



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 3 Aibreán 2025

Thursday, 3 April 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

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

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): For the record, Questions Nos. 1, 2 and 6 will be grouped. I call Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: My understanding is that priority questions cannot be grouped.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yes, priority questions cannot be grouped.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): I have been informed that they can be grouped.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have never seen that in the history of the Dáil. Priority questions are-----.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): They can be grouped with other priority questions but not with other oral questions.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I ask that they not be grouped, with the indulgence of the Chair. It is not fair for them to be grouped. Question No. 1 relates to a major issue.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I apologise for being a few minutes late. I was not aware of the change in the time. I did not mean to keep the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach or colleagues waiting. I am in his hands with regard to this. Important announcements were made last night. I am happy to answer questions in whatever way the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach sees fit or whatever way can be agreed by the Dáil. I have been briefed to the effect that these questions are grouped but I am happy, given the seriousness of the issues involved, to handle them in any way the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach feels is appropriate.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I propose that we not group them

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): I am happy with that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for that.

Trade Relations

1. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance to outline the potential impact on employment and tax revenues from possible US tariffs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16502/25]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This question relates to the potential impact on unemployment and tax revenues as a result of the announcement of US tariffs. We heard what Donald Trump had to say last night, with 20% tariffs being imposed on this State. Pharmaceuticals will not be the subject of a tariff, although we hold our breath in relation to that. We have the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and Department of Finance modelling on 25% tariffs and a reciprocal tariff from the EU and their impact in the context of job losses and potential income from taxation. Has any early work been done on what these tariffs will look like when it comes jobs? In all circumstances, the analysis shows that employment will continue to grow, even on the basis of the 25% tariff scenario. The modelling to which I refer estimates that the impact on the public finances would be approximately €500 million. Given what was announced yesterday, it appears that the impact will be somewhat less. Will the Minister elaborate on this matter?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Before I get into the important specifics the Deputy raised, I will reflect on the announcements relating to the tariffs introduced by the Trump Administration. Free trade has been at the centre of the Irish and European economies for many decades. However, it is clear that the global economic landscape has changed. Tariffs are being imposed in respect of trade into the United States at a level that is historically high. We are moving into a trading and economic world that will change. This will have consequences for the Irish economy and the global economy.

To better calibrate how we respond to these unprecedented challenges, we must first aim to understand their potential impact. To that end, my Department and the ESRI recently published an analytical paper where several tariff scenarios were modelled. The analysis showed that modified domestic demand, which is the most meaningful way of measuring our economy from a jobs and income point of view, would be 1% to 2% below its non-tariff baseline over the medium term, depending on the extent of tariffs.

9 o'clock

The potential impact on GDP is greater, between 2.5% and almost 4%, although changes in GDP have less impact on the ground. From an employment perspective, we assume it would be around 2% to 3% lower compared with the non-tariff baseline. In that context, we are talking about 55,000 to 85,000 jobs that either might not be created or could be lost or affected due to these measures.

To go back to Deputy Doherty's specific question, given that the position relating to tariffs only became clear last night, the global response is not yet clear. What we will do is begin modelling in respect of what we know. The Government will aim to publish that modelling in the annual progress report that is due to take the place of the stability programme update. We are aiming to do that in the coming weeks.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Given that the ESRI and the Department of Finance have worked out these models, I put it to the Minister that we should very quickly have information on the 20% scenario outlined by the Trump Administration last night. The analysis done by the ESRI and the Department of Finance examined the potential impact of a US Administration tariff and gave us the numbers for it. They also looked at the impact of countermeasures from Europe. These are still unknown, but different scenarios were assumed. In all circumstances, in the context of jobs, public finances, tax, the economy and businesses, it was shown that countermeasures from the European Union would have a significant impact on Ireland.

On modified domestic demand, the analysis carried out was based on a 25% tariff. The Minister referred to it decreasing by 1% to 2% from the baseline. Am I right in saying that we would still see growth right throughout the four-year period that has been assessed? In other words, modified domestic demand and GDP will continue to grow in all scenarios. Indeed, employment would also continue to grow, despite it being reduction from what would be the case in a non-tariff scenario.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Based on the papers published and the analysis we have done, the answer, which is subject to a number of assumptions, is that the Deputy is broadly correct. The issue is what happens to the assumptions. The assumptions in the paper in question assume that investment levels will be stable in our economy. The question is whether the assumption relating to the decisions made, their impact on the global economy and the ability of American companies to invest elsewhere will hold in the time ahead. The second assumption in the paper relates to the fact that we could not at that point identify the impact of sectoral-specific measures and what that impact might do to individual companies or groups of companies in our economy. I have been making the point that on the basis of what we know, we are moving into a scenario of lower growth and lower employment growth. However, I have been equally clear that there are other scenarios that could effect that. This is why, in the time ahead, it is critical that we look at how we can negotiate with the US to see if we can avoid the darker and more damaging scenarios coming to pass.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The key here is negotiation and de-escalation. We need to get to a point where sensible and cool heads prevail. What happened yesterday was an act of economic sabotage by the US Administration in respect of its own economy. What was done will push up prices for American consumers. Obviously, the analysis was based on a 25% tariff, which was more severe than what we have seen, particularly as a tariff of 20% on pharma has been excluded at this point. This would probably allow for GDP growth of approximately 2% to 2.5% in the next number of years, which would be positive. Would that be correct?

In the context of EU countermeasures, I am deeply concerned that we could have a scenario where, as the ESRI and the Department have indicated, countermeasures will impact on jobs, economic growth and the public finances and will obviously push up prices for consumers. What is the Minister's concern in this regard and in the context of the fact that EU countermeasures could give rise to a proper trade war? The US Administration has adopted a unilateral position. We need to get into dialogue with the US Administration in order to try to de-escalate matters and get it to reverse its decision. We have to be careful that we do not step into a trade war.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am struck by the value the Deputy places on negotiation and dialogue, particularly as his party made clear it would not go to the Oval Office. The Deputy's party leader and the First Minister of Northern Ireland indicated they would not engage with the

United States across the St. Patrick's Day programme.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Not true.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: That is the case.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: She was on a trade mission there the week before.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Given that his party made clear it would not engage politically with the Trump Administration, why is he advocating the benefits of negotiation? Why is he making the case for the benefits of dialogue? I welcome the fact he was doing so, but how is that consistent with the announcement his party made, to some fanfare and prominence, that it did not want to engage with the political Administration and leadership of the United States of America? With regard to the narrative he is developing here, if he does want to see negotiation happening, how does he believe that negotiation could be successful in the absence of the European Union being willing to either consider or implement measures to respond to what the US has done?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is interesting that the Minister would not answer my question on support for tariffs that will lead to prices for Irish consumers increasing. For his information, Michelle O'Neill was on a trade mission to the US in the week before St. Patrick's Day. We will continue to use our influence. If Deputy Donohoe, as Minister for Finance, wants to score political points on this serious issue, that is disappointing, particularly in light of what we are facing.

Trade Relations

2. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the mitigation measures his Department will implement given the recent ESRI working paper on the impact of deglobalisation and protectionism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16440/25]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Given the very serious announcements last night, what mitigation measures are going to be put in place?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The response the Government will put in place has three different levels. First is the engagement we will have with the institutions of the European Union and other governments in the EU to look at what the response should be. We believe any response should be proportionate and needs to create the incentives and environment within which negotiation can take place. Second, through IDA Ireland, we will engage with companies that will be affected by what has happened. It is important to be open and to continue to be honest by saying that what we need to do now is to focus our efforts on how we can identify new markets. We must also look at how we can engage and support our companies in engaging with other trading partners with a view to increasing trade and investment. Third, as we take those two steps, we will have to examine whether there is an opportunity for us to engage with the United States of America through the EU in all this. I hope and believe such an opportunity will develop.

The measures put in place by President Trump will not only affect the economy of the world, they will also have a significant effect on the economy of America. The President of the European Commission has been very clear in outlining that we want to negotiate and see if we

can find a scenario in which jobs and incomes are not further affected and the progress we have made with inflation will not be jeopardised. Those are the three different layers of our response, namely engagement with the EU, engagement with companies here in Ireland that are going to be affected and then, I hope, an opportunity for negotiation develop with the United States.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I agree that the priority must be to minimise the damage. A major amount of work will have to be done on that. In respect of support measures for impacted workers and sectors, will anything be done domestically? Will anything be done at EU level? I previously suggested that the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund should be repurposed to support specific sectors during this crisis.

In the context of the differential in tariffs between the UK and the EU, of 10% and 20%, respectively, has modelling been done on the potential impacts of this and on the issues that could arise in terms of the effect on cross-Border trade? Is that a particular risk that Ireland faces? What are the Minister’s views on that? What can be done about it?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy referred to three issues. First, the impact on our economy of the response to what has happened in the US was modelled in the paper published by the Department of Finance and the ESRI. The response of the EU to this will become clearer in the time ahead and we will aim to influence that and, of course, be part of it.

Second, the Deputy is correct; the issue of the implication of all of this across trade flows on our island is an important matter. The Government, through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, will now have to engage closely with colleagues in the Government of the United Kingdom and obviously within the Northern Ireland Executive as well to look at how we can understand and deal with this issue.

Finally, in terms of how we then deal with the issue of supports for companies that are affected, tomorrow, the Tánaiste has convened a trade forum where the different representative bodies of the employers that are affected by this will be present. We will look, through the Industrial Development Authority, IDA, and Enterprise Ireland, EI, at what response can be put in place but our first priority at the moment is to look at negotiation and see whether we can avoid the worst becoming permanent.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: With regard to the EU response, I agree that it needs to be level-headed, and that negotiation is the way to go. I also accept as part of that there is the potential for further actions by the EU. It is not realistic to think that that will not be on the table if negotiations do not work. There is a particular risk for Ireland in terms of the differential trade tariffs between the EU and the UK. We could have a scenario where the EU is taking retaliatory action and the UK is not, which could make that gap even more severe. Is that particular issue being worked on in terms of our interactions with the EU and how that could affect Ireland more than other EU member states?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Again, that is an important point. Every country is affected in different ways by the changes that have happened. However, there is a particular uniqueness to what it could mean due to the vital arrangements and agreements that are in place to recognise and protect the all-island economy in the context of dealing with Brexit. We understood this was a risk. It is one that has already been raised with the European Commission. It is an issue, of course, on which we will have to engage very closely with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive.

At this point in time, given the announcements are only a few hours old, I am sure the Deputy will appreciate it is not possible for us to go into the detail quite yet of how we will deal with this, but it is an extremely important issue that is important to acknowledge here today. In terms of the response from the European Union to this, clearly, none of us wants to be in this position. There is a clear consensus from contributions so far regarding the need to negotiate and see whether we can get an agreement to lead us away from the precipice we are now on. It is not clear to me, however, that we will get to that point unless we indicate how the EU would be willing to respond from a trade point of view. However, the European Commission, correctly, is going to take time to engage with member states of the EU on this but stressing that negotiation is our preference.

Mortgage Interest Rates

3. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to protect mortgage prisoners from extortionately high mortgage interest rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16503/25]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The scandal of selling off mortgages to vulture funds has never been addressed. Just this week, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, FSPO, legislation passing through the Seanad is finally giving people access to the financial ombudsman. That was only one of the many promises that mortgage holders would be treated the same that was broken. What steps is the Minister going to take to protect mortgage prisoners from extortionately high mortgage interest rates? We know they are being fleeced by the vulture funds. The Minister promised, along with others, that there would be no difference if their loans were sold on to mortgage funds. What an empty promise when we now see so many people paying extortionate interest rates in the hands of these vulture funds.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am, of course, very aware of the difficulties the increase in interest rates in recent years has caused to many mortgage borrowers. From a regulatory perspective, the Central Bank has put in place a range of measures to protect consumers who have or who are taking out a mortgage. The consumer protection framework, which applies in the same way to all regulated mortgage entities such as banks, retail credit firms and credit servicing firms, seeks to ensure that lenders are transparent and fair in all their dealings with borrowers.

Specifically with regard to variable rate mortgage holders, the Central Bank's consumer protection code requires all regulated mortgage creditors to explain to borrowers how their non-tracker variable interest rates have been set and to clearly identify the factors which may result in changes to variable interest rates. In this context, the Central Bank is continuing to update its consumer protection framework, and Deputies will be aware that it launched an enhanced consumer protection code this week which, following an implementation period, will come into effect next year.

The Central Bank has also engaged intensively with regulated firms on the operation of specific aspects of the consumer protection framework to make sure there is capacity in place to: manage applications by borrowers to switch their mortgage or mortgage provider; ensure there is no discrimination against borrowers based on where they currently hold their mortgage; ensure changes in mortgage interest rates are in line with mortgage terms and conditions; and have supports available to borrowers in or facing arrears.

Also, a number of measures were introduced by industry in 2023 to support borrowers who wish and are in a position to switch their mortgage. This included the provision of an aligned industry-wide set of initial eligibility criteria to facilitate people who are switching their mortgage from a non-bank to a bank.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is all cold comfort to people who are mortgage prisoners. The Minister was one of the cheerleaders who cheered this on and told them all there would be no difference and that it would be no problem whatsoever and they would have the same protections. However, he failed to deal with the main issue we are addressing.

There are 7,000 mortgage holders that are now being charged over 8.5% with the vulture funds. There are 100,000 mortgage holders who saw their interest rate go up over 6% last year. To give a bit of context, if somebody has a mortgage of €300,000 and is paying 6%, he or she is paying €1,800 per month, which is over €6,000 more than somebody with a high street lender fixing at just over 3%. That is €6,000 more out of people's pockets. If someone is one of the 7,000 who is being charged 8.5%, he or she is paying €12,000 more because his or her loan was sold to a vulture fund. We know that during that time, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil sold the Irish people a fairy tale, telling them that they would be no worse off. The reality is that these mortgage prisoners are worse off, and they need a way back to normal banks. They cannot switch because some of them are in arrears or have been in arrears in the past. Has the Minister anything to say with regard to providing a pathway back for these people so that we have normal lending rates as opposed to what is now happening with rates of 8.5% and 6% and with over 100,000 mortgages in that position?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have three points in response to that, the first of which is that the best prospect we have to see all mortgage holders pay lower interest on their loans in the time ahead is to see a change in general interest rates within our economy. I welcome the decisions that have been made in recent months by the European Central Bank, ECB, in that regard.

Second, I emphasised at all times during this very difficult period for those who had their mortgages sold on that their rights from a legal point of view would not be affected. That is the case. I outlined that in my answer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That was not the case.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Third, what we have seen is some switching take place and I, of course, want to look at how we can see further switching take place from the non-bank back to the bank sector.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: First of all, that is not true. It was not the case. On vulture funds, until last week those people were not able to even go to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, a legal provision that everybody else had until I pointed it out to the Minister and forced that to be changed.

The Minister said he would not mind if his mortgage was sold to the vulture funds. He made that statement to try to guarantee or give comfort to people that everything would be okay. I put it to him that there are 7,000 homeowners who are being charged an interest rate of over 8.5%. There are 100,000 homeowners who are being charged an interest rate of over 6%. They are all with the vulture funds. Why did this happen? Because the Minister, and Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, allowed this to happen. They blocked legislation that would stop this happening. They told people they would not be better off. The Minister should talk to the family that has

now been paying €12,000 more per year on their mortgage because that loan was sold off to a vulture fund. That is the change. That is the difficulty. To tell them they have the same rights and entitlements is not the issue here. They are being screwed royally by these vulture funds, and the question is: what is the Government going to do? Is it going to continue to sit back and allow tens of thousands of Irish consumers to be fleeced in this way?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I always acknowledge, and will do so again, that it was difficult and there were moments of high anxiety for those who saw the ownership of their loans or the mortgage on their homes or properties switching. I know that the impact on those affected has been difficult. For many, it has resulted in their mortgage payments and their interest rates being high.

At the same time, I must be honest in emphasising what I can and cannot do. What I can do is look at the changes that have been made in the consumer protection framework to ensure there are rights in place and levels of protection are available. I have outlined that to the Dáil. What I could not do was intervene to block decisions banks were making. Had I done so, it would have had other consequences for our banks and their ability to lend, contribute to our economy and, in turn, support others who wish to access mortgages and loans.

National Treasury Management Agency

4. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 95 of 4 July 2024, the timeline for the NTMA to fully divest from all Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, global portfolio investments in companies on the UN Human Rights Council database of business enterprises; the details of the ISIF's direct investments in companies on the UN database totalling €4.2 million; the details of the ISIF's indirect investments in eight companies on the UN database totalling €9.4 million; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15674/25]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: As the Minister knows, for more than eight years, the UN has maintained a database of businesses involved in specific activities in the occupied Palestinian territories. I followed my original question up with a number of questions. What is the timeline for the NTMA to fully divest from all of Ireland's strategic investment and global portfolio investments on that UN list and the details of ISIF's direct and indirect investments into the companies on same?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund is a €15 billion fund comprising the discretionary portfolio of €8.4 billion and the directed portfolio of €6.2 billion. It has a double bottom line mandate to invest on a commercial basis in a manner designed to support economic activity and employment in Ireland.

