. This was a suggestion I made in my own party. It is a no-brainer. The legislation for that passed in 2009. If our prison system cannot accommodate prisoners, at the very least, they should be shackled to an electronic tagging system at home so An Garda Síochána can know where they are. I have a few seconds left.

The Garda eyesight check needs to be changed. While the fitness test standard for An Garda Síochána was lowered in the past 12 months to allow a greater age cohort to get in, the eye examination standard has increased, which is not fair.

Deputy Emer Currie: I note media reports yesterday that stated two thirds of the most recent recruit class from Templemore will be deployed to the streets of Dublin city. Like all Members of the House, I warmly welcome the deployment of additional gardaí to our capital's streets and communities. I sincerely thank those recruits for signing up, but if it is true that 98 out of 150 new Garda recruits are heading *en masse* to the city centre, I must admit it adds to my concern and that of the people I represent that Dublin's suburbs are losing out to the city centre when it comes to Garda numbers. Suburban communities, such as those in Dublin West, also face challenges when it comes to law and order. We have ongoing incidents of serious gangland crime along with persistent lower levels of crime and antisocial behaviour that, very worryingly, are becoming normalised. This includes open drug dealing, theft from cars every night of the week in estates, and growing incidents involving knives. All of that coincides with less visibility of gardaí on our streets.

My concerns are amplified by the fact that there seems to be significant inconsistencies in the deployment of gardaí across districts in the Dublin metropolitan region outside the city centre. These figures are based on Garda numbers provided in replies to parliamentary question and CSO population figures. They are conservative. In the K district, there is one garda per 510 people. In the neighbouring district, it is one garda for every 418 people; that district has 40% lower crime statistics. There is no valid reason for some Dublin Garda districts to have substantially fewer gardaí *per capita* than other districts, especially if they have more crime. The answer is not to take away from the Dublin districts that have those resources; it is to allocate more gardaí into under-resourced districts.

We need more gardaí on the beat in the villages of Dublin West. We should not have to rely on one Garda station serving 120,000 people there. There has been a lack of evidence-based policymaking. Will the Minister of State invite the Garda Commissioner to provide a report on levels of allocation of gardaí to all Dublin metropolitan regions with reference to population and crime levels? I am sure that data will tell a story we are very familiar with in Dublin West.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State for attending this debate. I will raise a couple of matters. I welcome the Government's commitment to the Dublin city task force and the implementation of its report. It is very important for the city centre and restoring confidence in the city.

I will call out two items in the report. The first is “Big Move 5 - Deliver more targeted and better located services for vulnerable populations in [the] city ...”. That is not easy to do. For example, there is a huge concentration of emergency accommodation on Gardiner Street. If we are to deal with the issue of safety, we will have to start redistributing those facilities. It will not be popular in other jurisdictions and locations throughout the country, but it is very important that everybody takes their fair share of those services. The second item in the report is Big Move 4, which recommends an additional 1,000 gardaí for the city, as my colleague mentioned. They will be very important for the city centre. I look forward to hearing about early progress and a timeline for recruitment, numbers and when boots will be put on the ground.

On a related point, from my experience in politics, community gardaí are often undervalued. Sometimes, that section seems to be seen as something of a backwater in the context of the various units of An Garda Síochána, but community gardaí do a huge service for their communities. They establish great rapport over many years in local communities and have very good relations with them. They are vital to the effective functioning of An Garda Síochána in our communities. Will the Government consider a community garda allowance, or some sort of allowance, that will allow An Garda Síochána to rebalance that perception? It would give an indication that the service is valued and rewarded. That is a very important element.

I mentioned previously the proposed Dublin metropolitan region headquarters at Northern Cross. I take the opportunity to raise that matter again. It is a new divisional headquarters for An Garda Síochána that will go into Northern Cross. Nothing is better in policing than boots on the ground. That headquarters will make a huge difference to safety and the perception of communities in Clongriffin, Belmayne and other areas. I encourage and ask the Government to continue to prioritise the delivery of that station.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I congratulate the new Minister of State, the Ceann Comhairle and the Leas-Ceann Comhairle on their new positions. I wish them well.

It is self-evident that with the rapidly increasing population, more gardaí are needed. I am very glad that the Government has taken very positive steps in that regard. Figures from Templemore indicate that it will probably be successful in its attempt to recruit 5,000 extra gardaí in the lifetime of this Government. I hope that it does so.

I will make one special plea to the Minister of State. A study is under way on the reconstitution of the Garda Reserve, which has the capacity to be a powerful adjunct and addition to the Garda force, not just in policing public events but in deterrence, especially in areas afflicted by antisocial behaviour. I ask the Minister to conclude and act on that study as soon as possible.

It is also a fact that as the population increases we will need more prison spaces, but we cannot go down the road of permanently building prisons and incarcerating people in them. I agree with the Minister that quite a large percentage of prisoners in the country probably should not be in jail. We should deal with them in some other way. The difficulty is that the non-custodial sanctions we have are pretty useless, not to put too fine a point on it, for example, the recent scandalous revelations about non-collection of fines. We have a very antiquated system of collecting fines in this country. It wastes Garda time going around begging people to keep up their instalments, etc. A much more effective way to collect fines would be to apply the attachment system to people’s income, whether it is from employment, social welfare or whatever.

I have come across many cases of people, especially those in deprived areas, on fixed in-

comes and the elderly, who have incurred financial losses as a result of the activities of people engaged in antisocial behaviour. I would like a system to be in place whereby people who are convicted of this antisocial behaviour, whether they are fined, or an attachment order or whatever is made against them, that this be directly related to compensating those people for the losses they have suffered. Some of those convicted are underage. They do not have any income and are not even old enough to be on social welfare. In some, though not all, of those cases, the parents of those kids have made no attempt whatsoever to control their children's behaviour. In those situations, if that can be established, I would not mind parents being called upon to pay the appropriate compensation.

The Minister for Justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, has made a very good start in his job. The feedback on him is extremely good throughout the country. I wish him the very best. I am confident that he will continue as he started.

Deputy John McGuinness: Yesterday, the Minister stated that he would listen carefully to what was said by Members in this House because they are on the ground experiencing all of what is happening in respect of crime and so on. I will take him at his word. To learn to improve the morale in An Garda Síochána, we need only go to John Barrett, who did a great service in exposing many controversies and scandals within the Garda, only to find himself booted out of the force and out of his job. I ask the Minister of State to reach out to him and listen to what he has to say. He should also talk to Maurice McCabe because we have learned nothing from that tribunal. We have learned absolutely nothing and have not put in the structures necessary to improve the Garda and give gardaí the scope to do their job. If the Minister of State wants further proof of the continuation of the abuse and blackguarding of gardaí who make complaints, the intimidation and, in some cases, the sexual abuse that goes on, he should listen to Lois West. Deputy Alan Kelly, who had more time than I have, made a wonderful contribution in which he put before the House very many issues that the Minister of State should take note of. I ask him to examine the Shane O'Farrell case because within that case is everything that is wrong in the State, the Garda, the DPP and the courts system. This State beat up Shane O'Farrell's family to hide the truth. That is what is happening. If the Minister of State is serious about that, he needs to start there. Then he needs to consider the contributions made by Members here.

In my constituency, which is no different from anywhere else, we have a drugs issue, a crisis, that is out of control. You can buy drugs on the street as easily as you can buy a pint of beer. You can sell drugs on the street and no one seems to bother or take action.

Extreme antisocial behaviour is ongoing in every single community and it is destroying communities. That behaviour, coupled with the violence and drugs, is simply causing serious problems for the young people in our country.

I ask the Minister of State to examine online crime and the fact that you can defame someone or a business online and get away with it. The Garda is ill equipped to deal with that issue.

Garda presence has been spoken about. In north and south Kilkenny, which are big rural areas, police stations have been closed. They need to be reopened and remanned. We need to have gardaí on the streets in the towns and villages to restore the confidence that people once enjoyed when they had a garda presence at that level. In cities like Kilkenny, where the numbers boom from time to time because of tourism, additional gardaí are needed during the tourism season. That requires a Commissioner to take the initiative, support the troops on the ground, the gardaí, and ensure communities are represented.

The new Garda structure, in line with that of the new local authorities, is not as good as the last one. There is not the same opportunity for input and you do not feel the same connection to the local gardaí. All of this feeds into the notion or feeling among the public that things are out of control to a degree in certain areas of our country and most parts of our cities and towns. If we do not deal with this now and have a modern, dynamic Garda force, we will pay a price in the future.

Deputy Ann Graves: Dublin is a great city. Our people, history and rich culture make it a great place to live. Everyone has a right to feel safe. Every community should be a safe and welcoming place in which to live, work and visit, but unfortunately not everyone feels safe here in Dublin. Every community is different but the challenges are the same. The lack of a visible, accessible, reliable and accountable Garda service has created a sense of fear and desperation in many homes and communities across Dublin. The lack of investment, cuts to essential services, and poor planning, transport and infrastructure all contribute to making neighbourhoods unsafe for residents. Of course, it is not true in all areas of Dublin. These challenges are the preserve of certain postcodes. Some communities have suffered for years from neglect and marginalisation, brought about and made worse by consecutive Governments imposing cuts from which they have never recovered. Youth services, mental health services, addiction services and drug task forces – I can go on and on – have all borne the brunt of Government cuts. These cuts hurt and cause damage. If we are to create safe communities, the Government must commit to investing in these essential services, not in a piecemeal fashion but through multi-annual budgets that are adequate and sustainable.

I fully acknowledge that we cannot simply police our way into safety, but the Garda must be a central part of any community safety plan. Garda numbers in Dublin have yet to return to pre-austerity numbers. The programme for Government commits to recruiting 5,000 additional gardaí. This is welcome but where is the plan to retain the current number? Gardaí are voting with their feet. We are haemorrhaging gardaí to the private sector and emigration. Pay, conditions and morale have to be addressed as a matter of urgency by the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan.

In my constituency, Dublin Fingal East, Swords needs a Garda station that is fit for purpose. The current station is there since Swords was a village, not a town. Swords station serves a population of over 50,000. The gardaí provide an excellent service, which I know from experience, but the station is simply not fit for purpose. The public and gardaí deserve better. We deserve a new, fully functional Garda station that meets the needs of our community.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: It is a very challenging time, particularly in Dublin, when it comes to policing and justice. We hear stories every week about assaults and violence on our streets, and people simply do not feel safe. The fact is that we do not have enough gardaí. Back in 2009, in my local Garda station in Coolock, for example, there were 123 gardaí. Today, the number is slightly lower. Between 2009 and now, the population covered has increased dramatically. The Belmayne and Clongriffin population alone is now estimated to be 30,000 and is expected to hit 50,000.

Back in 2019, when the constituency of Dublin Bay North was facing very serious issues with criminality, the then Minister for Justice, Charlie Flanagan, arrived at Coolock with hand-picked Government representatives and told the media he was to build a new Garda station for the region and, indeed, regional headquarters in Northern Cross. Six years later, we still have no Garda station. I ask the Minister of State to get us an update on this.

One of the main issues raised in my constituency office is Garda response times. People are often apologised to because there is only one Garda patrol car out in their area at the time in question. That is simply not good enough. Our gardaí need to be resourced with the equipment they need to do their job properly.

One thing I know from my years as a community activist is that community policing works. We see this all the time. A community response works. When communities and local organisations have built up relationships of trust with the gardaí, they feel more confident discussing other problems in the area, be it antisocial behaviour, vandalism or more serious crime. We all see that early intervention can make a genuine difference in a young person's life.

May I just ask the Minister of State-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The time is up. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I might follow up with the Minister of State on the last point.

Deputy Michael Collins: I wish the Minister of State the best in his role.

We were all asking for more gardaí on the ground and in our communities. It is no surprise that, in the few minutes I have, I will be making this request for west Cork. We are very fortunate in west Cork, particularly the Ballydehob–Schull area, to have Garda Jonathan McCarthy living and working. That is very valuable. A garda like Jonathan is of incredible value to a community because such a garda knows who is who, who should or should not be in the community, and who is there for good and benefit of people and who is not. Unfortunately, throughout this country we have lost the local garda living in the locality. I commend Garda McCarthy and his family on making the decision to do so. Community garda are essential across the country. Jonathan is well acquainted with the local dynamics and is involved in the local community. He knows which parents or teachers to contact with youth-related issues, which families or neighbours to approach with concerns about the elderly, and the right individuals to engage with on local matters. This model would be highly effective throughout Ireland. The Minister of State cannot dictate where a garda goes to live but he can certainly give gardaí incredible supports to live in the communities they work in. It would turn policing around in this country.

I am involved with the Garda youth awards, just on the outside looking in, to be honest, and maybe trying to put forward the name of some young person in our community who needs to be commended. I commend Garda Damian White and others, who have long been associated with the Garda youth awards.

3 o'clock

These awards are excellent for recognising the hard work of young people and the enthusiasm they have for their communities. Many people criticise young people but these awards are a special way for young people to be acknowledged for the significant work they do in their communities. Without the dedicated individuals who organise the event, such as Garda White, it would be challenging to provide such acknowledgement.

The unfortunate situation of international protection accommodation services, IPAS, centres being set up in rural communities means gardaí must be under immense pressure. No extra gardaí are going to be in those local communities and they need assistance. It does not matter if there are IPAS centres in an area. Even if there is an influx of 40 or 50 people to a village of

150 or 200 people, whether they come from Goleen, Donegal or across the water, extra gardaí and manpower are required. That is not being accounted for and is causing angst and worry in rural communities. There are discussions about establishing an IPAS centre in Skibbereen, which is causing concern. Another may be established in Glengarriff, a small tourist village that lacks the infrastructure to accommodate any influx of IPAS users. The village has no resident gardaí and limited services. This raises concerns about how these individuals manage their daily needs. They have daily needs and we need to be concerned about them. Unfortunately, the services are not being backed up by the Government's plans. I do not know if the Government has a great plan or if it has pulled together a botch job.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I wish the Minister of State well in his role. We need gardaí in my area. We also need equipment for our gardaí. Searches and rescues happened during snow and storms. The Garda assisted in searches for missing persons and had to borrow equipment from another county.

I wish to put a question on the record and would like a written response from the Minister of State. There was an investigation of gardaí in Limerick in 2019. That investigation is still ongoing. If somebody was found guilty, they would have been brought to justice by now. This has been going on for six years. Those gardaí could be back on the beat if they were found to have done nothing wrong. Why is the investigation taking so long? It does not make sense. If the judicial system works, it should not take that long. I would like to know when those cases will come to a close. When will we get those gardaí back on the beat, if that is going to happen? I would like a deadline for that.

According to the statistics, per head of population Ireland is now one of the biggest users of cocaine in Europe. That is alarming. We see all the different laws that are coming in. We are tightening up on drink and drug laws. We now have the changing of speed limits. When you add them all together, we do not have a police force to police these laws. When are we going to get the police force to police these laws? When are we going to get the community gardaí who are vital? Gardaí are working hard at the moment. They recently brought out a tractor on a tractor run. The tractor was painted in the colours of An Garda Síochána. What did that do? It allowed the Garda to communicate with the younger generation and try to help them with health and safety. It opened communication between the Garda and younger people coming up. It was a way for the Garda to say it is okay for young people to approach gardaí and that is what we want to happen. We want young people to know they can approach and confide in gardaí. That is a good thing. It is thinking outside the box. However, it can only be done with investment from the Government. It must provide the facilities and equipment for the Garda to carry out more of that work. When that happens when people are young, it will work as they get older because the communication is there. They can work together as a community for the betterment of the whole area. That is key. We need investment in Garda services and equipment and more of what we are seeing from An Garda Síochána at the moment, in collaboration with younger people.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: In my limited time to talk about policing community safety, I will focus on a couple of key points. The first is pay for gardaí. We need to create total pay restoration to the levels before the economic downturn. As I have mentioned in respect of nurses, if we are to have gardaí posted in urban areas, they need a Dublin allowance as an incentive. Otherwise we will be unable to replace the officers leaving the force. I put that first and foremost.

The second thing is community policing. You get more bang for your buck when you are able to be out there, liaising with people from all sorts of backgrounds and identifying problems before they happen. That is policing at its best.

We need to be putting the skills of our gardaí to their best use. I would not be one for diminishing the fitness test, for example. I suggest a super fit, focused and trained Garda core. However, why not have a dedicated Garda traffic corps that specialises in that area? We could separate it entirely. There are people who would be interested in traffic policing but would never think of getting involved in on-street policing. We might need to consider that option.

We need to update the IT systems. PULSE was not fit for purpose when it came out in the 1990s and it is definitely not fit for purpose now. We have data accuracy integrity issues, access and security concerns, technical and usability problems and training and user competency issues for this old system.

Others have mentioned governance and oversight issues. There are a whole lot of concerns. I also believe we need to change the legislation to assist the Garda to ensure there are more consequences for those who offend. I am not only talking about curfews. I am also talking about Revenue getting involved to dock people's pay or social welfare if they are not working. We need to create consequences for people who commit crimes, thereby resulting in less work for the Garda to allow it to focus on the real issues.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I wish the Minister of State well. There is a massive amount of work to be done. There is a significant drug problem in our communities. I recently spoke to several gardaí who told me they do not have the manpower or time to deal with drugs. Those drug issues include underage kids taking drugs, which is a major issue. Theft, violence and antisocial behaviour are all on the rise.

We all know we need more gardaí and that we need to reopen our rural Garda stations. That cannot be done, however, because of issues with recruitment and retention. Being a garda used to be a job a father would pass to a son, but that link has broken because we have reduced morale and pay and conditions in the Garda. There has been a radical change to policing. This country used to have a proactive community policing model. That has now been eroded because the Garda Commissioner and successive senior managers would rather have gardaí tied up behind screens doing paperwork. That is the truth.

Deputy Colm Brophy: No, it is not.

Deputy Paul Lawless: That is what is happening. Many years ago, gardaí would be on the street and would know what was happening before it even happened. That is no longer the case. We need to return to proactive community policing.

In 2023, the Garda Representative Association voted no confidence in the Commissioner. A total of 98% voted no confidence. I recently met the Commissioner at Mayo County Council. I asked him what has happened in management of An Garda Síochána to address the issues. Nothing has happened since that vote of no confidence. Is it any wonder we have a recruitment and retention crisis when we will not listen to gardaí?

A garda in my constituency retired recently after decades of service and it was not even acknowledged by senior management. He had no exit interview. If the Government had bothered to listen to him, it would realise what is happening. Perhaps we would not need TikTok videos

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and the waste of time with gardaí dancing and prancing around. Let us address the actual issues. That is what is happening. No amount of TikTok and spin will address the issues. Gardaí are talking. They are telling young recruits and other young people, including their sons, daughters and cousins, that it is not a job for the future. It is getting worse. I am pleading with the Minister of State to listen to gardaí, find out why 98% have no confidence in the Commissioner and address the issues with increased bureaucracy and pay and conditions. Then, perhaps, we will reach the programme for Government target that states we will have 1,000 extra gardaí every year. However, at the moment it is not going to happen.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I wish the Minister of State well in his new brief and also wish my constituency colleague Jim O'Callaghan well in his new brief.

I was going to start by giving praise to gardaí and the work they do, but having listened to Deputy Lawless's contribution I find it really frustrating that somebody in this Chamber would stand up and belittle gardaí in the way-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: A Cheann Comhairle, that is out of order.

Deputy James Geoghegan: -----he has just done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Did he mention your name?

Deputy Paul Lawless: He did mention my name.

Deputy James Geoghegan: To suggest there are no-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: Withdraw the statement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please do not interrupt, Deputy Lawless. I will ask the question. Did you, Deputy Geoghegan, mention Deputy Lawless's name with regard to that?

Deputy James Geoghegan: I did mention the Deputy's name.

An Ceann Comhairle: You cannot say it was belittling. I ask you to withdraw it. Deputy Lawless is entitled to make his statement too, Deputy.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Am I not allowed identify things that are being said in this House and to challenge those things? That is an extraordinary-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: A Cheann Comhairle, the point I made was around management of An Garda Síochána and I have tremendous respect and gratitude-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Deputy, resume your seat. You have had your time.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----for the wonderful work gardaí are doing.

Deputy John Lahart: You talked about them wasting their time dancing.

Deputy Paul Lawless: No.

Deputy John Lahart: You did.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: He said it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat please and let me speak.

Deputy John Lahart: Stop the clock as well, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: We can stop the clock, yes. We can stop the clock and resolve it. What was said was a reference to what Deputy Lawless-----

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Correct.

An Ceann Comhairle: -----said and it is the Deputy's opinion.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Precisely.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is the Deputy's opinion about what you said.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I was referring to senior management, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, whatever you were referring to it is-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: Senior management are not listening to gardaí.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, Deputy. It is Deputy Geoghegan's opinion of what you said. That is it. Move on. Start the clock.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Those of us who are public representatives, which is every single one of us in this room, deal with community gardaí every day of the week. The public watching this listen to and deal with community gardaí every day of the week and the public have huge faith and trust in community gardaí. They do not view gardaí as something to be featured on social media. That is not what this is about.

We need more gardaí. Everybody recognises that challenge. We have to recruit more gardaí. That is exactly what the Government is doing in its recruitment campaign. We must persuade people to come into the Garda, but we must also protect our gardaí. Over 300 gardaí were assaulted last year. They are men and women who are bravely putting themselves in harm's way in order to protect our safety and security and they need to be championed for the work they do in all our communities. We need to do more to support the work they do because we cannot police our way out of the problems of security and safety across the country, and in my city of Dublin in particular. There is a plan for dealing with safety in our city and it is not all on the shoulders of An Garda Síochána, but by increasing patrols in the city, which has happened over the last year, we have seen an increase in detections, arrests and prosecutions. Despite this we still have major safety challenges in our city. The ways to address those challenges are precisely written in the Dublin city task force report.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to discuss policing and community safety. I wish the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, well in his appointment as Minister for Justice. He has certainly had a very strong start and I welcome his fresh approach to his very challenging portfolio.

I welcome the Minister's ambition to introduce the new legislation which will support our gardaí and give them the tools they need to carry out their job. I support changes to the stop-and-search rules, reforming bail laws and the introduction of facial recognition technology, which should have been introduced in the last term. In particular, I strongly support the proposal to ensure anyone convicted of a crime while out on bail receives a consecutive sentence for that

crime. This has been the subject of many debates in this House and there have obviously been attempts to bring in legislation on it. If there is ambiguity and if it cannot be achieved through the sentencing guidelines then we should introduce primary legislation to deal that aspect of the courts and the legislation that exists.

The public have the right to be safe and feel safe as they go about their business in their communities, in the city centre and on public transport. This has been an acute problem for quite some time here in Dublin. The answer is more gardaí out and about in our communities. I welcome the Minister's confirmation Garda numbers will increase by 5,000 members over the next five years. We also need to see an increase in Garda Reserve numbers. It has played and can continue to play a vital and supportive contributing role in An Garda Síochána.

I am look forward to working with the Minister of State as we deal with the challenges facing our communities and cities, particularly here in Dublin.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I echo the remarks of my colleague, Deputy Devlin, especially regarding the appointment of Jim O'Callaghan as the new Minister for Justice. I wish him well in that regard.

I have a number of points to make about this area. They are small points but nonetheless very important. The use of the 999 number is counterintuitive. For years 999 was used by the public for genuine emergencies such as a homicide in the course of commission or a bank robbery that was under way. Now we have to ring 999 when there is a gang of teenagers on a corner and it seems utterly ridiculous. It also has the effect of undermining the efficacy and the presence of a local Garda station because the minor issues a local station may have been in a position to deal with in the past are now dealt with and triaged by central command and control and you may or may not get a Garda car or Garda presence to deal with the issue, which can sometimes turn into something bigger.

Another issue is the policy of non-pursuit of scramblers, e-bikes and so forth. These vehicles are used as courier mechanisms for drugs and weaponry throughout our city. You will often see children masked up on these vehicles. They are effectively untouchable because there is a Garda policy not to chase them. Creating an untouchable group who do not experience consequences has opened up a way for crime gangs to blossom in our city. I ask the Minister to look very seriously at the policies adopted in this area by the London Metropolitan Police, for example. It is very important no group is above the law in this regard.

The Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act that was passed last year is very important legislation and I welcome that it was commenced last May. However, I took a cursory look last night and I did not see any evidence in the media of any prosecutions having been brought under that legislation. I ask the Minister to look at that. There is ample evidence, based on my experience of going about my business in the city, and we can see lots of this going on under noses.

My final point is on the divisional headquarters promised by former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar back in 2019 for my constituency. It is a really important piece of infrastructure for us. Co-olock Garda station is groaning at the seams. We can recruit all the gardaí we like but we have nowhere to put them. We have nowhere for our female members to change and nowhere for our male members to change. There is not much point in having these numbers unless they can be assigned to a particular area or district. It is really important for our communities that this

project goes ahead and that every emphasis is put by Government on this. There was significant delay because there was a row between Dublin City Council's valuation office and the OPW in that regard that went on for far too long. We need to get this to planning stage, get the ground turned and get this vital piece of infrastructure delivered.

Deputy John Lahart: I support a robust Garda response to crime. I support dedicated transport police on our public transport to police it and especially in my constituency of Dublin South-West to police public transport modes like the Luas red line. I support facial recognition technology. I support a ban on masks at public protests. I support the confiscation and destruction of scrambler and quad bikes and scooters, including e-scooters, when they are used to engage in antisocial behaviour and reckless endangerment of people and to carry drugs.

I echo a previous speaker, Deputy John McGuinness, regarding the Shane O'Farrell case, which I have followed closely as an Opposition and Government TD, and how the institutions of State can still connive to thwart justice. As the Minister knows, young gardaí are rightly frustrated by the bureaucracy and oversight they face in terms of GSOC and other oversight bodies. These are necessary and did not arise out of a vacuum. They arose because of chronic abuses in the force historically, and that is why they are needed. Regrettably, abuses are still taking place in the force by a small minority. Regrettably, power and seniority within the Garda force is used to thwart whistleblowers. The vast majority of gardaí are exemplary professionals doing a very tough and worthwhile job.

There is increasing evidence that, in terms of law and order, menacing antisocial behaviour and petty crime is going unreported because gardaí lack the resources and numbers to deal with such offences. That is probably the biggest challenge the Government faces. Our beautiful city of Dublin needs vital resuscitation, and additional resources for gardaí are a key part of ensuring city life in Dublin is resuscitated and revitalised.

I want to highlight the issue of social media in regard to catfishing. One of our colleagues in Fianna Fáil, former Senator Lisa Chambers, introduced a landmark Bill in Seanad Éireann aimed at tackling the harmful practice of catfishing. The proposed legislation would make it a criminal offence to engage in catfishing and would empower gardaí to act and provide crucial recourse for victims. There have been some notable high-profile media examples of catfishing occurring in recent times.

There is a danger at the moment because recent content policy announcements from Meta essentially mean there will be less moderation of what is happening online. That poses a great threat to vulnerable people and communities. Harmful online behaviour, including, as I have stated, catfishing, risks becoming even more widespread in Ireland. Now, more than ever, we need to prioritise online safety and ensure our laws can face evolving digital threats while balancing privacy and free expression rights.

Gaps in the law at the moment leave victims vulnerable. Catfishing is a particular example of that. Gaps in the law also impede gardaí in their ability to respond effectively. I know the Minister and Government are committed to strengthening online safety laws and I ask the Minister to prioritise that.

I congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment at the Department of Justice and my colleague, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, on his appointment as Minister for Justice. The Minister has made a strong and robust start in his tenure and he enjoys the support of the House.

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I also know that the Ministers will shortly incorporate the migration piece into their portfolios. I ask that we continue where the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, has started, namely, with a fair but firm and robust response to the issue of those seeking asylum and international protection. Those who are entitled to do so should be granted all of the support of the State in doing so. We need to consider the number of countries we still regard as safe, because countries like Denmark, Holland and others designate far more countries as safe than we do, meaning that citizens of those countries cannot seek international protection in Ireland.

I was lucky today. One of my colleagues did not show up, so we got some additional time.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The funny part of this is that some Government back bench TDs have not turned up for their time.

Deputy John Lahart: He is at a briefing.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We are talking about an issue-----

Deputy John Lahart: He is at a briefing.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It happened again last week and the week before.

Deputy John Lahart: He is at a briefing.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Today in Cork city-----

Deputy John Lahart: I want to put it on the record-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Can I have my time back, please?

An Ceann Comhairle: You brought it up. We will stop the clock to clarify.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We have been interrupted. If a Sinn Féin person stands up and interrupts, we get lambasted.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I have stopped the clock to clarify. It was notified to the Whip’s office. The time was the time. It did not mean it was allocated if I was notified.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs are looking for speaking time in here and they are not turning up.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I am-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: They are crying that it is the end of the world, but they are not turning up.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am clarifying it. We will get the clock going again.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There are loads of Opposition people who would take their speaking time. I will take extra time if I can get it.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: There are empty benches over there.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We will go back to another area where the Government is failing. In Cork city, figures show that there are 26 fewer gardaí compared with the end of 2023 and a

staggering 61 fewer gardaí compared with two years ago. At the same time, over the past 12 months, burglaries, thefts and extortion have increased by 53% in the southern region. Last year, my constituency was subjected to a terrifying ordeal involving numerous petrol bombs, shootings and attacks on innocent homes where people were mistakenly identified. We saw what happened to people in the past who were terrorised for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. People are scared and the one thing they want to see is gardaí on the streets so they know there is someone there keeping an eye out and making sure there is law and order. People deserve to be safe in their homes.

Blackstone Rovers pitch in Fairfield, next to Cathedral Celtic, was destroyed by scramblers. Brave volunteers are doing brilliant work in the community, but the reality is young people who destroy property with their scramblers and bikes know there are no gardaí around and the chances of being caught are very limited. Therefore, they feel they can do whatever they want. We need community gardaí on the ground. We have seen the same happen in Glenthorn Celtic, Ballincollig AFC and Knocknaheeny Celtic. It goes right across the city and is not confined to one area. We want more gardaí supporting clubs and volunteers.

The Garda stations in Ballincollig, Blarney and Glanmire need to be open for longer. I am calling for extra resources, gardaí and civilian staff to make sure that happens. We need gardaí on the ground. The gardaí we have are doing a brilliant job; we just do not have enough of them in Cork.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There will be general agreement on the fact that, when we have seen a community response, as happened in my town of Dundalk, we have seen community gardaí doing absolutely brilliant work in their interactions with the communities. Sometimes they can deal with issues before they ever happen. We need a lot more of that. We need to have community safety partnerships up and running. I spoke to the Minister regarding the necessity for interventions at family and community level and youth diversion programmes, such as what we have in Muirhevnamor and being run out of the house in Cox's Demesne. We also need to see the likes of the Greentown project and real diversion for those who are becoming involved in criminality.

We know the lack of addiction services across the board and the chaotic outworking of serious organised crime. It is not only drug debt and intimidation; there are also chaotic cases, sales pitches, party houses and people who come apart under addiction and create a huge hassle for the communities and businesses that surround them. Supports are not in place, whether those are gardaí, Tusla or the powers county councils have to deal with estate management issues. It is a multiagency matter and we need to deal with that.

I refer specifically to mental health issues, which seem to be falling to the gardaí to deal with. We all know we do not have a robust enough mental health service. I will deal with one specific case without getting into any names. I know of a young woman to whom I have spoken. When speaking to her, I heard of huge conspiratorial ramblings and issues regarding personal hygiene. I know her family, who are very good people, but they cannot have her in the house. The gardaí have been very good in how they have looked after her. They have arrested her multiple times under the Mental Health Act and doctors will not sign committal forms. They will sign for voluntary admission but not for committal, and we are dealing with circumstances that will get a lot worse. There is also the issue that many people no longer have a long-standing GP who would recognise the change in a person. I am not even getting into one element of how difficult this is. We could be talking about anosognosia and the idea that a

person who is sick does not realise that is the case.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you Deputy. We are going to move on.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am not a medic but it is frustration that brings this to the floor of the House.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Go n-éirí leis an Aire Stáit ina phost nua. The presence of community gardaí is not just about enforcing the law, it is about building trust and, in north Dublin, creating the safer neighbourhoods I want to see. It is about fostering real partnerships between gardaí and the people they serve.

In recent years, we have seen progress in Dublin and I can stand here proudly and say I am the son of a garda who served for 35 years. I have seen at first hand how gardaí help when they are dedicated to community policing roles, engagement with youth services and an emphasis on prevention rather than reactive policing. When gardaí work closely with residents, schools and businesses, it has been shown through multiple studies that antisocial behaviour drops and a strong sense of safety grows. Community-led initiatives, such as the Garda youth diversion and outreach programmes, have proved that when people feel heard they engage more positively with law enforcement.