According to the most recent NTMA annual report, from inception to the end of 2023, ISIF generated an annualised investment return of 3.1%, or more than €2.3 billion, in investment returns across its portfolio, affecting and supporting 42,454 jobs in the economy. ISIF has complete independence in implementing its investment strategy under the NTMA Acts under an investment committee reporting to the NTMA's board.

The UN maintains a database of businesses involved in certain specific activities relating to settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. It was developed in 2020 with an update in

2023.

At the end of 2023, direct investments by the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund in companies on the UN database were approximately €4.2 million in 11 companies and its indirect investments were €9.4 million and included eight companies. ISIF divested from six of these companies, with a total value of approximately €2.95 million, across 2024. The six companies were Bank Hapoalim BM, Bank Leumi Le-Israel BM, Israel Discount Bank Limited, Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank Limited, First International Bank of Israel Limited and Rami Levi Chain Stores Limited. At the time, ISIF determined that the risk profile of these investments was no longer within its investment parameters. The level of holdings at the end of December regarding companies on the UN list was €4.2 million in 11 companies.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister. I will look at those figures and I appreciate his answer. I respect the NTMA and the subgroup. I was on the public accounts committee and remember the NTMA's proactive approach to divestment from fossil fuels and to former Deputy Thomas Pringle's Bill. I welcome that, and the NTMA grasped the nettle when the time came.

The Minister listed several Israeli banks and a retail chain. It is welcome that we have divested from them, but we are still investing. In the overall scheme, it is a small sum of money, but we are still investing in companies and banks in territories that are illegally occupied. I want to know the timeline of when we will divest directly and indirectly from those companies, given our stance on Palestine.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for recognising the work the NTMA has done in this and other areas and particularly the work ISIF has done. The Deputy is familiar with that. I have outlined the divestment that has taken place and it is important for me to emphasise to Deputy Connolly that the operational independence of ISIF is very important to this space. It manages €15 billion of our money, which is invested in jobs in Ireland and contributes to the economic growth and development of our country at a time when we will need new sources of economic investment and growth. It operates independently of me and is well aware of the sensitivity and importance of the investments the Deputy has referred to and, indeed, the questions being put to me.

I respectfully make the case, which the Deputy has already acknowledged, that these investments as a share of ISIF's total portfolio, not to mention as a share of the investment in the overall Israeli economy, are extremely small. However, Deputy Connolly is raising issues of principle and I am aware of the correct and deep concern the Irish people have regarding the suffering of the people of Gaza.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: In a previous answer, I was told by the former Minister for Finance: "My officials are in contact with the NTMA on an ongoing basis across a range of issues, including those arising from the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill 2023." I fully understand ISIF is independent but there is a policy issue in respect of illegal occupation. The Minister admits and accepts there is a country committing genocide and that we are investing in its trading companies. We still have a sizable proportion, albeit not in the overall scheme of things. Direct and indirect, it comes to more than €10 million. To bring home and put focus on what we are talking about, this refers to: the supply of surveillance and identification equipment for settlements; the wall and checkpoints directly linked with settlements; and the supply of equipment and materials facilitating the construction and expansion of settlements. This

is the list drawn up by the UN more than eight years ago to say we should not be investing in those companies. I appreciate the Minister is making the case it is a small percentage, but it is morally significant, not to mention the genocide taking place.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising this. While I make the case that the share of the overall portfolio of ISIF's investments is a small one, millions of euro is a lot of money for the Deputy and me. I accept that point.

The Deputy raises very important foreign policy and human rights issues. My Department engages with ISIF and the NTMA on these and other matters. The concerns and issues the Deputy has raised are very well understood.

The Deputy referred to issues of policy. I must emphasise again that, given the scale of the portfolio ISIF manages and how much of our money it manages overall, it is important that I respect and support the independence of the board and the decisions it makes. Divestments have already taken place and the ISIF board will determine what is the right investment in a way that is consistent with our independence and the mandate it has. It is well aware of the issues the Deputy raises and the exchanges the Deputy and I have had on a regular basis on this.

Housing Policy

5. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance to outline any engagement he has had with the Central Bank on tax incentives and other demand-side measures for housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16504/25]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What engagement has the Minister had with the Central Bank regarding tax incentives and other demand-side measures for housing and will he make a statement on the matter, particularly in light of what appears to be the Governor of the Central Bank pouring cold water on the latest apparently back-of-the-envelope policy on housing from the Minister for housing? It is reported that the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, will meet the banks regarding that proposal. What discussions has he had with the Central Bank on this and what is his view regarding banks lending and reducing the level of equity builders would need to have when lending for housing?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: My officials and I regularly engage with the Central Bank. However, I have not had any engagement recently with the Central Bank on the specific issue the Deputy has raised, which is the issue of tax-based support for housing.

The issue in the Irish housing market and so many of the social and economic difficulties that it is now causing are caused by a shortfall in supply. For more than a decade, the level of homes we have been building has not been in line with the needs of our society and the change in our demographic and economic growth. An increase in the supply of new homes remains a priority aim of Government policy. I will continue to work with my Cabinet colleagues to ensure that any further interventions in the housing market are appropriately calibrated, represent the best use of public money and boost the supply of homes in the public and private sectors.

A range of tax-based measures are already in place, namely, the help to buy scheme, the rent tax credit, the vacant home tax, the residential zoned land tax and the residential premises rental income relief. The Deputy will appreciate that decisions regarding taxation measures are

made in the context of the annual budget. He will also know that I am not going to comment in advance of any decisions that are yet to be made.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We discovered during the election period that many of the Minister's colleagues, maybe himself included, went out and argued that there were going to be 40,000 houses delivered last year, which we know was a big lie because the Department of Finance had provided an assessment to the then Minister before the election that that was not possible. Indeed, there was a risk of fewer being built than in the previous year, which is what actually transpired.

The Central Bank is pouring cold water on and disputing the Government's housing projections for the next three years. It believes that the Government will deliver 13,000 fewer homes than projected over the next three years. The Government is trying to justify measures whereby banks should lend to developers where developers have less skin in the game themselves. The Central Bank has come out and poured cold water on that.

Surely the Minister, as Minister for Finance, is engaging with the Central Bank on this matter or is his Cabinet colleague doing a solo run? Double-digit price inflation is back for the first time in eight years. It was 11.6% last year. There is a role for the Central Bank in controlling inflation.

It is reported that the Minister is to meet the banks concerning this idea about less equity from builders and more lending by banks. Is that actually on the cards?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I will be meeting our banks to engage with them on the greater role they can play in regard to housing because we all know how much more we need to do. However, I have to recognise two different points. First, the banks are independent of the Government. Second, they are independently regulated. I will be engaging with them to see what further measures we can put in place that lead to more lending and more homes being built. However, I fully respect the independence of the Central Bank, as does the entire Government, because we know the stability of our financial sector is vital to more homes being built in the time ahead. We will consider additional measures, as we always do, in the run up to the budget from an investment point of view and also in the context of the review of the national development plan that is taking place.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Dáil be given some clarity as to the Minister for Finance's position? Does he agree with his Cabinet colleague that banks should lend more to developers on the basis that the developers would have less equity? That is the proposal that has been made. It seems a bit hare-brained and Celtic tiger era, but it is not the first time we have seen something like it.

We deserve to know what the Department of Finance and the Minister for Finance's position is. The Governor of the Central Bank has clearly poured cold water over the idea. I could not believe that the Minister for housing would make a statement like that without even discussing it with the Minister for Finance or the banks, but then, it is Fianna Fáil we are talking about, so I will leave it at.

What is the Minister for Finance's position? What is the position of the Department of Finance? Does the Minister for Finance agree with the Minister for housing's assessment that banks should lend more to developers with less equity provided by those developers? Will the Minister answer that question clearly because I would like to know, in his engagement with the

banks, whether that something that is going to be under consideration?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I absolutely support all of the excellent work that the Minister for housing is doing in looking at what further measures can be put in place to lead to more homes being built. Regarding the Deputy's question, I support looking at ideas that will make more loans and more support available in our economy to lead to more homes being built. However, the Minister for housing and I do not want to see anything happen that leads back to the return of levels of lending and commercial practices that only create further difficulty. The Minister for housing will have the same view as me in that regard. What he is doing, as is his right, is looking at the different options that can be put in place to lead to more homes being built. He and I are clear that we do not want to see anything happen that is a source of additional financial risk because if that additional financial risk happens, it will only lead to more homes being built in the time ahead-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Minister support the proposal or not?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have answered the Deputy's question.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is still not clear. Does the Minister support the proposal?

Trade Relations

6. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Finance the proactive measures his Department is implementing to mitigate and support the most vulnerable sectors of the economy from the potential risks for substantial economic disruption due to impending US tariffs. [15890/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Given the recently announced 20% US tariffs on EU goods, which is double the 10% rate applied to Britain and Northern Ireland, and considering the exposure of the Irish economy, particularly export-reliant sectors and jobs, what proactive and specific steps is the Minister's Department taking to support those most vulnerable, including multinationals, SMEs and workers in mitigating these deeply concerning economic risks?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising the significant announcements that were made during the night. The Government is initiating a number of steps, but the Deputy will understand that I need to be honest and clear in setting expectations of what we can do. This is a deeply serious issue. Unfortunately, it is a significant moment in how global trade is conducted and what that can mean for jobs, income and prices all over the world, most particularly the country that the Deputy and I are trying to play a role in guiding through all of this.

As to our engagements and proactivity, it has been in publishing our best estimate regarding what it will mean for our economy. I have been engaging with fellow finance ministers in the EU and across the world on this. A further meeting on this situation will be happening at the end of next week in Warsaw where we are being hosted by the Polish Presidency of the European Union. The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade will be engaging with fellow governments as early as Monday. Before that happens, he has convened a meeting of our trade forum in which all Ministers who are involved in this will be present along with all of the representative bodies. I believe that meeting will happen as soon as early tomorrow afternoon, given the seriousness of this issue.

Regarding the supports that we can make available to companies and how we engage with them, that engagement will be through such organisations as the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, EI. We are talking about trade, for Ireland alone, of tens of billions of euro. If that was affected in any way, no Government could put in place measures that could take the place of that trade. What we will have to do is engage with companies individually to see how we can assist them in finding new markets or dealing with negotiation that awaits.

It is very serious, but by working within our economy, we will find ways of adjusting and responding to the difficult announcements of the night.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I thank the Minister. I appreciate the immediate steps the Minister, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste are taking but Ireland is uniquely exposed. Our export economy depends heavily on the US, which accounts for nearly one third of our total exports. Unlike Britain and Northern Ireland, which face a 10% tariff, we are hit with the 20% rate as members of the European Union, which puts us at a disadvantage. Key sectors such as agrifood and advance manufacturing are now vulnerable, not just in terms of competitiveness, but also in terms of employment, as the Minister mentioned. This morning, IBEC already announced a forecast of a 2% to 3% hit on exports in the short term.

There is a real risk in terms of job losses, investment slowdown and pressure on regional economies that rely on trade-driven growth, particularly around Cork, where people have been quite vocal in the news this morning. The situation is compounded by Northern Ireland's position under the Windsor Framework, which could see trade diverted away from the Republic. We cannot afford to be passive. I appreciate that negotiations are a key part of this and that the Minister is playing a crucial role in that.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: It is vital that we keep the Dáil informed of this and that all TDs be aware of what is taking place. I am aware that employers and workers in Cork will be feeling particularly worried today. It is something that affects everybody but I am conscious that large life science and medicine producers are located in Cork, many of which have been there for decades. Some very important food and drink manufacturers, farmers and suppliers that are located in Cork are also worried about what this will mean for their food, agricultural and drink exports to the US. I am very much aware of this. We are engaging with them to hear their views. We will have to work to see if we can avoid the worst happening in the short term. That is why negotiation is vital, but we will see a big change happening in the global economy and we will need to support employers and firms in moving to that new equilibrium. They know this is happening and we will have to work with them to see how we can continue to support the growth of our economy. As the Deputy notes, our forecasts based on what is currently happening are for a lower level of growth but for our economy to still have very high levels of employment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I should mention Intel and Kerry Group in my constituency of Kildare North and the impact they might face.

As the Minister noted, we need a co-ordinated and multilayered response to this. First, we should push diplomatically, particularly to our partners in the EU, for a negotiation of exemptions or reductions, especially for high-value sectors like agrifood in Ireland. Second, I would love to see a financial support package to be made available, with grants, bridging finance and tax reliefs for those firms directly affected. This would come under the Minister's Department. Third, workforce supports such as upskilling, reskilling and job transition schemes must be

activated. Finally, we must protect not only our businesses, but also our workers and the communities that depend on them.

I pay tribute to the late Mick O'Dwyer, whose passing was announced this morning. Micko was a legend of the GAA, particularly in Kerry, but we have a great fondness for him in Kildare for delivering two Leinster titles and bringing us to an all-Ireland final. I was quite young at the time but they are very positive memories. I acknowledge him and his contributions to Irish life and society over his many years. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: May he rest in peace. Many members of the GAA family in Kildare will be feeling particularly sad today. I thank the Deputy for mentioning that.

Regarding the Deputy's constituency, employers like Intel have made a magnificent contribution to the employment and growth of our economy, but they also make an important contribution to the European economy through the work they do in semiconductors and a high level of technologically advanced manufacturing. We will of course engage with companies like those because they and many other employers have been in our country for decades and have contributed to the US. By being globally present, they have allowed US companies to become even more successful. Even at this late stage, that is the case we continue to need to make. Through their presence in Ireland, those US companies have been more successful in the US. Being in Europe has contributed to their global performance. We will continue to make that case and will take on board the important issues raised by the Deputy about employers in his constituency.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): I acknowledge the Deputy's comments on Mick O'Dwyer. I had a personal involvement with him in Wicklow GAA. I was sponsor and he was manager. He was one of the most amazing characters I have ever come across. The legacy he has left the GAA world is priceless.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Financial Instruments

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the number of Israeli bonds that have been sold in Ireland since 2023 and the value of these and if he will introduce legislation to forbid the Central Bank of Ireland from facilitating the sale of bonds for countries that are in breach of human rights law and the Geneva Convention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16062/25]

60. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will take steps to ensure that the Central Bank is not facilitating the sale of Israeli war bonds and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16240/25]

197. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the measures he proposes to take to amend Ireland's obligations under Prospectus Regulation 2017/1129 and ensure that all securities licensed by the Central Bank of Ireland are not used for the financing of war efforts in Israel or any other country in the world and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16514/25]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach was very exercised on Tuesday by the suggestion that the Irish State was complicit in genocide. One of the ways we are complicit in genocide is by the authorisation by the Central Bank of Ireland of Israeli war bonds for sale in the EU. Despite all the evidence that these are used to fund the genocide, the Governor of the Central Bank has refused to act. If this continues, will the Government instead act to make it so that the Central Bank will not sell bonds for countries that are facing the charge of genocide?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7, 60 and 197 together.

Regarding the number and value of bonds sold in Ireland, the Central Bank of Ireland does not regulate the bonds as products and does not collect specific data on the number of bonds sold. The regulatory function of the Central Bank is limited to ensuring that the disclosure document for the offer contains all the necessary information required by the EU prospectus regulation. The bonds themselves are not listed for sale on the Irish Stock Exchange.

The legislative framework governing the approval by the Central Bank of a prospectus is provided by the EU prospectus regulation. This regulation, which takes direct effect across all EU member states, is not a minimum harmonisation document but a legal framework for all member states to fulfil the requirements as set out. As such, ensuring consistency of application of the rules across the Union is an important aspect of the regulation. Currently, the Central Bank, as the competent authority under the prospectus regulation, is required to assess prospectus documentation on the grounds of completeness, consistency and comprehensibility.

The Central Bank does not endorse the issuer or the securities by way of prospectus approval. It can only refuse the approval of a prospectus where it has a legal basis to do so. Where documentation meets the standards of the regulation, the Central Bank is required to approve a prospectus.

It is the position of the Central Bank, as set out by the Governor, that an advisory opinion of the ICJ or, indeed, the processes of the International Criminal Court do not constitute grounds for the Central Bank to refuse the prospectus of the Israeli bond programme. I do not intend introducing legislation that forbids the Central Bank of Ireland to fulfil its regulatory duties.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Shameful. The Minister says he is not complicit and yet he is saying he will do nothing about it. The Central Bank of Ireland allows Israeli war bonds that are used to commit this genocide to be sold in the EU. The Minister repeats the excuses of the Governor of the Central Bank that its only framework is to check whether the prospectus meets the standards of completeness, comprehensibility and consistency but it does not do that. The bond prospectus withholds ethical and risk-related information. It does not mention the genocide charge at the ICJ and Israel's profiting from weaponry that is field tested in Gaza. It is not comprehensive, complete or consistent.