I want to bring the Minister of State's attention to Belmayne in Clongriffin where there have recently been multiple incidents of teenage gangs assaulting residents. These teenagers have been named and are underage but the gardaí are not getting them into these youth diversion programmes. They need to be in those programmes. If you can prevent someone at an early age from engaging in crime, you can save their future.

We need to go further. We need to increase funding in the Garda, build up more gardaí on the beat and increase visibility on our streets. We need stronger partnerships between the Garda and local organisations to ensure gardaí remain proactive rather than reactive. When Garda models put people first, it prevents the crime before it happens, making Dublin safer. For me, that is especially important for my constituency of Dublin Bay North.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Go n-éirí an t-ádh leis an Aire Stáit sa phost nua. I am the wife of a retired member and related to many serving members, so my gratitude and appreciation for the role of An Garda Síochána is unquestionable. Growing up in the Ratoath-Dunshaughlin area of Meath East fadó fadó, Garda Andy Morgan was our weekly visitor to the primary school. He knew us and, more important, we knew him. That sense of guilt, whether you were up to something or not, is probably still ingrained in many of us from more than 50 years ago. It serves to illustrate the importance of the role of the community garda then and now. I will duplicate what colleagues have said regarding the importance of community policing and youth diversion projects. I wish to give a special mention to Garda Kelly, Garda Connor and Garda Fitzpatrick, operating from Duleek Garda station in the Meath-Westmeath division, who are involved in community policing.

Like all other areas, however, we need more gardaí and more collaboration with local authorities on the design of housing estates. Permeability is a buzz word in planning but it can also be a byway to escape routes. When it comes to community security and safety for older residents, the community gardaí know the people concerned and keep an eye out for them with the vulnerable persons register. With regard to increasing resources, I am happy to help and

support the Minister of State in whatever way I can.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on what has become an issue of major public and community concern. There can be no doubt that we are witnessing a significant escalation in knife-related incidents and antisocial behaviour and, in many cases, a rapid deterioration of respect for the rule of law. If you talk to communities or retailers away from the glare of the public spotlight, they will tell you that preteens and young adults are engaging in dramatically high levels of unchecked intimidation, vandalism and petty crime, often with little Garda intervention due to age protections.

The reply to a recent parliamentary question I tabled indicated the number of Garda members assigned to my own county of Offaly rose by just five from the end of December 2021 up to 31 October 2024, from a low of 157 to 162. That increase was over the course of three years. It is not acceptable. Gardaí are stretched beyond reason, despite all the pledges from the Government regarding ramping up recruitment.

We cannot shy away from the need to put in place entirely new measures to record data on the level of crime being committed by those in the country illegally or without proper vetting. This is absolutely necessary. People simply have no confidence that the tens of thousands of people arriving here are being checked against criminal databases. Absolutely nobody should get a pass or free rein just because they have entered a country through the asylum process. I am again calling for robust and forensic levels of scrutiny to be applied to this issue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will be as brief as I can. This is a huge issue. I welcome the statements but the numbers are being manicured and we are just not getting them. We want to keep Templemore because it is a wonderful centre. In south Tipperary, Carrick-on-Suir has three gardaí and two sergeants, but it used to have 14 gardaí. The Clonmel Garda district covers Carrick-on-Suir, Mullinahone, Kilsheelan, Cashel, Cahir and all the villages. The superintendent told me he would have eight gardaí on a good day. Are you telling me the criminals in roving gangs do not know this? It is a shocking situation that is only going to deteriorate, given the number of people due to leave An Garda. Those figures are there. The Garda always knew those members would be leaving the force 30 years after joining up, but it has not planned for this. We have seen that the Garda has been trying to recruit Muslims, Travellers and anybody else. It is doing its best but this will not buy it the time it needs. We need to get more gardaí on the streets.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: My time is very short but I want to thank all the gardaí for the great work they are doing. Criminals and vandals are more daring now than they were in the past and have many more ways of doing harm and blackguarding.

The area I want to focus on is both sides of the Kenmare river and Kenmare Bay, where Garda stations have been closed down. All the way from Kenmare down to Cahersiveen and back to Ardgroom and Lauragh and all that side as far as the boundary with Cork, numbers have been reduced. We have many small piers and harbours that are totally exposed and available to those bringing drugs in to our country. I wish to highlight the likes of Sneem. If something happens down there, it takes a good hour for the patrol car to come from Killarney and a good half an hour to come from Kenmare or Waterville. That place is very exposed as a result of the way the force is being divided. We need a patrol car to be available, especially to monitor drug importation because that is happening our country and county are riddled with drugs at present.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): We will close with a statement from the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy. I missed the opportunity to congratulate him when I was speaking earlier. We all wish him the very best in his new role and congratulate him again.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice(Deputy Colm Brophy): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on the issue of community safety policing and crime. I thank all the Deputies for their contributions today. They brought their own perspectives and insights on how we can make our country a safer place for our citizens to live.

We all share a common vision that everyone has the right to live in safe and secure communities. The programme for Government for the next five years has extensive and ambitious commitments to enhance the safety and security of our communities right across the range of justice, home affairs and migration. People are concerned, and rightly so, about crime in their communities. High-visibility policing is important to the safety of our communities and that theme has run through most of the contributions today. A well-resourced Garda organisation is vital to improving the feeling of safety for all. Like the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, I want to see increased Garda visibility in communities across the country. That is why the programme for Government commits to recruiting an additional 5,000 Garda members over the next five years. We want to see gardaí in every type of community setting, whether urban or rural. The Minister has impressed this view upon the Garda Commissioner. It is a view shared by the latter and, indeed, by the men and women on the front line of An Garda Síochána.

There have been challenges in the area of recruitment but we are starting to see the momentum move in the right direction. The overall Garda workforce, which includes Garda members, civilian staff and the reserve, is, at 18,000, the highest it has been. As Minister of State with responsibility for migration, I am proud that An Garda Síochána is committing to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in our society. The organisation continues to foster and embrace diversity by increasing efforts to attract and recruit personnel from every section of our society by enhancing its workplace culture to include, value and support all Garda members and by challenging discrimination and prejudice where it occurs in our society. The increase in the number of civilian Garda staff in recent years has freed up 900 Garda members to concentrate on front-line policing.

We continue to see strong numbers of applications to join An Garda Síochána. This Friday, new gardaí will graduate from the Garda College in Templemore and will be assigned to stations right across the country. The arrival of new probationer gardaí to their stations will be a welcome sight in those communities. New front-line gardaí help the whole Garda organisation by facilitating moves to specialist areas dealing with new and emerging types of crimes, such as cybercrime and cyber fraud, and to areas like community policing. The latter is something Members of the House understand and value. Indeed, a large number of speakers mentioned it as an important and integral part of overall policing. Community gardaí do great work addressing quality-of-life issues, working with people in their local area and providing accessible and visible services to the community. It is important to note that the new Garda operational model, which is almost fully rolled out across the country, was specifically designed to deliver a greater level of public engagement with the superintendents in charge of community engagement in An Garda Síochána divisions.

Many of the new gardaí attesting in Templemore on Friday will be assigned to busy stations in our capital city. As a TD for Dublin South-West, this is very welcome to me, particularly as we approach the busy times around the St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, when Dublin receives so

many extra visitors from all over the world. We all want to see Dublin being a safe place for people to live in, work in and visit. Gardaí work tirelessly to keep our city safe for residents and visitors alike. When incidents occur, they respond quickly, effectively and with a graduated response. I am grateful to all gardaí for their ongoing efforts to keep people safe. The Garda Commissioner has assured the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, that he has the resources to police the city. At the end of December 2024, there were 3,809 gardaí working in Dublin. Of those, 1,381 are assigned to the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, north-central and south-central divisions and to policing the inner city.

A number of Garda operations are taking place in Dublin to provide a high-visibility policing presence and deter antisocial behaviour. As part of Operation Citizen, uniformed Garda members perform high-visibility patrols on foot as well as on bicycles and respond to reports of crime throughout Dublin city centre. The members deployed to Operation Citizen are drawn from the Store Street and Pearse Street Garda stations, thereby utilising the gardaí who are best placed to provide the most effective policing service. They bring with them their local knowledge. Operation Táirge focuses on the growing issue of retail theft. In 2024, there were 8,460 arrests and 20,052 charge summonses recorded in association with this targeted operation.

At the heart of our approach to community safety is the principle that every community has the right to thrive and flourish. Youth justice is a vital part of that vision to create safe and secure communities, which is something the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, will work on throughout his brief. How we care for young people is central to this goal. Youth justice is not just about preventing crime; it is about nurturing potential and fostering resilience within our communities. It is not about young people avoiding the consequences of their actions. It is about offering them an opportunity to get back on the right path and to stay out of criminality. We are committed to providing specialist interventions for young individuals who are hard to reach. Our network of youth diversion projects, YDPs, do great work across the country in diverting young people who have become involved in crime or antisocial behaviour and supporting wider preventative work within communities and with families at risk. The Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, recently announced the selection of two new youth diversion projects for Tipperary and Clare, which will achieve the target set out in the youth justice strategy to ensure there is national coverage of the YDP service. Diverting vulnerable children away from a life of crime and giving them an opportunity to build a better future for themselves is key to our commitment to building safer and stronger communities.

An Garda Síochána and the Criminal Assets Bureau enjoy continuing success in disrupting the activities of criminals by seizing from them the proceeds of crime. We often hear that communities impacted by these criminals would like to see that money reinvested in their community. Putting the money back into communities is a real way to show that the efforts of law enforcement can directly contribute to making people feel safer. That is why we established the community safety fund, CSF, which encourages and supports the development of ways to improve our community safety by the people who best understand the needs of their locality. The CSF had an initial allocation of €2 million in 2022, increasing to €3 million in 2023, to €3.75 million in budget 2024 and to €4 million in budget 2025. We can see some themes emerging. Last year’s successful applicants included projects aiming at addressing antisocial behaviour, domestic violence, drug-related intimidation, safety on public transport - a key concern for many people, social exclusion, youth programmes and prison post-release support. Many of those projects focus on the use of education, sport and recreation and social interaction to proactively address safety concerns in our communities.

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Some Deputies may have concerns about the joint policing committees, JPCs, in their local area. The Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, which commences shortly, will provide for the establishment of a central national infrastructure, with local community safety partnerships, LCSPs, operating at each local authority level. The partnerships are building upon the good work undertaken through the joint policing committees. The LCSPs are also supplementing the work done by the JPCs by bringing them together with a broader range of stakeholders, including local councillors, An Garda Síochána, local residents, community representatives, business and education representatives and a variety of statutory agencies, including the HSE, Tusla and each local authority.

I thank Deputies for their contributions to this very important debate. I look forward to engaging with them, along with my fellow Ministers, in the coming months.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): I wish the Minister of State the best of luck in his new role.

Seachtain na Gaeilge: Ráitis

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): I welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and invite him to make his opening statement.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCoiste Gnó as an deis seo cúrsaí Gaeilge a phlé. Mar Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus mar Aire na Gaeltachta, fáiltím roimh an deis labhairt inniu anseo i nDáil Éireann. Mar atá ráite agam in áiteanna eile, is onóir mhór dom é a bheith anseo mar Aire na Gaeltachta agus Gaeilge. Mar a dúirt mé i ngach díospóireacht a bhí againn sa Dáil le haghaidh 18 bliain anois, níl an Ghaeilge do Sheachtain na Gaeilge amháin. Tá sí ann gach lá. Ba cheart, mé féin san áireamh, go mbainfear i bhfad níos mó úsáide as an nGaeilge atá againn sa Teach gach lá. Is teanga bheo í an Ghaeilge ach chun an bheocht sin a choimeád, ní mór dúinne, mar ionadaithe poiblí, í a labhairt go rialta agus a bheith inár n-eiseamláir dár bpobail. Le linn na seachtaine nó na coicíse seo, déanaimis gach iarracht aon chomhrá a bhíonn againn a thosú as Gaeilge. Caithfidh é sin a leanúint gach seachtain eile den bhliain.

Tá réimse leathan freagrachtaí ar mo Roinn maidir leis an nGaeilge, ní hamháin sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ach ar fud na tíre agus ar fud an domhain. Bhain an Rialtas deiridh mórán amach maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge, agus tá an Rialtas seo tiomanta na spriocanna maidir leis an Ghaeltacht agus an Ghaeilge atá sa chlár Rialtais a bhaint amach. Tá méadú suntasach tagtha ar bhuiséad na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta le cúpla bliain anuas. Mar thoradh ar ardú €6 mhilliún i mbliana, tá an chistíocht is airde fós - €106 mhilliún san iomlán - ar fáil ag mo Roinn don bhliain seo. Léiríonn an maoiniú suntasach seo tiomantas an Rialtais do chur chun cinn na teanga agus do phobal na Gaeltachta, tobar na teanga.

Tá Údarás na Gaeltachta i mbun cúraim sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ar fud na tíre ó bunaíodh é. Lean sé leis an obair a bhí ar siúl ag Gaeltarra Éireann roimhe sin agus freagrachtaí níos leithne aige i bhforbairt eacnamaíochta, shóisialta agus chultúrtha na Gaeltachta. Mar bhunchuspóir de pholasaí an údaráis, tá caomhnú agus láidirí na Gaeilge mar theanga bheo agus í a thabhairt mar oidhreacht don chéad ghlúin eile. Is cúram fíorthábhachtach i bhforbairt aon phobail é an

fhostaíocht agus cruthú fostaíochta. Is ábhar sásaimh é gur éirigh leis an údarás beagnach 900 post nua a chruthú sa Ghaeltacht in 2024 agus go raibh beagnach 10,000 post ina gcliantchomhlachtaí ag deireadh na bliana seo caite. Tréaslaím a chuid oibre leis an údarás.

Beidh an Bille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024 ar ais sa Dáil go luath tar éis dó an Dara Céim a chríochnú roimh olltoghchán na bliana seo caite. Tá athbhunú toghcháin don údarás luaite sa chlár Rialtais nua agus tá sé i gceist agam leanúint leis an mBille seo a thabhairt trí Thithe an Oireachtais. Ceann de na ceisteanna is práinní laistigh de phobail na gceantar Gaeltachta agus go náisiúnta araon ná soláthar tithíochta. Soláthraítear i mBille an údaráis chomh maith an chumhacht don údarás tailte atá i seilbh na heagraíochta a dhiúscairt chuig comhlacht aitheanta ceadaithe tithíochta nó chuig údarás tithíochta chun tithíocht a sholáthar sa Ghaeltacht. Táimid an-dáiríre faoin ábhar seo. Bhí cúpla smaoineamh iontach sa díospóireacht faoi rún Shinn Féin aréir.

Ag leibhéal náisiúnta agus ar fud an oileáin, tá Foras na Gaeilge ag obair ar bhonn uile-oileáin agus é ag cur na Gaeilge chun cinn. Is áisíneacht de chuid an Fhorais Teanga Thuaidh-Theas é agus obair thábhachtach idir lámha aige ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas. Tá dlúth chomhoibriú ag mo Roinn lenár bpáirtithe sa Roinn Pobail ó Thuaidh ag cinntiú go n-éireoidh le hobair Fhoras na Gaeilge agus, go deimhin, le hobair an Fhorais Teanga. Leanann dúshlán aon chomhoibriú. Tá dúshlán airgeadais an fhorais tagtha chun solais le déanaí, agus an cheist pléite anseo sa Dáil arís inné agus ag Ard-Fheis Chonradh na Gaeilge cúpla seachtain ó shin. Mar a dúirt mé ag an am sin, bhí cruinniú práinneach agam féin le Foras na Gaeilge chun an cheist a phlé nuair a tháinig sé chun solais. Is dúshlán é seo don fhoras agus do na heagraíochtaí pobail a fhaigheann tacaíocht ón bhforas. Is dúshlán é don Rialtas chomh maith agus, dá réir, tá gach iarracht fós ar siúl agus á dhéanamh againn chun teacht ar réiteach. Leanann an obair ar aghaidh agus tá mé ag coinneáil súil ghéar air.

Tá cloiste againn go léir mar gheall ar an bpleanáil teanga agus na pleanálaithe teanga atá i mbun na hoibre seo. Deich mbliana ó shin, rinne an Stát infheistíocht dár luach €500,000 sa réimse seo. Inniu, deich mbliana níos déanaí, tá infheistíocht dár luach €6.7 milliún á déanamh ag an Stát sa Ghaeilge agus i bpobal na Gaeltachta trí obair na pleanálaithe teanga. Dar liom, tugann an infheistíocht shuntasach sin le fios tiomantas an Rialtais i leith na teanga. Tá dul chun cinn suntasach déanta ag an bpróiseas ó cuireadh tús leis agus gach ceann den 26 limistéar pleanála teanga chomh maith leis an gcúig líonra Gaeilge agus an naoi mbaile seirbhíse Gaeltachta anois i mbun gnímh, agus toradh a gcuid oibre le brath ar an talamh i measc an phobail.

Is trí chomhoibriú le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus Foras na Gaeilge atáthar ag baint amach spriocanna an Rialtais maidir leis an obair seo ach tá cistíocht ar fáil do roinnt eagraíochtaí eile, leithéidí: Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta, Ealaín na Gaeltachta agus Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta. Cuireann an chistíocht seo ar a gcumas tacaíochtaí praiticiúla breise a chur ar fáil ar leas an phróisis. Tacaíonn Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta, mar shampla, le tuismitheoirí atá ag tógáil a leanaí le Gaeilge. Tuigimid uile a thábhachtaí is atá sé an Ghaeilge a bheith á labhairt sa mbaile, le leanaí agus leis an gcéad ghlúin eile. Chomh maith leis sin, tá scéim na gcúntóirí teanga leathnaithe amach go dtí na bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus na líonraí le cúpla bliain anuas, scéim atá fíorthábhachtach mar go gcuireann sé tacaíochtaí breise ar fáil sna scoileanna do leanaí nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge sa bhaile acu, b'fhéidir. Oibríonn na scéimeanna fíorthábhachtacha seo ó lá go lá, ó bhaile go baile agus ó shráidbhaile go sráidbhaile i measc an phobail ag buaná na teanga mar theanga phobail. Sna blianta amach romhainn, táthar ag súil le tús áite a thabhairt don obair chun seirbhísí óige sa Ghaeltacht a fhorbairt agus a leathnú amach ar bhonn lárnach. Ar ndóigh, gan an óige nó an chéad ghlúin eile, ní mhairfidh an teanga mar theanga pobail.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh as an díospóireacht aréir. B'fhéidir nár ghlacamar leis an rún ach bhí díospóireacht iontach againn agus tháinig a lán codanna iontacha as. Gan dabht agus muid ag caint ar an bpleanáil teanga, táimid ag caint ar phobal an oileáin trí chéile. Táimid ag comhoibriú ar bhonn uile-oileáin, ag buanú agus ag neartú an phobail tríd an teanga. Ar ndóigh, tá mórán scéimeanna tacaíochta don phobal teanga á gcur ar fáil ag mo Roinn d'ár gcéad ghlúin eile agus lárnach san obair atá ar bun ar an talamh. Luaigh mé scéim na gcúntóir teanga níos luaithe, ach d'fhéadfáinn trácht a dhéanamh freisin ar scéim na gcampaí samhraidh agus, gan dabht, scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge atá ar bun le breis is 50 bliain. Ghlac breis is 27,000 foghlaimoir páirt i gcúrsaí ag coláistí Gaeltachta faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge in 2024. Beidh níos mó ná €6 mhilliún á infheistiú ag mo Roinn go bliantúil san earnáil seo faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge ar leas na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta amach anseo. Sin infheistíocht shuntasach, dar liom.

Cuireadh tús leis an scéim DEIS Gaeltachta, sé sin scoláireachtaí Gaeltachta do dhaltaí i scoileanna DEIS, le blianta beaga anuas. I mbliana, ceadaíodh ciste €900,000 chun an scéim a leathnú amach. Tá súil againn go mbeidh os cionn 800 scoláire in aghaidh na bliana as na hiarbhunscoileanna DEIS ar fud na tíre in ann tairbhe a bhaint as tréimhse foghlama sa Ghaeltacht. Creidim gur deis iontach é seo d'óige na tíre. Ritheadh rún sa Dáil inné le hoideachas sa Ghaeilge a chinntiú. Tá dlúthchaidreamh ag mo Roinn leis an Roinn Oideachais agus comhoibriú leanúnach idir an dá Roinn maidir leis an nGaeilge sa chóras oideachais. Beidh mé ag obair an-dian ar an ábhar seo.

Mairimid inniu sa ré dhigiteach, ré dhúshlánach do phobail teanga ar nós phobal na Gaeilge. Ní mór do phobal na Gaeilge a fheidhmiú sa ré nua seo. I mí na Nollag 2022, d'fhoilsigh an Rialtas plean digiteach don Ghaeilge. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an bplean leas a bhaint as acmhainní teicneolaíochta agus digiteacha chun tacú le húsáid na Gaeilge ar ardáin dhigiteacha éagsúla, lena n-áirítear suíomhanna gréasáin, na meáin shóisialta, áiseanna oideachais, áiseanna do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas agus uirlisí digiteacha eile. Anuraidh, foilsíodh an straitéis d'ealaíona teangabhunaithe na Gaeilge 2024-27, straitéis atá fíorthábhachtach leis na healaíona teangabhunaithe a chur chun cinn agus a neartú i measc an phobail i gcoitinne agus freisin mar bhealach chun iad a chur san áireamh sa chóras oideachais agus sa chóras luathbhlianta. Cuirfidh an straitéis seo bonn níos láidre faoi na healaíona teangabhunaithe nuair a bheidh na moltaí atá inti curtha i bhfeidhm. Tá infheistíocht mhór á déanamh againn freisin in Oireachtas na Gaeilge chun ealaíona teangabhunaithe na Gaeilge a fhorbairt, a neartú agus a chur chun cinn. Ag croílár obair mo Roinne, tá cur i bhfeidhm Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá cathú orm chuir isteach ort. Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil córam againn.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): No, beidh seans ag an Teachta i gceann nóiméid. Leanfaimid ar aghaidh leis an Aire anois.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: An bhfuil córam againn? Tá mé díreach ag iarraidh a chinntiú go bhfuil córam againn sa Teach.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy is looking for a quorum.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá cathú orm chur isteach ort, a Aire.

4 o'clock

Tugadh faoi deara nach raibh 20 Comhalta i láthair; comhaireadh an Teach agus ó bhí 20 Comhalta i láthair;

Notice taken that 20 Members were not present; House counted and 20 Members being present,

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Cathal Crowe: If Deputy McGuinness is pulling others up on technicalities, there are technicalities for how he makes interventions as well.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Okay.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Ag croílár obair mo Roinne, tá cur i bhfeidhm Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021 agus an bogadh i dtreo seirbhís phoiblí dhátheangach. Céim shuntasach chun cinn sa mhéid seo a bhí i bhfoilsíú an chéad phlean náisiúnta um sheirbhísí poiblí Gaeilge i mí Dheireadh Fómhair anuraidh. Tá sé i gceist go bhfeidhmeoidh an plan náisiúnta seo, atá bunaithe ar chúig mhórhéama straitéiseacha, mar threochlár do chomhlachtaí poiblí maidir le líon agus caighdeán na seirbhísí poiblí Gaeilge a chuirtear ar fáil a mhéadú agus a fheabhsú go córasach. Tabharfaidh sé conair chun cur le líon na mball foirne le hinniúlacht Ghaeilge chun soláthar na seirbhísí sin a éascú freisin, de réir sprioc earcaíochta an Achta, is é sin go mbeidh ar a laghad 20% den fhoireann a earcófar chuig comhlachtaí poiblí inniúil i nGaeilge faoin 31 Nollaig 2030. Tacófar leis an bplan náisiúnta seo le dhá phlean gníomhaíochta trí bliana, leis an chéad cheann le tréimhse 2025 go 2027 a chlúdach. Tá sé beartaithe an chéad phlean gníomhaíochta sin a chur faoi bhráid an Rialtais lena cheadú sna míonna amach romhainn.

Chun tacú leis seo go léir, tá buiséad €1.5 milliún ar fáil in 2025 do thionscnaimh seirbhíse poiblí a chuirfidh go mór leis na hiarrachtaí an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn i soláthar seirbhísí poiblí. Sheol mo chomhghleacaí, an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Thomas Byrne, gréasán Gaeilge na hearnála poiblí anuraidh. Infheistear os cionn €1 milliún sa tionscadal seo sna trí bliana amach romhainn le tacaíocht ó mo Roinn chun tacú leo siúd atá ag iarraidh a gcuid scileanna teanga a fhorbairt. Molaim do na Teachtaí go léir a gcuid bhfoirne ina n-oifigí sna Dáilcheantair agus san Oireachtas a spreagadh le húsáid a bhaint as a gcuid Gaeilge agus clárú leis an ngréasán, agus le leas a bhaint as na tacaíochtaí agus na deiseanna atá an Stát ag cur ar fáil do na Comhaltaí ar fad anseo i dTeach Laighin.

Aithníonn mo Roinn an gá atá le cabhrú leis na daoine ar fad atá ag teacht chun na tíre seo ar chúis amháin nó eile. Tá sé tábhachtach dóibh go mbeadh sé ar a gcumas a bheith páirteach sa tsochaí anseo. Chuige sin, tá maoiniú suntasach curtha ar fáil ag mo Roinn le cúpla bliain don fheachtas Céad Míle Fáilte, feachtas fiúntach agus fiorthábhachtach a thugann deis do nua-Éireannaigh a bhféiniúlacht Éireannach a láidriú.

Chun imeachtaí na seachtaine seo, Seachtain na Gaeilge, a chlúdach, cuireann mo Roinn maoiniú ar fáil don chiste spreagtha, ciste atá ag tacú le himeachtaí pobail ar fud na tíre le linn na seachtaine agus go háirithe thar dheireadh seachtaine Lá Fhéile Pádraig. Anseo inár bpríomhchathair, tá Baile Átha Cliath le Gaeilge i mbun oibre chun dlús a chur le húsáid na teanga i measc an lucht gnó. Le seachtain anuas, d'fhógair mé ós cionn €4 milliún don togra Gaeilge365 chun an teanga a nascadh le seirbhísí na n-údarás áitiúla i mBaile Átha Cliath. Bhí oíche iontach againn aréir i Halla na Cathrach i lár Bhaile Átha Cliath chun ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar obair Gaeilge365. Aithníonn an Rialtas an fiúntas a bhaineann leis na scéimeanna agus na feachtais éagsúla seo, an dea-thionchar atá acu i measc an phobail, agus an chaoi a gcuireann siad an Ghaeilge chun cinn ar bhealach atá éadrom, spreagúil agus cumasach. Ar ais

san ardchathair arís, ag Ard-Fheis Chonradh na Gaeilge cúpla seachtain ó shin bhí áthas orm an athfhorbairt mhór atá á dhéanamh ar 6 Sráid Fhearchair a fhógairt. Ar ndóigh, is ionad stairiúil é an foirgneamh seo a bheidh mar mhol lárnach don Ghaeilge agus do chultúr na Gaeilge i lár na cathrach anseo i mBaile Átha Cliath. Tá allúntas €3.1 milliún ceadaithe ag Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí chun tús a chur leis an obair i mbliana ionas go mbeimid réidh le tairiscintí a lorg don mhórfhorbairt faoi 2026.

Tá an Rialtas seo, mé féin agus m'fhoireann tiomanta geallúintí an Rialtais i leith forbairt agus buanú na Gaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm, i gcomhar leis na Teachtaí uile agus leis an bpobal, agus tá muid ag súil le leanúint leis an obair le linn na blianta atá amach romhainn. Tá súil agam go mbeidh deis ag Teachtaí a gcuid Gaeilge a úsáid le linn na seachtaine seo. Tá sé iontach go bhfuil - tá mé ag ceapadh - níos mó Gaeilgeoirí sa Dáil seo ná mar a bhí lena lán blianta anuas. Tá sé tábhachtach go labhraímid an teanga sa Dáil agus sa Seanad. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go leanfaimid ar aghaidh agus an gcoiste Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta a athbhunú.

Go mbaine na Teachtaí sult as úsáid na Gaeilge. Tá súil agam go mbeidh i bhfad níos mó díospóireachtaí againn i nGaeilge faoin nGaeilge agus faoi ábhair eile, agus ní hamháin an díospóireacht bhliantúil le haghaidh Seachtain na Gaeilge.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Cathal Crowe: Anois, rachaimid chuig Páirtí Shinn Féin. Tosóimid leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh. Tá trí nóiméad aige.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá a lán cainte an tseachtain seo le linn Seachtain na Gaeilge - nó coicís na Gaeilge ag an staid seo - faoi bhrí focail Ghaeilge. Bhí a lán cainte ann le déanaí faoi cad is “bréag” ann. An bréag a bhí i gceist in Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2021, ós rud é go bhfuil ailt 9A, 18C, 18E agus 19A á sárú ag an Rialtas? An bréag a bhí i gceist leis an ndualgas in Acht an Gharda Síochána, 2003 gardaí le Gaeilge a lonnú sa Ghaeltacht, dualgas atá á shárú go leanúnach ag an Rialtas? An bréag a bhí sna geallúintí go dtiocfadh toghchán Údarás na Gaeltachta ar ais? Cad faoin ngeallúint i leith scéim labhairt na Gaeilge? An bréag a bhí sna geallúintí go léir faoi threoirlínte pleanála Gaeltachta, sé sin go mbeadh siad ann faoin Nollaig 2021, agus ansin sa chéad ráithe de 2022, roimh dheireadh 2022, go luath i 2023, i lár 2023, faoi Cháisc 2023, agus i lár 2024? Ní raibh na treoirlínte luaite in óráid an Aire díreach anois. An bréag a bhí ann nuair a dúirt oifigigh an Roinn tithíochta in 2022 go raibh na treoirlínte críochnaithe acu ach go raibh siad ag fanacht ar Roinn na Gaeltachta? An bréag a bhí ann nuair a dúirt an Roinn Gaeltachta in 2023 go raibh na treoirlínte críochnaithe aige ach go raibh sé ag fanacht ar an Roinn tithíochta? Níl mise ag rá gur bhréag a bhí ann, ach is léir nach bhfuil an fhirinne i gceist sna ráitis seo go léir. Níl na treoirlínte fiú luaite sa chlár Rialtas i mbliana cé go bhfuil bánú ag tarlú sa Ghaeltacht, nuair nach féidir leis an gcuid is mó den ghnáthphobal teach a thógáil nó a cheannach sna ceantair sin. Tá líon na nGaeilgeoirí laethúla ag titim. Tá borradh ar an nGaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht a bhuí go háirithe le leithéidí Kneecap agus na díograiseoirí eile thar na cianta a bhí ag streachailt ina measc. Ach tar éis 20 bliain de dhí-infheistiú ón Rialtas anseo, agus an DUP anois ag cur cosc ar arduithe maoinithe, tá iarrachtaí pobal ag streachailt fad is atáimid anseo ag maíomh as a gcuid oibre.

Thug Sinn Féin an deis don Dáil aréir dul níos faide ná béalghrá bliantúil na ráitis seo. Bhí sé spéisiúil nár labhair aon duine ó Fhianna Fáil sa díospóireacht sin. Dúirt Teachtaí Fhine Gael gur chóir go mbeadh oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge ar fáil do chách ach anocht vótálfaidh siad i gcoinne an rún chun an ceart sin a aithint. Tá focal againn i nGaeilge nuair nach ndéanann daoine gníomhú de réir a mbriathra - “bréag” atá i gceist ansin.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. Tá sé de phribhléid labhairt inniu faoinár dteanga náisiúnta, an Ghaeilge, teanga an oileáin seo agus teanga na nGael. Tá mé mórtasach agus bródúil go bhfuil mo theanga féin á labhairt agam anseo inár bParlaimint náisiúnta.

Labhair le haon Gaeilgeoir agus déarfaidh sé nó sí an rud céanna faoin mhothúchán a mhúsclaíonn sí ionainn agus sinn á labhairt. Is teanga bheo í an Ghaeilge, teanga a mhair trí na céadta bliain de dheacrachtaí agus dúshláin, teanga a d'fhan dílis dár n-oidhreacht, dár n-aitheantas agus dár spiorad. Is croílár ár náisiúin í agus is í an nasc a nascann sinn lenár n-am atá caite, lenár láthair agus lenár todhchaí. Is í an snáithe órga a nascann sinn le glúnta atá imithe romhainn agus a threoraíonn sinn i dtreo todhchaí ina mbeidh ár n-oidhreacht beo bríomhar.