After backing up the Central Bank's excuse for doing nothing about it, the Minister says he will not do anything about it. Legally, he can do something about it. Does he really think it is okay for the Central Bank to facilitate the sale of these bonds? Approximately €3 billion or so have been sold since 7 October 2023. These are used to buy white phosphorous and bombs and have been used to kill 45,000 plus people, of whom 20,000 were children, in Gaza.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The devastation that is happening in Gaza - the attacks on civilians and hospitals we are all appalled by - are being partially funded by the sale of these Israeli bonds. The head of Israel Bonds told investors that purchasing bonds was the best way

to help Israel's war campaign. Ireland is a signatory to the Genocide Convention and under that convention, we are obliged to ensure that our State's institutions do not facilitate genocide. The Central Bank of Ireland is a State institution and by authorising the sale of these bonds, it is clearly facilitating genocide. Will Deputy Donohoe, as a Minister with obligations under the Genocide Convention, act?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I absolutely refute the allegations and language used by the Deputies. This Government could not be clearer in our condemnation of the behaviour and loss of life that is taking place in Gaza and the untold suffering those people have endured. We have made that case very prominently within the EU and at a global level. As Minister for Finance, I am obliged to tell the truth about the work that the Central Bank of Ireland does and the legal framework within which it must operate. It must operate in that legal framework because that legal framework and how the bank discharges its duties is fundamental to the work it does and, in turn, to how our economy operates and how it regulates activity here within Ireland and in Europe. I have outlined the legal mandate that the Central Bank should fulfil. The Deputies are already aware of it, and the view of the Central Bank governor in relation to it. I am not going to say to Dáil Éireann here today that I can do anything that I do not believe is legal and I am not going to say that I can do something that would imperil or undermine the independence of the Central Bank.

We are clear in our condemnation of what has happened in Gaza. We are clear in laying out what we believe should stop and the support we have made available to those who are suffering in Gaza and in the Middle East. I do not accept the language that the Deputy has used in respect of the Central Bank. I have laid out its role very clearly.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not a question of language. The Minister might find it offensive for it to be said that he is complicit in genocide but it is the truth. He says he condemns what is happening in Israel. That is good but then the Central Bank is allowing this to happen. It is helping it to be financed. That is a fact. We can see the way these bonds are advertised online as facilitating its "war" in Gaza but then the Minister is saying it is fine. Even if what he is saying is correct in terms of the legal framework of the Central Bank, he can change that legal framework. He has not made the case that he legally cannot.

The OPLA advice concludes:

A PMB can provide for restricted access to its financial services on the basis of public policy grounds that are rooted in the Ireland's fundamental interest in pursuing its international law obligations. As noted by the ICJ in its Namibia judgment: "The qualification of a situation as illegal does not by itself put an end to it. It can only be the first, necessary step in an endeavour to bring the illegal situation to an end."

The Minister has a legal obligation to do everything he can to stop the genocide and he is not currently doing it.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: According to the head of Israeli bonds, these bonds are being used to fund their war campaign, which is genocide. That is a fact. The second fact is that Ireland is signed up to the genocide convention and we have obligations under that to ensure that none of our State institutions are operating in a way to facilitate genocide. We have those legal obligations so why will the Minister not act in line with those legal obligations under the convention to act to ensure our State institutions are not facilitating genocide?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Let me return in a moment to deal with the substantive issue raised by Deputy O’Callaghan but before I do so, I will reply to Deputy Murphy. At a time when we seek to look at how politics can unite people and bring people together, I am reminded again and again that for somebody who claims to be on the left and someone who claims to be part of a movement that is about tolerance and inclusivity, there are few figures who serve that agenda less than the Deputy. His language is consistently poisonous.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am not about tolerance of genocide or civility towards genocide.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: His language consistently looks to demonise those who are acting in good faith. He, in turn, in his own way is a contributor to the decay of standards and how we can engage with each other and debate issues in a way that is respectful. Every time he contributes on such a matter, he does it in a way that seeks to demonise an opponent or deny good faith.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Answer the question, Minister.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: That is the Deputy’s contribution. I am responding back to charges he laid against me that I am compelled to respond back to.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Answer with facts then.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: On the substantive issue that is being raised here today, I reiterate the clear view of the Government on what has happened in Gaza and the Middle East. However, there are a particular number of responsibilities that the Central Bank is obliged to discharge that are rooted not just in national and EU law and it discharges those responsibilities. The Governor of the Central Bank has outlined that the other extremely important issues that are being raised here are not ones that in his view allow him to effect the discharge of those duties. That is a matter of law as laid out and how the Central Bank discharges its duties is so important to our economy and to the financial markets it regulates in turn for the benefit and stability of our economy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Then why will the Minister not change the law? If he does not want to be complicit in genocide, then why does he not change the law?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Brennan): We will move on please.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister never answered the question.

Electric Vehicles

8. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance his views on how taxation measures could help arrest the decline in the uptake of electric vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16104/25]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Will the Minister give his views on how taxation measures could help arrest the decline in the uptake of electric vehicles?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The existing vehicle tax structures in the State have a strong environmental rationale, with the more pollutant, fossil-fuelled cars paying higher rates of tax, between motor tax, benefit in kind, BIK, vehicle registration tax, VRT, and the nitrogen oxide,

NOx, charge. In contrast, low-emission cars and electric vehicles, EVs, are subject to lower rates of tax. I know the Deputy will be aware of it but I want to emphasise the point that our tax code already recognises the differing contributions that those vehicles make to carbon emissions in our economy and society. The current policy approach aims to incentivise the uptake of zero- to low-emission vehicles, which will help to reduce Ireland's transport emissions.

A number of tax measures are in place to support the uptake of EVs, including preferential rates of BIK; BIK tapering relief of €35,000 in 2025 to €10,000 in 2027; a BIK exemption where an employer provides a facility for the charging of an EV; VRT relief of up to €5,000; and the introduction of an emissions-based VRT system for light commercial vehicles that will apply from 1 July 2025 in the Finance Act 2024. Other measures are in place such that EVs also benefit from low rates of annual motor tax. New proposals are considered and current vehicle tax policies are kept under review as part of the tax strategy group which is the transparent process we have in place to advise myself and the Government on the taxation options that are available to the Government in advance of the budget, the policy merits and demerits and what the costs of those options would be.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister for his response. I have been an EV driver since 2015, a so-called early adopter, and I am on my third EV. When I purchased my first EV, there were a number of incentives such as the SEAI grant that covered the entire cost of the charger. That has been greatly reduced in the intervening years. There was also free public charging and low road tax, as the Minister mentioned, as well. I realise that free public charging was not sustainable in the long run but combined with the grant that covered the full cost of the home charger, it made the transition to the EV much easier for me and my family. While I appreciate the measures the Minister mentioned, which go a long way to supporting the transition to EV driving, will he share his thoughts on increasing the home charger grant and reducing the current rate of road tax at €120 annually, which is the same as it was when I started driving an EV more than ten years ago?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I appreciate the case the Deputy is making for the further support of EVs. It is interesting to see the growth that has taken place and I hope it will continue in the coming years as EV technology improves and as we do a better job of rolling out the charging network needed to facilitate those who use EVs. We have made reasonable progress but it is very obvious that we need to do even more, particularly in some cities, as Deputy Gogarty raised with me last week. I have outlined the different measures in place.

10 o'clock

I will of course consider whether any further steps are needed, and I thank the Deputy for raising this. I have to remind the Dáil again that this is all subject to budget decisions. All of these options will have costs and we have look in the round at all the decisions we make in budget 2026. I thank the Deputy for acknowledging the measures that are in place, particularly with regard to motor tax. I know the Deputy wants this to go lower but all these things will be considered in October.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister and acknowledge the measures that have been implemented. A lot is often made of the insufficiency of the public charging network. I do not share that criticism myself because I have a home charger and rely solely on that. The Government decision to reduce VAT to 0% on solar installations in 2023 was hugely beneficial to my family and others like mine. It allowed us to invest in solar PV panels, which marries

very well with EV driving. I am a strong advocate for EV driving and would like to encourage more people to make the switch. In light of the high input costs of a new EV, does the Minister see any possibility in the current upper limit for VRT reduction being increased? I recently purchased a second-hand EV for the first time. What is his view on introducing some tax measures specifically for second-hand EVs, allowing first-time buyers of second-hand EVs to also receive a grant towards the purchase and installation of a home charger among other things?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I will certainly take on board what the Deputy said and make sure officials in the Department consider it. I am not doubting for a single moment the impact of the various measures she has suggested or what they could do to enhance the further take-up of EVs. We will certainly consider all of that in the coming weeks and months. I do, however, need to relate it back to the broader environment we are in, which she very well understands. We are at a point at which we are seeing a very big change take place in the economy of the world, which will have effects here in Ireland. We need to ensure that any changes we make in the tax code are affordable and, in particular, support jobs and enterprise in Ireland. I will offer that as the general point. In truth, a lot of the individual measures the Deputy has raised would not be huge budgetary items. However, in the round, pulling all of these things together sometimes has a big cost. I assure her that I will certainly consider the issues she has raised and see what more could be done to support the roll-out of EVs in Ireland.

Trade Relations

9. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement he has had to date with the EU Commission and other EU member states on the evolving situation of tariff increases by the US; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16161/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The imposition of Trump's tariffs of 20% last night is a deeply serious concern for Irish jobs and costs for so many people. The EU response is being co-ordinated and could add further pressure for people. What engagements has the Minister planned with his EU counterparts and with the Commission as regards this response?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising this. Just to add to his point, the greatest challenge of all to the livelihoods of those he is raising today is if the changes that happened last night become bigger and permanent and if they fundamentally change how our global economy works. In order to see if we can avoid that happening, we need to have negotiation and engagement with the US, as the Deputy has acknowledged along with many other Deputies today. It is difficult to see how we get to that happening unless the European Union, including us, indicates that we are willing to respond and take action. With regard to the cause of any long-term harm that we could face or the economy of Europe could face, the first instigator of that has been what has happened in the US, not measures that we may have to very regretfully consider here in Ireland and Europe. In the absence of those measures that have been announced by President Trump, as the Deputy well knows and as he inferred in the point he put to me, we would not even be considering actions that the EU needs to take with regard to trade.

To answer the question he put to me regarding my engagement, on Friday of next week there will be a meeting of all finance Ministers of the European Union in Warsaw. In advance of that meeting, beginning, I hope, tomorrow, I will be talking to my colleagues about the issues the Deputy raised. On Monday, the Tánaiste will be meeting trade Ministers of the EU. I know the Taoiseach has engaged with the Commission on this and will be doing so with other Heads of

Government. That is all under way. It has begun and will only intensify in the days and weeks that await all of us.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: While Trump's tariffs are only a few hours old, the Minister's officials have been examining various scenarios and preparing reports, some of which have been published. We recognise that the technology, pharmaceutical, and food and beverage sectors are a serious concern. In my own area in Cork, pharmaceuticals and food and beverages are a major concern. Will the Minister be making the case to his counterparts on different sectors when he meets with them? What particular priorities does he plan to set out to his counterparts at those meetings?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: To reconfirm to the Deputy, we have already raised the different sectors within the economy. The food and beverage sectors he raised are a really important part of the communities he represents and contribute to his local economy. Those issues have been raised. The Tánaiste formally communicated with the Commission, I believe on Monday, on this, making the case on the food and beverages sector and aligning ourselves with other economies that have been affected in a similar way. To be candid with the Deputy, however, that has really been moved on by the decision the United States have made to apply in effect universal tariffs to all that is coming out of the European Union. We have indeed modelled that and published the modelling a week ago. As we become clearer on what the EU will do, we will publish a revised economic update, probably indicating additional scenarios. We will do that in the next few weeks as part of the budget process we normally instigate. We will publish what is called an annual progress report, which will outline scenarios, giving our best answer to the question the Deputy is pointing to.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. With 10% tariffs on the UK and the higher 20% tariff on the EU, there is a particular concern about the all-island economy and how people in the Republic will be impacted by the tariffs versus those in the Six Counties. Is there space within the Windsor Framework to deal with this? Will the Minister put the all-island economy as a priority to his EU counterparts when he is meeting them?

Deputy Joe Neville: I wish to express my condolences on the passing of Mick O'Dwyer, a legend of the GAA who gave us great days in Kildare. I thank the Minister for all his information on the tariffs last night. Coming from Leixlip, we have Intel and the Kerry Group in our area in north Kildare. I saw a lot of the fears of my peers last night, the people I worked with in the business sector. What level of engagement has the Minister had with the Minister for trade in the past number of weeks? How does he see that continuing in the coming days?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: First and foremost, on the tariffs, we all understand there is no win here. Deputy Moynihan spoke about the discrepancy between North and South now and obviously there will be ongoing issues in relation to partition. However, be it 10% or 20%, neither is beneficial. There has been a lot of conversation on future engagement. First and foremost, it has to be about negotiation. I expect a significant amount of our conversation with the European Commission and other stakeholders throughout Europe will be about supporting our own business and ensuring we do not cut off our nose to spite our face. I also accept Europe will have a plan for circumstances where we do not have successful negotiations. It is about protecting and engaging, and this will suit nobody, including those in America and particularly those at the lower end that Donald Trump constantly says he is out there to support.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Obviously, this is bad news for Ireland - there is no doubt about

that. While the pharma sector seems to have been given a reprieve for the moment, which is a blessing, the secondary effect of tariffs internationally will be a dampening effect on the world economy. We are a small, open economy and will be very sensitive to that. That will have a significant effect on our tax take - both on corporate taxes and, potentially, a shrinking job market here in the future. The best thing for the European Union to do at the moment is to de-escalate the situation because an escalating tariff war does not suit Ireland.

What real efforts is the Government making to negotiate directly with the US on this? I understand it is a European competency in many ways but we have a leverage in the US that many European countries do not have. What specific efforts are we involved in to try to put pressure on the United States to ensure pharma does not become part of the landing zone?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputies for the questions they have raised. The very important companies the Deputy Neville mentioned, Kerry Group and Intel, form an excellent example of making the case for trade because they are also present in the United States of America. They sell there and have a large presence there.

I will, on behalf of the communities the Deputies represent and that other colleagues have raised, engage heavily within the EU. I outlined to the House earlier that a meeting of finance ministers of the European Union would take place on Friday. Deputy Moynihan asked what I would do in advance of that. I will engage with colleagues from tomorrow on this. Responding via the EU is the best way for the Irish people and Government to influence what is happening at a global level.

On the point Deputy Tóibín made, we of course want a negotiation or de-escalation but I make the point I have made a number of times this morning: it is difficult to see how such a negotiation could take place unless the European Union is willing to outline that we would, regrettably, have to respond to the tariffs put in place and respond in a proportionate way to what the administration of President Trump has done. We will engage with the US and within the EU to make the case for the medicine and life science sector.

Tax Collection

10. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the percentage number of households that opted to defer payment of the local property tax in the years 2023, 2024 and 2025; and if he will consider reducing further the interest rate penalty on the amount accrued-deferred. [16042/25]

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I ask the Minister to outline the percentage of households that opted to defer payment of the local property tax in the years 2023, 2024 and 2025 and if he will consider a further reduction in the penalty on the amount that has been deferred.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Property owners who are experiencing financial difficulty may avail of a wide range of flexible payment options in respect of current local property tax, LPT, liabilities and for any previous years. To answer the Deputy's question on those accessing it, the number is quite low: 0.6% of all taxpayers are accessing it across the years 2023, 2024 and 2025. Ahead of the revaluation in 2021, I reduced the interest that applied to deferred LPT from 4% to 3%.

Given I reduced the rate last time, I do not propose do so again. What I have done is increased the income thresholds at which deferrals can be accessed. We have seen income growth in our economy, despite the cost-of-living pressures many have faced, and I want to ensure the ability of hard-pressed homeowners to access those deferral options is maintained. The evidence is the vast majority of people look to pay their LPT bill on time. I know it is a big bill but those who find it difficult to pay upfront can spread the payment across the year. The number is low but we are looking to deal with the issue the Deputy raised by increasing the income thresholds instead.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister for that information. I accept 0.6% is a low figure. That suggests the cost to the State would not be significant if there were to be a further reduction in the interest penalty. I acknowledge there was a change in 2021 from 4% to 3%.

One of the flaws with the LPT is it is not based on a household's income; it is based purely on evaluation of the property. We know there will be properties in certain locations with high value but very often those households have a low income. It may be a household reliant on the State pension. It is unfair to charge a penalty of 3% to those households if they opt to defer the property tax based on income threshold grounds or hardship grounds. We should consider a reduction. I note in the changes announced that local authorities will have the option of increasing the property tax by up to 25%. That will allow scope for these households to be exposed to even greater liability. I ask the Minister to consider, in time, looking at the penalty again.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: To bring to life the figures and move them beyond percentages, the overall number of properties that accessed the deferral option was between 11,800 and 12,500, so it is indeed a low number.

The Deputy made a point about the ability for LPT to be varied upward by 25%. One of the things I have learned from watching how this tax operates is this. I believe 25 out of 30 local authorities have increased their LPT beyond the base rate, but the average level of increase is 9%, which is a fair bit below the 15%. Many local authorities, many of which are governed by coalitions between our two parties, have been successful in persuading voters that paying a bit more can lead to better services and amenities within their community. I know the Deputy appreciates that. That is why we put in place the change of going up by 25%. I will take on board the point he made and I hope the change in the income thresholds will be of some help to those who find this difficult.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I appreciate that the Minister will keep this under review. I acknowledge the change in income thresholds, which is welcome.