Is í an fhuaim a thugann beatha dár stair, dár seanchas agus dár dtraidisiún. Is í an teanga a labhair ár laochra, ár bhfilí, ár réabhlóidithe agus ár n-ealaíontóirí. In ainneoin an easa in aghaidh a snámhann sí, tá líon na ndaoine atá ag foghlaim agus ag úsáid na Gaeilge ag méadú de réir a chéile. Tá an Ghaeilge le feiceáil níos mó is níos mó inár saol poiblí, inár meán cumarsáide agus inár gcóras oideachais. Tá todhchaí na Gaeilge idir lámha ach tá sé in am dúinn an Ghaeilge a labhairt le bród, í a fhoghlaim le paisean agus a roinnt le grá.

Tá Sinn Féin dáiríre faoin teanga agus faoi thodhchaí na teanga. Tá polasaithe agus pleananna Shinn Féin dáiríre faoi Éire a bheith ina háit shábháilte don Ghaeilge, in ainneoin an caith san aer, an neamhaird agus an dímhéas a thagann ó dhreamanna eile i bhfad rómhinic.

Tá gá le maoiniú don Ghaeilge a ardú, go háirithe i scéimeanna Fhoras na Gaeilge, lena bhfuil ciorraithe de 45% déanta orthu le 20 bliain anuas. Tá gá le Gaeloideachas a chur ar fáil mar cheart do dhaltáí atá á iarraidh ag gach leibhéal agus in gach cuid dár dtír. Tá gá le Gaeilgeoirí a chóiméad sa Ghaeltacht le tithíocht agus fostaíocht agus stop a chur le bánú na Gaeltachta. Is ceist an-dáiríre í sin i mo cheantar féin i nGaeltacht na nDéise in iarthar Phort Láirge, áit a bhfuil teip ag teacht agus baol á chur ar thodhchaí na Gaeltachta mar gheall ar an easpa tithíochta. Impím ar an Aire, an Teachta Calleary, beart a dhéanamh dá réir a bhriathar air sin.

Tá sé de dhualgas orainn sa Teach seo an Ghaeilge a chosaint, a chur chun cinn agus a neartú. Caithfidh muid tacaíocht a thabhairt do na pobail Ghaeltachta, na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus na heagraíochtaí atá ag obair chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Caithfidh muid an Ghaeilge a labhairt, a scríobh, a léamh agus a chanadh. Caithfidh an Ghaeilge a bheith mar chuid lárnach dár saol laethúil, gan drogall gan náire agus gan laghmhisneach.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Mar dhuine ón Ghaeltacht agus mar dhuine a chónaíonn sa Ghaeltacht, is mian liom Seachtain na Gaeilge a úsáid mar dheis chun cuid de na hábhair atá ag cur inní ar mo phobal maidir le tithíocht a chur os comhair na Dála agus a léiriú. Ar feadh na mblianta, diúltaíodh cead pleanála do go leor daoine is muintir na Gaeltachta, cé go raibh easpa tithíochta le ligín ar cíós sa cheantar seo. Mar is eol dúinn, tá na tithe atá ar fáil ar cíós róchostasach. Tá na cinn atá le ceannach róchostasach fosta. I nDún na nGall, tá sé seo níos measa mar gheall ar an ghéarchéim ó thaobh na mbloc coinceáite lochtaí.

Bhí triúir i dteagmháil le m'oifig ar na mallaibh ón Ghaeltacht agus iad i mbaol go mbeadh siad fágtha gan dídean. Is rud é seo nach raibh againn riamh i gceantar Dhún na nGall san am a chuaigh thart. Is é polasaí tithíochta an Rialtais is cúis leis seo.

Is é ceann de na constaicí is mó atá ag muintir na háite ná cead pleanála a fháil. Cé go bhfuil sé ráite ag an Rialtas go bhfuil sé i bhfabhar cead pleanála, tá a fhios againn go bhfuil

fadhb mhór ó thaobh cead pleanála a fháil, go háirithe ar an phríomhbhóthar náisiúnta. Is é an príomhbhóthar náisiúnta ná an N56 a théann trí mhórchuid cheantar agus Ghaeltacht Dhún na nGall. Is é an N56 cnámh droma Dhún na nGall. Tá sé seo ag cruthú faidhbe millteanaí móire do dhaoine, go háirithe do lánúin óga atá ag iarraidh a gcuid teaghlach a thógáil le Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht mar nach bhfuil siad ábalta fanacht inti. Caithfidh an Rialtas comhréiteach a dhéanamh agus glacadh leis go bhfuil an polasaí seo ag déanamh dochar dochreidte do Ghaeltacht Dhún na nGall. Is rud é seo go bhféadfadh an Rialtas gníomhú air láithreach agus tá sé ráite is ardaithe agam arís is arís eile sa Dáil seo. Mar atá cúrsaí, caithfidh daoine an ceantar a fhágáil mar nach bhfuil siad ábalta an cead pleanála a fháil. Cuireann sé slánú ár dteanga dúchais i mbaoil. Is í firinne an scéil ná go bhfuil titim ar líon na gcainteoirí a luaigh go bhfuil Gaeilge acu sna ceantair Ghaeltachta le dhá dhaonáireamh as a chéile. Níl ach teaghlach amháin as gach cúigear ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge anois.

Níl na treoirilínte pleanála Gaeltachta - atá geallta dúinn ón iarAire tithíochta, atá ina Aire Iompair reatha anois, an Teachta O'Brien, - feicthe againn go fóill. Gheall sé iad in 2021. Ní dhearnadh go leor infheistíochta ach an oiread i mbonneagar Gaeltachta ó thaobh leictreachais, uisce agus séarachais de. Tá sé seo le feiceáil go soiléir. I mo cheantar féin, tá réabadh ar na píopaí uisce chóir a bheith achan seachtain agus níl scéim séarachais Ghaoth Dobhair ag dul chun tosaigh mar a bhí geallta agus beartaithe. Caithfidh muid i bhfad níos mó a dhéanamh ó thaobh na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus na teanga náisiúnta de. Mar shampla amháin, chuir Sinn Féin seacht n-uair níos mó airgid ar fáil don earnáil ná mar atá á chur ar fáil faoi láthair. Sin an rud atá ag teastáil.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tá mé an-bhuíoch as an deis labhairt faoi thábhacht na Gaeilge sa Gaeltacht agus Seachtain na Gaeilge faoi lánseol. Ar ndóigh, labhraíonn muintir na Gaeltachta agus lucht na Gaeilge an teanga chuile lá den bhliain. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach, áfach, go dtapaíonn muid an deis chun cinntiú go bhfuil muid ag tabhairt na tacaíochta atá ag teastáil uathu, agus ó na hoifigigh pleanála teanga, na coistí agus na pobail dheonacha atá taobh thiar dóibh atá ag obair sna limistéir phleanála teanga, sna bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus sna líonraí Gaeilge sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart, go háirithe sna dá bhaile seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus an deich limistéar i mo Dháilcheantar féin, ó Bhaile Chláir na Gaillimhe go Cloch na Rón, agus ó na hOileáin Árann go Dúiche Sheoighe.

Chomh maith leis sin, caithfidh muid a chinntiú gur féidir le gnáthphobail na Gaeltachta fanacht sa Ghaeltacht. Tá bánú na Gaeltachta ag tarlú. Sin an fáth go bhfuil an feachtas, BÁNÚ, ann de bharr nach bhfuil daoine in ann fanacht ina gceantair féin. Chuala muid an seachtain seo arís é. D'ardaigh bean óg, Caitríona Ní Chualáin, an cheist seo arís. Níl sí in ann tógáil ina ceantar féin in Indreabhán. Níl daoine in ann teach a thógáil ná teach a fháil ar cíos agus níl siad in ann teach a cheannach. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbeidh sé seo i gcroílár aon phlean atá ag an Rialtas seo don Ghaeltacht le go mbeidh daoine in ann fanacht sa cheantar agus teaghlach a thógáil ann.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is soiléir go bhfuil spiorad nua sa Ghaeilge. Chonaic mé sin nuair a bhíos ar an gcomhchoiste leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, a raibh mar Chathaoirleach air. Bhí sé mar onóir dúinn bualadh leis na scoláirí sna Gaelcholáistí agus sna scoileanna, go háirithe iad siúd i mBaile Átha Cliath agus Béal Feirste. Gan dabht, tá an Ghaeilge beo ach tá a lán dúshlán ann chomh maith. D'fhoilsigh Sinn Féin Ár Seacht nDícheall don Ghaeilge, chun an teanga náisiúnta a spreagadh i mbéal an phobail. Is é an príomhrud a bhí ansin ná an cheart chun an Ghaeilge a úsáid mar is minic gur chuala mé ó dhaoine gur scríobh siad a n-ainmneacha i nGaeilge, ach nuair a tháinig an cárta nó rud mar sin ar ais, bhí sé scríofa síos i mBéarla gan

cead. Gheall Sinn Féin chomh maith riachtanas nua don Ghaeilge i siopaí, ag cinntiú gur i nGaeilge nó go dátheangach a bheadh comharthaí siopaí, taispeántais fuinneoige agus mar sin de.

Tá saibhreas ann i logainmneacha sa tír seo ach níl an saibhreas sin ar na comharthaí bóithre. In 1892, dúirt Dubhghlás de hÍde go raibh dóchas agus muinín aige go n-áiteofar air Rialtas dúchasach Éireannach ár logainmneacha a athchóiriú, ach tá ár mbóithre fós truailithe le bréag-ainmneacha gan brí cosúil le “quilty” agus “snave” agus mar sin de. Cé nach bhfuil muid ag iarraidh na hainmneacha Béarla a chosc, ba chóir go mbeadh Gaeilge ar na comharthaí bóithre cosúil le “Port Laoise” agus “Dún Laoghaire”.

Mar fhocail scoir, tá fadhbanna againn mar gheall ar chead pleanála. Cé go bhfuil spiorad ann sa Ghaeilge, aontaím go raibh mí-úsáid le blianta anuas ach ba chóir go mbeadh buntáiste acu siúd a bhfuil fonn orthu maireachtáil sa Ghaeltacht. Chun an Ghaeilge a chóiméad beo, ba chóir go mbeadh sí beo sna Gaeltachtaí.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Tá mé an-bhuíoch as an seans labhairt inniu, go háirithe agus ráitis Ghaeilge agus Seachtain na Gaeilge i gceist. Dearaim achan bhliain go bhfuil orm níos mó cleachtaidh a dhéanamh agus deirim achan bhliain go ndéanfaidh mé sin. Tá mé á rá anois é. Tchfídh muid cad é a tharlóidh. Tá cuid mhór ráite cheana féin maidir leis na fadhbanna atá i gceist. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil fadhb ollmhór maidir le tithíocht sa tír ar fad. Tá cuid mhór fadhbanna nuair atá muid ag caint faoi cead pleanála tuaithe, ach tá cuid mhór fadhbanna ann sa Ghaeltacht. Níl sé maith go leor ar chor ar bith nach bhfuil daoine ón Ghaeltacht in ann a bheith ina gcónaí sa Ghaeltacht. Níl sé maith go leor ach oiread nach bhfuil na treoirilínte déanta agus nach bhfuil an fhadhb seo réitithe faoin am seo.

Tá sé ar intinn agam caint fosta ar an fhadhb atá ann sa Roinn maidir le scolaíocht trí mheán na Gaeilge. Níl go leor acmhainní ag an Roinn agus tá plean de dhíth uirthi maidir le, más rud é go bhfuilimid ag caint faoi, achan rud ó naíonraí, an bhunscoil, an meánscoil agus an tríú leibhéal. Táimse ag caint sa chomhthéacs seo faoi Ghaelcholáiste Dhún Dealgan. Tá tá an scoil seo mar scoil satailíte de chuid Choláiste Ghlór na Mara agus an Foras Patrúnachta i mBaile Brigín. Táimid an-bhuíoch as an scoil satailíte ach is pilot atá ann. Níl mé cinnte go bhfuil na hacmhainní ar fáil atá de dhíth ar an scoil seo agus ar an bhForas Patrúnachta le seo a chur i bhfeidhm mar is gnáth. Caithfidh go bhfuil fadhb ann leis an gcóras srutha atá i bhfeidhm faoin am seo, agus níl sé seo maith go leor. Tá cuid mór fadhbanna i gceist leis agus tá an scoil satailíte ag iarraidh go gcuirfí modh eile i bhfeidhm. Tá cuid mhór acmhainní de dhíth, mar a dúirt mé cheana féin, agus ba cheart go mbeadh níos mó cumhacht ag an Roinn chun na hacmhainní seo a chur i bhfeidhm agus córas níos fearr a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá sé sin de dhíth.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Is mór an onóir dom a bheith ábalta labhairt faoi Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Gabh mo leithscéal nach bhfuil Gaeilge líofa agam. Is cúis náire dom é nach bhfuilim lán-ábalta mé féin a chur in iúl tríd ár dteanga dhúchais. Is fearr Gaeilge briste ná Béarla cliste mar a deirtear. Is ceiliúradh ár dteanga náisiúnta í Seachtain na Gaeilge. Anuas ar sin, tugtar deis dúinn an Ghaeilge a chur chun agus tacaíocht shuntasach don Ghaeilge a lorg ón Rialtas.

Seachtain na Gaeilge is a celebration of our national language but it should be more than just a festival. It could be a national movement that celebrates our language in a positive way. People of all ages have different abilities when it comes to speaking Irish but there should be an opportunity each day to engage with the Irish language in a fun and inclusive way. Whether

someone is fluent or just knows a cúpla focal, this celebration encourages everybody to use and appreciate the language more.

One of the big challenges facing the language is its lack of everyday use outside of Gaeltacht areas – out in the wild. Despite spending 14 years learning Irish many people, including myself, leave school without the ability or confidence to speak it. This may be down to policy, to the method of teaching or to inadequate resources. I know from my own secondary school that, every year more and more students opt out of learning Irish. It is clear we need a new approach to prioritise practical learning, which improves people's accessibility and competence.

Despite these issues it can be said we are in the midst of a Gaelic revival. Social media and technology have helped us to grow our grá for Gaeilge by making it accessible and bringing it to a whole new audience. Irish is the most popular language on Duolingo in Ireland. The Gaeilge hashtag has more than 120 million views on TikTok with influencers making the language cool and helping to banish the shadow of Peig.

Seachtain na Gaeilge is also an opportunity to build on these successes and encourage schools, businesses and communities across the country to create a positive and accessible atmosphere around the language. Like our language, art is at the heart of our national identity and cultural heritage. Speaking our language reinforces our connection to our past while showing the valuable role it creates in the present and will ensure its survival into the future. One of the most important benefits of Seachtain na Gaeilge is that it inspires people to learn more and improve their Irish. Many people who may be hesitant to use the language feel encouraged to give it a go during this week in a friendly, non-judgmental atmosphere which helps to build people's confidence. For many people, their experience of Irish has been limited to the classroom where it can be seen as something to endure. When we have the opportunity to speak and celebrate our language it changes the perception by showing that Irish is a vibrant and living language that can be used in music, sport or comedy. Events such as concerts, storytelling sessions and céilís make learning and speaking Irish more enjoyable. When people see the language being used in a positive way they are more likely to embrace and use it.

Seachtain na Gaeilge is not just about promoting Irish. It plays a huge role in uplifting our musicians and artists. The week creates opportunities for people in creative professions to both use Irish and bring it into their work. It provides a platform for many organisations who are working to support the language, such as Conradh na Gaeilge, TG4, Foras na Gaeilge to use this time to highlight their initiatives and resources.

The impact of Seachtain na Gaeilge is not just national but global, with Irish enthusiasts and communities around the world getting involved and showcasing that Irish is a global language that connects people across continents through a shared love of language and culture. Art and music are powerful tools for cultural expression and Seachtain na Gaeilge reinforces the connection between language and identity. At last year's Oscars, "An Cailín Ciúin" was the first film as Gaeilge to be nominated, and Kneecap has further renewed excitement and interest in the language, making it cool. Many Irish musicians and artists who use the medium of Irish struggle to get the same exposure as their English-speaking counterparts. Seachtain na Gaeilge allows them to take full advantage of putting the Irish language – particularly Irish language music, poetry and visual arts – into the spotlight. This is especially so for those who play folk or trad music. They benefit from increased demand for their performances during Seachtain na Gaeilge. This helps to support their careers financially and encourages venues to book Irish acts outside of Seachtain na Gaeilge. It is also great to see schools and youth groups organise

talent shows and exhibitions, giving young artists performances so that they gain confidence and experience both with the language and with their art. Whether one is fluent or just starting out I would encourage anyone to take part in Seachtain na Gaeilge.

Tá an Ghaeilge beo beatha inniu, in ainneoin easpa acmhainní agus tacaíocht ón Rialtas, ach a bhuíochas le dúthracht agus díogras cheantair fud fad na tíre. Tá dualgas orainn ár dteanga dhúchais a chosaint. Iarraimid ar an Rialtas an teanga a chur chun cinn trí pholasaithe, maoiniú agus leasuithe oideachais. Molaim do gach duine an méid Gaeilge atá acu a úsáid le linn Seachtain na Gaeilge. Ar bharr sin, molaim do gach éinne a ndícheall a dhéanamh cúpla focal a úsáid ó cheann ceann na bliana.

This week made me reflect on my own use of language. Eu falo Português du Brasil. Je parle Français. Ora studio Italiano. I have used these phrases in the wild, in Dublin, during the past 12 months than I have ever used Irish, up to this week really. It has made me reflect on my use of the language which I intend to be a lot better if I am making this speech next year.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Sár-iarracht. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Theachta.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Creidim go bhfuil malartú cultúrtha agus meas nua tagtha ar ár dteanga dhúchais le blianta beaga anuas. Tá Pop-Up Gaeltachtaí, leabhair nua, podchraoltaí cosúil le “Motherfoclóir”, ceol Kneecap agus a leithéid sin ag cabhrú leis an nGaeilge a chur chun cinn. Tá suim sa Ghaeilge ag daoine óga na linne seo, agus tá ár dteanga ar fáil do gach duine. Ní mór dúinn an deis seo a thapú agus seans a thabhairt do dhaoine an teanga a fhoghlaim anois, agus níos tábhachtaí fós, í a labhairt gach lá. Ba chóir dúinn tosú ar an obair seo sna scoileanna. An tslí is fearr chun teanga a fhoghlaim ná a bheith báite go dtí na súile inti. Mar sin, tá sé rithábachtach go dtabharfaimid deiseanna dár ndaltaí an Ghaeilge a labhairt istigh sna seomraí ranga agus taobh amuigh sa phobal.

Tá an t-ádh dearg orainn i mo Dháilcheantar féin, Baile Átha Cliath Thiar Theas, go bhfuil Gaelscoileanna iontacha againn, ar nós Gaelcholáiste an Phiarsaigh i Ráth Fearnáin; Gaelscoil na Giúise i dTeach na Giúise; Scoil Chaitlín Maude agus Scoil Santain i dTamhlacht; agus Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna i gCnoc Liamhna. Is mian liom scoileanna mar iad a fhás agus a fhorbairt ionas go mbeidh an deis ag i bhfad níos mó daoine óga an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim agus a fhás aníos saite inti.

Tugaim ardmholadh a thabhairt do na grúpaí éagsúla sa phobal agus na grúpaí comhrá i mo cheantar, Baile Buadáin le Gaeilge ach go háirithe, a dhéanann sárobair an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ag comhoibriú le club CLG Baile Buadáin Naomh Éanna. Eagraíonn siad imeachtaí iontacha agus ranganna trí Ghaeilge a léiríonn an fhoghlaim nádúrtha. Bíonn toradh thar barr ag tionscnaimh mar ghrúpaí WhatsApp as Gaeilge chomh maith. Ní mór dúinn ár seacht ndícheall a dhéanamh chun tionscnamh mar seo a chothú sa phobal, chomh maith le níos mó deiseanna a chur ar fáil do dhaoine óga ár dteanga dhúchais a labhairt sa chóras oideachais agus ar chuairteanna go dtí na Gaeltachtaí. Is trí í a labhairt a thiocfaidh méadú ar líon na gcainteoirí Gaeilge.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Is mór an onóir dom seasamh os bhur gcomhair inniu chun Seachtain na Gaeilge a chomóradh agus chun cloch mhíle thábhachtach i scéal na Gaeilge a cheiliúradh. Agus muid ag machnamh ar stair ár dteanga agus ar a todhchaí, tá sé rithábachtach an dul chun cinn iontach atá déanta againn a mheas, go háirithe ar stáitse na hEorpa. Ag meán oíche ar an 31 Nollaig 2021, bhain

an Ghaeilge cothromas iomlán amach le 23 teanga oifigiúil eile an Aontais Eorpaigh. Nóiméad tábhachtach a bhí anseo, agus ní hamháin d'Éirinn. Ón 1 Eanáir 2022, tháinig deireadh leis an maolú a bhí i bhfeidhm ó 2007 agus bhain an Ghaeilge stádas iomlán amach in institiúidí an Aontais Eorpaigh i ré nua don chomhionannas teanga. Is aitheantas suntasach é an fhorbairt seo ar an nGaeilge agus ar ár bhféiniúlacht ar leith mar phobal. Dearbhaíonn sé, ag an leibhéal is airde go hidirnáisiúnta, nach déantúsán stairiúil amháin í an Ghaeilge nó iarsma ón am atá thart, ach teanga bheo atá ag forbairt, á labhairt ag go leor agus a bhfuil meas ag na milliúin uirthi. Is teanga de chuid an Aontais Eorpaigh í anois, a úsáidtear ar an mbealach céanna le haon teanga oifigiúil eile de chuid an Aontais Eorpaigh.

Cad a chiallaíonn an t-aitheantas iomlán seo dúinne mar náisiún? Ar an gcéad dul síos, cuireann sé an Ghaeilge ar chomhchéim le teangacha bhunaitheoirí an Aontais, chomh maith le teangacha na mballstát is deireanaí a tháinig isteach ó shin. Is admháil é go bhfuil teanga againn, mar phobal, a léiríonn ár gcultúr, ár n-oidhreacht agus ár dtraidisiúin uathúla. Léiríonn sé freisin don domhan go bhfuil ómós agus meas ar éagsúlacht teanga agus chultúrtha na hÉireann laistigh den chreat Eorpach. Ní ceist stádas oifigiúil nó gradam amháin atá san éacht seo, áfach. Is aitheantas é go mbaineann ár dteanga le hinstitiúidí an Aontais Eorpaigh ar bhealach fíorphraiticiúil. Ciallaíonn an cinneadh an Ghaeilge a thabhairt isteach go hiomlán taobh istigh den Aontas go mbeidh an Ghaeilge ar fáil as seo amach le húsáid i reachtaíocht an Aontais Eorpaigh, i gcumarsáid agus i seirbhísí poiblí, díreach mar a dhéantar leis na teangacha oifigiúla eile. Deis atá ann dóibh siúd san Aontas Eorpach taithí a fháil ar shaibhreas ár dteanga, agus is freagracht é nach mór dúinn a ghlacadh anois mar náisiún. Cé go bhfuil a háit cheart ag an nGaeilge anois laistigh d'institiúidí an Aontais Eorpaigh, ní mór dúinn a aithint nach bhfuil sa stádas seo, cé go bhfuil sé tábhachtach, ach an tús.

Ní leor an Ghaeilge a bheith le cloisteáil i hallaí na Bruiséile agus Strasbourg. Bhí mé ag fágáil bialann i Lucsamburg cúpla bliain ó shin agus thosaigh roinnt daoine ag labhairt Gaeilge liom. Bhí mé an-bhródúil ag an am sin, agus tá sé iontach an Ghaeilge a chloisteáil sna cathracha sin. Ní mór í a chloisteáil agus a labhairt anseo sa bhaile, i saol laethúil ár ndaoine. Ní luíonn fíorluach an éachta seo san aitheantas foirmiúil laistigh d'institiúidí an Aontais Eorpaigh, ach ina thionchar i measc an phobail. Caithfidh a chinntiú go mbeidh rath ar an nGaeilge inár scoileanna, inár bpobail, inár dtithe agus sna Gaeltachtaí. Níl aon dabht ach go ndéanfaidh an tAire, an Teachta Calleary, jab iontach don Ghaeltacht agus Gaeltacht ina Dháilcheantar agus i mo Dháilcheantar freisin. Ní mór dúinn an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus a húsáid a spreagadh i ngach cearn den tsochaí - ó ghnó go healaíona agus cultúr, ó oideachas go seirbhísí poiblí. Is í úsáid rialta na Gaeilge don fhíorchumarsáid an eochair. Ní leor an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim agus a úsáid sa chóras oideachais. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go n-úsáidimid sa chóras oideachais í, ach caithfidh ról a aimsiú di inár saol. Go deimhin, ní féidir máistreacht a fháil ar aon teanga mura bhfuilimid á húsáid go rialta, is cuma cén leibhéal inniúlachta atá againn. Taithí a dhéanann máistreacht, mar a deir an seanfhocal. Is trínár gcuid Gaeilge a chleachtadh go rialta a shroichimid líofacht.

Bíonn an-bród orm an Ghaeilge a chloisteáil nuair atáim ag obair san Aontas Eorpach agus ag úsáid na Gaeilge ag cruinnithe Comhairle na nAirí. Ag an am céanna, áfach, is rud an-phraiticiúil é don teanga freisin, mar tá an Ghaeilge anois in ann dul isteach sa todhchaí ag déileáil leis an gcóras digiteach, le hathrú aeráide agus cúrsaí cosanta. Tá a lán teangacha ar fud na hEorpa ag déileáil leis an dul chun cinn sin agus tá athrú ag teacht ar ár dteangacha agus focail nua á gcumadh. Tá sé sin ag tarlú sa Ghaeilge, ach tá sé ag tarlú i ngach teanga freisin. Tá roinnt de na dúshláin atá ag an nGaeilge ag teangacha eile freisin. Foilsíodh fógra ar shuíomh

Idirlín an Choimisiúin Eorpaigh. Tá 33 dlítheangeolaí le Béarla agus dhá theanga eile á lorg acu. Caithfidh na hiarrthóirí a bheith ó hÉirinn, an Bhreatain Mhór nó Málta. Tá deis iontach ansin d'Éireannaigh le Gaeilge ar ardleibhéal acu post a fháil sna hinstiúidí. Impím orthu an fógra sin a léamh.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Fáiltím roimh an díospóireacht anseo inniu agus an deis chun cúrsaí Gaelainne a chur chun cinn. Ar ndóigh, ní hamháin i rith Sheachtain na Gaeilge a bhíonn gá cúrsaí teanga a thabhairt chun cinn, ach go minic i rith na bliana chomh maith. Fáiltím roimh an deis inniu.

Tá Fianna Fáil gníomhach le fada an lá ó thaobh cúrsaí teanga. Mar shampla, in 2003, thugamar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla chun cinn. Rinneadh leasú ar an Acht sin le blianta beaga anuas, agus spriocanna móra cosúil leis an sprioc go mbeidh 20% d'earcaigh nua chuig an Státseirbhís inniúil ar an nGaeilge leagtha síos san Acht nua sin. Beidh sé sin dúshlánach, ach tá gá leis, mar tá éileamh ar an nGaelainn ón Státchóras agus tá muintir na Gaelainne ag lorg go mbeadh freastal cuí ann dóibh. Bhunaigh Fianna Fáil Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga, an Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta chun tacú le múinteoirí scoile agus le daltaí, agus Foras na Gaeilge. Inné, d'ardaigh mé ceist mar gheall ar mhaoiniú Fhoras na Gaeilge agus an brú atá air. Tá gá go mbeifí ábalta é sin a láimhseáil gan teacht salach ar Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta.

I mo thaobh na tíre, tá brú ar thithíocht, díreach mar atá in a lán áiteanna eile. Tá deacracht faoi leith sa Ghaeltacht, mar gan tithíocht, gan daoine agus gan pobal, ní bheidh teanga againn. Mar sin, tá brú faoi leith ann. Tá an t-ádh linn go bhfuil oifigeach pleanála teanga fuinniúil gníomhach inár ndúthaigh, Eibhlín Ní Lionáird, ag cur cúrsaí chun cinn. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeadh na háiseanna cuí ar fáil do na hoifigigh pleanála teanga ar fud na tíre. Sa chlár Rialtais romhainn amach, tá spriocanna an-mhaithe leagtha síos ag an Rialtas. Cuirfidh scéim na mbóithre áise, a bhí á lorg ag mo chomhghleacaithe agus mé féin, le hinfreastruchtúr agus le caighdeán maireachtála sa Ghaeltacht. Molaim é sin a thabhairt ar aghaidh chomh luath agus is féidir.

Mar fhocal scoir, ar mhaithe leis an daonlathas sa Ghaeltacht, molaim an reachtaíocht maidir le toghcháin Údarás na Gaeltachta a thabhairt chun cinn chomh luath agus is féidir.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Déanaim comhghairdeas le hAire na Gaeltachta, an Teachta Calleary, atá ceaptha anois. Ar ndóigh, beidh sé ag coinneáil súil ghéar ar na Gaeltachtaí éagsúla sa tír, ach ní ar na Gaeltachtaí amháin ach ar phobal na Gaeilge tríd an tír. Fáiltím roimh an deis seo labhairt sa díospóireacht seo ar Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Ní seachtain na Gaeilge atá i gceist anois; tá thart ar choicís nó níos mó i gceist. Nuair a bunaíodh Seachtain na Gaeilge in 1902, is Conradh na Gaeilge a bhunaigh é agus tá an-jab déanta aige thar na blianta sin. Tá go leor féilte tríd an tír agus smaoiním ar an cheann i mo bhaile dhúchais féin, féile Mary from Dungloe nó Féile Mháire an Chlocháin Léith. Gach uile Déardaoin i rith an fhéile sin, bíonn lá Gaeilge ann. Tagann daoine ó gach chairn den chontae agus níos faide i gcéin chun a bheith mar pháirt den fhéile sin.

Nuair a bhí mé féin i bParlaimint na hEorpa thar na blianta, ghlac mé an deis agus labhair mé an Ghaeilge. Tháinig go leor daoine chugam ina dhiaidh sin nach raibh a fhios acu go raibh an Ghaeilge againn. Dúirt siad nach raibh a fhios acu go raibh ár dteanga dhúchais againn. Bhí mé mar pháirt de ghrúpa ina dhiaidh sin chun aistriúcháin a chur ar fáil. Bhí Eamon Ó Cuív mar Aire na Gaeltachta mar pháirt de sin chomh maith.

Caithfimid dea-shampla a thabhairt don aos óg. Is an-deis é seo inniu, ós rud é go bhfuil an díospóireacht seo againn i nGaeilge. B'fhéidir gur cheart go mbeadh díospóireachtaí níos minice againn i nGaeilge agus treoir a thabhairt don aos óg. Caithfimid déanamh cinnte de go mhairfidh an teanga. Caithfimid í a chaomhnú agus í a chur chun cinn.

Déarfaidh mé rud amháin fá dtaobh den chlár Rialtais. Tá go leor daoine sa Ghaeltacht ag fanacht, mar a dúirt an Teachta Ó Muineacháin, ar thoghcháin Údarás na Gaeltachta. Nuair a bhí mé féin ann, bhí go leor airgid chun na bóithre áise a chóiriú. Níl sé sin ann anois agus tá sé mar sprioc ag an Rialtas airgead a chur ar fáil go luath.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Is mór an onóir dom a bheith ag labhairt ar an nGaeilge don dara huair i rith Seachtain na Gaeilge. Is seachtain í seo do gach duine le ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar ár dteanga. Gaeilge más féidir, Béarla más gá, mar a deirimid. Ba bhreá liom a bheith ag seasamh os bhur gcomhair agus ag ceiliúradh na rudaí iontacha faoin teanga. Ba bhreá liom a bheith caint faoin ngrá pearsanta atá agam di, faoin saibhreas atá aici, faoin neart agus spiorad atá ag Gaeilgeoirí fud fad na tíre, agus faoi na daoine ar fad atá á labhairt lá i ndiaidh lae. Ach, faraor, ta géarchéim ann i leith na teanga. Ta líon na ndaoine ag labhairt na teanga sa Ghaeltacht tar éis titim sa dhá daonáireamh deireanach. Níl ach teaghlach amháin as cúig ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht, agus tá an ghéarchéim thithíochta ag meá na Gaeilge mar nach féidir le daoine áitiúla tithe a thógáil sna ceantair inar tógadh iad. Tá níos mó ná 1,000 teach ar cíos ag Airbnb sa Ghaeltacht chomh maith, gan ach deich acu ar cíos fadtéarmach. Tá an Rialtas seo ag cur le scrios na teanga.