I will speak on the tariffs for a moment. As a Deputy representing Cork South-Central, we have a large concentration of US companies. I live only a couple of miles from Ringaskiddy, a large industrial base. I welcome the Minister's comment earlier that our first and foremost priority is negotiation and finding ways forward but it is critical we have a strong strategy for our multinational and FDI sectors to show them the Government will take a step-by-step approach with them in addressing the economic challenges we face. It is vital we show that support to them and show that we will be shoulder to shoulder with them so that we can navigate these difficult times. They are unprecedented times. I know the EU will respond as a collective but Ireland is particularly exposed. Within Ireland, the region I represent is particularly exposed. I urge the Minister to ensure every effort is made to find solutions and negotiate our way out of this. Obviously, the EU will respond in due course in terms of potential reciprocal tariffs.

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Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I referenced earlier the large number of significant employers clustered in particular parts of our country. This is, for want of a better phrase, because of the ecosystem and their ability to upskill people working in communities who then leave to go to employers in similar sectors located in similar parts of our country. There are some very large employers, and one in particular that Deputy McGrath is referring to. I absolutely understand that. The Government and I have engaged with individual employers on this. We are proud to have them in Ireland. They have contributed to the growth of our country but we also believe we have played a role in contributing to their success here and back home in the US also. Of course we will continue to engage with these very important employers at what is also an unprecedented time for them. All Deputies have emphasised this to me today.

Trade Relations

11. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Minister for Finance if he can detail the key impact of the ESRI working paper, *The Impact of Deglobalisation and Protectionism on a Small Open Economy - The Case of Ireland*, on policy in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15839/25]

15. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 2 of 13 February 2025, the analysis to establish the impact that US tariffs will have on the economy; the preparations being made to deal with this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15673/25]

Deputy James Geoghegan: My question relates to the policy response to tariffs that were hypothetical when I tabled it and that are now real. I am concerned about a creeping narrative emerging from certain quarters within the Opposition, and Sinn Féin in particular, which seeks to pitch Ireland against Europe in the response. Does the Minister agree that in our response to this we need more, and not less, Europe? The Single Market now stands as a shining light for free trade and the rule of law. What we need in response is Europe working together.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 and 15 together.

The Single Market is the best answer we have to this. We are speaking about the need to grow trade to take the place of trade that may be lost. The best place to do this is on our own doorstep. We have on our doorstep this incredible creation, which Irish politicians and diplomats have spent decades trying to craft, which is the Single Market. We need to plough on with realising the potential it still offers.

We also need to continue to remind and make the case to the people of Ireland that the cause and catalyst of the difficulty we are now confronting are the decisions that have been taken by President Trump. We acknowledge that there are issues relating to the flow of trade and the impact these can have on communities. We are all aware of them and we all need to engage. The measures that have now been instigated will have a significant effect on the world and on Ireland in line with the forecast the Department of Finance published two weeks ago. The only reason the European Union wants to consider measures to respond is in order that we can approach the negotiating table in a strong position. We do so because of the Single Market. We must also be willing to outline the steps we are willing to take. The cause of this is not action taken by the European Union.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister. There is no sugar-coating the tariff announcements made yesterday evening. We are only beginning to understand their effects. It is now the reality that the United States, which started globalisation, is seeking to bring an end to it. We in the European Union need to be proud of what we have done in developing the largest single market in the world. We need to ensure we do more in Europe to better enhance in particular our banking market and the impact this can have. The history of Europe has always been forged in crisis. The response to these crises has always made Europe better and led to more prosperity and more peace. We need to ensure that Ireland remains at the heart of this. We need to take measures at domestic level. Most of this will be in the form of investment in infrastructure. As a result of the decisions we have made in the past, we have the money available to make that investment.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not think I can agree with Deputy Geoghegan on Europe being a shining light of the application of the rule of law but that is not for now. I understand there is uncertainty. I have read the ESRI report on how it will affect our exports and jobs. It is all being debated here this morning. I have listened to the debate and I have heard what the Minister has said. Long term we absolutely need to diversify. Obviously we need diplomatic efforts now, and we need various steps, but in the medium to long term we need to diversify our economy. We have been warned for a very long time about the urgent need to do this. Coming from Galway city I am acutely aware of the value of the big pharmaceutical and medical devices companies based there, with almost 12,000 people working in them. They have significant implications for the city in terms of spending power. We need to diversify. We need to put a big emphasis on indigenous industries.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Deputy Geoghegan has laid out a compelling case, with which I agree, regarding Europe's place in the world and what we have built up in the Single Market and by means of the rule of law. The argument we need to make is that if people invest in Ireland and Europe, if they employ people in Europe and if they want to create new ideas and be entrepreneurs in Europe, they will do so in a very stable environment in which they can be clear about the rules of regulation, trade and taxation. We need to make the case for this and we will do so in the time to come.

With regard to Deputy Connolly's point on diversification, we need to continue to diversify our economy. This is not something we will be starting, however, because it is already under way. For many decades we have been supporting our indigenous employers through Enterprise Ireland. We have also diversified the number of international employers we have but we need to continue this work.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

National Development Plan

89. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform in relation to the national development plan, his plans for additional investment in infrastructure in the west of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15892/25]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Minister knows Galway, the west and Connemara. He has seen the impact Storm Éowyn continues to have in certain parts of Connemara and across Mayo. It is very clear from the impact of this storm and Storm Darragh that we seriously need investment in basic infrastructure throughout the west of Ireland. The need in this regard is particularly acute in certain parts of Connemara and Mayo. Will the Minister outline what plans he has for additional investment?

Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Jack Chambers): As Minister for public expenditure, infrastructure, public service reform and digitisation, I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and for monitoring monthly expenditure at departmental level. The responsibility for the management and delivery of individual investment projects or sectoral policy strategies within the allocations initially rests with the individual sponsoring Department in each case. Each Minister is responsible for deciding on the priority programmes and projects that will be delivered under their remit within the national development plan, NDP, and for setting out the timelines for delivery. As a result, expenditure is allocated and monitored on a departmental basis.

The Government has committed €165 billion of funding for capital investment under the NDP to 2030. An additional €2.25 billion was allocated in 2024 as part of an update to the NDP which set out revised capital ceilings from 2024 to 2026. In budget 2025, almost €15 billion was made available from the Exchequer for investment in public capital projects, along with €3 billion of funds from the sale of the State's shareholding in AIB. This level of expenditure is pivotal to consolidate the progress already made, to support balanced regional development, to address key infrastructural bottlenecks more rapidly, and to lead to further improvements in living standards and competitiveness.

In addition, the recently agreed programme for Government sets out that the Government will prioritise an early review of the national development plan, which will be completed in July 2025. The review of the NDP will encompass all public capital investment, as I have mentioned, and will utilise State funds to support increased capital investment levels.

The northern and western region has already seen significant delivery of infrastructure under the NDP in the context of housing and many other projects. I can list a number of regional transport projects that are important for the west. I could also refer to the national broadband plan and other important priorities.

The Deputy has seen the NDP and some of the projects listed in it. We are reviewing the plan and updating it in the context of the additional capital that is available and that will, as we have stated, be allocated in strategic areas. That will be completed by the summer.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I will be seeking a briefing on the review of the NDP and where it stands. The Minister mentioned housing, which is one of the basic infrastructures needed across Galway, Connemara and the State. I have to ask the Minister, because this was a hugely important issue during the general election campaign, about this number of 40,000 homes. The Deputy was Minister for Finance at the time. I am aware that he is now Minister for public expenditure. It is my understanding that he was advised on 6 November that the target of 40,000 homes would not be reached, but the Government parties continued to put that out to the public. This has a real-life impact on people. The housing crisis and homelessness are having a real-life disastrous impact on so many people. It is really serious to not have full transparency in that

regard. Did the Minister bury this matter? What did he do with the information? Why was he not transparent about it? Who else in the Government did he tell? These are crucially important things the people should know.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reject the Deputy's assertions in respect of that matter. What she outlined relates to CSO and Central Bank data that was already in the public domain and that as debated in the Dáil on the day it was published by her colleague Deputy Doherty and the then Minister for housing, Deputy O'Brien. There were lots of projections across the public domain, and the Government obviously said it was disappointed with the final outturn relating to housing completions. That is why, in the context of the NDP review, we have set out that housing will be a central priority. We are particularly focusing on transport, energy, water and housing to unlock further supply in our economy. These are central to what we have set. As stated, the information the Deputy referenced was not new. It related to CSO and Central Bank data which was published in the weeks prior to that, and that is the context.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This was information that the Minister had. It was information that the Central Bank was pointing to housing outputs for 2024 similar to or slightly below the previous year. Does the Minister genuinely believe that people can have faith in the delivery of the NDP or of what the Government is saying about housing now when, during the general election campaign, two days after the information had been received, it told people that it would hit the 40,000 target? Did the Minister genuinely believe this target would be hit when he was in receipt of information like that? Does he think people can have faith in that? This is a huge crisis that is impacting on most people. There are women who cannot even leave women's refuges because they do not have anywhere to go. There are children who are in homeless accommodation or who cannot even access such accommodation in Galway city and county. This is really serious. Did the Minister honestly believe that the 40,000 target would be hit, even though he was were getting figures or briefings like this?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Minister for housing responded to that on the day the CSO figures were published. There were lots of----

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am asking you.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----different projections which set out higher levels of completions and which were in the public domain. As has been previously said, the Government is disappointed with the final outturn of 2024.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Disappointed is not good enough for people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why central to the review of the national development plan will be housing supply and infrastructure delivery.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Does the Minister think people can believe that?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have a lot of constraints and barriers when it comes to housing supply which we need to unblock and which are undermining our ability to deliver the overall level of supply required to help people in the communities we all represent.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: But they are not.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Similarly, investment in transport infrastructure unlocks housing development.

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Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Are they going to sleep on buses?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We know about the deficit in water infrastructure. Supporting the capital plan Irish Water has will be fundamental to unlocking the overall housing supply we require. In addition, there are the many of the other capital projects the Deputy referenced around refuges and other areas of priority. That is why we are reviewing the NDP. We are also looking at the delivery systems that underpin capital investment. These need to be strengthened and streamlined in order that we can accelerate delivery from concept to completion.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Does the Minister think people can have faith in that?

Ethics in Public Office

90. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform for an update on the proposed revised ethics legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16243/25]

Deputy Ged Nash: Will the Minister provide with an update on the Government's plans, as contained in the programme for Government, for updated ethics legislation. He will be well aware that we have been waiting a number of years to see the enactment of legislation that was committed to in the 2020 programme for Government. In fact, it first took draft legislative form in Brendan Howlin's public sector standards Bill in 2015.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. As he is aware, in the recently agreed programme for Government, we agreed to update the ethics in public office legislation. This is on foot of a wide-ranging review of the legislative framework for ethics in public life that my Department undertook during the lifetime of the previous Government. The report relating to that review was published in February 2023. The report's recommendations include that the legislative framework for ethics should be underpinned by a set of overarching integrity principles, that disclosure requirements should be strengthened to improve transparency and that consideration should be given to whether the regime should encompass more office holders. The report also recommends a strengthening of the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO. I am conscious of recent further recommendations in relation to ethics that will also need to be considered in the context of this reform.

This is an area that is complex and that requires careful consideration. I intend to look in detail at the outstanding policy issues, including those I have outlined, and to try to find an appropriate way forward to fulfil the programme for Government commitment. My ultimate goal is to create a fit-for-purpose, easy-to-understand and user-friendly ethical framework that contributes to the quality, efficacy and transparency of our system and builds on the strengths of our existing framework.

Deputy Ged Nash: I hope the Minister will agree that the standard for this legislation, for want of a better description, was set in the 2015 legislation developed by Brendan Howlin, my then colleague and one of the Minister's predecessors. It has been a considerable number of years since the commitment was made. We have had three Governments since the 2015 legislation was introduced. We have had the review, to which I contributed. I think there were merely ten submissions to that particular process.

Whether the Minister likes it or not, there is a renewed interest in ethics and standards in public life with the invitation to Michael Lowry to participate in Government. The latter was viewed by the relevant tribunal as a corrupt figure, something he has not challenged in the courts. This is a matter of major and genuine public interest. When will the Minister develop the heads of a Bill and bring it to the relevant committee?

Deputy Jack Chambers: In the context of the engagement with the Government Chief Whip and the Attorney General on the legislative programme, that is obviously legislation my Department has responsibility for. We have said we are going to engage in a review. Deputy Howlin was an excellent Member of this House. He did an excellent job in the role I am in. He brought forward the Bill in question, which has not made its way through this House. That is why we are undertaking a review of the statutory framework which the former Minister, Deputy McGrath, advanced. What we are doing is trying to draft that legislative framework in the context of the legislative programme. We will then fulfil the programme for Government commitment. When I have further information about what is possible in terms of a timeline, I will provide it to the House.

The review is ongoing. We will prioritise the drafting of a Bill when we have agreed a legislative framework around it. I want to fulfil the programme for Government commitment and advance the legislation.

Deputy Ged Nash: There was a commitment in the previous programme for Government. The Deputy spent time as Minister for public expenditure and reform in that-----

Deputy Jack Chambers: I did not.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister has clarified that. I am happy to accept that. I hope then he will bring some renewed vigour, if I can describe it as such, to this particular process. This is fundamental. Parliamentary democracy is a fragile flower. We have seen across the world how bad actors can exploit situations of corruption or perceived corruption. The consequences of that are happening across the world. It is happening on our screens all the time and is having real impacts in the context of the election of populist right-wing leaders to positions of power. When the framework is revised, new obligations are going to be placed on elected officials and public officials, as has been advised in, for example, successive reports from SIPO. Does the Minister agree that people with criminal convictions should be prohibited from being special advisers to Government Ministers?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. Through this legislative reform, we want to have an effective updated standards framework. Such a framework is integral to the quality and efficacy of public governance in our State. It needs to be future-proofed in that context. The regulation of conflicts of interest is obviously central to building trust in public institutions and in the objectivity of public service decision-making. We have the review that was carried out, the previous legislative proposal and other reports. These will all will inform the broader evidence-based context for how we try to draft this proposal. My focus is to fulfil the programme for Government commitment. When we manage to formalise a particular draft or heads, we will engage through the Oireachtas process in terms of pre-legislative scrutiny. We will engage with parties across the House in making sure that it is a fit-for-purpose public governance framework that updates the ethics legislation appropriately and in line with best practice.

Office of Government Procurement

91. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform his plans for the public procurement system, and to better align it with strategic goals and ethical considerations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15893/25]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am a big believer in looking at how we use our public procurement system. When I was on Galway City Council, we ensured that there were ways to employ, through social clauses and so forth, people across Galway. There are so many real positives we can use through our public procurement system. Given everything that is going on in the world at the moment, I am of the view that they can be used very wisely. What plans does the Government have to align our procurement system better with strategic goals and ethical considerations?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Deputy Farrell. The programme for Government includes a commitment to review the public procurement process to make it more transparent and to encourage greater participation by SMEs and other entities the Deputy has just spoken about. Working towards this aim and in the interests of setting out the strategic direction of public procurement for the next five years, my Department is developing a first national public procurement strategy. Last week, I launched a public consultation, which is being run by the Office of Government Procurement, that will inform this strategy. The consultation is open for eight weeks – there are seven weeks left at this point – and I encourage SMEs and social enterprises to use this opportunity to help shape the public procurement system.

A key ambition of mine, as Minister of State in the Department, is to make public procurement more accessible for SMEs in the interests of making it easier for them to tender for Government business. That is why I am asking for their feedback through the survey and through workshops we will be running in different regions.

Ultimately, this consultation will inform our strategy, which we expect to be innovative, sustainable and transparent around public procurement that supports competition, ethics and value for money. Groundwork has already begun on this. In June 2024, my Department published a policy statement, *Developing a New Public Procurement Strategy for Ireland*. In September, in partnership with the European Commission, it ran a national strategic dialogue workshop on the use of green, socially responsible and innovative public procurement. The outcome of this dialogue was the publication of a roadmap towards the new national public procurement strategy.

In parallel with this, the EU Commission launched a programme of review of its procurement regime. That has now commenced, and my Department has been active in engaging and collaborating with counterparts in other member states on this. The Commission has signalled that a draft text will emerge in 2026. It is quite likely that this might happen while Ireland holds the EU Presidency.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I welcome the fact that the Government is having that consultation. It is welcome that we are all thinking more about this issue, whether in the context of SMEs, social enterprises, as the Minister of State outlined, councils and so on.

The EU has long been calling on member states to use the public procurement system in a more strategic way to support industrial policy objectives. Data collection oversight of our public procurement system is poor in comparison with EU peer standards. The data reports we tend to get from the Office of Government Procurement are generally two or three years out of date when they are published. If we are to better use our procurement system, the first step is to have better access to recent data in order that we can know what is happening. That must be interoperable with other public data registries. Our current system seems antiquated in that regard, particularly in comparison with the systems that obtain in other countries. I produced a Bill at the end of the previous Dáil which would begin to move us in this direction. Would the Minister of State be willing to work with me on that?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I have not seen the Deputy's Bill.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That is okay.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am absolutely happy to look at it and to sit down with the Deputy to discuss it.

Data collection is a key issue of concern for me. I have tasked the Office of Government Procurement to look at how we can better collect those data. Looking right across the spectrum, from SMEs to social enterprises, it is important to consider how much is being tendered versus how much is actually used at the end of a project.

The Deputy referred to ethical sourcing. The Office of Government Procurement has, as she will be aware, a sourcing division that employs 127 staff. All of those staff have successfully undergone ethical procurement training, which the Deputy might be interested to hear. The Chartered Institute of Procurement Supply, CIPS, has awarded the Office of Government Procurement certification in ethical procurement. As part of that, it has received the Ethical Kitemark accreditation and is also included on the CIPS corporate ethical register, which is a really positive development.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That is really good. I am delighted to hear the Minister of State talking about data collection. I did a survey a few years ago asking different public bodies about their use of social clauses. One body responded by saying that it paid the minimum wage. Obviously, that is not a social clause; it is the law. You have to do that.

I wish to flag another thing, which comes on the back of the Minister of State's mention of ethical considerations. It is good that staff of the Office of Government Procurement have done that training because we can all do with extra training. The EU Commission has stated that there is nothing precluding member states and contracting authorities from including ethical considerations as a criterion for awarding contracts. A significant number of local authorities in this State have passed motions supporting ethical procurement policy. It is always really good when councils are looking at this as well. The response they keep getting from their respective chief executive officers, however, is that this would infringe upon the EU's procurement directions. When the statements of the EU Commission are presented to them, they maintain this position even though it flies in the face of reality. Will the Minister of State commit to speaking to the Office of Government Procurement about this matter?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am happy to speak to it about that matter. It is worth noting that the feedback I have been getting is that local authorities often source locally. That is really positive. We need to ensure that this is baked into our frameworks going forward to make

sure we are being socially aware and that transparency, value for money and efficiency are top priorities for all procurement, whether that is in the context of local authorities or the various Departments.

We have a sourcing team to support any Department, local authority or bodies like the HSE when it comes to sourcing particular goods. I encourage more of our procurement experts in these entities to reach out to the sourcing department in the Office of Government Procurement because its staff are procurement professionals who have a great handle on this matter. This expertise is available to them and it can be used to help them shape their tenders, applications for competitions or smaller bids. It can also be used to help them source suppliers. That is an efficient use of Government resources.

Pension Provisions

92. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform if his Department has taken any steps to address issues with the fast accrual (uniformed) single public service pension scheme for uniformed services recruited after 2013; if his Department plans to address these issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16472/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The changes to the public service pension scheme in 2013 essentially created, first, an anomaly and, now, something that has crystalised into policy in respect of fast accrual. Has the Department taken any steps to address issues with the fast accrual single public service pension scheme for members of uniformed services recruited after 2013, specifically the lack of a supplementary pension until they reach State pension age? Has the Department any plans to address these issues?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The single public service pension scheme is a statutory public service career-average defined benefit pension scheme, established on 1 January 2013 under the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012. The single scheme was established to place publicly funded retirement benefits on a more sustainable footing in the context of longer life expectancies. All new entrants to the public service hired after 1 January 2013 are members of this single scheme.

Members of the Permanent Defence Force, firefighters, members of An Garda Síochána and prison officers are categorised as members of the uniformed accrual cohort of single scheme members. The uniformed grades have certain enhanced benefits that other members of the single scheme do not have in recognition of their earlier retirement age, such as early payment of scheme benefits. This enables them to accrue more single scheme benefits over expected shorter public service careers in these roles. Once members of the uniformed accrual cohort reach their normal retirement age as provided for in section 26 of the 2012 Act, they can retire at that age and receive their occupational retirement benefits accrued at a higher rate, including their retirement lump-sum and pension benefit payments. These benefit payments are separate from, and in addition to, any future entitlement that they may have to the State contributory pension, which is administered by the Department of Social Protection.

While members of the Defence Forces and other uniformed accrual members have mandatory retirement ages lower than the State pension contributory retirement age, they are still able to work in other employment in the intervening period while fully accessing their single-

scheme pension benefits, subject to abatement, where applicable, if in the public service. In 2024, in recognition of changing demographics and a desire for each member of the fast-accrual category to continue working for longer, the Government enacted Part 11 of the Courts, Civil Law, Criminal Law and Superannuation (Miscellaneous Provisions) 2024. This allowed work to be done by officials in my Department and those in other Departments. The legislation allows for an increase in the mandatory retirement age for uniformed staff to 62 years for those who choose to avail of it and applies to single scheme and pre-existing public service pension schemes. I will get back to the Deputy on the rest of it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will jump on one phrase the Minister used. I know it has been essentially a policy that Government spokespeople have used. It is that people are “able” to work after the age of 55. I raised this question on the back of a meeting I had with Dublin firefighters and their union representatives last week. They spoke to me about the specific dangers that their vocation introduced into their lives. They simply have lower life expectancies and poorer quality of life after retirement and higher incidences of cancer and addiction. Recent research from the World Health Organization, WHO, backs this up further. It is not good enough that we are simply saying to firefighters and people in those uniformed services that they can just work after that age. The stopgap of bringing it forward to the age of 62 is welcome but it is not enough and the Minister knows this because, as an Opposition TD, he tabled a motion in 2019 related to the Defence Forces that highlighted this issue. Will the Minister please tell me what he is actually going to do to help those firefighters who are retiring at the age of 55?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will finish by giving some further context. We brought forward the increased mandatory retirement age for those who choose to avail of it. The legislative change also allows uniformed members of the single scheme to continue accruing referable amounts towards their occupational pensions for the additional years now worked. These members will continue accruing pension benefits on a fast-accrual basis up to the age of 60.

Another issue that is occasionally raised by the single scheme uniformed members is access to a supplementary pension, which exists in pre-existing public service pension schemes. However, supplementary pensions have never been a feature of the single scheme, nor is it envisaged that they will be. The wider context, which the Deputy can appreciate, is to try to have some sustainability in the overall pension system, which has been well flagged by many external and independent experts.

We all engage with many uniformed service members of the State who do an incredible job on the front line. However, we are trying to get the balance in the context of what represents a longer term risk. We see the actuarial analysis around that in terms of the total pension liability the State has.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I appreciate the liability of the State in terms of pension services but the fact that the supplementary pension has not been a feature since 2013 shows that these uniformed services are a casualty of that policy.

Besides the moral obligation we have to these workers who have provided crucial services to our society in the course of their careers, I would also speak to the retention issues that this drives. In a recent survey of more than 2,000 members of the services recruited after 2013, fewer than 1% were not concerned about their pensions and three quarters of them did not believe that they could serve until the mandatory retirement age, partly due to the pension issue. This means that, rather than waiting until age 55 - according to Government policy, they should

then seek other work - they are asking themselves at the age of 40 whether they should seek other work. This is leading to the issues we are seeing with recruitment and retention in these crucial services that our communities rely on.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate the feedback the Deputy has received. I regularly engage with all the uniformed members myself. I again acknowledge the work they do. The context of the 2013 scheme when it was introduced meant that it was the largest reform of public service occupational pension schemes in the history of the State. That was to try to put them on a sustainable footing by acknowledging the demographic changes taking place and the actuarial analysis and liability that those changes reflect. That is the context in which this has been managed.

The previous Government made decisions relating to the State pension age, as it was important to give certainty to many members of the public. There was a huge campaign in 2020, which we responded to. That was the right decision. All of these decisions have a broader context that we have to acknowledge. The decision against increasing the State pension age was the right one in that instance. We want to make sure that the overall State pension system is sustainable and manageable in the context of the other priorities we have.

Public Expenditure Policy

93. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform the total overruns in public infrastructural projects in each of the past five years. [15639/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The previous Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments had a reputation for incinerating public money through wastefulness in public projects. We have numerous examples, from the Gucci bicycle shed to the WRC wall, to the national children's hospital, to the ventilators that never worked. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, does not have that reputation and I think he could bring change to the Department. What cost overruns does the Department know about that the Minister has not told the public about yet?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Securing value for money is a central priority for this Government and is at the heart of all decision making at every stage of a policy, project or programme's life cycle, and it should be. Delivering value for money is about securing the efficient and effective use of public resources in the pursuit of better public services, living standards and infrastructure for the people of Ireland. Achieving value for money is the responsibility of each Minister and Department spending public funds. The Accounting Officers of those Departments and offices are accountable to the Comptroller and Auditor General and their respective Oireachtas committees for that spending. Accounting Officers must ensure that capital projects for which they have statutory responsibility are managed and delivered effectively. The Accounting Officers must decide whether the processes in place in their Departments, offices or bodies are appropriate to ensure compliance with the infrastructure guidelines; the management of capital budgets overall; and the management of budgets at an individual project level.

In terms of its capital allocation, my Department has not had significant direct overruns. We have a responsibility for overall oversight and we are responsible for the infrastructure guidelines that replaced the public spending code and were published in December 2023, with an effective date of 1 January 2024. These set out value for money guidance for evaluating,

planning and managing Exchequer-funded capital projects. The management and delivery of these must be done in the context of the allocation and the national frameworks, which is a key responsibility of each Department and Minister.

As part of the capital appraisal process for projects under the infrastructure guidelines, projects' sponsoring agents are asked to critically consider the schedule and cost implications of those projects, which is further developed as a project progresses through the approval gates and more information becomes available, for example, when a project moves from the preliminary phase to final business case before the awarding of a contract. This includes detailed financial and economic appraisal, sensitivity analysis, accounting for behavioural influences such as optimism bias as well as consideration of appropriate levels of contingency. I will elaborate more on the governance framework.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The process is clearly not working because we are coming down with cost overruns left, right and centre. One of the reasons for this is that the Government is allergic to accountability and has been for a long time. Even when answering a simple question here on the actual cost overruns over the past five years, this level of accountability is refused. The Minister has not even answered the question that was put on today's Question Paper.

Farmleigh House, for example, is another project we in Aontú have been researching. It was bought and refurbished for some €52 million. Over the past 24 years, it has received approximately 70 delegations that have stayed there. That is an average of three per year. Farmleigh House is empty for approximately 48 weeks a year. In the past ten years, only two delegations, on average, have visited annually. This means that it is costing some €750,000 per delegation. The house is empty for most of the year. This level of waste would not be acceptable in any other location in the country, yet it is allowed to happen under the Minister's watch.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reject the Deputy's assertion that it is not a consideration; it categorically is. That is why we have put in place many of the governance frameworks around the major projects' advisory group. This has significant external evaluation and assurance processes and addresses the need for value for money in all elements of the infrastructure guidelines, which are published.

11 o'clock

That is set out across a number of the frameworks that are submitted to Departments.

The Deputy referenced Farmleigh. A large number of visitors attend Farmleigh, which the Deputy will be aware of. Many of them are from in his constituency. I was there at the weekend when local artists availed of one of the facilities to showcase their local art. It is used for many cultural and other activities, which the Deputy recognised. A large number of visitors use it. I acknowledge that there is public concern about value for money on certain projects. I do not reject that as an issue. I will bring forward a memorandum to the Government in the coming weeks on value for money and it being a central consideration across the Government's frameworks. It is something I want to continue to assess in the context of the overall budgetary envelope we have.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Bureaucracy does not create accountability. Accountability is an issue that is created if there is a cost to an individual for making a mistake over and over again that costs the State. I very clearly asked what the total overruns in public infrastructure projects were. The accountability to the Dáil has not achieved an answer on that here and now. I also

asked what overruns were happening in public projects at present that the public did not yet know about. It is important that we put this question in shining neon lights because the Department knows about cost overruns that it will not tell people about yet. That is a real problem for transparency and accountability.

We have a situation where 100 Dublin Bus electric buses did not move an inch because somebody forgot to put in a planning application for a charger. We also have a situation where €300 million has been spent on metro north and not one shovel has been put into the ground. People at home are so frustrated with the fact that their hard-earned taxpayers' money is being incinerated and is not achieving the public infrastructure they so badly need.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is very inflammatory language, to be frank.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is true.

Deputy Jack Chambers: You have to balance that against the public service that is trying to deliver on broader policy objectives, such as decarbonising public transport,-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The buses did not move for 18 months.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----which is an important public good. You have to balance that against many public servants working in our transport system who want to ensure we advance a major capital project. There are issues with the systems around timelines, sequencing and the delays that happen in public projects, especially those relating to the planning system and the decision-making that happens in that regard. There is general frustration with that. In the infrastructure division we are establishing, we are providing much greater oversight so that we drive the acceleration and delivery of projects that have been outlined in plans for many years. People want to see the outworking and the completion of those projects.

I want to address the value for money concerns that are in the public domain. However, the Deputy's narrative does not give any balance in respect of delivery and things that are happening in the context of the envelope we have given to capital expenditure. It is fair that we should give more balance regarding the public servants who are trying to deliver value for money-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No quibble with the public servants. It is the Government we have a quibble with.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and trying to deliver on our broader social and public objectives when it comes to many areas of capital expenditure.

Flood Relief Schemes

94. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform if his Department has now received an up-to-date environmental impact study in respect of the Blackpool flood relief scheme; the timeframe for when the public consultation will occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16513/25]

Deputy Colm Burke: This question is related to Questions Nos. 102 and 103. I wish the Minister of State well in his new role in the Department of public expenditure. My question relates to the Blackpool flood relief scheme, which was initiated in 2013. In the past 12 years,

little or no progress has been made on the matter. Has the Department received the up-to-date environmental impact study in respect of the Blackpool flood relief scheme? What is the time-frame for when the public consultation will occur?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The River Bride flood relief scheme in Blackpool was initiated in 2013 following a major flood that occurred in 2012 and is expected to provide protection from the River Bride for some 290 residential and commercial properties. The Blackpool area has an extensive history of flooding, with at least 15 flood events occurring since 1974, including recent flood events arising from storms such as Storm Babet. The proposed scheme design includes conveyance improvements, flood defence embankments, walls and pumping stations and has an estimated budget of €20.5 million.

In 2018, the scheme design was submitted to the former Minister for public expenditure for statutory confirmation under the Arterial Drainage Act 1945, as amended, and ministerial confirmation was granted in 2021. In June 2021, this decision was challenged by a community group that was granted leave to apply for a judicial review of the decision. The Minister agreed to consent to an order reverting the evaluation of the Blackpool flood relief scheme back for further public consultation. This resulted in further information being requested from the OPW in support of the request for consent under the Arterial Drainage Act 1945.

The OPW provided a response to this request in October 2022. In November 2023, a further request was made to the OPW to provide supplementary environmental information that required some additional environmental surveys. In line with seasonal restrictions, these surveys were conducted throughout 2024. Additionally, the OPW has recently received and is reviewing a draft update to the environmental impact assessment report, EIAR, which was prepared by the OPW's consultant. This report was updated to take account of relevant surveys, including field surveys, invasive species surveys, mammal surveys, bat surveys, fisheries surveys, otter surveys and ecological surveys. Supplementary information and an updated EIAR will be submitted to the Minister for public expenditure.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister for his reply but I am getting no answer to the question I raised. I asked when the Minister of State expected to have the environmental impact study back. When will we have a public consultation? When can we move on with this project? It is 12 years on and we have not made one single step forward on this project. I am frustrated. The fact is the OPW submitted the design to the Department of public expenditure in 2018. It took until 2021 for a decision to be made. There was then a judicial review. An environmental impact study was submitted in 2022. By the time the Department dealt with it in 2023, that environmental impact study was then out of date as a result of the report sitting on someone's desk for 12 months. I do not want that to happen again. As the Minister of State outlined, there are more than 290 properties, which cannot be sold at the moment and where people cannot borrow money to redevelop them. As a result, no development has occurred in that area over the past 13 or 14 years.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I understand the Deputy's frustration and that of the people he represents in his constituency. However, once the judicial review came in, that also delayed the process. We have to carry out the environmental assessment. It is very important we do so. If we do not and it is challenged again, the Deputy will be the very one standing up to challenge me on why the proper procedures were not carried out.

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I am doing everything in my power to bring this to a conclusion. It is with the Department at present. As soon as we get it out there, I will progress the scheme.

Deputy Colm Burke: Can we get a timeframe for when the study will come from the OPW to the Department of public expenditure? When will we have a consultation? Have we a guideline? Will it be in three, six or 12 months' time? I fully understand the Department has to be extremely careful because it was a judicial review. However, we now have a situation where an area on the northside of the city is totally at a standstill. People cannot even get money to refurbish many old properties because the banks will not give out money where they cannot get insurance for flood relief. When there was flooding there previously, a lot of damage was caused to properties, so the financial institutions will not risk giving out money again. If people want to sell a property, they are at standstill. I know of a number of sales that collapsed because the people buying who were borrowing money could not get insurance and the banks said they were not prepared to give them the loans they required.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Any public consultation on the supplementary information to be provided by the Office of Public Works will be a matter for the Minister for public expenditure, infrastructure, public service reform and digitalisation. The Office of Public Works will continue to engage with that Department, as appropriate, to further progress the scheme. It is with the Department and as soon as it comes out - I do not want to be long-winded but I have to wait for that process to take place - I will revert to the Deputy. I will do my best to progress the scheme in the near future.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Office of Public Works

95. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform the total number of properties sold by the OPW in each of the past ten years; and the cost of each, in tabular form. [15633/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The might also mention the Midleton flood defences, which have been mooted since 2017. My understanding is that the planning application has still not been processed. It is a real life and death issue for the people of Midleton.