I mo Dháilcheantar féin i gCill Dara Theas, tá an-chuid grúpaí Gaeilge ag déanamh a seacht ndícheall an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Is grúpa pobail é Glór an Churraigh. Cuireann sé imeachtaí ar fáil trí Ghaeilge ar nós maidin chaife an Luain, céilithe móra, tráth na gceist agus Pop-Up Gaeltacht, a d'fhreastail mé air le déanaí. Grúpa eile is ea Cill Dara le Gaeilge, atá ag cur seirbhís chuimsitheach ar fáil chun tacú leis an nGaeilge sa chontae. Tá baill an ghrúpa ag cur an teanga chun cinn tríd í a spreagadh i ngnólachtaí áitiúla, trí scéimeanna a chur ar fáil dóibh siúd atá spéis acu an Ghaeilge a fhorbairt sa ghnó atá acu, agus tríd imeachtaí iontacha a chur ar fáil do Sheachtain na Gaeilge do mhuintir Chill Dara.

Mar gheall ar fadhbanna maoinithe le Foras na Gaeilge áfach, tá baol ann nach mbeidh eagrais thábhachtacha cosúil le Cill Dara le Gaeilge beo amach anseo. Caithfidh an Rialtas a chinntiú go mbeidh eagrais mar seo beo. Caithfidh an Rialtas maoiniú eile a chur ar fáil don bhforas ionas gur féidir leis leanúint ar aghaidh leis an sáróbair atá ar siúl aige. Níl an Rialtas dáiríre faoin nGaeilge. Deir sé sa chlár Rialtais:

This Government is committed to the protection and promotion of the Irish language. It is the first language of the state.

Tá sé seo go léir scríofa i mBéarla. Don Rialtas seo, it is English only, Gaeilge if necessary.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá a lán Gaeilge ann freisin.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Cá bhfuil sé?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá leagan Gaeilge ann ach níor úsáid an Teachta é.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Táim an-sásta cúpla focal a labhairt ar Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Tá mé ag foghlaim Gaeilge since July 2023. Bhí mé sa Ghaeltacht in Oideas Gael i nGleann

Cholm Cille i gContae Dhún na nGall. Bhí an-craic againn. Níl mé ábalta a lán Ghaeilge a labhairt ach táim ábalta í a thuiscint. Nuair a bhí mé elected, rinne mé cúrsa Gaeilge online. Tá na ranganna go hiontach. Táim ag léamh an leabhar *Beidh tú Alright: An Irish Language Journey* le Joe McHugh, a bhí mar Aire Stáit na Gaeilge nuair nach raibh a lán Gaeilge aige. Nuair a dúirt daoine “Aire gan teanga, Aire gan clue”, thosaigh sé ag foghlaim Gaeilge. Cúpla bliain níos déanaí, tá Gaeilge líofa aige.

Mar sin, cad é an scéal leis an nGaeilge? Cén fáth nach bhfuil daoine ábalta Gaeilge líofa a labhairt? Bíonn muid ag foghlaim Gaeilge ar scoil ar feadh ocht mbliana sa bhunscoil agus cúig nó sé bliana sa mheánscoil. Ní mór teanga bheo a labhairt agus a chloisteáil. An bealach is éasca do go leor daoine teanga a fhoghlaim ná í a chloisteáil, agus ansin tar éis tamaill a bheith in ann abairt nó dhó a shreangú le chéile agus an duine atá ag labhairt leo a thuiscint. Cuidíonn an buzz sin le forbairt fhoghlaim na teanga ó bhéal. Caithfidh cinntiú go bhfuilimid ag forbairt cumas cainte go leanúnach inár scoileanna. Ciallaíonn foghlaim teanga go bhfoghlaimíonn an duine scileanna praiticiúla chun cumarsáid a dhéanamh sa teanga sin. Sílim go gcuirfeadh úsáid TEG inár gcóras oideachais leis seo. Úsáideann na Gearmánaigh an *Sprachdiplom* agus úsáideann na Francaigh scrúdú DELF. Chinnteodh an córas TEG atá aitheanta go hidirnáisiúnta go mbeadh líofacht sa teanga.

Gné eile den chaoi a bhfoghlaimímid teanga go fírinneach is ea foghlaim faoin bhfilíocht, faoi na scéalta agus faoin stair chultúrtha trí Ghaeilge. Ba cheart é seo a chosaint inár gcóras oideachais. Tá áilleacht ár dteanga feicthe againn in úsáid sa scannán “An Cailín Ciúin” agus freisin i gceol Kneecap. Tá an ghluaiseacht teanga seo ag scaipeadh ar fud na cruinne. Tá ardú feicthe againn freisin ar líon na ndaoine a fhreastalaíonn ar chúrsaí teanga agus ar an nGaeltacht. Ba cheart tacaíocht agus maoiniú a thabhairt ionas go mbeadh aon duine ar mhaith leo cúrsa a dhéanamh in ann é a dhéanamh.

Gabhaim buíochas le mo mhúinteoirí as a gcuid ama agus a gcuid foighne. Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine anseo as ucht éisteacht le mo chéad óráid go hiomlán i nGaeilge. Tá súil agam gur thuig sibh mé.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Le linn Sheachtain na Gaeilge, ní mór dúinn an teanga a cheiliúradh, ach tá sé tábhachtach dúinn mar ionadaithe an phobail tacú leis an teanga sa chuid eile den bhliain chomh maith. I mo Dháilcheantar féin, Baile Átha Cliath-Ráth an Dúin, tá páistí ag fágáil bunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge cosúil le Gaelscoil na Fuinseoige, Gaelscoil Shliabh Rua, Gaelscoil Thaobh na Coille, Gaelscoil Laighean agus go leor eile toisc nach bhfuil spás dóibh in aon Ghaelcholáiste sa cheantar, cé go bhfuil éileamh ann. Táimid ag déanamh feall ar na daltaí seo ag cur iallach orthu deireadh a chur lena nGaeloideachas. Tar éis na mblianta i mbun feachtasaíochta, níl aon Ghaelcholáiste i mBaile Átha Cliath 2, 4, 6 agus 8. Cé gur raibh gealltanas déanta ag an Aire roimh an toghchán, is léir go mbeidh rang eile ag iompú ar an mBéarla mar gheall ar pholasaithe an Rialtais. Níl sé seo sách maith.

Sa Ghaeltacht féin, tá géarchéim eile. Is iad Gaeltachtaí na tíre seo a choinníonn an Ghaeilge beo. Ní féidir teanga bheo bhríomhar a bheith againn gan pobal beo bríomhar. Leis an ngéarchéim tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht, tá an pobal sin faoi bhrú. Is sampla eile é seo den chaoi ina bhfuil an ghéarchéim tithíochta ag scriosadh ár bpobal agus ár n-oidhreacht. Gealladh treoirlinnte pleanála Gaeltachta in 2021 ach fós níl siad foilsithe. Tá líon na gcainteoirí laethúla sa Ghaeltacht tar éis titim idir daonáireamh 2016 agus daonáireamh 2022. Táimid ag breathnú ar mheath na Gaeltachta ag tarlú os ár gcomhair. Caithfidh é a stopadh trí thacú le pobail Ghaeltachta, le pleanáil teanga, le fostaíocht agus le tithíocht.

Ar fud fad na tíre, tá grá ollmhór don teanga. Tá sé mar chuid dár bhféiniúlacht ar an dá thaobh den Teorainn. Chonaic muid é sa scannán “Kneecap”. Tá sé tábhachtach tacú leis an nGaeilge Thuaidh agus Theas trí mhaoiniú a chur ar fáil d’eagraíochtaí pobail, clubanna óige, aonaid phobail agus go leor eile. Gan maoiniú Fhoras na Gaeilge d’aonad pobail, ní bheadh aon Kneecap ann. Is cúis náire é go bhfuil laghdú de €820,000 tagtha ar mhaoiniú Fhoras na Gaeilge. Caithfidh níos mó obair a dhéanamh trasna na Teorann chun an fhadhb seo a réiteach. Níl sé ródhéanach ach caithfear é a dhéanamh anois.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Tá grúpaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta fud fad na tíre buartha faoi staid reatha na teanga. Is cinnte go bhfuil rudaí maithe ar nós Kneecap, “An Cailín Ciúin” agus eile ann ach níl ag éirí go maith leis an nGaeilge sa chóras oideachais. Tá crúachas ann i maoiniú na Gaeilge sa phobal agus tá fadhbanna an-mhór le tithíocht sa Ghaeltacht. There is a welcome flourishing of the Irish language in communities and the arts among people young and old. Feicim é i mo pháistí féin. The language is being returned to as an expression of positive inclusive identity, of community and of connection and meaning in a world where we are increasingly alienated from each other in a monotonous culture that wants to commodify everything. We in the Social Democrats and people throughout this country, including Irish and Gaeltacht groups, are deeply concerned about the state of the Irish language. We are calling for urgent action from the Government to ensure that the language survives and thrives through action in the education system, through support for the Irish language sector in our community by giving the additional €20 million requested by 130 Irish language, Gaeltacht and other groups as per an plan fáis through Foras na Gaeilge and through urgently addressing the housing crisis in our Gaeltachtaí.

Labhróidh mé le himní mhór. I will speak with deep concern about the housing crisis in our Gaeltachtaí. Tá an staid tithíochta reatha sa Ghaeltacht tagtha go pointe éigeandála le cúpla bliain anuas. Idir diúltú cead pleanála do dhaoine áitiúla, ganntanas títhe ar fáil ar cíós go fadtéarmach cé go bhfuil iliomad acu ar Airbnb agus easpa tithe inacmhainne ar díol, tá sé ag éirí níos deacra i gcónaí do mhuintir na Gaeltachta cur fúthu sa Ghaeltacht. The housing crisis in the Gaeltachtaí has particular significance to the language given their importance in the continuation of the language and its ability to thrive and survive. I have spoken to young people from our Gaeltachtaí who cannot buy or build a home in their community. Those young people are the future of our language. They should be supported to get a home in the Gaeltacht so that the language can survive. The future of the language depends on their future and their ability to get a home in the Gaeltacht. Is géarchéim chórasach náisiúnta í an ghéarchéim tithíochta atá ag réabadh na tíre le tamall de bhlianta anuas ach tá cástacht sa bhreis ar an scéal sa Ghaeltacht toisc go bhfuil todhchaí ár dtéanga á cur i mbaol ag an gcóras reatha, córas atá ag cur muintir na Gaeltachta as a gceantair dhúchais mar gheall nach féidir teach a cheannach, a thógáil nó a fháil ar cíós go fadtéarmach.

Airbnb is a massive problem in these communities with just a handful of places to rent on Daft while there are hundreds on Airbnb. The Government should move without delay to clamp down on these. The Government must also urgently support the delivery of affordable homes in our Gaeltachtaí using our budget surplus to fund and resource Údarás na Gaeltachta. As per the recommendation from Foras na Gaeilge, the údarás should be given the statutory power and resources necessary to enable it to purchase land, obtain planning permission, provide services and develop affordable housing for Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht areas. Ba chóir an chumacht reachtúil agus na hacmhainní riachtanacha, idir reatha agus caipitil, a thabhairt d’Údarás na Gaeltachta le rannóg tithíochta a bhunú le cur ar a chumas talamh a cheannach agus seirbhísí riachtanacha a chur ar fáil le gur féidir tithíocht a fhorbairt do chainteoirí Gaeilge sna ceantair

Ghaeltachta.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Is cúis áthais é labhairt anseo inniu faoin nGaeilge, go háirithe i rith Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Tráthnóna inné, bhí mé ag ócaid de chuid Gaeilge³⁶⁵ i Halla na Cathrach, áit ar pléadh an obair iontach atá ar siúl ag grúpaí agus daoine aonair ar son na Gaeilge. Tugaim aitheantas do Chomhairle Cathrach Bhaile Átha Cliath agus Daithí de Buitléar as an obair atá ar siúl acu. Tá sé mar chuspóir ag an Rialtas seo sa chlár Rialtais Gaeilge³⁶⁵ a leathnú timpeall na tíre. Tugaim aitheantas ar leith dóibh siúd atá ag obair gan staonadh chun an teanga a threisiú i bpobail fud fad na tíre: Conradh na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael, TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta, Raidió na Life agus, go háitiúil i gCill Dara, Cill Dara le Gaeilge, Gaeilge Nuada, Gaeilge an Bhradáin, Sult na Sollán agus Glór an Churraigh. Táim fíorbhuíoch as an obair atá á déanamh ag na grúpaí seo i gceantair áitiúla agus fud fad na tíre. Gan iad, ní bheadh an fás atá feicthe againn ar an nGaeilge chomh láidir is atá sé inniu.

Tugaim aitheantas do na Gaelscoileanna i gCill Dara: Gaelscoil Uí Fhiaich, Gaelscoil Ruairí, Scoil Uí Riada, Scoil Chearbhaill Uí Dhálaigh, mo sheanscoil féin, agus Gaelscoil Nás na Ríogh. Tá Gaelscoil de dhíth i gCill Droichid leis an bhfás atá sa phobal ansin. Tugaim aitheantas freisin do na Gaelcholáistí: Gaelcholáiste Chill Dara agus Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Nuad. Táim an-bhainteach le Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Nuad. Guím gach rath ar lucht na hidirbhliana lena gceoldráma “Beauty and the Beast”. Beidh mé ann i gceann cúpla seachtain. Tá foirgneamh buan de dhíth ag Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Nuad. Tá an-obair á déanamh ag an bpríomhoide, Mícheál Ó Ceoinín, ag an leas-príomhoide, Séamus de Búrca, agus ag an bhfoireann. Táim ag tnúth le foirgneamh buan a fheiscint i Maigh Nuad. Oibreoidh mé leis an Aire Oideachais faoi sin.

Tá sé tábhachtach labhairt faoi mhaoiniú. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an tAire ag déanamh a dhíchill ó thaobh maoinithe d’Fhoras na Gaeilge. Tá sé tábhachtach go dtagann deireadh leis seo agus go mbeidh cinnteacht ag an bhforas go luath agus go fadtéarmach. Chomh maith leis sin, tá cead pleanála sa Ghaeltacht luaite cheana féin. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil cead pleanála á fháil ag daoine sa Ghaeltacht agus go mbeadh tithíocht ar fáil dóibh. Tugaim aitheantas do BÁNÚ chomh maith.

Tá todhchaí na Gaeilge geal ach teastaíonn tacaíocht leanúnach chun a chinntiú go bhfaidh sí láidir agus bríomhar sa saol laethúil. Tá an obair ar siúl agus an fás le feiscint. Táim tiomanta do thacaíocht a thabhairt don Ghaeilge i gCill Dara agus timpeall na tíre.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire. Is onóir an-mhór é a bheith roghnaithe mar Aire Rialtais. Ba cheart dó féin agus dá mhuintir a bheith fíorbhródúil as an éacht seo. Tá áthas orm labhairt sa díospóireacht seo. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go bhfuil Seachtain na Gaeilge againn gach bhliain agus go bhfuil ráitis tiomnaithe di sa Dáil.

Chuala mé píosa gairid ar “Drivetime” ar RTÉ inné. Bhí Caitríona Ní Chualáin, láithreoir le TG4, ag rá go raibh sí ag streachailt chun cead pleanála a fháil ó Chomhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe chun teach a thógáil ina ceantar féin, is é sin, i gConamara. Níl ciall ar bith le seasamh na comhairle. Má theastaíonn uainn go mbeidh an Ghaeilge ina teanga bheo, teastaíonn polasaithe uainn a ligeann do chainteoirí Gaeilge maireachtáil ina gceantair Ghaeltachta féin.

I mo cheantar féin, Contae an Chláir, tá fadhb againn maidir le Gaelcholáiste an Chláir. Faoin am seo, is aonad in Ennis Community College í ach teastaíonn ó na múinteoirí, na daltaí agus tuismitheoirí na ndaltaí go mbeadh neamhspleáchas ón community college ag an scoil.

5 o'clock

Mar Theachta Dála do Dháilcheantair an Chláir, aontaím leo. Táimid ag lorg tacaíocht ón Rialtas freisin, go háirithe ón Aire Oideachais. Caithfidh níos mó tacaíocht a thabhairt do na húdaráis áitiúla chun feabhas a chur ar logainmneacha. Táimse féin as sráidbhaile beag i ndeisceart an Chláir darbh ainm Mileac Chillian, logainm a chiallaíonn “low marshy ground”, cur síos an-chruinn ach litriú an-neamhghnách ar na chomharthaí ar na bóithre áitiúla.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam an deis seo a thapú labhairt ar cheist na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta tráthnóna. I dtosach báire, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas oifigiúil a dhéanamh le hAire nua na Gaeltachta. Seo hé an chéad deis dom é a dhéanamh ar úrláir na Dála. Is as Contae Mhaigh Eo do mo bhean agus tá sise an-tógtha go bhfuil Aire Gaeltachta ann ó Chontae Mhaigh Eo. Guím gach rath ar an Aire.

Faoi mar a dúirt an Teachta Ó Cearúil níos túisce, bhí mise i láthair ag an ócáid inspioráideach a bhí ar siúl i Halla na Cathrach i mBaile Átha Cliath tráthnóna inné. Tá cur chuige nuálaíoch idir lámha ag na húdaráis áitiúla timpeall Bhaile Átha Cliath faoi deiseanna labhartha Gaeilge a chothú sa ghnáthshaol. Is dóigh liom gurb í an bhunchloch gur chóir go mbeadh ag baint le haon pholasaí i leith na Gaeilge labhartha sa tír seo ná go gcuirfear deiseanna labhartha ar fáil sa chóras oideachais, ó thaobh cúrsaí eacnamaíochta nó ghnó de, nó ó thaobh cúrsaí pobail agus sóisialta. Is é sin an fáth go gcuireann sé gliondar croí orm go bhfuil sé go soiléir sa chlár Rialtas go bhfuil i gceist Gaeilge³⁶⁵ a leathnú amach ag na húdaráis áitiúla. Ní chóir go bhfágfar seo faoi Roinn na Gaeltachta amháin. Ba chóir go mbeadh cur chuige uile-Rannach ann i leith leathnú an tionscnaimh sin thar na húdaráis áitiúla timpeall na tíre.

Ní cainteoir dhúchais mé. I attended an English-language primary school and learned my Irish at an immersion Gaelcholáiste in Clondalkin, where I learned a love for the Irish language. I was especially struck by Deputy Robert O'Donoghue's contribution when he spoke of shame in not being able to speak Irish more. Generally, for people watching this debate who are not fluent in the first official language, it is important that we as Gaelgeoirí support their efforts to use the language more. I hope that message will come from today's session.

Ceann de na rudaí a thaitníonn liom ó thaobh mo Dháilcheantar féin ná go bhfuil an oiread sin Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí ann, ina measc Ghaelscoil Eiscir Riada, Gaelscoil Naomh Pádraig, Scoil Chrónáin, Gaelscoil na Camóige agus Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcáin. Rud faoi leith is ea go bhfuil Gaelscoil nua ann, darbh ainm Gaelscoil Lir. Tá páistí sa Ghaelscoil sin a tháinig go hÉirinn nach bhfuil Béarla mar chéad teanga acu, ach is í an Ghaeilge an chéad teanga oifigiúil den Stát a bhfuil á fhoghlaim acu agus a bhfuil á labhairt acu go laethúil. Is rud inspioráideach agus speisialta é sin a léiríonn dom go bhfuil tábhacht agus beocht nua faoi leith ag teacht faoin nGaeilge.

Ag féachaint timpeall orainn ar fad, agus ag féachaint ar a bhfuil ar siúl i leith podchraolta ar nós “How to Gael” agus na seóanna raidió a bhíonn ar súil, ar nós “Splanc” ar Newstalk, is léir go bhfuil cur chuige nua á dhéanamh i leith na Gaeilge. Is é sin an fáth gur chóir dúinn ar fad féachaint ar an ról a bhfuil againn mar Rialtas cinntiú go gcuirtear leis na deiseanna labhartha Gaeilge sin.

Ba mhaith liom díriú isteach ar ról Údarás na Gaeltachta ó thaobh gnéithe eacnamaíochta, ar nós gnólachtaí nua-aimseartha a mhealladh chun na Gaeltachta. Tá an-dul chun cinn déanta ag Údarás na Gaeltachta ó thaobh an bhunchloch sin a leagan i dtaobh cúrsaí eacnamaíochta.

Smaoiním go háirithe ar an obair thar a bheith spéisiúil atá á dhéanamh ag an údarás i dtaobh intleacht shaorga, AI. Tá an cur chuige sin de dhíth ó gach rannóg agus áisíneacht Rialtais i leith an Ghaeilge a chothú agus ardán a chur ar fáil d'úsáid na Gaeilge freisin.

Tá an-chuid ráite faoi thithíocht a chur ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht. Aontaím le an-chuid den mhéid atá ráite ag mo chomhghleacaithe ar an taobh seo den Teach. Caithfear gan mhoill na treoirlínte pleanála a chur i bhfeidhm agus cinntiú go bhfuil daoine in ann cur fúthu sa Ghaeltacht. Ar an dtaobh eile, tá dualagas orainn freisin féachaint go bhfuilimid ag cur le beocht agus splanc nua na Gaeilge san ardchathair anseo i mBaile Átha Cliath, agus i gceantair uirbeacha eile timpeall na tíre. I mo Dháilcheantar féin, tá gréasán Gaeilge i gCluain Dolcáin. Ba mhaith liomsa fócas nua a fheiceáil ar a leithéid de ghréasáin sin a spreagadh agus maoiniú a infheistiú iontu freisin.

Ó thaobh cúrsaí Fhoras na Gaeilge, cuireann sé díomá orm nach bhfuil an DUP tar éis teacht leis agus réiteach a fháil ar an gceist maoinithe sin. Tá a fhios agam faoi chreatlach Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta go gcaithfear é sin a chomhaontú idir an dá chuid den oileán. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an tiomantas atá déanta ag an Rialtas seo le níos mó maoiniú a chur ar fáil don fhoras i ndiaidh don chomhréir sin bheith sórtáilte, agus mé ag súil leis na rudaí a thiteann amach as sin.

Cuireann sé gliondar croí orm éisteacht le mo mhac, atá ag freastal ar Ghaelscoil anois, ag labhairt Gaeilge liom. Músclaíonn sé an ghrá sin ionam. Tá mé ag súil go mbeidh deiseanna labhartha aige amach anseo i ndiaidh dó an córas oideachais a fhágáil. Is é sin an bealach a n-éireoidh linn an Ghaeilge a chosaint. An rud deireanach a deirfidh mé ná go gcuireann sé gliondar croí orm bheith in ann rannpháirtíocht a dhéanamh ar na meáin Ghaeilge le Teachtaí ó gach aon taobh den Teach seo agus gur féidir linn díospóireachtaí shubstantiúla a bheith againn trí mheán na Gaeilge. Gura fada a mhairfidh sé sin.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Rinne an athbheochan Ghaelach ag tús an 20ú haois iarracht stop a chur le meath na teanga agus an cultúr Gaelach bhí ar riocht neamhbhuan de thoradh na dlíthe daingean a chur cosc ar na teanga agus ar chultúr dúchasach na nGael, agus - ina dhiadh sin - an gorta, an imirce agus an meath. Bhí an dearcadh ann san am a chuaigh thart go raibh an Ghaeilge ina bac ar dul chun cinn agus rathúlacht. D'éirigh an dearcadh seo fite fuaite in a lán glúnta de mhuintir na hÉireann agus d'fhág sé gur diúltaíodh don teanga agus gur beag an t-olc a bhí air. Na laethanta seo, is minic a luíonn cinniúint na teanga i lámha múinteoirí maithe atá paiseanta faoin teanga agus a chuireann an paisean seo ar aghaidh dá scoláirí. Cé go bhfuil naimhdeas áirithe i leith na teanga, tá gné den sentimentality freisin maidir lena caomhnú.

Is trua go mthaíonn a lán daoine gur streachailt neamhriachtanach é an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim toisc go gcreideann siad nach mbeidh aon úsáid acu as nuair a fhágann siad an scoil. Sin an fáth go bhfuil daoine ann a áitíonn ar son an Ghaeilge a bhaint mar ábhar éigeantach ar scoil. I mo Dháilcheantar, Baile Átha Cliath Thiar Thuaidh, tá roinnt Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí le foireann tiomanta a mhúineann agus a chuireann an Ghaeilge chun cinn i mbealach a thugann grá don teanga, do na páistí agus dá dteaghlach. Scoil amháin dá leithéid is ea Gaelscoil Cholmcille, a bhunaíodh in 1996 agus atá ag fanacht go fóill ar fhoirgneamh bhuan agus a chaith a chéad blianta thuas staighre i gclub peile i Seantrabh. Bhog siad chuig a suíomh reatha ar Lána na Cúlóige in 2008, i bhfoirgneamh réamhdhéanta a bhí le bheith ina réiteach gearrthéarmach. Tá go leor airgid caite thar na blianta ag iarraidh an foirgneamh sealadach seo a chothabháil. Tá an scoil rathúil agus móréilimh seo suite in áitreabh nach bhfuil oiriúnach don fheidhm. Chomh maith leis sin i Mí Mheán Fómhair seo chugainn, tá súil acu rannóg speisialta a oscailt chun freastal ar dhaltáí le huathachas. Tá iarratas nua curtha isteach go dtí an Roinn Oideachais

chun scoil nua le 18 seomra ranga a mhaoiniú ina mbeidh seomraí ranga speisialta, giomnásiam nua, cistin, leabharlann, agus áiseanna riachtanacha eile in aice láimhe. Má tá rath agus fás ar ár dteanga, ní mór dúinn tacú lena leithéid de scoileanna. Tá tacaíocht an Aire de dhíth le haghaidh an scoil seo.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Bhí oibrithe na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge amuigh ar stailc an tseachtain seo caite. Bhí siad go tógáil raic agus iad i mbun ágóidíochta in aghaidh na gciorruithe atá á gearradh orthu. Deir siad go bhfuil sé soiléir anois go bhfuil struchtúr maoinithe Fhoras na Gaeilge briste. Tá thart ar €17 milliún níos lú ag Foras na Gaeilge inniu nó mar a bhí acu in 2002. Le boilsciú curtha san áireamh, is ionann sin agus ciorruithe de 45% ar bhuiséad Fhoras na Gaeilge thar 20 bliain. Ceangailte leis seo, tá an méid daltaí atá ag staidéar na Gaeilge ag ísliú ó Dheas. Níor shuigh beagnach ceathrú de dhaltaí an scrúdú ardeistiméireachta don Ghaeilge in 2024 agus gearradh 30 nóiméad in aghaidh na seachtaine ó mhúineadh na Gaeilge do dhaltaí bunscoile. Mura raibh sé soiléir uaidh seo, níl meas madra ag an Rialtas dár dteanga dhúchais. Tá sé tábhachtach a thuiscint agus a rá nach bhfuil sé i gceist ag an Rialtas riamh go mbeidh sé arís mar phríomhtheanga na tíre againne. Dá mbeadh suim dá laghad ag an Rialtas an teanga a neartú, d'éistfí agus chuirfí i bhfeidhm na héilimh atá á gcur amach go soiléir ag Conradh na Gaeilge agus ag na heagraíochtaí eile. Chuirfí an plean fáis i bhfeidhm agus an plean infheistíochta don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht don chéad chúig bliana eile. Le barrachas stairiúil an Rialtais, beidh sé go héasca dó €20 milliún atá lorgtha ag na heagraíochtaí a sholáthar seachas a bheith ag cur na billiún isteach i bhfearas cogaidh is míleata agus ionsaí a dhéanamh ar ár neodracht.

Déarfadh mé an méid seo. Is féidir brath ar an Rialtas uaireanta. Is féidir brath air go leanfaidh sé leis an scannal ó thaobh ghéarchéim tithíochta na Gaeltachta ina bhfuil muintir na Gaeltachta ag fulaingt go géar. Fad is atá beagnach 3,000 duine ar an liosta feithimh do thithíocht shóisialta ann, níl ach seacht áit ar cíós ar *daft.ie*. Léirítear agus is soiléir an fhadhb nuair a bhreathnaítear thall ar Airbnb agus an rogha abhus de bheagnach 1,000 áit ar cíós gearrthéarmach. Caithfear srian a bheith ar thithe saoire agus ar Airbnb sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá sé ráite go maith ag an grúpa BÁNÚ atá ag eagrú ar an mbonn seo. Ní féidir a bheith ag brath ar an margadh, na forbróirí móra agus cistí móra idirnáisiúnta le fadhbanna tithíochta na Gaeltachta a réiteach mar ní ar a leas é sin a dhéanamh. Mar sin, mar a rinneadh cheana, caithfidh an Stát seasamh isteach sa bhearna bhaoil agus na tithe seo a thógáil. Éilimid ar Údarás na Gaeltachta tithe a thógáil ar a thalamh féin agus tuilleadh talaimh a cheannach, más gá. Is é seo an réiteach a mbeimis ag screadach ar a shon gach uile sheachtain. Caithfidh an Rialtas an brabús uafásach a bhaint ó thógáil na tithíochta sa Stát seo. Ní tharlóidh sé seo ach trí chomhlacht Stáit tógála.

Críochnóidh mé le rud a dúirt mé anuraidh. Ní féidir aon athbheochan a bheith ann ó thaobh na Gaeilge de gan na cainteoirí dúchasacha a bheith mar chroílár air. Níl suim dá laghad ag na caipitlithe atá i gceannas ar an tír an Ghaeilge nó ceantar na Gaeltachta a chaomhnú. Dá mbeadh, ní bheadh sé deacair é a dhéanamh leis an oiread suime agus tola atá i measc an phobail. Ní ar a leas é sin a dhéanamh. Ní éireoidh linn gan ghluaiseacht agus réabhlóid ollmhór a bheith againn agus iallach a chur ar an Rialtas an tslí a ghéilleadh agus tarraingt uainn.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ar ndóigh, cuireann sé gliondar ar mo chroí agus tugann sé ardú meanman dom an méid Comhaltaí, an Teachta Murphy san áireamh, atá sásta an Ghaeilge a úsáid inniu agus páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo. Tá éacht déanta aige agus ag na Teachtaí Dála eile freisin.

Ag an am céanna, tá ráitis i gceist arís agus ráitis ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Chuile bhliain bíonn ráitis againn ó thaobh na Gaeilge de agus tá sé ag coinneáil na Gaeilge ar imeall seachas an Ghaeilge a bheith fite fuaite ar chlár oibre na Dála. Chun an sprioc nó an cuspóir sin a bhaint amach bhí mise páirteach i bhfochoiste, nuair a d'fheidhmigh mé mar Chathaoirleach air, agus d'oibríomar go léir traspháirtí chun tuarascáil ghearr a chur le chéile le moltaí praiticiúla chun an cumas in úsáid na Gaeilge a mhéadú i líon na dTeachtaí Dála agus na foirne. Faraor géar, níl a fhios agam cad a tharla don tuarascáil sin ach bhí moltaí praiticiúla ann. Bhain ceann dóibh le ceisteanna chuig Airí, go mbeadh an chéad cheist de na Ceisteanna Eile i nGaeilge, go mbeadh deis ag gach Teachta Dála cur isteach ar an bpróiseas sin agus, ar a laghad, gach lá ar an Máirt, an Céadaoin agus an Déardaoin, go mbeadh ceist i nGaeilge. Níor tharla sé sin, ach b'fhéidir go mbeidh tionchar ag an Aire Stáit ar an gceist sin. Is rud praiticiúil é sin.

Bhí rudaí eile i gceist freisin ó thaobh-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Tá an tAire sa Seanad ag plé le Commencement Matters.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go hiontach. Rud eile praiticiúil ná na ranganna a éascú do gach leibhéal den fhoireann sa Dáil, na Teachtaí Dála, na Seanadóirí ach, go háirithe, an fhoireann ar an talamh agus sa bhialann, go mbeadh na ranganna seo feiliúnach dóibh agus ansin, tar éis sé mhí, go mbeadh togra píolótach ann le go mbeadh deis ag na daoine sin freastal saor in aisce ar chúrsa Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht. Níor tharla sé sin ach an oiread. D'oibríomar traspháirtí agus chuireamar moltaí praiticiúla le chéile agus níor tharla sé sin. Tá beagáinín frustrachais orm go bhfuilimid fós i mbun ráiteas seachas beart a dhéanamh de réir ár mbriathar.

Chomh maith leis sin, luaigh an Teachta Murphy BÂNÚ. Bhí cruinniú poiblí againn an Domhnach seo caite agus bhí sé plódaithe. Is é an teachtaireacht chumhachtach a tháinig as ná go bhfuil géarchéim thithíochta náisiúnta ann agus tá an ghéarchéim sin ina géarchéim pobail agus teanga sa Ghaeltacht. Tá ceithre mholadh ann agus ní dóigh liom gur féidir le haon Teachta Dála anseo easaontú leis na moltaí sin. Tá siad thar a bheith praiticiúil. Is é an rud atá ar bharr an liosta ná go mbeadh na treoirlínte pleanála foilsithe. Is é an dara rud nó go mbeadh cumhacht ag Údarás na Gaeltachta dul i ngleic leis an ngéarchéim thithíochta, i measc moltaí eile. Níl tada déanta go dtí seo. Maidir le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus an Bille, beidh sé againn go luath, dár leis an Aire ina óráid. Arís, cén tseachtain, cén mhí nó cén bhliain? Tá gá práinneach chun toghchán a thabhairt ar ais ach, níos práinní fós, go mbeadh cumhacht ag an údarás ó thaobh tithe de. Tá neart talaimh ag an údarás.

Chomh maith leis sin, tháinig seacht gcóras áitiúil os ár gcomhair ar an gcoiste ó na Gaeltachtaí uilig agus bhí sé damanta soiléir nach raibh aon eolas acu faoi na dualgais a bhí orthu ó thaobh ceantair Ghaeltachta de. Bhí easpa tuisceana iomlán i gceist.

Ní féidir a bheith ag caint i ndáiríre faoin nGaeilge gan chaint faoi chúrsaí tithíochta agus gan an plean ó thaobh oideachais taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht, oideachas trí Ghaeilge agus oideachas lánGhaeilge taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Táimid fós ag fanacht ar an dréachtpholasaí. Tá deireadh á chur leis an polasaí thar a bheith dearfach don oideachas laistigh den Ghaeltacht agus níl tasc nó tuairisc ar cad a tharlóidh amach anseo.

Mar fhocal scoir, tá éiginnteacht amach is amach i gceist ó thaobh an chórais pleanála teanga. Tá na hoifigigh pleanála teanga i dteagmháil linn go mion minic ag cur in iúl go bhfuil gá le cinnteacht.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Táim saghas cosúil leis an Teachta Connolly ag an am seo

den bhliain. Táim idir dhá chomhairle faoin am seo den bhliain. Tagaimid go léir isteach agus labhraímid mar gheall ar cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an teanga agus, go pointe, go gcreidimid sa teanga agus sa todhchaí atá le teacht don teanga. Ní theastaíonn uaim an frása “tokenism” nó “cur i gcéill” a úsáid ach braitheann sé cosúil leis sin ó am go chéile. Aontaím leis an Teachta Connolly go gcaithfimid níos mó ama a thabhairt chun an teanga a labhairt sa Seomra seo gach seachtain, agus má déanann muid é sin trí priority questions - ní theastaíonn uaim an díospóireacht sin a oscailt anois - nó cibé slí, caithfear níos mó ama a bheith curtha ar leataobh don teanga a úsáid sa Chamber.

Creidim go huile is go hiomlán sa dátheangachas agus tá sé le feiceáil timpeall an domhain gurb é sin an tslí is fearr chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn i mo thuairim féin. D’fhreastail mé ar Ghaelscoil, fadó ag an bpointe seo. Nuair a bhíomar sa rang gach lá ag déanamh comhrá le chéile, ag déanamh cumarsáide, ag imirt spóirt le chéile, ag dul chuig an gceaintín le chéile agus ag déanamh na gnáthrudáí sin, ba é sin an t-am a raibh an teanga á cur chun cinn. Creidim go huile agus go hiomlán sa dátheangachas. Mar Rialtas, caithfimid a bheith dáiríre faoi sin ó thaobh na bpolasaithe go léir atá ag teacht chugainn.

Tá triúr leanbh agam. Caithfidh mé smaoineamh ar a n-aoiseanna. Is trí, ceithre agus sé bliana d’aois atá siad. Tá siad go léir ag freastal ar bhunscoil lán-Ghaelach nó réamhscoil lán-Ghaelach. Cosúil le roinnt daoine eile, nuair a thagann siad abhaile gach lá, tá sé deas le feiceáil go bhfuil siad ag foghlaim focal nach raibh ar eolas agam nuair a bhí mé an aois chéanna thart ar 40 bliain ó shin. Chuirfeadh sé náire ort cé chomh simplí is atá sé don aos óg an teanga a fhoghlaim chomh tapa sin.

Ar an bpointe sin, caithfimid níos mó deontas a thabhairt do réamhscoileanna agus do na naíonraí. Má táimid dáiríre faoin teanga, chun a bheith macánta, caithfimid gach réamhscoil a iompú ina naíonra chun tacú leis an teanga. Ar a laghad, ba chóir seans a thabhairt do na tuismitheoirí an rogha sin a bheith acu.

Tá pointe amháin eile agam mar gheall ar Ghaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí. Ba cheart béim a chur ar thionscnaimh atá á dtógáil againn - extensions agus araile - chun scoileanna a fhorbairt inár gceantair féin. Táim ag smaoineamh ar Choláiste an Phiarsaigh i mo cheantar féin. Tá an coláiste anois ag feitheamh le trí bliana le dul tríd an gcóras pleanála. Tá sí ag feitheamh ar an 40 seomra atá le teacht. Caithfidh an Rialtas agus an tAire Oideachais a bheith dáiríre faoi na tionscnaimh sin a chur os comhair na ndaoine chomh luath agus is féidir.

Fáiltím roimh an infheistíocht a tugadh do TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta le blianta anuas. Roimh gach buiséad, bhíomar go léir - an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, an Teachta Connolly, san áireamh - ag lorg níos mó airgid ach, chun freastal ar an aos óg, caithfimid infheistíocht chinnte a thabhairt do na meáin chumarsáide sin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Tá sé iontach an Ghaeilge a chloisteáil á labhairt i dTeach Laighe-an an tseachtain seo. Ach an oiread leis an Teachta a labhair romham, tacaím leis an dátheangachas. Tá sé iontach an dream atá ar bheagán focal nó a gceapann nach bhfuil cumas cuimsitheach acu a chloisteáil ag déanamh iarracht an Ghaeilge a labhairt. Cuirim an-fháilte roimhe sin. Bíonn fáilte roimhe sin i gcónaí. Níor cheart go mbeadh éinne neirbhíseach ná go mbeadh drogall ar éinne triail a bhaint as an nGaeilge agus í a labhairt. Tá fáilte roimhe sin i gcónaí. Tacaím leis an infheistíocht i mBaile Átha Cliath a fógraíodh aréir. Tá baint ag an gclár Gaeilge365 leis na húdarais áitiúla thart ar Bhaile Átha Cliath. Tá an-fháilte roimh an €4 milliún seo.

Tá taighde cuimsitheach déanta ag Conradh na Gaeilge ó thaobh fhorbairt na Gaeilge. Tarraingeoidh mé cúpla pointe amach ón taighde sin. Is é an chéad rud ná an díolúine ó thaobh oideachais, múinteoireachta agus staidéar ag an dara leibhéal. Phléigh muid an cheist seo ag Ard-Fheis Fhine Gael bliain ó shin i nGaillimh. Gan dabht, tá na huimhreacha ag dul sa treo mícheart ó thaobh na ndíolúintí agus na daltaí nach bhfuil ag tabhairt faoin scrúdú ardeistiméireachta sa Ghaeilge. Caithfimid dul i ngleic leis sin agus an fhadhb sin a réiteach. Ó thaobh an chóras oideachais de, mar a deir an conradh, caithfear polasaí cuimsitheach nua a fhorbairt don Ghaeilge ó na naíonraí ar aghaidh go dtí an tríú leibhéal. Níl sé sin againn faoi láthair.

Ó thaobh Údarás na Gaeltachta de, aontaím leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach gur cheart go mbeadh ról níos lárnaí ag an údarás ó thaobh tithíocht sna ceantair Ghaeltachta agus na planning guidelines sin. Blianta ó shin, ba í an fhadhb a bhí ag na Gaeltachtaí ná go raibh tithíocht ar fáil ach nach raibh poist dá laghad ar fáil. Tá sé sin athraithe anois agus tá an fhadhb an bealach eile. Tá an-chuid oibre ar fáil ach níl tithíocht ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht don dream ón nGaeltacht. Caithfear an fhadhb sin a réiteach. Níl sé difriúil. Tá an fhadhb chéanna i mBaile Átha Cliath ach tá fadhb ar leith i gceantair Ghaeltachta. Mar gheall ar an teanga, ba chóir dul i ngleic leis sin.

Tá Gaelcholáiste Reachrann, i mo Dháilcheantar féin, in prefabs le 24 bliain. Tá an-spiorad sa scoil agus tá ard-chaighdeán oideachais ar fáil ann. Tá na múinteoirí ag obair go crua agus tá na daltaí ag imirt spóirt an t-am ar fad, ag staidéar agus ag fáil torthaí maithe sna scrúduithe. Tá an scoil fós in prefabs tar éis 24 bliain. Tá sé an-tábhachtach an fhadhb seo a réiteach chun go mbeidh foirgneamh ar fáil don Ghaelcholáiste sin i mo cheantar.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Ní Gaeilgeoir mise. Táim beagnach neirbhíseach a bheith i mo sheasamh san áit speisialta nuair nach bhfuil Gaeilge perfect agam ach creidim gur fíor an seanfhocal “is fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste”. Tá a lán daoine sa bhaile cosúil liomsa. Ba mhaith liom labhairt go minic ach tá eagla orm go ndéanfaidh mé botún. Níl mé líofa ach tá mo thriúr páistí líofa. In fact, thiomáin mé 120 km san iomlán gach lá chun iad a thabhairt go dtí ár local Gaelscoil. Bhí an bealach ar fad tríd na blianta completely worth it mar tá Gaeilge blasta acu. Tá brón orm, I will have to revert. I ask the Government to please consider introducing even basic Gaeilge to the proposed State-funded childcare facilities. Táim ag caint faoi fhocail shimplí cosúil le “Tóg amach do bhosca lóin”, “bróga” nó “Seo é cathaoir” because I think it would be very beneficial to tuismitheoirí cosúil liomsa nuair atá siad sa bhaile. It would open an opportunity to demystify the perceived difficulty i scoileanna in learning ár dteanga, even if it is only for a dedicated leathuair nó uair gach lá.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Níl mé líofa ach táim ag foghlaim. Chuaigh mé go dtí an Ghaeltacht i nGleann Cholm Cille an samhradh seo caite agus beidh mé ag dul ann arís i mbliana le cúpla ball de mo chumann Shinn Féin i gCill Dara Thuaidh. Cabhraigh sé go mór liom. Is féidir linn go léir feabhas a chur ar ár gcuid Gaeilge le chéile. Tá an-chuid tacaíocht don Ghaeilge fud fad na tíre. Táim ag caint faoi ghrúpaí cosúil le Cill Dara le Gaeilge agus Sult na Sollán i mo Dháilcheantar féin. Cuireann siad tacaíocht ar fáil do shiopaí agus d’áiteanna eile i gCill Dara atá ag iarraidh níos mó Gaeilge a úsáid, cosúil liom féin. Cuireann siad ranganna Gaeilge ar fáil. Cuireann siad scéimeanna ar fáil freisin. Tá clár iontach acu le haghaidh Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Bhí oíche iontach agam agus ag an Teachta Ní Raghallaigh sa Nás ag an seoladh cúpla seachtain ó shin. Táim ag tnúth go mór le freastal ar na himeachtaí. Tá siad ag cabhrú go mór leis an bpobal Gaelach i gCill Dara ach, mar gheall ar na fadhbanna le Foras na Gaeilge, tá Cill Dara le Gaeilge i mbaol. Caithfidh an Rialtas agus an DUP a chinntiú go mbeidh tacaíocht ag Foras na Gaeilge. Muna mbeidh, beidh deireadh le Cill Dara le Gaeilge. Tá sé tábhachtach

go mbeidh sé ann. Tá an-chuid Gaeilgeoirí i gCill Dara. Féach ar na Gaelscoileanna ar fad i mo Dháilcheantar: Scoil Uí Dhálaigh i Léim an Bhradáin; Scoil Uí Riada i gCill Choca; agus Gaelscoil Nás na Rí i Nás. Tá dhá Gaelscoil i Maigh Nuad chomh maith, is iad sin, Gaelscoil Ruairí agus Gaelscoil Uí Fhiach. Tá dhá Gaelcholáiste i gCill Dara Thuaidh freisin, Gaelcholáiste Chill Dara i Nás agus Gaelcholáiste nua i Maigh Nuad, atá fós ag fanacht ar scoil buan. Caithfidh an Rialtas tacú le Foras na Gaeilge, Cill Dara le Gaeilge, Sult na Sollán agus leis an Ghaeilge go ginearálta i gCill Dara. Ní mór beart de réir briathar a dhéanamh.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. Tá spreagadh an-tábhachtach don Ghaeilge. Is é an rud is tábhachtaí mar gheall ar chur chun cinn na Gaeilge sa todhchaí. Ba mhaith liom labhairt mar gheall ar fhear darb ainm Séamus Ó Fianghusa. Is as na Stáit Aontaithe é agus chaith sé a shaol iomlán ann. Throid sé ar son arm na Stát Aontaithe san Iaráic agus san Afganastáin. Ba as Dún na nGall a athair agus ba as an gCóiré a mháthair. Fuair a athair bás blianta ó shin agus dá bharr sin, thug Séamus cuairt ar an tír seo, go dtí Dún na nGall. Thit sé i ngrá leis an nGaeilge nuair a thug sé cuairt ar Dhún na nGall agus nuair a chuaigh sé ar ais abhaile go dtí na Stáit Aontaithe, chinn sé an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim. Bhí sé dochreidte gur fhoghlaim sé, tar éis sé mhí, an Ghaeilge go huile is go hiomlán agus gur bhain sé líofacht amach sa Ghaeilge. Ní raibh aige ach an tIdirlíon, leabhair agus téipeanna taifeadta. Ní raibh fiú duine ar bith aige lena raibh sé in ann Gaeilge a labhairt, ach bhain sé líofacht amach.

Tháinig sé ar ais chun na tíre seo le Gaeilge bhinn Thír Chonaill aige. Bhí go leor agallamh leis ar an raidió. Is cuimhin liom go raibh Marian Finucane ag cur ceist air conas arbh fhéidir leis líofacht sa Ghaeilge a bhaint amach i gceann sé mhí nuair nach mbaineann go leor páistí líofacht amach i ndiaidh 13 bliain a chaitheamh ar scoil. Is í an fhreagra a thug sé ná go raibh spreagadh aige. Bhí spreagadh aige chun an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim mar bhí grá mór aige le haghaidh a athar agus bhí sé ag iarraidh ómós a dhéanamh dá athair agus an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim. I mo thuairim, tá sé sin ar cheann de na fadhbanna atá againn mar Stát anois mar níl spreagadh ag an Stát i ndáiríre chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Caithfidh mé aontú le cúpla duine de na hurlabhraí a bhí os mo chomhair cúpla nóiméad ó shin. De ghnáth, bíonn óráidí deasa anseo le haghaidh Sheachtain na Gaeilge, ach i gceann cúpla seachtain, de ghnáth, déanann go leor daoine dearmad iomlán ar an nGaeilge go dtí go dtagann an bhliain dár gcionn. Cosúil leis an nath cainte “a dog is not just for Christmas”, the Irish language is not just for Seachtain na Gaeilge.

Caithfidh muid a admháil nach mbíonn béim againn ar infheistíocht sa Ghaeilge. Tá fadhbanna maoinithe ollmhóir ag Foras na Gaeilge agus tá an fhadhb sin ag dul ar aghaidh bliain i ndiaidh bliana. Dá bharr sin, níl go leor de na heagraíochtaí atá ag brath ar mhaoiniú ó Fhoras na Gaeilge in ann teacht ar an airgead sin agus níl siad in ann fás.

Maidir le scoileanna thar timpeall na tíre, tá sé dochreidte go bhfuil 25% de na tuismitheoirí sa tír seo ag iarraidh agus ag éileamh Gaelscolaíochta le haghaidh a gcuid páistí agus nach bhfuil ach 6% de na páistí ag fáil Gaelscolaíochta. Cé go bhfuil mé tinn tuirseach á rá sin, go minic bíonn muid ag éisteacht leis na meáin cumarsáide ag caint faoi Ghaeilge éigeantach istigh sa chóras oideachais ach i ndáiríre, tá Béarla éigeantach sa chóras oideachais. Tá muid ag brú an Bhéarla síos scornaí na bpáistí timpeall na tíre. Níl páistí in ann teacht ar Gaelscoil nó Gaelcholáiste go minic.

Caithfidh mé a rá go raibh díomá ollmhór orm nuair a chuala mé an scéal faoi Scoil Synge i lár Bhaile Átha Cliath. Bhí múinteoir ar an nuacht agus í faoi agallamh. Cuireadh ceist uirthi

cén fáth nár ghlac siad leis an bplean a bhí ag an Roinn Oideachais Gaelscoil iomlán a dhéanamh den scoil agus dar léi, shéan siad an Ghaeilge ar son éagsúlacht teangacha an cheantair. Tá an Ghaeilge iontach tábhachtach i gcomhthéacs éagsúlacht teangacha thar timpeall na cruinne. Tá sé dochreidte go bhfuil muid ag úsáid an leithscéil sin chun stop a chur leis an bplean a bhí ag an Roinn Oideachais. Déarfadh mé an méid atá ráite agam as Béarla chomh maith, más féidir liom.

Séamus Ó Fianghusa is an American citizen who was born and raised in America. He has lived his whole life in America and even fought in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. His father was from Donegal and his mother from Korea. His father died, unfortunately, and because of that he took a trip to Donegal to learn more about him. There he heard the Irish language spoken for the first time and fell in love with it. He went home to the United States and decided to learn the Irish language. He learned it to fluency within six months and learned it in a beautiful Donegal accent. The only tools he had were the Internet, books and tapes. He did not even have anybody to practice the Irish language with, so it was an incredible feat, in fairness to him. He came back to Ireland to practice his Irish and was on a number of radio shows. I remember him being interviewed by Marian Finucane, God rest her. She asked him how he could learn the Irish language to fluency within six months when most of the children who go through the school system spend 13 years learning the language but never really achieve that level of fluency. He answered with one word, which was “motivation”. He said he had the motivation to learn the language and that is what took him to reaching fluency.

Motivation is a key problem, if we are honest with each other. Many of us have a love for the Irish language and value the Irish language, but as a State or a society do we have a motivation to ensure the Irish language grows as a language in the Gaeltacht and as a language outside the Gaeltacht? I do not think we do. The number of people in the Gaeltacht who use the language daily is falling. Some language experts are saying there are only ten or 15 years left for the Irish language as a community language. If that is true, it will be our generation who will see the death of the Irish language as a community language. Whether a language that has flourished for 2,000 years exists as a community language in future could rest on our shoulders.

Despite all the wonderful language and the contributions that have been made in this debate, we have to get to a situation where we get real about the Irish language. We need to show future parents that there will be a future for the language for them, that it is worth their while raising their children in Irish, that it is worth their while sending their kids to Gaelscoileanna, that there will be Gaelscoileanna there for them, that we are going to raise the standard of teachers in relation to the Irish language going forward, that we will invest in and fund Foras na Gaeilge, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4 to a level where they are able to produce really good content in future and that we will actually ensure the hundreds of jobs in the State system where Irish is needed will be provided so services can be achieved in the Irish language.

Tá go leor Teachtaí Dála nua istigh anseo agus is rud iontach é sin. Tá gliondar ar mo chroí freisin go bhfuil Gaeilge líofa labhartha istigh anseo ag go leor acu. Deir an seanfhocal, áfach, go gcaithfear beart de réir ár mbriathar a dhéanamh. Tá go leor briathar istigh anseo ach tá easpa gníomhartha maidir leis an nGaeilge. Ba cheart dúinn beart de réir ár mbriathar a dhéanamh ar an ábhar sin.

Bhí an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach, an Teachta Connolly, mar bhall den chomhchoiste Gaeilge sa Dáil deireanach, ach ní raibh go leor daoine ag freastal ar an gcomhchoiste sin ag an am. As seo amach, caithfidh muid a bheith cinnte go mbeidh an Ghaeilge i lár thosaíochtaí

an Rialtais.

Deputy John McGuinness: Tá áthas orm a bheith anseo inniu chun Seachtain na Gaeilge a cheiliúradh. Tréimhse iontach atá inti a thugann deis dúinn ár dteanga agus ár gcultúr a chur chun cinn. Is cuid dár n-oidhreacht í an Ghaeilge. Tá sí beo agus bríomhar agus is teanga ár sinsir í. Tá sí le cloisteáil inár gceol, inár litríocht agus inár logainmneacha. Tá sí linn i ngach áit, sna hamhráin a chanaimid, sna seanfhocail a úsáidimid agus ar TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta. Ní gá a bheith líofa chun páirt a ghlacadh.

Is minic a chloisimid duine ag rá nach bhfuil mórán Gaeilge aige nó aici nó nach bhfuil Gaeilge mhaith aige nó aici. Is cuma cén leibhéal atá ag duine, tá fáilte roimh gach duine. Bíodh sé in úsáid na bhfrásaí cosúil le “Dia duit”, “Go raibh maith agat”, nó fiú cúpla focal eile, is í an iarracht an rud is tábhachtaí. Gach uair a úsáidtear cúpla focal, cuirtear le todhchaí ár dteanga. Sin an fáth go bhfuil Seachtain na Gaeilge chomh tábhachtach sin. Tugann sí deis dúinn an teanga a úsáid ar bhealach taitneamhach, bíodh sin trí cheol, trí spórt nó trí chomhrá. Tugann Seachtain na Gaeilge an misneach agus an deis dúinn ár dteanga a úsáid le bród.

Deputy Barry Ward: Aontaím leis na cainteoirí a dúirt go bhfuil tábhacht a bhaineann leis an teanga náisiúnta agus ár dteanga dhúchais. Ní aontaím leis na ráitis a dúirt go dtiocfaidh bás ar an teanga i gceann 100 bliain nó mar sin. Ní aontaím leis in aon chor, ach is féidir linn a fheiceáil go bhfuil feabhas ag teacht i gcónaí ar an nGaeilge agus an méid daoine a labhraíonn í gach lá, cé nach bhfuil an líon céanna cainteoirí dúchas ann. Tá a fhios agam, agus táim ag labhairt anois mar dhuine arb as Dún Laoghaire dó, ceantar i mBaile Átha Cliath nach bhfuil Gaeltacht ann, ach ina bhfuil a lán daoine a labhraíonn Gaeilge gach lá. Dúirt duine éigin liom go raibh níos mó daoine ag labhairt Gaeilge gach lá i nDún Laoghaire ná in aon cheantar eile sa tír taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Níl a fhios agam má tá sé fíor nó nach bhfuil, ach tá súil agam go bhfuil. Tá scoileanna cosúil le Scoil Lorcáin agus Gaelcholáistí cosúil le Coláiste Eoin agus Coláiste Íosagáin. Timpeall na scoileanna agus na gcoláistí sin, tá pobal a labhraíonn Gaeilge agus atá thar a bheith buíoch as ucht an Ghaeilge a bheith acu.

Is cóir dúinn, go háirithe sinn nach cainteoirí dúchais sinn, an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus a labhairt. Is cóir dúinn an Ghaeilge a labhairt lenár bpáistí freisin. Má tá foirm ann trí mheán na Gaeilge, ba cheart dúinn an leagan sin a úsáid in ionad an leagain Bhéarla. Má tá an Ghaeilge ag duine mar sin, ba cheart dó nó di í a úsáid san fhoirm sin ionas go n-úsáidfear í agus go bhfuilimid in ann a rá go n-úsáidtear an Ghaeilge ag an leibhéal sin. Sin an tábhacht a bhaineann leis, ach sin an dualgas a bhaineann linn freisin. Is fúinne atá sé an teanga a shábháil, a úsáid agus a labhairt.

Cé go gcreidim go bhfuil ceart ag gach aon duine sa tír a chuid oideachais a dhéanamh trí mheán na Gaeilge, tá a fhios agam nach bhfuil an rogha ag gach aon teaghlach sa tír agus nach bhfuil an seans ag gach aon duine dul go Gaelscoil nó Gaelcholáiste. Is trua an rud é, má tá seans ag duine dul go Gaelscoil agus nach bhfuil an seans céanna aige dul go Gaelcholáiste. Tá sé thar a bheith deacair dom nuair a thagann tuismitheoirí chugam le páistí sa Ghaelscoil ach nach bhfuil áit sa Ghaelcholáiste áitiúil acu freisin. Caithfidh, mar Rialtas agus mar thír, rud éigin a dhéanamh faoi sin.

Ag an am céanna, tá a fhios againn go bhfuil a lán rudaí ar siúl ag an Rialtas atá ann toisc go bhfuil éileamh ar úsáid na Gaeilge agus éileamh ar an nGaeilge san oideachas ann. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil níos mó Gaelscoileanna ag teacht an t-am ar fad, agus tá a fhios againn go léir faoin scoil i Synge Street, Baile Átha Cliath, a bhí le hathrú ó scoil trí mheán an Bhéarla go

scoil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Is slí nó bealach dúinn é sin an t-oideachas a athrú agus a fheabhsú ar son na Gaeilge.

Rud eile atá thar a bheith tábhachtach dom ná an fhógraíocht agus polasaí an Rialtais dheireanaigh go gcuirfidh eagraíochtaí poiblí 20% ar a laghad dá gcuid fógraíochta ar an raidió agus ar an teilifís trí Ghaeilge. Mar sin, tá seans ag gach aon duine sa tír an Ghaeilge a fheiceáil ar an teilifís agus an Ghaeilge a chloisteáil ar an gnáthraidió, ní hamháin Raidió na Gaeltachta, Raidió na Life, Raidió Rí-Rá nó pé raidió trí Ghaeilge, ach ar RTÉ, mar shampla, atá trí Bhéarla de ghnáth. Anois tá fíorfhógraíocht trí Ghaeilge le cloisteáil, ní tokenism atá ann. Déanfaidh sé sin an-difríocht dúinn, go bhfuil an Ghaeilge sin ar fáil dúinn sa ghnáthshaol freisin. Sin píosa amháin atá á dhéanamh. Caithfidh é sin a dhéanamh arís agus arís i ngach scéim, i ngach Roinn Rialtais agus i ngach páirt den phobal. Má tá an dualgas orainn an Ghaeilge a choimeád agus an Ghaeilge a labhairt lenár bpáistí, is slí í sin ar féidir linn an Ghaeilge a úsáid gach lá agus a úsáid go dáiríre.

Deputy John Connolly: Tá a lán ráite ag na Teachtaí Ward agus McGuinness atá fíor. Rud a cheap mé féin le píosa ná go bhfuil orainn athrú meon ó thaobh úsáid na Gaeilge a bheith againn sa tír. Is é sin an dúshlán, go bhfuil ar chuile dhuine an méid Gaeilge atá aige nó aici a úsáid chomh minic agus is féidir leis nó leí. Más rud é gur féidir le chuile dhuine é sin a dhéanamh, beidh dul chun cinn mór déanta ó thaobh na Gaeilge agus a húsáid mar ghnáththeanga an phobail.

Ní hí seo an chéad deis atá agam cúpla focal a rá sa Teach, ach mothaíonn sé feiliúnach cúpla rud a rá faoin toghchán agus an rath a bhí agam ann. An chéad uair a labhair mé, is ar ábhar na stoirme a bhí sé, agus níor cheap mé ag an tráth sin go raibh sé feiliúnach. Gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine a thug cúnamh dom le linn an fheachtais, go mór mór mo bhean, mo chlann agus m'íníonacha, ceann acu a bhfuil breithlá aici inniu. Go maire tú an chéad, Lauren, más rud é go bhfuil tú ag éisteacht linn. Tugaim buíochas dóibh agus do mo mháthair. Cuimhním ar m'athair chomh maith.

Cé gur tógadh mé ar imeall na Gaeltachta is mó sa tír, ní raibh aon Ghaeilge againn sa bhaile, faraor. Rud a bhí againn, áfach, ná béim láidir ar an oideachas, agus chuaigh mé ar scoil a raibh béim ar an nGaeilge inti ag uair nach raibh Gaelscoileanna sa cheantar nó fiú sa tír ag an tráth sin. Táim fós buíoch de na múinteoirí a bhí agam, mar is ansin a fuair mé bunchloch láidir sa Ghaeilge. Tá deis níos fearr Gaeilge a fhoghlaim ag mo chlann féin mar téann siad ar bhunscoil agus meánscoil lán-Ghaeilge. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil an rogha sin ag tuismitheoirí ar nós mise in áiteanna difriúla sa tír faoi láthair.

Caithfidh mé mo réamhTheachta Fhianna Fáil do Ghaillimh Thiar a lua. Thug Éamon Ó Cuív an-chúnamh dom le linn m'iarrachtaí polaitiúla. Roinn sé a thaithí liom go minic. Is tearc polaiteoir eile a bhí ann a raibh an tionchar céanna aige ar shaol na Gaeilge nó ar an nGaeltacht sa tír. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis, agus tá súil agam go n-aontaíonn chuile dhuine liom ag déanamh comhghairdis leis agus é ainmnithe mar uachtarán Oireachtas na Samhna agus gradam an uachtaráin buaite aige ag Ard-Fheis Chonradh na Gaeilge i mbliana. Guím gach rath ar Éamon agus é sna róil sin.

Agus é luaite, is fíor a rá nach raibh agus nach bhfuil an buiséad céanna ag Roinn na Gaeltachta ó shin, nó nach bhfuil sé ag an leibhéal anois agus a bhí sé nuair a bhí Éamon ann mar Aire Gaeltachta. Tá a fhios agam gur dúshlán mór é don Aire nua, agus guím gach rath air. Is maith an rud é - mar atá ráite ag go leor daoine - go bhfuil Aire sinsearach don Gaeltacht ann

fós agus an dualgas maidir leis an nGaeltacht agus leis an nGaeilge ag Aire sinsearach. Guím gach rath air. Tá a fhios aige gur féidir leis brath orm agus é ag iarraidh chuile rud is féidir leis a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht a chur chun cinn.

Tá mise dóchasach do thodhchaí na teanga. Ceapaim go bhfuil meon níos dearfaí anois faoin dteanga ag an nglúin níos óige. Cé gur mhaith linn níos mó scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge a fheiceáil, tá rogha ag cuid mhaith de thuismitheoirí, mar a dúirt mé cheana. Tá an Ghaeilge bríomhar sna meáin cé gur bhreá linn í a fheiceáil níos bríomhara fós agus go mbeadh tagairt níos minice ar an nGaeilge sna meáin.

É sin ráite, níl an mhuinín chéanna agamsa do na ceantracha Gaeltachta. Tá inní orm do chuid de na ceantracha Gaeltachta sa tír. Cloisim go bhfuil líon na ndaltaí sna scoileanna in áiteanna Gaeltachta ag laghdú, agus is ábhar inní é sin. Tá sé ráite ag go leor daoine sa díospóireacht go dtí seo go bhfuil fadhb tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht, agus tá. Is gá dúinn rud éigin a dhéanamh le haghaidh daoine óga atá ag iarraidh fanacht sa Ghaeltacht, teach a thógáil ann agus a gclainne a thógaint ann chomh maith.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Fuair mé freagra ar cheist parlaiminte cúpla seachtain ó shin ar cheist a bhain le Gaeilge mar ábhar scoile. Sa fhreagra sin, bhí ionadh orm nuair a chonaic mé na huimhreacha maidir le díolúintí atá faighte ag daltaí ar fud na tíre seo. I mo chontae féin, Contae Uíbh Fhailí, fuair 400 dalta díolúine ón nGaeilge. Baineann formhór na ndíolúintí seo le hoideachas dara leibhéal. Fuair 320 dalta díolúine ón nGaeilge. Mar gheall air sin, ba chóir dúinn scrúdú éigin a dhéanamh ar an gcóras maidir leis na díolúintí Gaeilge. An cheist atá ann ná an bhfuil an córas atá againn rósholúbtha nó cad atá ag tarlú.