Vacant property during a housing crisis is one of the biggest problems I have with this Government. This and the previous Governments are the biggest hoarders of vacant property in the State, believe it or not. Last month, the OPW wrote to me stating it had 67 vacant properties. What efforts are being made to get those vacant properties back into use or to sell them so they can be brought back into use?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The OPW, like other State bodies, is obliged to follow Government policies on the disposal of surplus properties and the arrangements involved are set out in Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform circulars, Circular 11/2015 on protocols for the transfer and sharing of State property assets, and Circular 17/2016 on the policy for property acquisition and disposal of surplus property. The OPW's policy in managing surplus properties is to establish if the property is required for alternative State use, includ-

ing the potential for it to be repurposed for Departments or the wider public service. A number of strategic properties are retained in anticipation of potential State use or development in line with service demands arising from Government policy changes to public service provision. If no State use is identified, the OPW considers whether open market disposal is an option, depending on prevailing market conditions. The OPW may consider community involvement, subject to a detailed submission that demonstrates that the community or voluntary group seeking to use the property has the means to insure, maintain and manage it in order to reduce costs to the Exchequer. As a matter of policy, no property is disposed of until it is absolutely certain that there is no alternative State use for that property.

The OPW has disposed of 171 properties over the past ten years, garnering an income of more than €35.5 million for the Exchequer. The breakdown for each of the years 2015 to 2024 is as follows: 28 properties disposed of in 2015 for €3,590,198; 19 properties disposed of in 2016 for €3,338,500; eight properties disposed of in 2017 for €522,500; ten properties disposed of in 2018 for €2,112,011; seven properties disposed of in 2019 for €5,250,500; 22 properties disposed of in 2020 for €2,550,000;-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: -----13 properties disposed of in 2021 for €1,508,803; 24 properties disposed of in 2022 for €8.6 million;-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): The Minister of State is half a minute over time.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: -----22 properties disposed of in 2023 for €3.7 million; and 18 properties disposed of in 2024 for €4.3 million. This amounts to a total of 171 properties for €35,509,162.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome the sales of those properties. That is a good thing, but the Minister must admit that on a day when 15,600 people are homeless, the idea that one Department would have 45 vacant properties is absolutely wrong. The OPW is involved in a total of 450 lease agreements which concern approximately 374 properties. We have seen the OPW lease property from Larry Goodman where someone measured it incorrectly and the taxpayer is paying rent for space that does not even exist, which is quite incredible. That was before the Minister of State's time in the Department.

Having vacant properties in a housing crisis is akin to exporting food in the middle of a famine. It is absolutely wrong and what I missed in the Minister of State's response was any real sense of urgency to offload the 45 properties and make sure they were brought into use. It is not just the OPW. It involves many departments, including the HSE and the Departments of agriculture and Justice. Hundreds of properties and parcels of land owned by the State are vacant, many for decades.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: There is a clear process we have to follow and the Deputy is well aware that, if I did not follow it, he would be standing opposite telling me I had done this and that and had not followed the proper procedure.

Fourteen properties went to Tipperary County Council for social housing. Eight residential units in Dublin city centre were leased to housing agencies. A building in Crumlin was leased to Dublin City Council for use as a family hub. Two former Garda stations in Cork were trans-

ferred to social housing. Three Garda stations in Limerick went to social housing. The list goes on. We have followed all the criteria that are in place.

No more than any other agency, the OPW has an enormous number of properties. For some of them, we go through the process of releasing them to local authorities. We always look at State bodies first and then we release them to the local authorities if they require them. However, it is not always the case that the properties are situated in areas where they are wanted by the different departments.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Aontú put in freedom of information, FOI, requests to each of the local authorities and found there were 4,000 empty local authority homes in the country. If those 4,000 empty local authority homes were brought back into use, they would be enough to house the total 15,600 people who are currently homeless. We found that it is taking on average eight months to get those local authority homes back into use, while it takes less than two months to get private rental accommodation back into use.

This is the key. While the Minister of State set out the criteria that have to be gone through to get those back into use, the State is incredibly cumbersome, slow and bureaucratic about getting them back into use. All I am saying is that we need to match urgency within the Department to the level of crisis that exists in the real world for very many people. We need the State to go through the system, make sure it is done properly and carefully and protect taxpayers' money, but I want the Minister of State to inject significant urgency into the process. For people who are currently living in hotel accommodation or emergency hubs, life is urgent. They need to get out of those hubs and into a home, have their own front door, have the protection of their own home and be able to get on with their lives.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Government is doing everything possible to help those people in hotels.

On the question the Deputy asked, we have offered a great number of properties to different organisations, such as local authorities and local groups. If the Deputy knows where there are properties, he should make that information available to me and I will look into them. It is easy to stand up - I am not being critical here - and talk about properties in different parts of the country, but it is not always easy to find an end use for them because some are in isolated areas. There is always a use for any property that is in an urban setting, but some of the properties we have are not in areas where people require them. If the Deputy knows someone who requires a property and if he has information, I would be glad to work with him to see whether we can find an end use for it.

Freedom of Information

96. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform his plans for the reform of the FOI system; the recommendations from the last review that have been implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15896/25]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: What plans does the Minister have for reform of the FOI system, which of the recommendations from the last review have been implemented and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Jack Chambers: A comprehensive review of the FOI regime has been undertaken and is nearing completion. The review was undertaken in the context of a system that appeared to be operating well on its own terms. Since the introduction of the updated legislation in 2014, there has been a large expansion in FOI usage. The number of organisations covered by the legislation has increased significantly and the number of requests received annually has almost doubled. Approximately four out of every five requests decided upon are granted. Reviews are available where requesters are dissatisfied with the outcome of their requests. However, these are availed of in approximately 3% of cases annually, while an independent review by the Information Commissioner is sought in slightly over 1% of cases. Key indicators remain consistent from year to year.

However, this does not mean that there is no room for improvement. Against this backdrop, a thorough and careful review has been undertaken, assessing the current regime and identifying challenges and opportunities to build on and update the system, aiming to deliver transparency in more effective ways. The review process has been an open and collaborative one, taking in the views of a wide range of stakeholders. It commenced with a scoping process that sought the views of stakeholders across all sectors in setting the direction of the review and included a customer satisfaction survey as well as a full public consultation. This was supplemented by engagement with all the key stakeholders and accompanied by a review of international approaches to FOI seeking to identify best practices and innovations globally. The review draws on this evidence to inform its findings and recommendations. Broadly speaking, the key strands in the review involve considering potential reforms leading to a more coherent approach to information governance and access, supplementing formal FOI requests and improving the request process. I expect to receive the final report shortly and then intend to bring it to Government for approval in due course. If amending legislation is required on foot of the report, this will be progressed together with some of the recommendations.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: One of the Minister's predecessors, who is now a European Commissioner, undertook a significant review of the FOI system. There are still issues with certain public bodies refusing requests or redacting large volumes of information. Sometimes, it comes out through appeals that this was done incorrectly. There is a view that this is done based on trying to deter people in the hope they will not appeal, in which case the decision is likely to be overturned. I was dealing with one request recently and it was kind of new to me. The request was not submitted by me, but I was asked my views on it. The public body concerned said it could not release the information under FOI because one of the requesters had a connection to the information being sought. They were told it was a conflict of interest. That was bizarre and not something I had seen before. I am not aware of any provision in the legislation that states information can only be released to disinterested parties. Is the Minister?

Deputy Jack Chambers: It was prudent that a review took place. It was very open-ended on public consultation and structured stakeholder engagement. There is also the international metric, which is important in that context. It has been established with very strong engagement in the recent period. We want to assess the feedback from the broader political system and, indeed, public interest parties that want to extract information in the interest of transparency, which does help to strengthen evidence-based public policy. It has been a force for good in overall public policy over many years. The spirit in which I will bring forward this review will be very much in that light. It will take into account the feedback we are getting from the public.

Turning to the Deputy's point concerning appeals and consistency of decision-making, as I said, there is a low rate of review decisions, at 3%, while 1% are submitted to the Information

Commissioner. This has been consistent over many years. I have not seen the report yet so we will see what it recommends.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I worked very constructively with former Minister, Michael McGrath, on this matter and other issues. I hope the Minister and I can do the same. Regarding this issue, we also need to consider solutions. Sometimes when people are refused an FOI request, they do not think they have the grounds to appeal the decision. I also encourage people who believe they are entitled to some information to make sure they go forward and appeal the decision. One of the solutions I suggest is if an FOI appeal to the Information Commissioner concerning the refusal or redaction of information sees the initial decision overturned, then the cost of the process should be refunded to the person who submitted the appeal. If we required public bodies to disclose in their annual reports the amount paid out in such successful appeals, this would highlight those that have had an issue with transparency or whose FOI officers may need additional types of training. I proposed a Bill in this regard. Sometimes it is just about getting proposals we can work on together constructively and try to get them over the line so the system works better.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am happy to do that. If we look at the existing scheme, the fact that the requests have doubled is a good sign that people are engaging with the broader FOI system. One thing that also needs to be strengthened across public bodies is the work we are doing with the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, on data and digitalisation. A great deal of public information can be published properly and proactively that should be in the public domain without people having to go through an FOI process. That line of work needs to be strengthened across State agencies and Departments to ensure people can access information and do their own independent data analysis of much of the work to strengthen public policy and evidenced-based decision-making. That would help. When I was a Minister of State in the Department of Transport, the fragmentation of certain information somewhat inhibited transport research in certain areas where it was necessary to go through a protracted process to extract the information.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Yes.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The more information we can publish and allow academics and the public interest to interact with it, the better it will be for public policymaking. This needs to sit in parallel with the FOI system itself in respect of how we get better proactive publication across the board.

Construction Industry

97. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform to provide an update on the recent meeting of a group (details supplied); if there is a work plan for this group for 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16112/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I seek an update on the recent meeting of the construction sector group, whether there is a work plan for this group for 2025 and if the Minister will make a statement on the matter. This takes in all the construction stakeholders. We could have an over-and-back discussion concerning the 40,000 houses last year, but the fact is there was a failure to deliver that number. We are where we are, so how do we get beyond this point? We

have all talked about new methods of construction, but much of this has been just talk. In some instances, we are still talking about pilots.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The construction sector group was set up in 2018 by my Department. The group ensures regular and open dialogue between government and industry on how best to achieve and maintain a sustainable and innovative construction sector positioned to deliver on the national development plan and Project Ireland 2040. It is made up of representatives of key industry bodies, as well as senior representatives of relevant Departments and agencies with responsibilities for policy and for the delivery of infrastructure. It is chaired by the Secretary General of my Department.

The construction sector group currently meets quarterly, with the most recent meeting of the group having taken place on Tuesday, 28 January 2025. The group discussed the following items at the meeting: an update on the work of the construction sector group innovation and digital adoption subgroup, procurement reforms, the Planning and Development Act 2024, construction skills and apprentices and an update on Project Ireland 2040 provided by the National Investment Office. A work programme for the construction sector group in 2025 has been developed by my officials following consultation with industry representatives and it will be formally noted at the next meeting of the group. Over the course of 2025, meetings of the group will focus on the following four priority themes: improving regulation and public procurement, supporting innovation and digital adoption, securing the skills pipeline and communicating the public investment pipeline. There was broad agreement among group members on these priority topics for inclusion in the 2025 work programme.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Can more detail be provided on those discussions? We have all heard about the issues that exist in this area. The Minister mentioned the need to ensure we have an adequate workforce pipeline. We know there are constraints now. Additionally, how much conversation was there concerning new methods of construction? We have recently seen 3-D concrete printing and several such houses have been built in Muirhevnamore, Dundalk. While that is not a solution to the housing problem on its own, it is part of a solution along with modular construction and all those other methods. We have seen major development companies being able to use timber frames and so on to do things on a massive scale. Talking to developers, though, the issues are still going to centre on planning. In dealing with the State, the issue will be the multiple planning constraints. Beyond that even, it is going to be about the obstacles in the way of drawing down funding. If we could get some more detail, we might be able to see that we are going to get beyond our constraints. This is before we talk about the ESB or Irish Water.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The latest meeting of the construction sector group received an update on some of what the Deputy mentioned. This included the proposed research on a pathway to having a 30% embodied carbon reduction in the construction sector, the development of a modern methods of construction data dashboard, which is nearing completion and the collaboration between Dublin City Council, DCC, and the Build Digital Project to progress the building information modelling in DCC. There was also reference to the Department of Education modular builds programme. Construct Innovate workshops are happening across March and April this year to align with that centre's next funding call to members. A call for proposals was also launched by Skillnet Ireland as a way to address the cost of training. A training needs analysis workshop was co-hosted with the Construction Industry Federation. The Build Digital Project was restructured into a thrive-up structure from quarter 2. There has, therefore, been engagement on what the Deputy referred to regarding modern methods of construction and that

is a central focus. All this needs to lead to more supply, which is key.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It would be very useful to have a greater level of detail regarding the issues they put out there with the planning system and infrastructural obstacles and the workforce piece, and then if there is a timeline and even projections. While I accept that some of this will involve public works and we will also have works that happen in the private sector, it is what we are looking at even percentage-wise as regards using some of these new methods of construction. Many of us come into this Chamber and end up talking about the absolute crazy rents, people who find themselves in brutal situations as regards evictions and the issues we have with the new constraints around the tenant in situ scheme. While we see that there have to be some temporary solutions in the sense of a ban on any increases with regard to rents, we need to be able to increase supply. If we have all the stakeholders in the room, it is vital that we know what the actual constraints are, some of which we have heard ourselves, and then those solutions and whether there are timelines and projections.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The construction sector group is doing an element of that in the context of construction skills. The Planning and Development Act was obviously discussed, and modern methods of construction as well as other priority areas, which I have referenced, around digital adoption and productivity in the construction sector. However, a separate very serious piece of work is ongoing in the Department on establishing a new infrastructure division. That is all about removing the constraints, barriers, blockages and paralysis that exists in too many elements of the State when it comes to infrastructure delivery and housing supply in our economy. Its central focus will all be on that and how we match the increased level of ambition on capital investment in our economy with a very systematic view taken on all of the delays, which are just unacceptable. Across the House, all of us want to see investment leading to the project delivery happening in a much quicker and accelerated way. The whole focus of the infrastructure division is to do that centrally so that we try to unblock some of the delays that have been going on for too long.

Flood Risk Management

98. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 100 of 13 February 2025, for an update on the Corrib go Cósta project; if the design options have now been developed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16249/25]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question relates to the urgent need for flood defences in Galway and specifically an update on the Corrib na gCósta project. Have the design options been developed? I understand from a previous question that they are now out, but the Minister of State might just clarify that, and the status of the project given the appalling delays that have taken place up to now.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme was the largest study of flood risk in the country, studying the flood risk for some two thirds of the population. Following and based on the CFRAM study outputs, Galway City Council appointed consultant engineers in November 2020 to design an option to protect the city from a significant flood event in the future. The work completed by the consultants has identified that the scale of flood risk in Galway city is much greater than that identified in the strategic CFRAM study.

A revised scope reflecting the additional works for the scheme was presented by the scheme's consultants to Galway City Council, the leading authority for the scheme. The scheme was originally intended to protect 312 properties. The revised scheme is designed to protect 940 properties. The revised scope includes quay walls that extend from the Galway dock area, including along Long Walk and the Spanish Arch. The properties in the Claddagh area, along Grattan Road and Father Griffin Road will be protected by the construction of a quay wall along the Claddagh basin and Nimmo's Pier. Flood defences along the property line, localised land and road raising in Salthill will manage wave overtopping risks.

Galway City Council submitted a request for additional funding to the OPW for an increase in the fees to facilitate the revised scope, and this was subsequently approved in June 2024. The revised programme was published on the scheme website in January 2025, with the scheme currently progressing with development of the design options.