Ba mhaith liom tagairt a dhéanamh den stailc a tharla ag deireadh mhí Feabhra freisin. D'eagraigh 40 grúpa teanga Gaeilge ar fud na tíre an stailc seo. Tá na grúpaí seo ag lorg níos mó infheistithe sa teanga ón Rialtas anseo agus an ceann sa Tuaisceart. Eagraíodh an stailc tar éis ciorraithe de beagnach €820,000 ó Foras na Gaeilge ar ghrúpaí Gaeilge. Tá gá ann anois tacaíocht a thabhairt don Ghaeilge agus d'Fhoras na Gaeilge gan mhoill agus ár seacht ndícheall a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn agus ár dteanga dúchais a choimeád beo agus láidir.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ba mhaith liom rud éigin a chur amach ansin. Tá scoil i mBaile Átha Cliath Thuaidh darbh ainm Gaelcholáiste Reachrann agus níl foirgneamh buan aige. Tá sé uafásach go bhfuil daoine i mBaile Átha Cliath ag iarraidh oideachas a fháil trí Ghaeilge agus níl foirgneamh ag an scoil. Tá siad fós i prefabs. Tá siad ann le haghaidh 22 bliain. Tá sé uafásach. D'fhreastail mé ar an scoil agus tá go leor cairde agam a bhí mar dhaltaí sa scoil seo. Má táimid serious faoin nGaeilge, caithfidimid infheistiú sa scoil seo agus foirgneamh a bheith ann do na daltaí agus do na múinteoirí atá ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam. Beidh mé ag caint idir an dá theanga. The most beneficial resource we have through the local government system is the local authority Irish-language officer. For access to the public participation networks, the provision of pop-up opportunities at meetings, etc., are the way forward. A few minutes of Irish here and there will bring people on board. We must have pride in our language and celebrate it in equal opportunity with the celebration we have of other nationalities in our country.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, will quote Pádraig Pearse. As he said, a nation without

its language is not a nation at all. Dhein mé mo dhícheall i gcónaí chun cúpla focal a úsáid. Ní raibh aon Bhéarla ag mo sheanmháthair. Bhí breac-Ghaeltacht sa Chaisleán Nua, mo bhaile, until 1957. Thosaíomar ranganna Gaeilge agus bunaíodh Gaelscoil Charraig na Siúire 20 bliain ó shin. Ní sé san áit céanna anois ach tá naíonra ann. Is dream é a bhí ag Helen Duggan and it is flourishing. I cannot believe the way it is. Tá naíonra eile i gCathair Dún Iascaigh. Kathleen Ní Loingsigh is the manager there, the múinteoir, and it is amazing. I saw them on the street one day: daoine óga ó 30 tír ar fud an domhain singing and reciting as Gaeilge. Dúirt sí liomsa that young people like that from abroad can learn the Irish easier than they can learn the English. That struck me. Therefore, we need to do more.

All of us need to do more. Úsáidfídh mé níos mó Gaeilge anseo. Bhí an Teachta Connolly ag caint earlier on and she was adamant that we should have some ceisteanna here gach seachtain. I agree. This great committee of reform, where many people are trying to deny us our speaking time, might allow ceist i nGaeilge gach seachtain, nó gach lá mar a dúirt an Teachta. Ní neart go cur le chéile. Together we will do what we can.

I salute all the naíonraí, the múinteoirí and the voluntary boards and committees who have supported these naíonraí. We need more. We have a lán bunscoileanna but we need more meán-scoileanna as well to let people continue their education. Tá a lán oibre le déanamh againn.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Déanaim comhghairdeas le gach aon duine a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht iontach seo. Cosúil le gach duine eile, níl mórán Gaeilge agam, ach tá beagáinín agam. Táim ag foghlaim na teanga agus tá an teanga an-tábhachtach do gach duine, go mór mór sa Dáil agus sa Seanad.

Mar a dúirt an tAire, an Teachta Calleary, is teanga bheo í an Ghaeilge, beo de bharr go bhfuil pobal teanga againn sna ceantair Ghaeltachta agus in áiteanna eile ar fud na tíre, sna líonraí Gaeilge agus bailte seirbhís Gaeltachta go háirithe. Tá cáil na teanga ar chathair Chorcaí de bharr beocht na gceantar Gaeltachta ina timpeall - Músraí agus Oileán Chléire i gContae Chorcaí, agus trasna na teorann i gCorca Dhuibhne agus Uíbh Ráthach. Tá na pobail sin ag caomhnú na teanga agus ag roinnt a dtraidisiún agus an cultúr a ghabhann léi leis an gcéad ghlúin eile.

Mar Aire Stáit atá freagrach as forbairt pobail agus carthanachtaí, tuigim an tábhacht leis na heagraíochtaí pobail agus deonacha i bhforbairt na Gaeltachta agus pobail na Gaeilge. Luaigh an tAire, an Teachta Calleary, an phleanáil teanga, agus ar ndóigh is ionann sin agus forbairt pobail trí mheán na teanga. Tá infheistíocht shuntasach á déanamh ag an Rialtas agus tacaíocht ar fáil don phobal ón Roinn, ó Údarás na Gaeltachta agus ó Fhoras na Gaeilge chun an phleanáil teanga a chur i bhfeidhm sa phobal. Tá forbairt ag teacht de réir a chéile ar na bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus na líonraí Gaeilge ar fud na tíre, ag cur dlúis le pobal teanga sna ceantair seo taobh amuigh de na ceantair traidisiúnta Ghaeltachta. Tá an Rialtas seo tiomanta a chuid a dhéanamh ar son na teanga don chainteoir Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht, sa bhaile seirbhíse, sa líonra Gaeilge agus go deimhin in aon áit ar fud an oileáin seo. Mar bhall den Rialtas agus mar Aire Stáit, beidh mé ag tapú gach aon deis a fhaighim an teanga a úsáid agus a chur chun cinn aon slí ar féidir liom. Tá spriocanna dúshlánacha sa chlár Rialtais ach creidim go mbeidh an Rialtas seo in ann na spriocanna sin a bhaint amach nó a chur i bhfeidhm.

Bhí díospóireacht anseo sa Dáil inné maidir leis an oideachas trí Ghaeilge. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh agus le Sinn Féin as ucht na díospóireachta iontaí sin. Thug an rún seo deis do Theachtaí plé a dhéanamh ar an dul chun cinn suntasach atá déanta sa

chóras oideachais le blianta beaga anuas i dtaobh na Gaeilge de. Is teanga bheo í an Ghaeilge agus tá pobal beo labhartha ag an teanga. Tá an Rialtas ag iarraidh an pobal sin a bhuanú agus a neartú tríd an infheistíocht go léir agus an chistíocht a chuirtear ar fáil. Aithním agus aithníonn na hAirí, na Teachtaí McEntee agus Calleary, go bhfuil tuilleadh dul chun cinn le déanamh sa réimse seo agus go bhfuil dúshlán os ár gcomhair, ach caithfear a admháil go bhfuil an-chuid bainte amach againn ar gá a aithint agus creidiúint a thabhairt don obair sin go léir.

Tá éacht déanta ag scoileanna Gaeltachta na tíre seo mar thoradh ar an scéim aitheantais scoileanna Gaeltachta ach tá obair fós le déanamh. Ar an mbonn sin tá obair tosaithe ag an Roinn Oideachais i dtreo polasaí nua a fhorbairt.

6 o'clock

Tá taighde fadtréimhseach á chur i gcrích i láthair na huaire a bheidh mar bhonn eolais don pholasaí nua, agus tá oifigigh na Roinne i mbun plé leis na scoileanna le roinnt míonna anuas chun tús a chur leis an gcomhairliúchán cuí.

Tá mórán scéimeanna ag mo Roinn a thacaíonn agus a chuireann le obair na Roinne Oideachais sa chóras trí chéile. Cuireann scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge deiseanna breise foghlama agus saibhriú teanga ar fáil sna ceantair Ghaeltachta d'fhoghlaimeoirí lasmuigh den chóras oideachais. De réir fhigiúirí na Roinne, ghlac breis is 27,000 foghlaimoir páirt i gcúrsaí d'fhoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge anuraidh. Fágann sé seo go bhfuil infheistíocht sa bhreis ar €6 mhilliún á dhéanamh ag mo Roinn san earnáil seo faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge ar leas na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Sa bhreis air seo, ceadaíodh ciste €900,000 chun leathnú suntasach a dhéanamh ar an gciste scoláireachta do scoláirí in iarbhunscoileanna DEIS chun freastal ar chúrsaí Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht le linn an tsamhraidh amach romhainn. Faoin gciste breise atá ceadaithe, beidh os cionn 800 scoláire in aghaidh na bliana as iarbhunscoileanna DEIS ar fud na tíre in ann tairbhe a bhaint as tréimhse foghlama sa Ghaeltacht.

Chomh maith leis an bpolasaí don oideachas Gaeltachta, tá an Roinn Oideachais anois i mbun oibre ar pholasaí nua don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht a fhorbairt. Leagfaidh an Roinn amach spriocanna uailmhianacha sa pholasaí seo maidir le soláthar an oideachais lán-Ghaeilge, agus aithneofar gníomhartha ann chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh i dtreo na spriocanna sin. Tá aonad nua don Ghaeilge bunaithe ag an Roinn Oideachais chun plean gnímh dhá bhliain a fhorbairt chun tacú le teagasc agus le foghlaim na Gaeilge i scoileanna meán-Bhéarla, plean a bheidh le foilsiú freisin i mbliana.

Tá an Stát agus an Rialtas seo tiomanta don Ghaeilge. Tá mo Roinn agus an Roinn Oideachais tiomanta don Ghaeilge agus tá freagracht ar gach Roinn agus orainn go léir as an nGaeilge. Mar Aire Stáit, leanfaidh mé agus mo Roinn ag comhoibriú leis na Ranna Stáit go léir i leith na Gaeilge, ag cinntiú go n-éiríonn leis an Rialtas na spriocanna sa chlár Rialtais a chur i bhfeidhm. Luaigh an tAire, an Teachta Calleary, Gréasán Gaeilge na hEarnála Poiblí agus measaim gur iontach an deis é seo dúinne, mar ionadaithe poiblí, na deiseanna a thapú chun an Ghaeilge a úsáid. Arís eile, tá an Stát, an Rialtas seo, agus mé féin mar Aire Stáit sa Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe, Pobail agus Gaeltachta, tiomanta do ghealltanais an Rialtais i leith fhorbairt agus bhuanú na Gaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm trí chomhoibriú libhse go léir agus go háirithe leis an Aire, an Teachta Calleary, agus leis an Aire, an Teachta McEntee.

Bainimis go léir sásamh as an Ghaeilge atá againn a úsáid le linn Sheachtain na Gaeilge agus gach seachtain sa téarma Rialtais sa Dáil agus sa Seanad.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): I thank Deputies for their participation in this important debate to mark Seachtain na Gaeilge.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 6.04 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.04 p.m. and resumed at 6.10 p.m.

Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (Amendment) Bill 2023: Committee and Remaining Stages

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

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

In page 3, to delete lines 17 to 20 and substitute the following:

“(a) in subsection (1)—

(i) in the definition of “financial service provider”, by the insertion of the following paragraphs after paragraph (g):

“(ga) a person who, before the commencement of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2015, engaged in any of the activities referred to in subparagraphs (i) to (iii) of paragraph (a) of the definition of ‘credit servicing’ in section 28(1) of the Central Bank Act 1997 and does not otherwise fall within paragraph (gb);

(gb) a person who, before the commencement of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2018, engaged in any of the activities referred to in subparagraphs (i) to (iii) of paragraph (a) of the definition of ‘credit servicing’ in section 28(1) of the Central Bank Act 1997 and does not otherwise fall within paragraph (ga);”

and

(ii) by the insertion of the following definition:

“ ‘Credit Reviewer’ has the meaning given to it by the Guidelines issued under section 210(1) of the National Asset Management Agency Act 2009 (S.I. No. 127 of 2010);”.

This amendment amends section 2 of the Bill, which provides for an amendment to the underlying section 2 of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017. There are two parts to the amendment. The substantive amendment is to the definition of the financial service provider as set out in the 2017 Act. The definition of “financial service provider” is the list of

financial entities in respect of which a complainant may submit a complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

The amendment will include any person engaged in the activity of credit servicing before the commencement of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Acts 2015 and 2018, respectively. Currently, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman may only accept a complaint relating to the conduct of a credit servicing firm where the conduct giving rise to the complaint occurred after the commencement of the relevant Act.

This amendment will extend the jurisdiction of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman in respect of the activity of credit servicing. The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman will have jurisdiction to review complaints made at any point after a loan sale. This includes complaints before the commencement of either the 2015 Act or the 2018 Act.

As the Deputies will be aware, this issue was raised by Deputy Doherty in particular at the Second Reading of the Bill. This amendment will now address the legitimate concern which was raised and will ensure that all mortgage holders will have access to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, if needed.

The second part of the amendment is solely a drafting amendment, essentially to specify the statutory instrument number of the reference guidelines in the Bill.

I commend the amendment to the Deputies in the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an leasú seo a chur i láthair na Dála inniu. Is leasú tábhachtach é seo atá tugtha isteach ag an Aire Stáit. Tá an leasú mar a gcéanna leis an leasú atá agam féin ar son Shinn Féin agus leis an leasú atá ag an Teachta Nash ar son Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre. Tá an trí leasú ag iarraidh an rud céanna a dhéanamh agus a bhaint amach.

Deputy Robert Troy: I just need to get the translation.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is fine.

Deputy Ged Nash: That is just the preliminaries.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I merely made the point that I appreciate the amendment the Minister of State has brought before the House and I referred to the amendment I have tabled on behalf of Sinn Féin. Without speaking for Deputy Nash, who will speak for himself, his is a similar amendment. All three amendments are trying to achieve the same thing.

There was a serious problem with the original legislation which prevented legitimate claims being heard by the FSPO regarding conduct that occurred before the authorisation of a credit servicing firm.

The role of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman is vitally important. It is a piece of legislation that I have amended successfully in terms of the time limit that was there to investigate pieces of legislation. I am proud that the legislation I got through the Houses of the Oireachtas and enacted has allowed for many customers, particularly those in the tracker mortgage scandal, to have their complaints heard and adjudicated on.

The role of the FSPO is to investigate to resolve consumer complaints regarding financial

services. It is essential that the FSPO works as it is intended and that everybody has access to it and its services. That is crucial. That has to include people who have had their mortgages sold off, usually without their permission and against their will.

As I said, the first three amendments before us all have the same intention. The aim is to close a loophole that existed in the legislation since the FSPO was established in 2018. The legal loophole has resulted in people whose mortgages are with a vulture fund having no access to the State's financial services ombudsman. That was a scandal. It was a disgrace. We need to recognise that many people went without those protections for many years.

I welcome the inclusion of the amendment by the Minister in this legislation. I raised this on numerous occasions with his two predecessors. Indeed, there were attempts to proceed with this legislation in committee. I thank all my colleagues on the committee for agreeing to my proposal that the Bill would not go to Committee Stage until we had dealt with this loophole, and this is the legislation to deal with it. I welcome the fact that there is consensus on this issue.

This stemmed from the fact that tens of thousands of mortgages were sold to unregulated vulture funds - something that should never have happened. Approximately 80,000 mortgage loans are held by vulture funds. I and Sinn Féin strongly oppose these sales. I strongly believe that retail banks should be those who hold our mortgages and long-term loans. These should never be in the hands of vulture funds and I warned against the negative consequences for consumers. We have seen those consequences in higher interest rates and also in the context of what we are trying to fix in this legislation, that is, the fact that they did not have access to the FSPO.

At the time, Fine Gael told us that all these homeowners would have the same protections as anybody else. That is complete and utter nonsense. As we know now, they did not have access to the FSPO, one of the core issues that you have in terms of a financial product. Not only that, we know that those whose loans are with a vulture fund are likely to have experienced significant interest rate increases in recent years. That was the cornerstone of the argument that was put forward, not only by Fine Gael but also by Fianna Fáil, when they supported the sales to the vulture funds. The previous Minister for Finance repeatedly made those assurances to the public. In 2019, in a bid to convince the public, he stated that he would be happy for his own mortgage to be sold to a vulture fund. Little did he know he would not have access to the FSPO or, indeed, that the vulture fund would have jacked up the interest rate probably nine times over the past year and a half.

The Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2015 came into effect on 8 July 2015 and that was followed by the consumer protection Act in 2018, which came into effect in January 2019. Before July 2015, the vulture funds owning the loans or the firms servicing them were not required to be regulated. That meant that the FSPO could not investigate conduct prior to the date with respect to either the fund or the credit servicing firm. The vulture funds owning the loans were only required to be regulated after the 2018 Act and many of these funds did not even ask for authorisation until months later. As a result, we had thousands of mortgage holders with loans held by vulture funds who simply could not make a complaint or, if they made the complaint, it could not be heard by the FSPO because the conduct was prior to 2019 or, in some cases, during 2019.

I welcome the fact that these changes have been brought forward and that the Government has listened to the concerns I have raised but, without doubt, it damages the credibility of what

Government parties argued in the past, that is, that everything was kosher and there would be no difference. The amendment, while positive in that it closes the loophole, is an admission that the public were misled. Let us be clear about it. They were misled, whether by mistake or design, on the protections they would have. We now need to see people who have been denied this recourse to be prioritised by the FSPO. People could not have their complaints heard. Now they will be able to have their complaints heard and we need to make sure there is a way in which those complaints can be fast-tracked, which may require additional resources.

The statistics of the FSPO indicate the average waiting time for a decision is nine months. They also tell us that 85% of cases were decided within the first 12 months. We know from those two figures that a substantial minority of claims that are skewing these numbers. We have some people who have been before the FSPO not for months but for years. I was recently contacted by a person with a case before the FSPO relating to a tracker mortgage who has been waiting seven years for a decision. When this legislation is passed the people who have been denied access to the FSPO for the past number of years need to be prioritised, but that cannot come at the expense of those are waiting. We need to look at how this will be managed and how those who have waited too long for access to justice will now be treated and how they can have their complaints against the vulture funds or banks heard.

I welcome the amendment and that the Minister of State has introduced it. I would like some clarification. The legislation deals with the 2015 and 2018 Acts as well as the Central Bank Act and the original FSPO Act. which established the FSPO. All are interlinked in terms of this amendment. I understand from the drafting that it does not require the credit servicing firm to be authorised. It says if an entity was involved in any of the activities - the activities are listed in a previous Act - the entity is automatically deemed a credit servicing firm regardless of whether it is authorised. There is an authorisation process. A grandfathering clause in the legislation allowed for automatic recognition of authorisation, but that obtained only for a period of a short number of months until applications were made. The automatic entitlement of authorisation was also conditional on a number of steps. Will the Minister of State clarify – I believe this is the case anyway – that this text will not require the credit servicing firm to be authorised? The effect of this text's inclusion is that, if an entity was involved in any type of activity that is defined under a different piece of legislation, whether authorised or not, the entity is deemed a credit servicing firm and, consequently, the FSPO can now hear cases on the entity's conduct or the conduct of others.

Deputy Ged Nash: For what it is worth, I think Deputy Doherty's interpretation is correct. I would also appreciate the Minister of State's clarification on the matter raised by the Deputy. It seems to me there is a particularly broad definition captured in the amendment. If that is the case, it is very welcome. There was a very wide lacuna in the legislation that was identified quite some years ago by Deputy Doherty and others in opposition at the time. We have individually and collectively campaigned to have this lacuna addressed. It is a pretty egregious loophole to which the Minister of State and Deputy Doherty have referred, where somebody who wanted to make a complaint about the conduct of a financial services firm, a fund or credit servicing firm and the complaint involved conduct prior to regulation, the complaint could not be accommodated by law by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. It is to the Minister of State's credit that he has listened to the Opposition - finally, the Government has listened - and has addressed what is a very real problem for all too many people. We know from our experiences as constituency TDs and as spokespersons for finance the number of people across the country who have been damaged - families and businesses destroyed - because of the

behaviour of funds and credit servicing firms that acted with impunity and simply could not be held to account by the FSPO because of this loophole in law, which prevented them from having a complaint about something a firm did prior to being regulated investigated.

This is a very welcome development and something that was raised repeatedly on Second Stage. We requested that the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Chambers would come to the Dáil on Committee Stage to work with the Opposition or, indeed, to present his own proposition for how this would be addressed. In anticipation of that, Deputy Doherty and I have separately tabled amendments, which will be dealt with later in a grouping, that seek to achieve the same thing the Minister of State is achieving here. This is a good initiative. It is positive and welcome, if belated.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I also welcome this. It is very important. Like others, I have spoken to people who have been treated absolutely abysmally by some of these credit servicing firms. These include people who have been harassed or who have tried to get out of the situation and tried to sell. On contacting the firms to say they want to sell, they have been told that if they want to talk about that, then they will be charged a fee. They have not had recourse. These people, who have been trapped in these situations - that is their language - have over the past 15 years effectively paid off the vast bulk of the value of their mortgages in real terms, but because of the punitive interest rates they have been subjected to, they are still trapped with very heavy mortgage payments that they cannot get out of. They cannot see a route out of this for themselves at any point. I have been contacted by people in situations where they have been looking to sell but have had grave difficulties getting back possession of deeds from the credit servicing firm. These are all people whose mortgages were sold on for values of maybe 30% or 40%, yet they are shown no co-operation or leniency and, in fact, are treated in a very punitive way. This has a huge impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

This legislation allows people some recourse and it is welcome that the loophole is being shut, but much more needs to be done on the entire area to help people in situations who have been really aggressively pursued. There are media reports today that another ECB rate cut is due. One of these credit servicing firms has made no cuts to its rates at all over five ECB rate cuts. They are charging people punitive rates that are grossly unfair and they never signed up for. That also has to be addressed.

Deputy Robert Troy: It was the Opposition that highlighted this at the time when the legislation was coming through. To the credit of the Minister for Finance at the time, former Deputy Michael McGrath, he undertook to take on board the Opposition’s concerns. I looked back at the debate in the Official Report. In February 2024, he acknowledged the Deputy had raised this matter in the House the previous week when we were bringing through legislation. The then Minister said it was important, and his commitment, that all consumers have equal access to the Financial Service and Pensions Ombudsman. He was not in any doubt about that. He undertook to consider the matter and postpone Committee Stage until a satisfactory resolution could be identified.

Following consultations with the Attorney General, the previous Government approved this amendment last July. It expands the definition of “financial service provider” in the FSPO Act to include entities engaged in credit servicing before the credit servicing regulatory regime came into force. To confirm, it covers all activity of credit servicing before regulation came into being.

Deputy Doherty referred to the length of time it has taken for cases to be adjudicated through the FSPO. I also have concerns about that. The Minister for Finance sanctioned its work plan for 2024 to 2026. The implementation of this work plan increases the office's resources and the capacity of the FSPO to resolve cases more promptly, with an increase of 42% in staffing. We would hope to see much greater efficiency in dealing with consumers' complaints. We all deal with people who have had their mortgage sold to vulture funds or who have been dealt with inappropriately by financial institutions and credit servicing firms. It is not unique to members of the Opposition. I deal with them in my constituency office, as do Government backbenchers, on a daily basis. It is in all our interests that all consumers have the protection of the Financial Service and Pensions Ombudsman. This amendment takes on board what was identified initially and will give that protection to everyone who needs it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister of State. I do not want to fall out with him but, for the record, there were attempts to move this on Committee Stage. He is absolutely right that when I raised this with the then Minister, Michael McGrath, he said he would investigate it, but this legislation was going to go ahead. We stalled it, therefore, because this is the best vehicle to deal with it. That does not matter but I am highlighting it for the record.

I welcome the Minister of State's clarification that those involved in credit servicing before the 2015 or the 2018 Acts will now be captured regardless of whether they are authorised. In order that it will be on the record, will he give the same clarification that those involved in credit servicing activities prior to the commencement of either of those items of legislation, but before their authorisation, will also be captured?

Deputy Robert Troy: That is correct.

Amendment agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): Amendments Nos. 2 to 4, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together. Is that agreed? Agreed. Amendment No. 3 is a physical and logical alternative to amendment No. 2.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am not going to move amendment No. 2 because we have just passed amendment No. 1, which does exactly what we are looking for.

Amendment No. 4 is also in my name, and while I am not going to move it either, I ask the Minister of State to ensure the legislation does what that amendment proposes. It calls on the Minister to bring forward a report on the extension of the jurisdiction of the FSPO to cover all mortgage holders. This relates to the conversation we have just had regarding whether it covers pre-authorisation and so on. So many people have been caught out having been given assurances and told everything was okay. We would not even have known about this had someone not taken a case and pursued it, and the same applies to a lot of areas. When we think about the tracker mortgage scandal and the 40,000 cases, it was a handful of individuals, fewer than a dozen, who started that ball rolling and then we found out the issue was so widespread, with €1 billion of theft in reality.

This amendment would provide that after a sufficient period, the Minister would ask his officials to look at this with the FSPO and carry out an exercise to ensure that the Bill, with amendment No. 1 in particular, is doing what it is intended to do, namely, include all mortgage holders in the net. I am not asking for it to be put into the legislation but, in the spirit of the amendment, the Minister might ask his officials after a period to touch base with the FSPO,

make sure there are no issues and report that to us.

Amendment No. 2 not moved.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): Does Deputy Nash wish to move amendment No. 3?

Deputy Ged Nash: I am happy not to move my amendment because it has been dealt with effectively by the Minister's amendment.

Amendment No. 3 not moved.

Question proposed: "That section 2, as amended, stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy Doherty and understand where he is coming from. The Minister does have regular engagement with the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman and we can commit to keeping the matter under review and on our radar in the regular engagement.

In respect of the amendments, as the Deputies are aware, we undertake post enactment to carry out scrutiny of all legislation. This includes the requirement under Dáil Standing Orders that a post-enactment report be produced and laid 12 months after the enactment of legislation in the parliamentary Library. This 12-month post-enactment period provides a more appropriate timeframe in which to consider the operation of new legislation, particularly in this case in respect of extending the scope of the FSPO's jurisdiction. The FSPO is also accountable to the public accounts committee under section 22 of the 2017 principal Act and to other Oireachtas committees under section 23 of that Act. In recent years, representatives of the FSPO have also appeared regularly before the Committee on Public Petitions and the Ombudsmen.

In addition, a range of parliamentary procedures are available to all Deputies, and I have committed to engaging with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to ensure he will keep this on the radar in his engagements. It is available to all Deputies to seek updates on the FSPO by way of parliamentary questions and I have no doubt the Deputies will use that opportunity themselves. Under section 25 of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017, the FSPO publishes a comprehensive annual overview of complaints, while under section 62 of that Act, it also publishes decisions on complaints against financial service providers and case studies of decisions on complaints against pension providers subject to the requirements of the Act. Accordingly, while it was not proposed to accept the Deputies' amendments, I appreciate that they did not move them and I give a commitment to engaging with the Minister and requesting that, in his ongoing engagement with the FSPO, he will keep this on the radar.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister of State. Really, what I am looking for here is an early warning system. I am familiar with the 12-month review and so on but I am thinking of people for whom, while they may have made a complaint that has not been heard, it may be a case of a vulture fund absolutely robbing them. It may be the case the vulture fund has taken their home wrongly from them. It may be that they were overcharged. We do not know what the cases are, and the cases have not been able to be heard. We are fixing that now when this legislation becomes enacted.

What I really wanted was that we would not have to wait for a year to find out that there is still an issue. The FSPO may think this is fine, but there is another animal that challenges this

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and its lawyers will get to see whether the FSPO has jurisdiction in a given case. I welcome the Minister of State's comments but really what we want is an early warning system for this whereby, if something is flagged in respect of the FSPO, in these cases that are now going to come before it but cannot be heard for some reason, and where there is still another issue with the legislation, we will not have to wait for 12 months to find out about it. In the spirit of trying to resolve the issue, I ask the Minister of State to relay that to the senior Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

SECTION 3

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): Deputy Doherty has indicated he does not intend to move amendment No. 4.

Amendment No. 4 not moved.

Question proposed: "That section 3 stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This section, which deals with the original legislation, addresses the funding of the FSPO. As we know, it is funded through two sources, namely, a levy and Exchequer funding. The former is an industry levy imposed on financial service providers annually in respect of FSPO activities for the investigation of complaints and the second source is funding provided by the Exchequer through the Department of Finance Vote. The section amends the Act, with which I have no issue, to clarify the methodology underlying how the distribution of expenses across the FSPO to sources of funding would take place. To that end, it is going to replace in the legislation the words "dealt with" with "received by", which reflects the metric used by the FSPO in practice, so I have no issue with that. It also allows for expenses to be calculated over a three-year period rather than a one-year period, which is fine with me as well. These clarifications in this legislation seem straightforward and I am not opposing them.

I would like to take the opportunity, however, to hear from the Minister of State, or indeed from the Department, about the rationale for not using the levy to cover the costs of the FSPO in its work that deals with pensions, because that does not come from a levy but directly from the Oireachtas Vote. I also note that the existing practice and this amendment focus on complaints received. Over recent years, there has been a concerning decline in the number of complaints substantially or partially upheld. It is concerning. I have written to the Minister about this issue and the trends that are there need to be analysed and explained. Maybe it is just a case that we are dealing with complaints that are of a certain nature but there is a trend of a decline in the number of complaints that are upheld, substantially or partially.

Will the Minister explain why the work of the FSPO on pensions is not covered by an industry levy?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): Does the Minister of State wish to respond?

Deputy Robert Troy: I have been told that the FSPO was created by merging the Financial Services Ombudsman and the Pensions Ombudsman and the levy system design reflects that since the 2017 Act. I do not know if that clarifies the matter for Deputy Doherty but if not we can come back to him with a more comprehensive answer.

Section 3 outlines and updates the methodology for calculating expenses via a percentage

split charged to the financial services ombudsman sector by a levy for financial services complaints, and expenses charged to the Exchequer for pensions cases. That was the question raised by the Deputy and that has been the case since the merger of the two ombudsmen in the 2017 Act.

The main updates proposed by this Bill are to calculate the percentage split between the industry and Exchequer funding over the three immediately preceding financial years as opposed to the previous financial year as is currently provided for in the 2017 Act, and to update the term “dealt with by the Ombudsman” to “received by the Ombudsman”.

By providing for a calculation of expenses over a three-year period, any spikes, or the opposite, with regard to a certain type of complaints received during the year would not dramatically affect the calculation of expenses in a given year. That will provide certainty in terms of the resources for the ombudsman. Updating the term “dealt with” to “received by” makes it easier to identify when a complaint has been received as opposed to when it has been dealt with. This is the metric used in practice used by the FSPO and provides more clarity and transparency for the calculation of expenses.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister of State for the response. As I said, I have no issue with the parts in this section. However, the clarification and answer the Minister of State gave me was that it always was this way and, therefore, it shall ever be. Without delaying this process, will the Department officials send me a note on why it should always be this way? I am not advocating that it should change but I just want to know the rationale behind the Department’s thinking that may have been this way. We amalgamated the financial services and pensions ombudsmen in legislation a number of years ago. Is there any rethink in the Department as to whether a levy should be imposed on all activities or should it just be maintained for financial services, which is what is provided for here?

Deputy Robert Troy: I will undertake to ask the officials to respond to the Deputy. I honestly do not know but I will put it into context. In the 2024 budget for the FSPO, only 4%, or €525,000, of the overall costs came from the Department and 96% of the funding was covered by the industry. A very small percentage of the funding is coming from the Department. I do not know what the rationale was back in 2017 but we will get that information from the Department. To put it into context, we are talking about a very small element of the overall funding for the ombudsman’s office.

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 4 to 11, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 12

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 6, between lines 8 and 9, to insert the following:

“(2) Section 44 of the Principal Act is amended by the insertion of the following subsection after subsection (6):

“(6A) Notwithstanding any other provisions of this Act, the Ombudsman may, where he or she considers it appropriate to do so to protect the interests of a complainant, accept a complaint with respect to a joint account or joint policy in instances where all

owners of that account or policy have not consented to the complaint.”.”.

This amendment seeks to amend the principal Act by the insertion of the following:

Notwithstanding any other provisions of this Act, the Ombudsman may, where he or she considers it appropriate to do so to protect the interests of a complainant, accept a complaint with respect to a joint account or joint policy in instances where all owners of that account or policy have not consented to the complaint.