There will be an opportunity for the public to view and comment on the design options, currently scheduled to take place in June 2025. Thereafter, the emerging preferred option will be significantly developed by the scheme consultants in conjunction with Galway City Council, and it is anticipated that this will be finalised in early 2026.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I wish the Minister of State the best in his job. Forgive my frustration. Maybe I should not use the phrase “appalling delays”, but rather the absolutely unacceptable delay. I sat on the council. Like many people here, I was very familiar with the CFRAM programme and the necessity then following that to have flood defences. I think I am on my fourth Minister; it could be the fifth. Everyone took a hands-on approach. Planning originally was to be September 2023. Then it changed to July 2025. Then it became July 2027. The construction was to commence in October 2025, then June 2026, then December 2027. The completion date was to be September 2027. The next completion date was 2029, and March 2031 is now the completion date. We have had one public consultation. I know there will be another walk-in consultation in June this year. With regard to the figure of 312 properties, the city council knows that as well the engineers from back in 2021. The project has gone from €9 million to €50 million.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I really understand. I spoke to a great number of people in Galway. I was there when it flooded in the days when I was Minister of State previously. I understand the Deputy's frustration, but compared to the initial CFRAM study, we have gone from 312 to 940 properties. That takes in a huge area of Galway and many stakeholders. A lot of consultation has taken place. We have one chance to get it right. We cannot afford to get it wrong. There is a lot of work going on. From the day a scheme is announced to the day we get it on the ground takes between nine and ten years. It is very frustrating. We have a job in hand, however, working with the lead authority, which in this case is Galway City Council. I work closely with the officials, no more than the Deputy, and I give them every opportunity. If they need to do works such as minor works, the money is there for them. I have always helped to facilitate them in any way we can, as does the whole of government.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I hope the Minister takes a hands-on approach like his previous colleagues. I live in the Claddagh. I know the area; I have a vested interest. Besides that, however, it is a very important project. From day one there was a misunderstanding with regard to a once in 100 years event. That is what they were planning for when it was quite clear, and we witnessed the recent storm, that this was going to be a frequent event. Of course it is complex and I understand all that. We need to bring the public with us. If there is structure going

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up, the public need to be with us. There has been one public consultation, which was years ago. There will be a walk-in consultation to look at the plans and then down the road there will be a further consultation for the options. That will be really important. The project cost has gone from €9 million to €50 million. Finally it has dawned on the establishment that this is a very serious and complicated project and it will take time but we need somebody to drive it. I am asking the Minister of State to drive that given just some of the dates that have slipped. The project was going in one direction and then there was an argument with the consultants over the price, and I understand that. However, all of this should have been foreseen. At this point, I just want a commitment to a hands-on approach with regard to this and that there will be no further slippage in dates.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I am nearly afraid to say “a hands-on approach” because, as the Deputy said, four Ministers told her they were taking hands-on approach. My-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: They helped to---

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: My interest in flooding is no different from the Deputy’s or the whole country. I give her a firm commitment. I have to follow the rules that are set out in front of me. I am working with the local authority and the Deputy and other Deputies from the region, and I will continue to work with them as I have in the past. My job as Minister of State is to deliver a scheme and when it goes from 312 properties to nearly 1,000, it means the scheme is broader and bigger and takes a lot more time. I understand that, and I hope the Deputy does. However, I will give her a commitment----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That figure was from 2021.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I could talk to the Deputy about my town of Athlone-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: No, no, just the-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: It started off with four or five cells and ended up with 11 or 13. These all take time. The CFRAM programme set out to do a job. It has done the job and when they appointed the consultants, they realised the scheme was way bigger than it was. I will give the assurance that I will be hands-on and I will do what is necessary to bring it to a conclusion.

Questions Nos. 99 and 100 taken with Written Answers.

Flood Relief Schemes

101. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform the engagement there have been between his Department and other Departments in 2025 on the delivery of necessary flood protection schemes in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16111/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I wish to ask the Minister about the Department’s engagements on the delivery of necessary flood protection schemes in the State. This is a follow-up to the two parliamentary questions I asked him previously to which I received written answers. It is that whole idea of everything from the minor flood mitigations, the works that are being done regarding coastal protections and the interdepartmental group. The national coastal change

management strategy report referred to the need to build up a body of work. Combined with delivering on CFRAM which in my constituency had to be reviewed on the basis of the flooding during the huge rains in Cooley in 2023, there is a huge body of work to be done, particularly in the part of the world I live in and I am very interested in the Minister of State's answer.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Office of Public Works, OPW, as the lead agency for flood risk management, is co-ordinating the delivery of measures towards meeting the Government's national flood risk policy. A broad range of structural and non-structural measures have already been implemented to address flood risk under an approach structured around three pillars: prevention, protection, and preparedness. In the course of its work, the OPW engages with other Departments and State agencies through a variety of key groups and I will briefly outline the work of some of these groups.

In 2016, the Government established the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group to improve co-ordination between all State agencies involved with the River Shannon and to introduce co-ordinated flood risk solutions. The group, which is chaired by the OPW, co-ordinates the work of all members to maximise flood risk mitigation. The group meets biannually and is due to meet this month.

The group produces an annual work programme which demonstrates the extensive work and co-ordination by all State bodies to jointly help address flood risk on the Shannon under the following themes of activity: physical works, maintenance, water management, regulatory, policy and planning. The group has structured progress in several collaborative initiatives, including a planned programme of maintenance works.

The interdepartmental flood policy co-ordination group chaired by the OPW is a whole-of-government cross-sectoral group which co-ordinates national flood policy development and implementation. The purpose of the group is to give regard to the extent of non-structural solutions informing the implementation strategy of the 2018 flood risk management plans and to ensure policies that can benefit communities and individuals directly are carefully considered.

The group is preparing a wide range of significant policy initiatives, including avoiding construction in flood-prone areas, protecting at-risk communities against their significant flood risk and planning responses to reduce the impacts of flood events on communities and individuals. Many actions identified are now being implemented by the relevant Departments and offices. The group meets twice per annum and last met on 23 October 2024, with a further meeting due to be held imminently. I will give the Deputy more on that later.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would appreciate that. The interdepartmental group has responsibility for delivering on policy and we saying we cannot have enough protections and mitigations. We know we are dealing with rising sea levels. When we talk about the likes of Dundalk, we are talking about a significant amount of redeemed land. Therefore, we were under pressure from the beginning. There are many houses under sea level and I have already heard much conversation regarding those who cannot get flood insurance or house insurance. Many of my neighbours would fall into that particular bracket. Some of that should be solved by delivering on CFRAM. I ask the Minister of State for a written update on that, although I do not expect it now. I got some detail regarding some of the CFRAM works that have been done but I ask for a timeline for the delivery on the sizable pieces that need to be done, particularly in and around the Dundalk area. Again, when will that body of work by the interdepartmental group be available, following the review looking at natural flood protections and at what you

would call unnatural protections that we have seen in the likes of Holland. I had an engagement with the Dutch ambassador in the last while.

Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere: I wish to briefly raise the issue of the Graiguenamanagh flood relief scheme. It is my own town. In 2016, there was a devastating flood event which wreaked havoc and mayhem on many families and businesses in Graiguenamanagh. Funding was approved by the Minister of State in his previous term as Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW which was much welcomed and received. In March 2020, a design team was appointed to come up with a scheme but five years later and we have not even gone for planning permission. Getting these schemes over the line is far too slow. I ask the Minister of State to try to prioritise the Graiguenamanagh flood relief scheme and get it over the line, because, as I said, the flood event happened almost ten years ago and ten years later, we still do not have any works to make the town, the businesses and the families feel safer for the next event that may come.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I want to answer the question put to me. Other stuff has been brought up in relation to the Deputy’s area and I fully understand that. I will get to him on that.

On the question, I can only say what I say to every Member of the House. When a politician turns the sod at a Garda station, it could be 11 years before we see that Garda station. The very same occurs with planning permission for flood defences. There are many hurdles. As a Department, we have to adhere to all these environmental things in order to deliver these schemes. Even though I announced a scheme back in the day, things change and can delay a scheme. I will get back to the Deputy with a detailed answer in due course.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is a very important scheme for Graiguenamanagh in County Kilkenny.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is necessary to make these interventions. All these schemes are very important because we have seen the huge issue with flooding in the last while. We are talking about better preparations for extreme weather conditions. It is absolutely vital we see delivery of these particular projects. I did not expect the Minister of State to come back with specifics. The Dundalk-Blackrock south relief scheme is really needed. Planning applications need to be submitted by the Q2 of 2027. In fairness, I got a written response on that but we must ensure there is delivery within those timelines and then beyond that, a wider piece of work needs to be done. That is the bit I asked about, that is, the interdepartmental group. When will we have the interdepartmental group’s body of work and a more detailed plan on all those mitigations, including everything from the natural to the unnatural flood protection schemes that can be put in place? We have seen some of this work expertly done in places where farmers agree to allow certain parts of land to be flooded. They flood, the water recedes quickly and everyone gets back to normal but it also saves many homes.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I will give the Deputy an answer to the question he put to me but some of the issues he is putting to me now are very detailed. I apologise for the simple reason that last time we were here, he put questions to me and I did not have the answers. However, this time I have the answer and it is back to him. I will gladly work with him. There is a huge body of work being done. It is hard to predict when we will have everything because it changes from time to time. The different groups we have now set up for flooding are working well and are well maintained and managed. Good proposals have come from them but I would gladly sit down with the Deputy and have a chat about this.

Legislative Reviews

104. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 99 of 13 February 2025, for an update on plans to review and strengthen the ethics in public office legislation following the completion of the review of the statutory framework in December 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16248/25]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Could the Minister give me an update on the plans to review and strengthen the ethics in public office legislation? The review of the need to change it was done and we are into our third year now since December 2022. Could the Minister give us an update on the specific plans of the Government?

Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Jack Chambers): As the Deputy is aware, we committed to updating the ethics in public office legislation in the recent programme for Government. This is on foot of a wide-ranging review the Deputy referred to on the legislative framework for ethics in public office my Department undertook during the last Government, the findings of which were published in February 2023.

The report's recommendations include: the legislative framework for ethics should be underpinned by a set of overarching integrity principles; disclosure requirements should be strengthened to improve transparency; and consideration should be given to whether the regime should encompass more officeholders. The report also recommends a strengthening of SIPO. I am also conscious of recent further recommendations relating to ethics which will need to be considered in the context of this reform.

This is a complex area which requires careful consideration. I intend to look in detail at the outstanding policy issues, including those I have outlined, and to have wider engagement with my officials on the most appropriate way to ensure the programme for Government commitment is fulfilled. My ultimate goal in this is to create a fit-for-purpose, easy to understand and user-friendly legislative ethical framework that contributes to the quality, efficacy and transparency of our system and builds on the strengths of our existing framework.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am glad it is in the programme for Government. However, the Minister did not provide any dates whatsoever. There are very serious issues here. These are being raised not just by me but also by SIPO, year after year, in its annual report. SIPO has highlighted the gaps that exist and its lack of power.

Will the Minister display some sense of urgency in relation to the issues that have arisen regarding insider information? Examples in this regard relate to the disclosure requirements, on which nothing has happened, and to the commission itself. There are members who are working full time in other areas. That needs to be looked at. The resources need to be looked at. There is also a need to look at what we do when we leave the Dáil, for example, where we go and the conflicts of interest that may arise. We also need to look at an independent Vote for SIPO. On every level, we need to strengthen SIPO and recognise the gaps that exist and that it has raised year after year. When is that going to happen?

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Deputy Jack Chambers: The first thing is to take into account the review that has happened and some of the more recent recommendations which have been made, and to have a policy consideration around those. Following that, what is set out in the context of the programme for Government is to give legislative underpinning to that. Once the policy matters have been bottomed out within my Department, which I am engaging on, I will be in position to develop a draft scheme. This will be done in collaboration with the Attorney General. It will then be considered by the Oireachtas process in the context of pre-legislative scrutiny. I will be working on this as a legislative priority.

I do not want to give the Deputy a particular date. What I will say is that it is an important priority for me as Minister. I want to fulfil the programme for Government commitments and ensure that we update the ethics in public office legislation and utilise the various external and internal reports that are there to underpin that work in the context of the reforms that have to be advanced.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister. I appreciate that he is making this a priority. I also appreciate he cannot give me a date, but there has to be recognition that the existing legislation is totally inadequate, that SIPO has repeatedly pointed out a range of difficulties in terms of its lack of power in the context of ensuring that the highest standards in public office obtain. We know that. I am not going to go into individual issues, but there has to be a sense of urgency. The review of the framework was completed in December 2022. It is now 2025 and there is going to be still more consultation and more policy. I cannot understand how the Minister cannot introduce legislation and then amendments could be made along the way. There has to be an urgent recognition that we have failed to update SIPO in order to give it adequate powers to ensure the highest standards in public life. We all have made mistakes in our lives; none of us is perfect. We need an organisation that holds all of us to account to the highest standards. We need to empower and resource SIPO, but most of all we need recognition from the Government in relation to it.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why it has been set out as a priority in the programme for Government and why, in the first instance, we need to make sure that the policy framework that is developed can be reflected in a general scheme. At that point, we will have pre-legislative scrutiny and cross-party input in the Oireachtas. This is an important matter across the political system in terms of broader engagement. We know that other legislative measures were published previously. These were not advanced. As a result, I want to make sure that we fulfil the intention of the programme for Government and that legislation can be enacted.

I am prioritising the particular policy inputs that we have. There are many of these in multiple reports and they need to be acted on in the context of the policy framework which will feed into a general scheme. We will be working with the Attorney General's Office to produce that. We would welcome and value input from the Deputy and all Members of the Oireachtas in ensuring we can update the legislation in the best way possible. That is what my intention is in the role I have been given.

Questions Nos. 105 and 106 taken with Written Answers.

Dáil Éireann
Heritage Sites

107. **Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform for an update on the refurbishment works scheduled to be carried out at Kilkenny Castle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15973/25]

Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere: I congratulate the Ministers of State on their new roles. I have not had the opportunity to formally congratulate them previously.

I am seeking an update on the refurbishment works that are scheduled to be carried out at Kilkenny Castle.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I thank the Deputy for his words of encouragement. The OPW is responsible for the conservation, care and preservation of Kilkenny Castle and parkland. In 2024, there were approximately 417,000 ticket visitors to Kilkenny Castle and 780,000 to the parkland. The OPW delivers an annual programme of maintenance and conservation at the castle. Planned maintenance works, including mechanical and electric works and window maintenance, continue to be undertaken. Painting and decorating, cabling, lighting and infrastructure upgrades and improvements in the castle wing were undertaken during 2024. Further maintenance works on lighting in the picture gallery will be taking place this year. Improvement works to the river steps and further painting work are also planned for 2025.

Preliminary investigations of the cause of water ingress in some areas were conducted in January. This work identified a need for some flashing and slate repair to or replacement of certain roofs. Following further assessment, it is expected that some of this work can be addressed in 2025. Some of the necessary roof works may be incorporated in the future development works in the picture gallery wing. Archaeological investigation works were conducted last November to investigate subsurface conditions. The findings of this investigation will inform the engineering approach for conducting the forthcoming development works, including courtyard resurfacing that will take place as part as of the major development of the project.

The OPW has secured planning permission for major conservation work to improve accessibility to the castle. These proposed works will facilitate universal access. The project will incorporate lift access to the picture gallery, as well as a changing places bathroom facility.

As part of these works, the OPW plans to carry out fabric repair works to the picture gallery. Section 57 consent has been obtained from the local planning authority for these works. The visitor reception and ticket office will be relocated. The location of the current ticket office is unsatisfactory and too small to accommodate the two guides needed during busy periods.

The project team is engaged in producing a detailed design. Subject to the availability of technical resources and funding, this project will be put out to tender next year.

Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere: I welcome the significant investment in Kilkenny Castle in recent years. I look forward to continued investment being made in the years ahead. Kilkenny Castle is a jewel in the crown of the south east. Visitor numbers are absolutely through the roof every year. The castle is a fantastic asset on our doorstep and is worth a huge amount to the local economy. The Minister and Ministers of State are always welcome to Kilkenny, especially if they bring the cheque book. We will welcome them any time.

Last Sunday, I had the opportunity to visit Kilkenny city and the castle itself. The crowd

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of people there was absolutely unbelievable. To have a state-of-the-art facility like Kilkenny Castle in the middle of the city centre is quite unique, not only in the context of the south east but across Ireland in general. I encourage everybody to get into their cars this summer and go down to Kilkenny and enjoy everything that is great about it.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: You could not get better advertising than that. When he mentioned getting the cheque book, I looked at the man on my right and he smiled. We all know, particularly those of us in government, how important Kilkenny Castle is to the economy and to Kilkenny. The OPW has invested hugely in it and will continue to do so. As I stated, there are some good projects coming down the line that will enhance the experience for visitors. We will continue to do that.

I will gladly work with the Deputy and other Members in relation to this matter. The Deputy referred to the castle as a jewel in the crown. That is the case with all our national monuments. When we think of what the castle does and provides, we can see that it is of enormous value. The weather has been very good over the past week. People have been talking about flooding, but the weather has been good for the visitors.

I agree with the Deputy's suggestion. Everyone should get into their cars and travel. I encourage that them to do so.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: If people want to cycle, they can do so. That is not a problem. In Kilkenny, we are proud of our heritage, history and culture. The continued investment in Kilkenny Castle is most welcome. As stated, over the course of the summer, I would love to welcome the Minister and the Ministers of State to Kilkenny city. We will take a tour of the castle. They will be able to explore everything that is brilliant about our wonderful city.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I am invited to attend many events. I appreciate the offer. I have to go up and down the country to look at flood schemes. I assure the Deputy that I have been in Kilkenny Castle. I met with my team yesterday to discuss a number of different projects. Kilkenny Castle was at the top of the list. We are investing heavily in the project. I will always support Deputies coming to my Department and, in particular, to me to discuss projects like this.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

12 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Chuala muid ó Donald Trump aréir go mbeidh sé ag cur taraifi i bhfeidhm ar fud an domhain. Is polasaí gan tuiscint é sin a ndéanfaidh earraí níos costasaí do mhuintir na Stát Aontaithe agus a mbeidh impleachtaí aige sa Stát seo agus ar fud na hEorpa fosta. Last night, we were subjected to US trade aggression. To add insult to injury, we had to watch the US play the victim. Trump talked about prying open markets and breaking down barriers. He wants unfettered access to every market, and the EU is front and centre in that agenda. What Trump calls reciprocal tariffs are no such thing. I watched him as he waved the US trade estimates report, a US document that clearly sets out that the average EU tariff is 5%

on US goods. Fact and reality took a back seat last night when he went on to claim that the EU has tariffs of 39% on US products. What Trump did was an act of self-sabotage that will heap higher costs on US consumers. That is what tariffs do, especially blanket tariffs. We need to be careful not to step into the same space, risking jobs and higher prices for workers and families. We need to protect people struggling with a cost-of-living crisis from higher prices. Working people cannot be expected to pick up the tab from this mess that Trump has created.