What we are trying to do is self-explanatory. The amendment is intended to try to address the deficiencies in the legislation as regards complaints from people who have jointly held mortgages or other financial services. This is a consequence, in certain circumstances, of empowering an individual to block another from seeking justice or availing of consumer protection. This can be done out of spite or coercive control and in these instances the ombudsman is blocked from taking the complaint forward. There are situations in relation to this and what this amendment does is that it does not say it will happen automatically but it allows the ombudsman to hear the complaint. The ombudsman may, where he or she considers it appropriate to do so to protect the interest of a complainant, accept a complaint with respect to a joint account or joint policy. This is a sensible amendment and I am interested to hear the Minister of State's response and whether there is another way he believes this issue can be resolved.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is a very welcome amendment and one I considered tabling but I did not manage to do so. I have dealt with cases over the years and I have engaged with the FSPO on behalf of constituents in situations where they were joint holders of a mortgage, the relationship had broken down and there was evidence of fraud, for the want of a better description, perpetrated by one of the people who held the account, which was accepted by the bank. The relationship had broken down and the person on the other side of that relationship wanted to make a complaint to the ombudsman about a matter related to that account and the ombudsman could not accept that because the complainant could not obtain the consent of the other signatory.

That is a very real-life human set of circumstances that confronts far too many people and, arguably, is a form of economic and financial abuse that the FSPO is not in a position to investigate. It perpetrates another injustice against someone who has already experienced a number of injustices in his or her life.

I have been in correspondence with the FSPO on this particular case and I believe it illustrates a broader problem. The ombudsman made it very clear that there are very obvious difficulties in framing a legislative amendment that might be able to accommodate everybody's rights. I understand that. It seems that the ombudsman's equivalent in the UK – the regulator there – has managed to steer a middle course on this and is acknowledging the problems. They too have a form of a GDPR regime. GDPR is not necessarily the problem. Of course, it is used as the omni-excuse to cover everything by some agencies that would just prefer to not do anything at all and that is the defence. I accept, however, that when the ombudsman was corresponding with me on this issue that was not the purpose but was obliged to point out the obvious GDPR issues that would arise.

It should not be beyond us as a Legislature to try to come up with an innovative solution to accommodate somebody's rights because it is an all too human problem. It arises all of the time. I would like to think there are people in the FSPO and similar organisations who would

like to see a solution to this. It is not immediately obvious to me what that is. Deputy Doherty's amendment is helpful in trying to get to the bottom of this and propose some kind of resolution. I am interested in the Minister of State's views. It is a very human problem. It would be useful to hear his views on how the problem might be addressed.

Deputy Robert Troy: The FSPO has advised that where a complaint is made to it concerning a joint account or joint policy, it must recognise that all parties who own the account or policy have rights, entitlements and potential liabilities arising from that account or policy. The rights, entitlements and potential liabilities of joint owners arise not only from a legal and contractual perspective but also from other legislative and regulatory sources such as data protection legislation. Whether the complaint is resolved by way of a binding mediation settlement agreement between the parties using the confidential dispute resolutions service or is subject of a formal investigation by the FSPO leading to a legally binding decision, the rights and obligations of all joint account or joint policy holders are thereby affected. This approach is in accordance with the statutory obligation placed on the FSPO by section 56(3) of the Act, which prescribes that:

Where the Ombudsman proposes to conduct an investigation into a complaint made under this Part, he or she shall provide the parties, and any other person who, in the opinion of the Ombudsman, might be adversely affected by any decision he or she may make in relation to the complaint, an opportunity to—

- (a) make submissions with respect to the conduct the subject of the complaint, and
- (b) comment on any allegations contained in the complaint or reference.

Under this section, all owners of the account or policy must consent to investigation of the complaint and processing of personal data by the FSPO. Another consideration worth noting is that joint owners who have not consented to the complaint may hold key information relevant to the investigation of the complaint.

This approach is of particular importance given the views of the Supreme Court in the *Zalewski* case. The court held a public administrative body, such as the FSPO, which provides a complainant with a route to redress as an alternative to the courts is operating within the confines of the provision of Article 37 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* and is administering justice. It is against this constitutional background that the FSPO operates a quasi-judicial function and, therefore, is especially cognisant of the need to adhere to fair procedures. On that basis, I do not propose to accept the amendment.

Fraud is clearly a matter for An Garda Síochána, not for the financial services ombudsman. Financial abuse is to be redefined soon in the Central Bank code of conduct. I accept that when complainants are at the financial services ombudsman, they have gone through the code of conduct, but it will be redefined to assist in situations where there is a joint account before the need arises to go to the financial services ombudsman.

My understanding is the process in the UK is different as the UK financial ombudsman sets out that if the consumer accepts the ombudsman's decision in a specified timeframe, the business has to do what the ombudsman has told it to do. It will be binding on the business. The consumer does not have to accept the ombudsman's decision and a rejected decision will not be binding on the business. That, I am told, is the difference between us and them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am very disappointed with the response from the Minister of State and Department. This is a real issue. I have an example of this. Coercive control exists. These people have a right to do what everybody else can, which is to make a complaint to the financial services ombudsman about the conduct of financial institutions. The Minister of State is telling me he will not do anything about the legislation that prevents them doing so where the person exercising coercive control over them does not allow it. That is nonsense and should not happen. Surely to God there is enough wisdom in this room to deal with this issue. If it cannot be fixed for contracts in the past, surely we can legislate to ensure contracts in the future allow for all joint accounts to have it specified that if a party to the agreement brings it to the FSPO without consent, it will be heard by the FSPO. There are ways around this.

That response is a typical response outlining why not to do something. The Minister of State has to put himself in the shoes of the, mostly, women in this situation. Their partner took a joint mortgage with them and is not allowing them to get the justice they deserve. They do that, in some cases, out of spite and as a way to harm the individual. That is what this is about. If there is a way for us to resolve that, which I believe there is, it should be done. I understand the limitations of the FSPO but if the Minister of State is saying the limitations are consent and GDPR, can they not be provided at the point of entering into a contract?

I have a case where there were eight signatories to a contract, six of them children. Some of them were not even in the country at the time. They were in Australia. They cannot take the case to the FSPO because the individual who benefited from this and from the wrongdoings of the financial institutions, as is alleged, will not play ball with the partner and children. That is nonsense. I cannot accept that. Let us imagine somebody coming to my constituency clinic who is the victim of domestic violence. Through other engagements, we find out she has been wronged by a financial institution but she cannot seek justice because the person who perpetrated that violence is attacking her once again through legislation that we can fix. Surely they have the right to do it.

The Minister of State is probably not in a position because Cabinet has decided all this stuff but we have to be able to fix this. This is simple to fix if we want to do it. We make the law. The Minister of State read out that these are the rules by which the FSPO is set up. We know the FSPO has to play by the rules but we make the rules. Sinn Féin in this amendment is trying to change the rules so this type of situation would not be allowed and the FSPO would have discretion to hear a case from one party to a joint agreement where it felt it was in the interests of protecting the rights of that party. We can put in protections and rights for people to do this, that and the other but the basic right to take a case and seek redress should be afforded not just to some citizens but to all citizens.

I strongly urge the Minister of State to rethink this. This is absolutely wrong. I know some individuals who have been in this circumstance. It is just not right.

Deputy Ged Nash: With respect, the remarks the Minister of State read out are a restatement of the position the FSPO has put into correspondence with me over the years, and with others as well. Deputy Doherty is familiar with these kinds of cases. He has worked on them too. I imagine many other Members of the House have as well. The Deputy is right that we are legislators. We make the law and it is up to the agencies of the State to enforce that law. If the political will is there, it is surely not beyond our ability to develop an innovative solution that is fair to everyone and that can address these very real everyday human problems that are becoming more apparent by the day.

7 o'clock

I spoke last year to the *Business Post*, which started to express an interest in these cases. It did a desktop assessment of the kinds of regimes in place in similar common law jurisdictions where, for example, GDPR laws apply. They referred to the UK financial services ombudsman which said, "it had similar problems, but crucially, it was able to help in some instances". It did not go through in detail what those instances were, but clearly the legal system with which we have most in common, the UK common law system, managed to find a way around this to accommodate this unfortunate everyday reality.

Deputy Doherty's amendment is well crafted and it gives some latitude to the FSPO to make a determination on whether a complaint is appropriate or whether it can accept that complaint. An agency and organisation, operating under the laws we develop in this House and pass as a sovereign Parliament, should be able to interpret those laws and we should give it the latitude it needs to be able to operate in the real world and create some kind of practical framework to take these complaints and try to resolve them. The amendment is not overly explicit as to how that will be done. It is drafted broadly enough to allow the FSPO to look at all of the facts and merits of each individual case and make a determination as to whether it can take on the case while balancing everyone's interests. I find it extraordinary that there is an overly legalistic interpretation of these kinds of things. We deal all the time in this House with much more complex problems and we manage to find solutions. I reiterate that if the political will is there to deal with this, it should not be beyond us to find a resolution to this very real problem.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I ask the Minister of State to reconsider this. The case for this amendment has been made strongly. Yesterday in the audiovisual room, Members of the House from Opposition and Government parties heard directly from women who are survivors of domestic abuse and have gone through horrendous situations. They spoke passionately about the lack of support for them and the lack of refuge places that have trapped survivors of domestic violence in horrendous situations. Their clear message to all of us as legislators is that we need to do everything we can to support them in every possible way and that they are not consistently getting the support they need and deserve. All this amendment seeks to do is allow some level of flexibility and discretion so that people, usually women in those situations, would have recourse. I cannot possibly see how it is defensible not to allow some level of flexibility and discretion here so that when people are in those terrible situations and need recourse, at least that can be considered. Every Member of this House, across parties, in opposition and government, would surely support what is being attempted to be achieved in this amendment. I ask the Minister of State to reconsider.

Deputy Robert Troy: To be brutally honest with the Deputies, when I was briefed on this Bill before coming in, I saw the merits of where they were coming from. I could see the reason for this and the examples of where it could well be needed. I could think of examples of dealing with marital breakdown in my constituency where one party has gone, never to be engaged with and the other person is unable to make contact with them. I see the rationale behind this, and it is in that context that the Central Bank's consumer protection code plays an important role in the context of wider financial consumer protection frameworks to support consumers. The code was subject to a major review by the Central Bank recently in order to deliver an updated, modernised and fit-for-purpose code for consumers of financial services. As part of that consultation process and the proposed revised code measures, the Central Bank has set out a number of important policy proposals relating to consumers in vulnerable circumstances and experiencing financial abuse, which would provide important enhancements for consumers in

such circumstances. That is what Members were alluding to a moment ago. This includes a proposed new and overarching provision on securing consumers' interests, which obliges firms to effectively incorporate those interests in their strategy, business model and decision-making process, reflecting their overarching obligation to act in the best interests of their consumers. New measures on vulnerability are expected to be included in the updated code as part of the overarching duty on firms to secure the interests of customers. Firms would also be required to secure the interests of customers in vulnerable circumstances. This approach seeks to embed an understanding of vulnerability within the operation of a firm and ensure the needs of consumers in vulnerable circumstances and that a commitment to addressing these needs is an integral part of a firm's customer focus. This should allow firms to be prepared to assist when the needs of consumers in vulnerable circumstances arise.

The Central Bank also consulted on the introduction of a new definition of financial abuse to mean the wrongful or unauthorised taking, withholding, appropriation or use of customers' moneys assets or property; any act or omission by a person, including through the use of power of attorney, guardianship or any other authority regarding a customer, to gain control through deception, intimidation or undue over the customer's money, assets or property; or wrongfully interfere with or deny the customer's ownership, use, benefit or possession of the customer's money, assets or property.

A lot of work has been done on updating the Central Bank consumer protection code to help customers in vulnerable situations. However, I am told that in relation to the amendment, and taking account of the views of the Supreme Court in the Zalewski case, in which the Supreme Court held that any public administration body, such as the FSPO, which provides a complainant with a route to redress as an alternative to court is operating within the confines of the provisions of Article 37.1 of Bunreacht na hÉireann and is administering justice. It is against this constitutional background that the FSPO operates as a quasi-judicial function and, for that reason, must be especially cognisant of the need to adhere to fair procedures. I am advised that legally we cannot do what is proposed. The Deputies are saying we can but I have to take the advice I am being given, which is that we cannot do it. I accept the rationale they have brought forward and their bona fides on this, but I have to take the advice I am given.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I heard what the Minister read from his note, but his note did not say that he could not do it. It stated that he had to be conscious of quasi-judicial procedures and so on. I have not seen legal opinion on this, and I do not have legal opinion on it, but I am certain there are ways in which we can address the matter if we put our heads together. Even if, as I said, we may not be able to do it for those who have entered into contracts, we can look at contracts in the future if there is an issue. The bizarre thing in this is that an individual - for example somebody who is a victim of domestic violence - who may have been wronged by the financial institution can make a complaint herself to the financial institution. The Central Bank, in the context of the codes the Minister of State mentioned, expects that financial institution to deal with her complaint and to respond to her regardless of whether the individual who has been involved in domestic abuse against her consents to it. However, when the financial institution fails her, she has no right to seek recourse from the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman unless her abuser puts his signature on her complaint form. That is nonsense. It just does not make any sense.

Let us look at the Bill before us, which I support. Section 15 gives the Minister for Finance the power to bring forward regulations involving internal dispute mechanisms within financial services providers where they may not exist. Would the Minister of State be happy if those

regulations stated that an individual cannot be heard from unless the second person signs the form? No financial institution works like that. It is only the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman that works like that. The financial institutions will hear a complaint from one individual. There has to be a way to deal with this.

I am conscious that we are not going to get agreement on this amendment tonight, but I am trying to make sure that we go away, look at the legal avenues and find a way to resolve this issue. Protections can be put in place to allow for due process, engagement and information to be provided to any other signatory of the account but that should not block any consideration of a complaint the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman feels is important. As already stated, I am not arguing that it should be done willy-nilly or for every single case. I am arguing that this should be allowed where the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman is of the view that it is in the interests of the complainant for a complaint to be heard. This may be in a case of domestic abuse or coercive control or where the other party to the original mortgage is in some far-flung land and the complainant has not had contact with him or her for 20 years. As it stands, the complainant's case can never be heard. That is not acceptable in this day and age. As I have said, there are bound to be ways to resolve this.

The amendment could stand in this legislation because all it does is enable the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman to hear these cases. It does not mean that he or she will hear the cases. It may be the case that we will have to look at other amendments to legislation to allow for protections for other signatories to the contract. The Minister of State mentioned the Central Bank code of conduct and all of the protections that are there but who polices the code? It is the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. If you make a complaint to the Central Bank, it will say that it cannot deal with individual complaints and will direct you to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. It is the ombudsman's code and he or she obliges the bank to adhere to it. If you feel the banks are not adhering to the code, you can make a complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. However, in this circumstance, you cannot. All of the protections are there. The more protections, the merrier. I am absolutely for that but I want to ensure that people are able to exercise their rights where they feel that consumer protections have been disregarded by financial institutions. They should then be able to make a complaint. It is crucially important that they can do that through a mechanism I very much support, which is free of charge, which has been efficient, although there are some issues at the minute, and which is readily available to the population.

I ask the Minister of State to commit to looking at this issue again in the spirit of determining what we would need to do to allow this to happen in these circumstances, which are limited in number but which still exist. How can we give the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman discretion to hear such cases? That is what I am not hearing at the minute. I hear what the Minister of State has said about just being briefed on this recently but I ask that he commit to looking at this issue again. I am not asking for it to be included in this legislation. This legislation will pass tonight but there will be other opportunities.

Deputy Ged Nash: Just to clarify, this is Committee Stage and we will also have Report Stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: Report Stage is being taken tonight.

Deputy Ged Nash: I understand. We will be dealing with other finance-related Bills over the coming months. It is not unusual for an amendment that is not directly related to the sub-

ject matter of a Bill to be accommodated. This might be done in respect of the issue that is exercising me and Deputy Doherty. Deputy O’Callaghan has also spoken about it. This is not the first time I have raised this. We have raised it time and again in the Houses and elsewhere. The Minister of State understands the issue. He gets it. He is a constituency representative and a compassionate human being who understands that these problems arise all the time. He believes it is not possible to accommodate this in the legislation at the moment. We would disagree although regulation could potentially enable this area to be addressed. An overarching amendment to future legislation might be able to house such a regulation, for want of a better description, and enable that to happen. Will the Minister of State commit to engaging with the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman on this issue and to coming back to us in any format? He can see that we are exercised about it. We want to resolve this. Our bona fides on it are well established. Will the Minister of State engage with the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman to see if there is an innovative and imaginative solution that balances everyone’s rights while addressing this problem? If we can get such a commitment here this evening, it would be a good evening’s work and we could return to the issue again.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I endorse Deputy Nash’s request for that commitment from the Minister of State that he will look at this and work on getting a solution to it. It would be very welcome if he would do that. I will make a point to him. I accept his bona fides in what he is saying about the Supreme Court ruling on the Zalewski case. What is pertinent in that ruling is that, because of the quasi-judicial role involved here, there must be cognisance of the need to follow fair procedures. Deputies Nash and Doherty, the Minister of State and I all recognise that accommodating those who have been put in horrendous situations and their access to recourse must be at the heart of fair procedure. There is nothing fair in a procedure that excludes them from recourse. I bring that point strongly to the Minister of State’s attention. With regard to the Zalewski case, the access to fair procedure he has talked about has to apply to people who have been in abusive relationships, who have been subject to coercive control or who have suffered horrendous abuse in their relationships. There must be fair procedure for them. Any reading of the Zalewski case ruling and the reference to fair procedure would surely acknowledge that access to fair procedure must apply to people in those situations.

Deputy Robert Troy: I hear what each of the Deputies is saying but, to be fair, the review of the consumer protection code is a good, positive and concrete change. We must also acknowledge that both parties to a contract have rights and they both have obligations. Deputy Doherty mentioned that the Central Bank or the relevant financial institution or pension provider can undertake a review if one party raises an issue, but it is also fair to say that neither the Central Bank nor a financial institution or pension provider is a quasi-judicial body. As a result, they cannot issue a legally binding finding in such a scenario.

I recently wrote to a bank to request a change of address on a joint account I hold with my wife. The bank would not change it without her signature. It would not even change a postal address without her signature. I am not saying the Deputy is wrong, but my personal experience is in a situation where there is a joint account, both signatures must now be present, even to change an address. That is probably a welcome protection that is in place. I know of examples where the courts have difficulties where both parties are not coming to the situation. Quite often, the courts will suspend and give additional time to get a party to make contact with the other party because it will make it easier.

I will give a commitment that I will engage with the FSPO to see whether anything is at all possible going forward. I accept and agree with the bona fides of what the Deputy is saying,

especially in respect of people who have been subjected to marital breakdown and domestic abuse, who should not be penalised unnecessarily. I do not accept that it is as easy as projected, but I will give a commitment to the Deputy, if he does not press the amendment, that I will speak to the FSPO to see whether anything can be done.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome that. As I said, the FSPO will operate within the rules that we set. It would be worth having that conversation with the Attorney General as well. The original Bill stems from the Zalewski case in the WRC. Any quasi-judicial organ of the State should have fair procedures, but fair procedures do not mean that someone should have to sign the complaint. Fair procedures can be about being notified that a complaint is in, and that an individual has the right to be there, to be heard, to be cross-examined and to take evidence under oath. These were all the issues that were at the core of the case that was dealt with by the Supreme Court. It should not be a block for an individual. As I said, the FSPO is a good first step but advice from the Attorney General on how this can be addressed in the here and now, or going forward, is crucially important.

I will not press the amendment, given the Minister of State's commitment, although to tell the truth I want to press it. This is a big issue. It may not be one that affects hundreds of thousands of people but as I have said over and over again, a lot of the issues that become financial scandals happen because of one individual. One person did not lie down, was not going to be browbeaten by the financial institution and may have told his or her story to people. Those people may have thought that person was a crackpot or whatever, but he or she just kept on going and took it to the FSPO, which ruled for him or her. In some cases, the FSPO ruled against the person and he or she still kept on going.

I know people who have benefited from the actions of one individual. I will not mention the bank, but there was an FSPO case a number of years ago. One individual took a case on prevailing rate issues. That person won the case. One complaint won that case and thousands of people were notified that they were owed thousands of euro by that bank. Let us imagine that the person who took that case against a major financial institution in this State was a woman whose partner or former partner was exerting control over her and would not sign the document. Can you imagine the impact of that on any financial institution? It would state straight away that it could not deal with that case and to forget about it, and not one of those thousands of people would have ever found out that they were robbed by that financial institution. At its core, this is about the right to justice, the right to be heard, and rights in those circumstances where blackguarding is going on that tries to deny access to the organs of the State that allow a person to have his or her complaint heard, considered and adjudicated on. It is that person's right in the first instance. I am very conscious, from our past, that the actions of such an individual can have an impact on tens of thousands of other people who have been wronged but who never knew about it and would never do anything about it if were it not for that person.

I will leave it at that but I am very passionate about this issue. I am happy to work with the Minister of State on it. I will return to it because, as I said, this issue can be resolved. I hope it is without delay.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Question proposed: "That section 12 stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This relates to SMEs. At present, a dual track or dual process is

under way where people can appeal a credit decision by a participating institution to a credit reviewer, while at the same time submitting a complaint regarding the conduct to the FSPO. The section seems to clarify that the complainant may not make a complaint to the FSPO and it may not investigate the complaint in circumstances where the credit reviewer has already issued an opinion to the complainant. The text in the explanatory memorandum is a wee bit contradictory. Maybe that is just my reading of it. I am looking for clarification on this. Obviously, the credit reviewer or the credit review office is something we want people to go to. It is non-binding, but can people go to a credit reviewer and if they are not happy with that decision, can they take a case to the FSPO after this legislation is passed? I ask the Minister of State to clarify that in order that we have clarification regarding section 12.

Deputy Robert Troy: Section 12 clarifies the respective remit of the financial services ombudsman and the credit reviewer. There is another similar amendment to section 14 of the Bill; that section also corrects a typographical error. The credit reviewer makes a recommendation regarding a participating bank's lending decision as a result of which the participating bank may decide to approve the loan. The FSPO's jurisdiction does not overlap because the FSPO does not interfere with the commercial discretion of a financial service provider regarding its decisions to advance credit, or the conditions under which the loan facilities are offered, including interest rates or repayment period.

It is important to note that the credit reviewer reviews cases for SMEs, sole traders and farm enterprises, where the FSPO also investigates complaints by individual consumers. Nevertheless, a consumer, including a small business, may make a complaint to the FSPO regarding the conduct of the bank in how it assessed the loan application or regarding the treatment of a customer during the application process. The FSPO has jurisdiction to investigate whether the bank's conduct during the period was contrary to law or was unjust, unreasonable, oppressive or otherwise improper. The updated wording will foolproof the provisions of the legislation to prevent an overlap in the respective roles of the FSPO and the credit reviewer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am still not clear, and that may fall on me, on what the Minister of State said about updating and clarifying. People will still have the ability to make a complaint to the FSPO regarding the conduct. What will they not have the ability to make a complaint to the FSPO about as a result of the legislation? This legislation will ensure there is no overlap, which means it will remove the right to make a complaint in certain areas because it will have already been dealt with. Will the Minister of State explain what that is or what the overlap is?

Deputy Robert Troy: It will not remove any right; it just clarifies what the right is. The Credit Review Office, as the Deputy knows, was established for people who had a grievance or felt their credit application was not dealt with appropriately by way of a commercial decision on their ability to repay a financial loan. The measure clarifies the difference between the review office and the FSPO but is not removing any right. If people still believe it is required to go to the FSPO on grounds other than commercial-decision grounds, they can still do that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is clear. Why does this arise? The FSPO cannot adjudicate on commercial decisions of banks that operate in line with the codes of conduct and all the rest. Can the Minister of State explain to us why there is some confusion in the legislation because what he has described seems to be clear regarding the existing practice? Why is this section needed? Why is an amendment to the original Act needed?

Deputy Robert Troy: I understand it was raised during pre-legislative scrutiny that clarity was needed. The amendment is to give rise to that clarity.

Question put and agreed to.

SECTION 13

Question proposed: “That section 13 stand part of the Bill.”

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I mentioned this section earlier when talking about amendment No. 5. This obviously clarifies that the ombudsman may require witnesses to attend before him or her to be examined or cross-examined on oath or affirmation. This comes from the judgment we referred to in the case that involved the Workplace Relations Act 2015. It was found that the procedures were unsatisfactory in that cross-examination of witnesses of the opposing party is fundamental to the fair procedures guaranteed under Article 40.3 of the Constitution. It is obvious that cross-examination of witnesses is fundamental to the concept of fair procedures. We talked about fair procedures.

The original 2017 Act contains several provisions that recognise the quasi-judicial role of the FSPO. The decision in the Zalewski case has required such bodies to examine their processes and procedures and ensure consistency with the constitutional requirements. That is really the core function of the original legislation. However, my understanding is that cross-examining witnesses has always been a feature of oral hearings of the FSPO, without this being in legislation. I understand there has always been a stenographer present to take a transcript and cross-examine the other party’s witnesses, and that has provided for the three-dimensional discussion. Can the Minister of State provide certainty that the amendments will not have an impact on the operations of the FSPO? The FSPO has been doing what I have described anyway in practice for quite a long period. Is putting the existing practice in legislation just to have a belt and braces so things will remain as normal within operations?

Deputy Robert Troy: To clarify, it is exactly that.

Question put and agreed to.

Section 14 agreed to.

SECTION 15

Question proposed: “That section 15 stand part of the Bill.”

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On section 15, which we touched on in terms of internal dispute resolution and the power of the Minister to make the regulations, will it now be the case that all financial services firms and pension providers will have to have internal dispute resolution procedures? Will this amendment ensure this is the case? Is it a factor that there are many that do not have such procedures in place?

Deputy Robert Troy: Currently, there is no statutory obligation on pension providers to have internal dispute resolution processes in place. This measure will make it a statutory requirement.

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 16 to 18, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 19

An Ceann Comhairle: The acceptance of amendment No. 6 involves the deletion of section 19.

Deputy Robert Troy: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 7, between lines 20 and 21, to insert the following:

“19. Section 62 of the Principal Act is amended—

(a) in subsection (1), by the substitution of “section 60 or 61” for “section 61 or 62”,

(b) by the substitution of the following subsection for subsection (2):

“(2) Subject to subsection (2A), the Ombudsman—

(a) shall publish—

(i) decisions made by him or her after the establishment day in relation to complaints concerning financial service providers, and

(ii) case studies in relation to complaints concerning pension providers,
and

(b) may, if he or she considers it appropriate to do so in any particular case, publish, in such form as he or she thinks fit, a report in relation to any investigation under this Part and the result of that investigation,

in such a manner that—

(I) ensures that—

(A) a complainant shall not be identified by name, address or otherwise, and

(B) a financial service provider or a pension provider, as the case may be, shall not be identified by name or address,

and

(II) ensures compliance with the Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018.”,

(c) by the insertion of the following subsection after subsection (2):

“(2A) Where the Ombudsman has, as part of an investigation into a complaint, conducted an oral hearing in public under section 56(4A), the Ombudsman may identify the complainant and either the financial service provider or the pension provider concerned when publishing decisions, case studies or reports, as the case may be, under subsection (2).”,

(d) by the repeal of subsection (3), and

(e) in subsection (4), by the substitution of “any decision, case study or report, as the case may be, under subsection (2)” for “any report under subsection (2) or (3)”.

This is just to correct a typographical error in section 62 of the 2017 Act, which refers to a decision of the ombudsman under sections 61 or 62 in respect of a complaint rather than a decision of the ombudsman under sections 60 or 61 in respect of a complaint. The amendment rectifies the typographical error so section 62, on decisions of the ombudsman, refers to sections 60 and 61. Section 60 is related to complaints and redress in respect of financial service providers, while section 61 refers to complaints and redress in respect of pension providers. It is just a technical amendment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: While the amendment is technical, is it correct that section 19 deals with the publication of information relating to complaints?

Deputy Robert Troy: Yes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The issue I have, although the Minister of State will probably refer to fair procedure and all the rest, is that there is a huge difference between not naming Mrs. Doherty or whoever is taking a case that may not be upheld or is partially upheld and not naming the financial institution, such as Mars Capital. A David-and-Goliath battle that is being fought on this. I do not like the idea that the same privacy given to those making the complaints is being provided to the massive financial services firms, including vulture funds. That protects them from adverse findings made against them. I have concerns about this. The onus is on them, they are regulated, and, by law, they are supposed to do X, Y and Z. I am just concerned about this and wanted to put my concern on the record.

Deputy Robert Troy: My clear understanding is that, as the law stands, the only person who can opt to have the hearing in public is the person bringing the complaint. Therefore, it is not the FSPO who makes the decision to have the hearing in public. By virtue of the fact that the complainant is willing to have the hearing in public, he or she is giving implied permission to be known. If he or she wanted to have it in private, he or she could do so. It is his or her choice, nobody else's.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I hear that and it is to be welcomed, but does the section not deal with the power of the FSPO to publish the decisions and, therefore, give privacy or protection to the financial institutions under the guise of providing privacy to the individual making the complaint, whether he or she wants the hearing in public or not? None of us, or very few of us, will rock up to the hearing, but it is the publication that I am referring to. It relates to what I was saying earlier, namely that it is sometimes the case that only a few challenges to the system open up a Pandora's box. Where there is a case in which it is stated that AIB, Bank of Ireland, Mars Capital, Start Mortgages or another body did X, Y or Z, people start to pull out their contracts, be they in suitcases under the bed or elsewhere, and see whether X, Y or Z actually happened to them. When the name of the financial institution is not published, it becomes a bigger issue. I am not arguing that it all should happen but discretion should be applied by the FSPO. That was my point on the section.

Deputy Robert Troy: To confirm again, it is only where the hearing has been in public. The matter that will be published has already been heard in public. No new information is being published. The only person who can decide if they are willing to have the hearing in public is the person who is bringing the complaint. If someone is willing to have their complaint heard

in public, they will not have an issue with the findings being published.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Ombudsman be able to name the financial institution if the case against it was partially upheld?

Deputy Robert Troy: That is my understanding, yes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is that possible without the consent of the financial institution?

Deputy Robert Troy: The hearing would have been held in public anyway. It would be known.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is only known to people who attend the public hearing. There is a publication thereafter of the findings. There is also then a second thing.

I will go back to a point and finish on it. It is a David and Goliath scenario. People come to me all the time and I tell them the FSPO is a great system because people do not have to get lawyers or barristers. They can take out a pen and paper and write their story. They do not have to worry about how well it is written or whatever else and can send it to the FSPO. It will assist people in finding where the complaint is and all the rest. Some people will be gung-ho and will want to have that in public. However, most people will not. That is the reality. If their complaint is upheld, they would like the institution to be named. In that circumstance where they have not exposed themselves, their vulnerability and what they might believe to be their inadequacies, whether grounded or not, if they have decided not to hold the hearing in public, can the financial institution's name be published? I have argued that a discretion should be there.

Deputy Robert Troy: The FSPO publishes an overview of complaints every year, as the Deputy will be aware. Where there are numerous complaints against a particular financial institution, it is named. It is at the discretion of the FSPO. The Deputy is right. If the complaint is heard in private, it is not guaranteed that the name of the financial institution will be published. However, if there are continuous complaints against that financial institution, the FSPO will publish and name it. I will have to come back to the Deputy on the threshold required in respect of the number of complaints against a particular financial institution. If there is one complaint, we can take it that will not be published. However, if there are numerous complaints, the institution's name will be published. I need to come back to the Deputy on the threshold.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister of State.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 19 deleted.

Section 20 agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported with amendment and received for final consideration.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I agree with the question. I thank the Minister of State and his predecessor for engaging to deal with the loophole in this legislation. I also thank the officials from the Department and the FSPO for their input.

Question put and agreed to.

Oideachas trí Mheán na Gaeilge: Tairiscint (Atógáil) [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]

Thairg an Teachta Aengus Ó Snodaigh an tairiscint seo a leanas ar an 4 Márta 2025:

Déanann Dáil Éireann:

ceiliúradh ar ár dteanga náisiúnta agus ár bpríomhtheanga oifigiúil atá lárnach i saol sóisialta, cultúir agus eacnamaíoch an náisiúin uile, an Stáit, agus na Gaeltachta ach go háirithe, mar mheán bríomhar, nua-aimseartha agus síorathraitheach sa ghnáthshaol laethúil, foghlama, cúraim, tráchtála, ceartais, riaracháin, litríochta, ceoil, drámaíochta, agus ealaíon closamhairc, mar a léirítear sa rath atá bainte amach go hidirnáisiúnta ag *Kneecap* agus An Cailín Ciúin, chomh maith le bheith mar sheod ár n-oidhreacht Gaelach agus an teanga oifigiúil is ársa de chuid an Aontais Eorpaigh;

tréaslú le múinteoirí, tuismitheoirí, pobail scoile, daltaí, gníomhairí agus eagraíochtaí fud fad oileán na hÉireann as obair na gcapall a dhéanamh chun bua na Gaeilge agus an Ghaeloideachais a bhronnadh ar na glúnta óga, go minic i gcomhthéacsanna deacra, agus murach a gcuid oibre ní bheadh muid in ann a mhaíomh go bhfuil breis is 2 milliún cainteoir Gaeilge fud fad na tíre inniu;

aitheantas a thabhairt don tairbhe a bhaineann leis an nGaeloideachas, go hacadúil agus i dtéarmaí forbartha cognaíche agus scileanna riachtanach do slite beatha agus deiseanna eile fadsaoil, agus cuirimid fáilte roimh an taighde leanúnach san earnáil seo, ag nótaíl an staidéar de chuid Ollscoil Mhiami le déanaí a d'aithin buntáistí an ilteangachais do leanaí le huathachas agus leanaí eile;

ceart gach leanbh chun tumoideachais i scoil lán-Ghaeilge a dhearbhu;

na cuspóirí náisiúnta seo a leanas a ghlacadh dár gcóras oideachais maidir leis an teanga náisiúnta:

— rochtain a chinntiú do chách ar ár dteanga náisiúnta, agus don saibhreas litríochta, cultúir agus staire a bhaineann léi;

— úsáid na Gaeilge a mhéadú fud fad na tíre, agus go háirithe mar theanga an phobail sa Ghaeltacht, i mBailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta, agus i Líonraí Gaeilge;

— an t-éileamh don Ghaeloideachas ó tuismitheoirí agus ó leanaí ní amháin a shásamh ach a fhás; agus

— líon agus caighdeán cainteora Gaeilge a oiliúint atá leordhóthanach ar a laghad chun spriocanna agus dualgais eile reachtúil a shásamh, lena n-áirítear, ach ní amháin, an gá le freastal ar phobail Ghaeltachta agus ar chainteoirí Gaeilge lasmuigh di ina dteanga féin, an dualgas i leith an sprioc bhaint amach go mbeidh 20% d'earcaithe státseirbhíse inniúil sa Ghaeilge ó 2030, agus an dualgas múinteoirí a sholáthar ar ardchaighdeán don oideachas Gaeilge i scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus Béarla;

a nótáil le himní:

— gur thit líon na ndaltaí ag freastal ar scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge sa tréimhse ina raibh sé geallta sa chlár Rialtais deireanach obair i dtreo an líon sin a dhúbailt;

— go bhfuil aon chontae déag sa Stát seo gan Gaelcholáiste ar bith;

— go bhfágfar roinnt daltaí gan an deis tairbhe iomlán a fháil as oideachas trí Ghaeilge toisc teip ar an ngeallúint iompar scoile a sholáthar don scoil lán-Ghaeilge is gaire;

— go bhfuil tionchar díréireach ag ganntanas múinteora ar an earnáil lán-Ghaeilge agus suirbhé 2023 de chuid Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann tar éis aithint nach raibh 50% de Ghael-scoileanna agus Scoileanna Ghaeltachta in ann folúntais fadtéarmach múinteora a líonadh i gcomparáid le 28% de na bunscoileanna Béarla;

— go raibh ar 80% de na hiarbhunscoileanna Gaeltachta a ghlac páirt i suirbhé Tuairisc. ie múinteoirí nach raibh líofa sa Ghaeilge a earcú agus theip ar aon trian stádas a bhaint amach mar Scoil Ghaeltachta;

— nach bhfuil foirgneamh buan ag 39% de Ghaelscoileanna;

— nach bhfuil ach teaghlach amháin as gach cúig sa Ghaeltacht ag tógáil a gclann trí Ghaeilge;

— go bhfuil líon na gcainteoirí laethúla Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht tar éis titim don dara daonáireamh as a chéile;

— gur léirigh tuairisc de chuid ArdChigire na Roinne Oideachais i 2022 go raibh droch-chomparáid le déanamh idir múineadh na Gaeilge agus múineadh na gcroí-ábhar eile;

— nach bhfuil ach leath de na luathbhlianta pobalmhaoinithe pobal-mhaoinithe Gaeltachta ina naíonraí; agus

— nach féidir le scoileanna a dhéanann freastal ar phobail Ghaeltachta lonnaithe lasmuigh dá teorannacha, lena n-áirítear i mBailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta, cur isteach ar stádas mar Scoil Ghaeltachta;

aiféal a chur in iúl:

— faoi chinneadh Fhianna Fáil, Fhine Gael, agus na Neamhspleácháigh Réigiúnacha ina gClár Rialtais 2025 fáil réidh leis na geallúintí rithabhachtacha i gClár Rialtais 2020 maidir leis an nGaeilge sa chóras oideachais, lena n-áirítear i measc rudaí eile:

— “an bhéim ar Ghaeilge labhartha a mhéadú sa seomra ranga”;

— “oibriú i dtreo líon na ndaoine óga atá i scoileanna Gaeilge a dhúbailt faoi láthair”;

— “beartas cuimsitheach a sholáthar don Ghaeilge ó oideachas réamscoile go hoidéachas múinteoirí do gach scoil”;

— “tacaíochtaí a mhéadú don Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta”; agus

— “an clár ina múintear Corpoideachas trí Ghaeilge a leathnú do gach bunscoil agus

leanúint ar aghaidh ag méadú líon na n-iarbhunscoileanna sa chlár seo”;

— maidir le teip an Rialtais deireanaigh geallúint an iar-Aire Stáit Patrick O’Donovan, mar a bhí, a chomhlíonadh chun Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge a thabhairt ar ais do theaghlaigh Gaeltachta;

— in ainneoin go roghnódh 23% de thuismitheoirí Gaelscoil áitiúil, go gciallaíonn an easpa soláthair faoi riar Rialtais i ndiaidh a chéile nach bhfuil ach 8% de dhaltáí bunscoile agus 3% ag an iarbhunscoil ag freastal ar scoil lán-Ghaeilge, agus titim i líon na ndaltaí ag fáil oideachas trí Ghaeilge ó timpeall 50,000 sa bhunscoil go dtí thar ar 17,000 ag an iarbhunscoil, agus níos lú ná 3,000 sa tríú leibhéal ag staidéar trí Ghaeilge;

— go dtugann an próiseas reatha chun patrúin nua iarbhunscoile a roghnú cosc buan i ndáiríre do mhóramh i gceantar ar son scoil Béarla, fiú áit ina bhfuil scoileanna Béarla áitiúla ann cheana féin agus gan rogha ar bith lán-Ghaeilge;

— faoin bpléascadh ar líon na ndíolúintí do dhaltáí ó staidéar na Gaeilge ó 2.5% sa bhliain 1999 go dtí breis is 13% inniu, a lán acu ag déanamh staidéar ar theanga iasachta go dtí an Ardteistiméireacht gan fadhb, pléascadh atá imithe in olcas toisc critéir curtha i bhfeidhm ag an Aire Norma Foley atá, de réir cur síos a thug Cumann Disléicse na hÉireann, “lochtach go mór agus... nach réitíonn ar chor ar bith leis an gcuid eile den phróiseas bailiúcháin fianaise”;

— faoi theip Airí Oideachais i ndiaidh a chéile Alt 9(a) d’Acht Oideachais 1998 a chinntiú ionas go gcuirfeadh scoileanna oideachas ‘ar fáil do mhic léinn ar oideachas é is cuí dá gcumais agus dá riachtanais’, agus cinneadh glactha acu ina áit chun daltaí a choimeád amach ó foghlaim na Gaeilge seachas foghlaim a chur in oiriúint dá riachtanais, agus go minic ag cur iachall ar dhaltáí roghnú idir croí-ábhar na Gaeilge agus rochtain ar shainteagasc;

— faoin easpa scrúdú cainte agus gur fuarthas réidh leis an mBonnleibhéal don Teastas Sóisearach;

— gur imigh an Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta 2017-2022 in éag gan iarbheart;

— faoi chinneadh an Aire Helen McEntee le déanaí chun leasuithe cúlchéimnitheacha do Ghaeilge na hArdteiste a bhrú chun cinn tar éis drochphróiseas comhairliúcháin i gcoinne comhairle ó mhúinteoirí, agus scrúdú níos deacra á mbagairt ar dhaltáí lán-Ghaeilge gan aon bhuntáiste;

— faoin dtitim 30% i líon na mná tí ag óstú daltaí ag freastal ar choláistí samhraidh sa Ghaeltacht ó 2017, agus na costais a bhíonn iomarcach go minic ar dhaltáí;

— faoi thionchar na mblianta fada dí-infheistíochta agus na gciorruithe fógartha le déanaí ag Foras na Gaeilge ar an oideachas lán-Ghaeilge agus ar dheiseanna seach-churaclaim;

— maidir leis an dteip iomlán atá déanta chun deiseanna lán-Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ag an tríú-leibhéal, diúltú an iar-Aire Simon Harris, mar a bhí, roimh leasuithe chun ról níos mó a thabhairt don Údarás um ArdOideachas ina leith, agus nach bhfuil an oideachas tríú-leibhéal san áireamh i bhforbairt an Pholasaí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht;

— gur theip an gheallúint réamh-thoghcháin maidir le Gaelcholáiste do Bhaile Átha

Cliath 2, 4, 6 agus 8;

— maidir leis an iachall curtha ar dhaltaí Gaeloideachais iompú ar an mBéarla agus iad ag bogadh ar aghaidh tríd na leibhéil oideachais réamhscoile, bunscoile, iarbhunscoile agus tríú-leibhéal;

— go bhfuil sé mar thoradh ar an ngearradh siar de shíor atá déanta ar uaireanta teagaisc na Gaeilge i mbunscoileanna Béarla nach bhfuil fiú an íosmhéid 1,250 uair atá riachtanach trasna an bhunscolaíocht agus iarbhunscolaíocht chun bunchumas a bhaint amach i dteanga de réir caighdeáin idirnáisiúnta;

— gurb í an Ghaeilge an t-aon chroí-ábhar nach ndéantar dul chun cinn daltaí inti a thástáil i ngach bunscoil de réir scrúduithe Dhroim Chonrach de chuid an Fhoras Taighde ar Oideachas; agus

— faoi iarrachtaí na Roinne Oideachais chun coincheap an Aonaid Gaeilge, atá fós neamhshainithe, laistigh de scoil agus timpeallacht Béarla a chur chun cinn in áit Gaelcholáiste tumoideachais ann féin a sholáthar áit ina bhfuil éileamh; agus

éileamh ar an Rialtas:

— na geallúintí thúsluaite nár baineadh amach ó 2020 a ghlacadh ar ais sa Chlár Rialtais nua, agus cloí leis an ngeallúint maidir le Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge a thabhairt ar ais;

— Bille a thionscnú chun an ceart dearbhaithe agus na spriocanna glactha sa rún seo a chinntiú sa dlí;

— pleanáil chun 50% den daonra a bhaint amach in ann an Ghaeilge a labhairt faoi 2050, agus spriocanna céimnitheacha a shocrú chun freastal ar scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge a mhéadú, lena n-áirítear chun soláthar a dhúbailt laistigh de deich mbliana agus aon cheathrú den soláthar bunscoile a bhaint amach faoi 2045;

— an cur chuige bunleibhéil a thugann tús áite do rogha scoile lán-Ghaeilge a sholáthar áit nach ann dó agus scoil nua á bhunú a leathnú don dara leibhéal;

— tús áite a thabhairt do Ghaelscoil a sholáthar do cheantar Bhaile Átha Cliath 10 agus 12, agus soláthar Gaelcholáistí do cheantar Bhaile Átha Cliath 2, 4, 6 agus 8, do cheantar Bhaile Átha Cliath 9; do cheantar Bhaile Átha Cliath 18 agus Choill na Silíní; do Chaisleán an Bharraigh, Co. Mhaigh Eo; do Chloch na Coillte, Co. Chorcaí; do Chill Dhéagláin, Co. na Mí; don Tulach Mhór, Co. Uíbh Fháilí; agus do Sord/Mullach Íde i gContae Bhaile Átha Cliath, agus é mar sprioc go mbeadh Gaelcholáiste amháin ar a laghad i ngach contae faoi 2045;

— a ghealltanais a chomhlíonadh chun iompar scoile a sholáthar don scoil lán-Ghaeilge is gaire;

— cur chuige iomlán nua ionchuimsitheach d'fhoghlaim an dara teanga, oiriúnaithe do riachtanais gach dalta, a chur in áit an chreat reatha do dhíolúintí, i gcomhairle le daltaí reatha agus iarscoláirí, tuismitheoirí, oidí, saineolaithe, agus grúpaí a dhéanann ionadaíocht thar cheann daoine le deacrachtaí foghlama, sainriachtanais oideachasúla, agus daltaí ini-mirceacha;

— obair chun a chinntiú go bhfuil áiseanna agus leabhair suas chun dáta agus tarraingteach ar fáil do scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge ar chomhchaighdeán leo siúd atá ar fáil do scoileanna Béarla;

— cinntiú go gcuimsítear riachtanais ar leith na ndaltaí lán-Ghaeilge agus Gaeltachta nárbh iad an Ghaeilge nó an Béarla an príomhtheanga acu, nó a chuir tús lena gcuid oideachas lasmuigh den Stát, i bpolasaithe an todhchaí a bhaineann le huaireanta taca teanga agus staidéar na Gaeilge;

— ról ar leith an tumoideachais luathbhlianta lán-Ghaeilge a aithint agus ciste a chruthú chun tacú le leathnú na seirbhísí luathbhlianta lán-Ghaeilge fud fad na tíre, agus é mar sprioc go mbeadh 100% den soláthar sa Ghaeltacht lán-Ghaeilge;

— ligint don freastal réamhscoile lán-Ghaeilge a bheth mar chúinse iontrála Gaelscoile;

— rannóg a bhunú sa Roinn Oideachais chun scoileanna Béarla a éascú ag aistriú isteach i scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge chun freastal ar an éileamh reatha;

— Ciste Caipitil ar leith a chruthú do Scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge chun dul i ngleic leis an gcóiríocht neamhchuí a ghoilleann go díreireach ar Ghaelscoileanna agus ae Ghaelcholáistí;

— na liúntais múinteora Gaeltachta agus lán-Ghaeilge a thabhairt ar ais;

— straitéis náisiúnta a fhorbairt chun feabhas a chur ar an gcaighdeán teagaisc agus líon na múinteoirí atá inniúil chun an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh agus chun múineadh i scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge mar chuid de thobar comónta uile-Éireann, deiseanna a mhéadú don forbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach, agus painéal ar leith a bhunú do mhúinteoirí agus múinteoirí ionaid do scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge;

— athbhreithniú cuimsitheach a chur i gcríoch ar ról na Gaeilge sna hinstitiúidí oiliúna do mhúinteoirí chun a chinntiú go bhfuil siad oiriúnach dá bhfeidhm cumas sa Ghaeilge a chothú, maoiniú cuí a sholáthar do na hinstitiúidí seo, go háirithe iad siúd a chuireann Máistir Gairmiúil san Oideachas, agus tús a chur leis an obair chun Coláiste Oideachais ar leith lán-Ghaeilge a bhunú sa Ghaeltacht;

— uaireanta teagaisc reatha a chosaint don Ghaeilge i mbunscoileanna, agus féachaint ar bhealaí na huaireanta seo a mhéadú chun oideachas leordhóthanach sa teanga a sholáthar chun cainteoirí a chruthú de réir an dea-chleachtais idirnáisiúnta, lena n-áirítear tríd an pháirt-thumoideachas;

— scrúdú Gaeilge Dhroim Chonrach a chinntiú mar thástáil caighdeánach riachtanach i ngach bunscoil;

— moltaí an Chomhchoiste Oireachtas Gaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm maidir leis an sonraíocht T1/T2 Ardteistiméireachta Gaeilge, scrúdú cainte a chinntiú de luach 40% ar a laghad agus rogha Bonnleibhéal a thabhairt ar ais do Ghaeilge an Teastas Shóisearaigh, agus scrúduithe a chaighdeánú de réir leibhéil faoin gComhchreat Tagartha Eorpach um Theangacha;

— Polasaí ar lean don Oideachas Gaeltachta a fhorbairt, agus é mar sprioc go mbeidh glacadh 100% le stádas mar Scoil Ghaeltachta sa Ghaeltacht, agus a leathnú chun scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht a chuimsiú a dhéanann freastal ar phobail Gael-

tachta agus Líonraí Gaeilge;

— Pacáiste Tarrthála a sholáthar d’earnáil na gColáiste Samhraidh Gaeltachta agus spríoc fadtéarmach a shocrú faoina mbeidh deis ag gach dalta Gaeloideachais freastal;

— ranganna Gaeilge saor in aisce a chur ar fáil d’fhoghlaimeoirí ag leibhéil tosaitheora agus idirmheánach i ngach contae tríd na Boird Oideachais agus Oiliúna; and

— an tríú-leibhéal a chuimsiú mar chuid den Pholasáí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht, dualgas a chur ar an Údarás um ArdOideachas chun tabhairt faoin bpleanáil maidir le deiseanna an Ghaeilge a staidéar agus staidéar trí Ghaeilge ag an tríú-leibhéal a phleanáil, agus roghanna a scrúdú maidir le ollscoil lán-Ghaeilge a bhunú.

Atógadh an díospóireacht ar leasú Uimh. 1:

Go scriosfar na focail go léir tar éis “Dáil Éireann” agus go gcuirfear an méid seo a leanas ina n-ionad:

“a thabhairt dá haire go bhfuil an Rialtas tiomanta do chosaint agus do chur chun cinn na Gaeilge, agus go bhfuil geallta ag an Rialtas deiseanna a leathnú do scoláirí freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna agus ar Ghaelcholáistí; go n-aithníonn sí:

— go raibh tionchar dearfach suntasach buan ag an bPolasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta ar scoileanna agus ar phobail Gaeltachta, rud a d’fhág go bhfuil méadú tagtha ar úsáid na Gaeilge labhartha i scoileanna Gaeltachta agus athnuachan ar mhórtas pobail sa teanga;

— go bhfuil €405 milliún infheistithe ag an Rialtas ar thograí caipitil i scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus Gaeltachta ó 2020 go 2024;

— go bhfuil infheistíocht shuntasach bhreise déanta ag an Rialtas sa Ghaeilge sa chóras oideachais ag an mbunleibhéal agus ag an iar-bhunleibhéal, lena n-áirítear sna réimsí a bhaineann le hathchóiriú curaclaim, soláthar tacaíochtaí foghlama gairmiúla do mhúinteoirí, agus oiliúint tosaigh múinteoirí;

— a bhuí leis an maoiniú méadaithe atá curtha ar fáil ag an Rialtas, go bhfuil an Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) in ann tacaíocht luachmhar a chur ar fáil do scoileanna, lena n-áirítear acmhainní nuálacha, tarraingteacha teagaisc agus foghlama a fhorbairt don Ghaeilge agus trí Ghaeilge, agus mol digiteach d’acmhainní Gaeilge;

— go bhfuil rannán ar leith – an GaelAonad – bunaithe in Oide chun tacaíocht foghlama ghairmiúil a chur ar fáil maidir le múineadh na Gaeilge agus teagasc trí Ghaeilge, rud a rachaidh go mór chun sochair do mhúinteoirí agus do cheannairí scoile sa réimse seo;

— gur aithníodh san athbhreithniú a críochnaíodh le déanaí ar Scéim Iompair Scoile na Roinne Oideachais go dtacaíonn agus go n-éascaíonn an scéim rochtain do pháistí ar an suíomh oideachais lán-Ghaeilge is gaire dóibh;

— trí thionscadail ar nós an Tionscadail um Fhoghlaim Chomhtháite Ábhar agus Foghlama (FCÁT) agus Gaelbhhratach, go bhfuil deiseanna méadaithe ag na mílte

daltaí agus scoláirí ar fud na tíre dul i ngleic leis an nGaeilge ar bhealach comhtháite i rith an lae scoile;

— toisc go bhfuil an Ghaeilge ina croí-ábhar do dhaltaí agus do scoláirí i mbunscoileanna agus in iar-bhunscoileanna, go gcinntítear go mbíonn deis ag gach páiste agus duine óg dul i ngleic leis an teanga mar chuid dá n-oideachas; agus

— gur thug beagnach 1.9 milliún duine le fios sa daonáireamh is déanaí go raibh siad in ann Gaeilge a labhairt, méadú 6% ón daonáireamh roimhe sin; agus

go n-iarrann sí ar an Rialtas:

— plean náisiúnta do sholáthar na Gaeilge i bhfoghlaím agus cúram na luathluath-óige agus i gcúram leanaí d'aois scoile a fhoilsiú;

— plean gnímh don Ghaeilge i scoileanna meán-Béarla a fhoilsiú;

— comhairliúchán a reáchtáil chun bonn eolais a chur faoi fhorbairt an chéad leagan eile den Pholasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta;

— a chinntiú go nglacfar cur chuige comhtháite agus nuálach chun tacú le pobail Ghaeltachta lena n-áirítear soláthar oideachais trí mheán na Gaeilge i mBailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta;

— polasaí don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht a fhoilsiú;

— tascfhórsa a bhunú a mbeidh sé de chúram air contanam soláthair don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge a dhearadh agus múnlaí an tsoláthair a bhfuil ann a athshamhlú;

— a chinntiú go dtarlóidh an fás atá beartaithe san oideachas lán-Ghaeilge ar bhealach atá ailínithe go hiomlán le riachtanais fhoriomlána an chórais scoile agus na scoláirí a bhfreastalaíonn sé orthu, lena n-áirítear Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais, cleachtas ardchaighdeán i dteagasc na Gaeilge i ngach suíomh scoile, agus cur chuige lán-ionchuimsitheach i leith theagasc na Gaeilge;

— polasaí comhtháite don Ghaeilge sa chóras oideachais a fhoilsiú, ag cur san áireamh na polasaithe don oideachas Gaeltachta, don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge agus do mhúineadh na Gaeilge i scoileanna meán-Bhéarla;

— suirbhé rogha tuismitheoirí a dhéanamh chun éileamh ar bhunoideachas lán-Ghaeilge a aithint;

— tacú le hiar-bhunscoileanna múinteoirí a roinnt le haghaidh múineadh na Gaeilge agus le haghaidh ábhair a mhúineadh trí mheán na Gaeilge;

— oibriú i dtreo cur le líon na gelár Oiliúna Tosaigh Múinteoirí atá ar fáil trí Ghaeilge;

— tús áite a thabhairt d'athfhorbairt thrialacha caighdeánaithe Gaeilge Dhroim Conrach do scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus do scoileanna meán-Bhéarla; agus

— leanúint le maoiniú a chur ar fáil do COGG chun forbairt bhreise acmhainní Gaeilge a éascú, lena n-áirítear acmhainní chun tacú le múineadh na Gaeilge i scoile-

anna meán-Bhéarla.”.

- (Aire Stáit ag an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the guaranteeing the right to education in Irish for all. On Tuesday, 4 March 2025, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stاون</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	

<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jen- nifer.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		

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<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

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".

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 71; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	

<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	

5 March 2025

<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

8 o'clock

Waste in Public Expenditure: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Michael Collins on Wednesday, 5 March 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— overspending and waste within the public sector not only erodes trust in Government but also diverts resources from essential services; and

— as members of Dáil Éireann, and therefore custodians of the public purse, we have a duty to the people of Ireland to be committed to ensuring that taxpayers' money is managed responsibly, efficiently, and transparently;

acknowledges that there have been numerous ongoing failures by Governments past and present to properly manage cost control on Government funded projects, such as:

— the €808,000 Dáil printer scandal, where a printer was purchased but could not fit into the print room, leading to over €230,000 in modifications;

— the €725 million RTÉ bailout;

— the Office of Public Works (OPW) Government Buildings security hut at a final cost of €1.43 million;

— the National Children's Hospital overrun which has surpassed €2.5 billion;

— the €22 million on covid ventilators, that never worked, with another €50,000 spent on storing them;

— the €2.5 billion paid out in medical compensation over ten years, by the Health Service Executive;

— the OPW Leinster House bike shed at a cost of €336,000;

— the OPW Iveagh House refurbishment at a cost of €825,000;

— the National Transport Authority spend on Metro North, in the region of €300 million with nothing built;

— the OPW wall at the Workplace Relations Commission's Dublin headquarters escalated from an initial estimate of €200,000 to over €490,000;

— the electric buses, that sat idle for a year and a half because there were no chargers;

— the €7 million by the Arts Council on an Information Technology system that has never been used;

— the National Gallery scanner, purchased at €120,000, but never used because no suitable room was found; and

calls on the Government to:

— acknowledge that the historical record indicates that there is systemic dysfunction across Government in public expenditure control and oversight;

— establish within the first year of this current Government, an Independent Watchdog for Government Spending; “The Department of Efficiency and Reform”:

— to be an independent entity recruited from the private sector, dedicated to monitoring and improving public sector spending;

— to operate similar to Revenue Commissioners or Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), with a regional scope, assigned to geographic areas;

— to appoint commissioners through a competitive tender process targeting qualified private professionals, such as private sector efficiency consultants, solicitors, auditors, accountants, actuaries, tasked to address procurement and tendering processes to streamline and improve efficiency with implementation of timelines and goals for delivery of projects, with powers codified in legislation and authority similar to HIQA’s inspection framework;

— to conduct unannounced audits and inspections of public bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations and agencies;

— to investigate waste, inefficiencies, or mismanagement of funds; and

— to issue recommendations or corrective measures, escalating unresolved issues to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The following amendment No. 1 was moved by the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“notes that:

— the Government condemns the waste of any public money and notes that significant sums have been spent on providing better public services in recent years with the additional funding allocated towards improving and expanding the public services provided to our people;

— Government expenditure has provided, and continues to provide, a robust response to the challenges and needs facing the Irish nation, through continued investment, leadership, and value for money in the delivery of public services and important infrastructure projects with this investment making significant positive impacts, including:

— since 2021, completion of almost 53,000 new local authority scheme dwellings and delivery of hundreds of projects under the Rural and Urban Regeneration and Development Funds;

— significant reductions in outpatient waiting lists and improved health facilities, such as the National Forensic Mental Hospital in Portrane, hospital extensions and new primary care centres and community nursing units across the country;

— a reduction of approximately 48 per cent in the weighted average waiting time for outpatient appointments, down from just over 13 months in September 2021 to 6.8 months at the end of December 2024;

— cost barriers associated with healthcare being reduced through the abolition of inpatient charges, the introduction of the free contraception scheme, and the expansion of access to free general practitioner care to over 670,000 people, making healthcare more affordable for individuals and families;

— Ireland performing well on treatable and preventable causes of mortality and making significant improvements over the past decade, including reductions in the mortality rate for all cancers;

— Ireland being among a small group of seven European Union (EU) countries where life expectancy at birth is above 82;

— significant upgrades to Ireland's national road network and improvements to the public transport system, including BusConnects;

— high-quality cultural and sporting amenities delivered, such as the Sport Ireland Campus in Blanchardstown;

— continued progress under the National Broadband Plan, such that over 330,000 homes have now been passed and can avail of the high-quality connectivity offered by this plan;

— free schoolbooks Scheme; and

— early years childcare cost assistance to our families;

— all five budgets under the previous Government term successfully balanced the dual challenge of remaining responsive to economic and social developments, while seeking to ensure both value for money and fiscal sustainability of the public finances and this Government will continue to manage the demand for better public services and fiscal sustainability;

— Accounting Officers and accountable persons operate under high standards of administrative accountability that ensures value for money is achieved and that this accountability is fundamental to good governance, which in turn is vital to ensuring trust in public administration;

— in carrying out their duties, Accounting Officers and accountable persons operate within a range of frameworks continually developed by the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in areas such as corporate governance, risk management, internal audit, infrastructure investment, current expenditure appraisal, standards in public office, freedom of information and financial reporting and that these frameworks have ensured both accountability and value for money

through the huge expansion of public services over the last decade and have ensured that there has been and will continue to be a focus on value for money at the heart of expenditure decisions across the public sector;

—the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform will carry out a review of Public Financial Procedures with a view to further enhancing its accountability requirements in terms of providing value for money;

— over the last decade, the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform has led on the development of expenditure appraisal expertise across Government Departments through the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service, which provides a network of analysts across Government to review the effectiveness of policies and programmes and to make proposals for improvements;

— the Office of Government Procurement provides expert guidance and advice to public bodies as to the optimisation and efficiency of their procurement function, and to provide a clear understanding of compliance obligations with National and EU law in this complex function as well as continually working with stakeholders in the public and private sectors to develop more efficient and effective procurement procedures;

— the size of Ireland’s public service and expenditure is lean and efficient and provides value for money when compared to many other states with a similar economic and social model;

further notes that:

— under Budget 2025, the Government continues to invest in important public services and provides value for money, including through the expansion of health services, increases in core social welfare allowances; increased investment in housing, expansion of the School Meals Scheme;

— investment in infrastructure is a critical component in supporting Ireland’s growth and in delivering better, fit-for-purpose public services, and the increased capital spend in Budget 2025 continues the delivery of a NDP that is providing the vital infrastructure we need to support our future economic and social requirements, as well as our climate change commitments;

— the delivery of capital projects has been challenged by a number of significant factors in recent years, including the continued impact of construction inflation on projects, labour shortages, particularly in the construction sector, and the ongoing delays in getting projects through the planning system;

— the Government has approved a number of priority actions to improve delivery of NDP projects, including the introduction of the Infrastructure Guidelines in December 2023, to reduce the administrative burden on Departments charged with infrastructure delivery, the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform also chairs the reconstituted Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board, which is charged with driving the delivery of the NDP, and these actions will boost the delivery of critical infrastructure in a sustainable and cost-effective manner, such as approximately 300 school building projects annually and BusConnects;

— the Office of Public Works has introduced new governance measures and revisions to project approval thresholds to ensure the Management Board has oversight and approval of all works above €200,000;

— the expansion of the mandatory Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies over the last decade and that it stipulates that ‘State bodies should serve the interests of Government as a shareholder, the taxpayer and all other stakeholders, and pursue value for money in their endeavours’, and that the Code is a critical framework for the application of best practice in corporate governance of both non-commercial and commercial public bodies under the aegis of Government Departments;

— international private sector internal audit standards are in effect across the Civil and Public Service bodies through their adoption of the Institute of Internal Auditors’ ,’2024 Global Internal Audit standards’ that came into effect worldwide on 9th January, 2025, and that the adoption of these standards ensures that Central Government’s internal audit framework is the same framework as for private sector entities, albeit with some clarifications pertaining to the different public sector governance arrangements; and

— the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform is currently rolling out a major financial reporting reform that is improving and modernising Central Government’s system of administrative accountability; and

acknowledges:

— the diligent, tenacious, and comprehensive investigations by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) and his staff in fulfilling his Constitutional duties and notes the high-quality of his annual Report on the Public Services based on his office’s investigations into economy and efficiency of public expenditure under section 9 of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993; and

— taking into account the governance frameworks already in place, ongoing work to make improvements in these frameworks, and the constitutionally independent oversight provided by the OCAG, there is no requirement for the establishment of a new body that would duplicate this work and that also would not have the same constitutionally independent and impartial role of the OCAG. “.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “notes that:” and substitute the following:

“— there needs to be a disciplinary process for senior civil servants for instances of repeated waste of public funds;

— accountability needs to be written into the contracts of senior civil servants; and

— there should be a Minister of State for Accountability, nominated and located within the Department of the Taoiseach, to track live procurement and infrastructural projects to ensure they do not go over budget and are delivered on time, to report to the Taoiseach on a weekly basis in terms of accountability.”.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to the Aontú amendment to the Government amendment to the motion regarding waste in public expenditure. Today, on the question, “That the amendment to the amendment be made”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment to amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 56; Níl, 102; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Aird, William.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	
<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	
<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	
<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	<i>Connolly, John.</i>	
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	
<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Cummins, John.</i>	
<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	
<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	
<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	

<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	
<i>Newsome Drennan, Natasha.</i>	<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	
<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	
<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	
<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	
	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
	<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	
	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	
	<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	
	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
	<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	
	<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	
	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	
	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
	<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
	<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	
	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
	<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>	

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	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
	<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>	
	<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>	
	<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	
	<i>Roche, Peter.</i>	
	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>	
	<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
	<i>Ward, Barry.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Peadar Tóibín and Paul Lawless; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment to amendment declared lost.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 90; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	

<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i>	

<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		

<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Collins and Richard O'Donoghue.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to".

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 90; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	

<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	

<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Collins and Richard O'Donoghue.

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 8.27 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Déardaoin, an 6 Márta 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.27 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 6 March 2025.