This morning, I raised with the Minister for Finance the need for a very early assessment of the impact of these tariffs on particular sectors. That is what we need in order to make sure that the supports at State and EU level are in place. We need to see urgency in contingency planning, making sure supports for industries and workers are ready to go, if and when they are needed. We also need to actively look at how we de-risk the economy and mitigate the impact of these tariffs. The fact that pharma has not been hit with these tariffs buys us some time, but the reality is that we do not know how much time we have.

There are serious issues with regard to the all-Ireland economy now we have two different tariff rates on this small island of ours and, potentially, two different responses to those rates. I have been in contact with my party colleague the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland. I ask that those in government work hand in glove and in lock step with their counterparts in the Assembly. The first step in this regard would be to convene the North-South Ministerial Council without delay. I ask that this be done.

Yesterday, Deputy McDonald asked the Taoiseach to convene a meeting of the party leaders. I repeat that request and ask that such a meeting should take place without delay. We need to have a laser focus on things we can control. There are certain things we cannot control. We need to make sure our voice is heard in Europe. We also need to protect the all-Ireland economy and ramp up badly needed investment. We have been saying for years that we have allowed our competitiveness to slip. Businesses big and small have been telling us about the issues that are affecting us. We need investment in housing, infrastructure, energy, transport and childcare.

This is a time for cool heads. We need to take a breath and look at the reality of all options that are on the table. We also need clarity on the direction of travel of the Government. What position is the Government going to take at European Council meetings? Does it support counter-tariffs? The ESRI and the Department of Finance have told us that counter-tariffs will have a negative impact on jobs and will result in job losses and higher prices for Irish consumers. What is the Government's position on non-tariff measures? There has been speculation that tech could be in firing line. This would have a significant impact on Irish jobs. What contingency plans are in place? Is the Government looking at supports for particular sectors that will be impacted as a result of what has happened? Will it convene meetings of the various party leaders and of North-South Ministerial Council as soon as possible?

The Tánaiste: I begin by paying tribute to Mick O'Dwyer. It is with tremendous sadness that we learnt of the passing of one of Ireland's greatest GAA icons. His contribution to Irish sport and community life was extraordinary, particularly in his native county of Kerry, although we do like to claim a bit of him with the great joy he brought us in Wicklow and many other counties. I think of him and his family on his passing, and all of the GAA family as well. May he rest in peace.

I thank Deputy Doherty for the range of questions he posed. I agree with him that tariffs are bad. They are bad for Ireland, bad for Europe, bad for the US economy, bad for consumers,

bad for growth and bad for jobs. The actions of the US President last night are deeply regrettable. It seemed clear, particularly in recent days, that President Trump was determined to have this moment - what I describe as a moment of chaos - in terms of the announcement of tariffs. This the biggest change in terms of trading approaches in probably a century. He has had that moment, and what now needs to happen is negotiation. If I am to try to find some glimmer of hope in a very dark and grim situation, it is that there were references to negotiation by the US President, the US Secretary of Commerce, with whom I spoke last week, and the US Secretary of the Treasury and in the executive orders signed by the US President. That is what needs to happen. There needs to be calm, measured and strategic consideration. This is the approach Ireland will take.

The Deputy asked a very direct question about counter-tariffs. I think he will agree that this was not the EU's idea. It was not Ireland's idea. We do not want to get into an escalatory tariff situation. I share that view. However, we have already had three hits by the US in this regard. We had an impact to the tune of €25 billion to €26 billion as a result of US measures relating steel and aluminium. There has also been an impact amounting to around €75 billion in terms of the decisions the US made regarding cars. The latter will have an affect on the prices that people across Europe will pay for cars. We do not yet have the quantity involved, but the impact of the announcements last night will probably amount to hundreds of billions. At some point, the EU, which has shown significant restraint, is going to have to say "Well, hang on a second, if you're not willing to negotiate and get round the table, there is going to have to be a response". The comments by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, earlier were balanced and restrained. The message is very clear - we want to talk, negotiate and find a way forward. The question is whether the US is willing to do that. The coming days will show that. The meeting of trade ministers in Luxembourg, which I will attend on Monday, will be an opportunity for the 27 member states of the EU to come together.

We will be carrying out early assessments of impact. Some of this has already happened. I have convened a meeting of the Government's trade forum for tomorrow. This involves business representative bodies and it will provide an opportunity to take stock.

On competitiveness and controlling what we can control, I have asked the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, to bring forward proposals to the Cabinet committee on the economy, which I chair, next Thursday in terms of what we can accelerate in the programme for Government around our economy, competitiveness and productivity.

In the context of party leaders and briefings, I have provided briefings. Deputy Doherty attended such a briefing on behalf of his party last week. I would be very happy to do that again tomorrow. In the context of whether there is a need for other forums or structures, we have to have a free flow of information. I am very clear on that. I want to do that and am very happy to make all information available so we can have informed debate, discussion and decisions.

Regarding the all-island economy, I came off a call ten minutes ago with the Deputy's colleague the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland, Caoimhe Archibald. I acknowledge the good job she is doing in trying to work her way through this. We met yesterday with the deputy First Minister and the Minister Archibald via video conference. We agreed to keep in very close contact because a differential is likely to exist from 9 April next.

The Deputy asked about non-tariff measures, which I think is the anti-coercion instrument. My view is that this would be the nuclear option and that we should seek to de-escalate rather

than arrive at that destination.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I understand that the North-South Ministerial Council is awaiting confirmation from the Government. This is important because there will be cross-cutting in terms of agriculture, finance, the economy and jobs. We need the type of all-Ireland approach that we saw during the Brexit negotiations in a very clear and effective way.

I agree with the Tánaiste's points about Trump and about the fact that Europe did not bring this upon itself. I am glad Europe has not gone with immediate counter-tariffs, but we need to be very careful in the context of the impact of any countermeasures. We know that countermeasures will increase prices for Irish consumers. That is something that should not be tolerated in these circumstances. It will risk jobs and the public finances. The real question is: will counter measures bring Trump to the negotiation table? We need cool heads, negotiation and calm. During the first Trump Presidency, there were counter-measures and it did not result in his tariffs being reduced.

Is there discussion on non-tariff measures at an EU level? Is that in the sight lines of Europe? There is a big impact and a big risk for Ireland if it focuses on tariffs.

The Tánaiste: I think I saw a comment from a spokesperson for the French Government today making some reference to that. I do not dismiss that but in the nearly daily conversations I have had with the trade Commissioner and those I have had with nearly a dozen European counterparts, the overwhelming majority view is to try to find a way to bring people around the table. The Deputy's question is valid. What gets the US Administration around the table? That is a judgement call that we have to work through together in the days and weeks ahead. I would make the point that the EU cannot not respond. There is only so much one can sit back and watch happen in terms of the impact on the European economy but any measures we take must be about trying to get to that negotiating table. I genuinely share that view.

The point on the North-South Ministerial Council sounds sensible to me but I have not had an opportunity to discuss it with anybody in government. Certainly, regular structured dialogue, North-South, east and west will be essential.

The Deputy referred to pharma earlier. We should not lull ourselves into a false sense of security here. This is just the start. President Trump has been clear he wants sector-specific actions on pharma. That is why it is really important that we work at an EU level. Yes, we have a large pharma industry here but we are not alone. There is about a dozen EU countries with a pharma industry. We have made that point to the Commission. The fact that next Tuesday, President von der Leyen will convene a strategic dialogue with the pharma industry is an important step but we should not fool ourselves that there are not further plans in relation to sector-specific plans in relation to pharma.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Last night Donald Trump took aim at every traditional ally of the United States with a blunt and destructive economic weapon. The tariffs his administration has imposed worldwide risk plunging us all into a global recession. In his Rose Garden address, Donald Trump exhibited zero economic rationale for pursuing such an approach but perhaps proved why he is one of very few people in the history of the planet that ended up bankrupting a casino.

The President accused states, both friends and foe, essentially of fiscal grand larceny with no basis for these claims. The great deceiver that he is stated his tariffs were reciprocal, claim-

ing the EU charging VAT justifies his tariffs. He even claims that these are discounted tariffs based on a made up 39% rate he claims the EU applies to the United States. Again, there is no basis to these claims.

There is a new reality coming to bear in the world and the United States, unfortunately, can no longer be trusted as an economy ally. In responding to this change in our relationship, the European Union needs to be measured but resolute. We need to be strategic in how we respond to these announcements with negotiations first but at the same time we cannot allow Trump to run roughshod over global markets without standing up to him. We need to react with urgency and not panic.

There is no doubt that Donald Trump is displaying traits of a wannabe strong man who sees an opportunity to damage democracies around the world. With only 25% of global citizens now living under liberal democracies compared with 50% in 2004, it is more important than ever that we take a stand against any attempt to weaken other democracies. We must resist the rise of the autocrat. We now need to play our role as a member of the EU to bring the US to the negotiating table but to do that we will have to stand firm with our allies and our allies will have to stand firm with us.

In this House, our focus must be on helping workers in Irish firms preparing for the threat of job displacement in vulnerable sectors. We in Labour, with a policy led by my colleague, Deputy Nash, want to see a new short-term wage subsidy scheme such as the German kurzarbeit model which would keep workers in their jobs in order to retain skills and employment in exposed parts of the economy during what will be a tumultuous period. We have been calling for this since the pandemic and the money to fund this scheme can be found in the Social Insurance Fund and the National Training Fund both of which are in substantial surplus. We also need to diversify our economy and we need to continue to invest in our infrastructure. We need to learn from the lessons of the past because if we are not careful, we will lose the ability to grow our economy through hemorrhaging our skilled people and economic attractiveness through underinvestment in public transport and housing infrastructure.

The Tánaiste has already hosted briefings and has said he will host more. I welcome that and I hope that they will continue. Will he confirm if the Government is considering a short-term wage subsidy scheme model or any other Ireland-specific model which will help keep workers in their jobs?

The Tánaiste: I share the Deputy's view of some of what we heard in the press conference in the Rose Garden, and that is what it was. One must then work through the legal detail. We are already seeing that things, which were announced as coming in at midnight last night, are not coming in until 5 or 9 April, so there is a fair bit of teasing through beyond the headline announcements. Certainly, the European Union does not impose tariffs of anything like 39% on the United States. The European Union, of which we are proudly a member - the Deputy did not do so but we should not refer to it as being a distinct part - has been very clear that we want talks not tariffs. That is the approach we have been taking almost daily.

There was a view that President Trump was determined to have that Rose Garden moment before getting to the talks. We think that is regrettable. He has had that moment and now can we get on with the talking? That is the approach we should take. I agree with the Deputy and think he put it well when he said measured but resolute. There is a moment where we have to show President Trump that we are a very big economic block. There are 450 million of us and

the economic relationship between the EU and the US is worth €1.6 trillion a year. It does not matter what anybody's politics is; that is not a relationship that can be sniffed at. It matters. It matters to people who voted for him in terms of their jobs, well-being and the prices of their consumer goods. The moment has happened. He has had the big bang moment with the little charts and he has gone through all the tariffs. Now it is about calm, mature, and measured engagement.

I agree with the Deputy about the European unity piece. I am struck by the strength of European unity. I think it is for a couple of reasons. For one thing, we value our European membership, the European Union matters to all of us, but it is also because President Trump has decided to target so many different areas. Slovakia and Germany have big car industries. That has been one impact. Steel and aluminium have had a disproportionate impact on others. Of course there were the EU-wide measures yesterday and potential further measures on pharma. What is very clear is that different countries may feel a moment of pressure at different times but all of us across the European Union are badly impacted as is the US by a high tariff protectionist attitude to trade.

I agree that protecting jobs has to be our number 1 job collectively. Of course, it does. The Government will keep an open mind and will engage constructively on supports that may be required in the time ahead. I have heard colleagues make that point, including the Minister for enterprise today. Our State agencies, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, are at the trade forum and will be there again tomorrow as are business representative groups. We will always engage. We have a proud track record across successive governments of supporting Irish business but the first thing we must do is to try to mitigate and not accept this as the final outcome but take up the opportunity to negotiate, to try to negotiate down and to try to get to a better place. That has to be the first priority because that mitigation will do more to protect jobs, growth, investment and our economy than any single support scheme we may be able to put in place.

Those briefings will continue on an as required and regular basis.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It might be somewhat optimistic to think last night was a moment and now we can move on to negotiations. My fear is we will have more moments like this from the President of the United States. EU unity is easier on trade because it is the *raison d'être* of the EU. It is essentially a trade agreement between European states from which peace and prosperity will flow. Therefore, unity is strong and we should ensure that continues, without doubt. However, we can do things in Ireland, such as a short-term work wage subsidy scheme, the work for which has to be done now. The potential impact of these tariffs will emerge in the weeks, months and years ahead but we have to do the work now. Will the Tánaiste confirm if the Government is considering a short-term work wage subsidy scheme? Both ICTU and IBEC have previously called for such a support. Will supports such as those put in place during Brexit, such as a credit guarantee scheme or a new marketing fund, be considered? Will the Tánaiste confirm if there will be a comprehensive assessment of the companies impacted and, as best we can, the potential number of jobs that could be impacted?

The Tánaiste: I am very clear that there will be many moments - I think the Deputy is right about that - and there will be sector-specific moments to come. The point I was making was that in my engagement with the US Commerce Secretary and others it was very clear that the US was not mandated to engage or negotiate until after this liberation day as they bizarrely described it. That has happened and now we need to get on with the engagement and negotiation. The European Commission and the European Union needs to make judgment calls as to what is

required to get into that meaningful process of engagement.

On looking at sectors and impacts, that work is already under way. On the impact on jobs, we have done some modelling. The ESRI has done some modelling, which has been produced. The main impact from a sustained period of tariffs in the first instance seems to be a slowdown in new job growth and employment growth. That is not good either, of course, but working to retain the jobs we have will be the absolute priority. I do not want to give a knee-jerk response to any specific scheme. We have a meeting of the labour-employer economic forum, LEEF, tomorrow. We will have a meeting of the Government trade forum. We are happy to engage and share insights and work with the Deputy on supports that may be required for the time ahead. The priority today and for the coming days is to mitigate the impact of the tariffs and get it to a better place.

Deputy Charles Ward: I welcome the release of the draft I.S. 465 for public consultation last Monday. For a long time, homeowners affected by defective concrete have been calling for the recognition of science. The standard now recognises that pyrrhotite oxidation causes internal sulfate attack, creating deterioration in Donegal homes. It is incredible that the freeze-thaw action potential damage mechanism has been retained in the revised draft document. This despite international research, scientists, the Department of housing and the GSI-commissioned research clearly ruling the presence of mica causing freeze-thaw does not exist in Donegal homes.

I have a number of concerns that need to be addressed in due course but time does not allow this today. The table of options, particularly remediation, that featured in the previous document has been omitted in the revised draft I.S. 465. At first glance, this would appear to be a welcome development because it looks like there is only one solution, namely, full demolition. However, further scrutiny reveals a number of references to partial remediation, which is incredibly concerning. For example, on page 28, section 7.3.1.1 on sample selection, point (c) states: “where part(s) of the structure has been identified for potential retention”. In page 39, section 8.2 states: “the chartered engineer shall recommend demolition and rebuild of all affected concrete block building elements to the client in the final [engineer’s] report”.

My question is twofold. Does this mean that every element, that is, rising walls, inner leaf and outer leaf, is considered separately? If one element of the building does not meet the threshold for removal, does this mean the element will be retained or does it mean the entire house will be demolished? It is unclear. In short, the revised version of I.S. 465 is seeking to provide the options for partial fixes to people’s homes. The peer research report supplied by Ulster University and the NSAI is very clear. Severe deterioration of all components is inevitable and it is strongly suggested that these concrete blocks be replaced as part of the remediation solution.

The recent revision of I.S. 465 sets out sulfur levels in their tests of construction materials at 0.3% despite the fact that the European standard EN 12620 specifies a limit of less than 1%. That concrete test would equate to 0.2%. Can the Tánaiste explain why the NSAI recommends using a total sulfur level that is in conflict with EU standards?

I understand these questions are very technical but I would be grateful if the Tánaiste could come back to me with clarity. These standards could have very serious consequences for people building their homes in Ireland.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for the question and his advocacy on behalf of his constituents in Donegal. I certainly will engage with him, as will the Government, on some of those technical matters. While I am taking the question, it very much relates to the testing standard that is used to evaluate the impact of defective concrete blocks. I realise this is an issue that is having a very significant impact and it is, as the Deputy has acknowledged, a complex issue as well.

The Government is allocating a significant amount of public money to affected homeowners. We are doing so to try to help enable them to rebuild their homes and get on with their lives. I cannot imagine the absolute misery, fear, pressure and stress - I am sure those words do not even capture it - that people are living with. I want to acknowledge that. We have seen funding increase significantly in 2025, I believe by over 50%, because the scheme is now ramping up. It is designed so that sufficient additional funding will be provided as required. The estimate is that the overall cost of the scheme will be in excess of €2.2 billion. Notwithstanding the challenges that I accept and the legitimate questions the Deputy is asking, over €2.2 billion is a significant commitment by this Oireachtas to those people to try to make progress. Our aim has been to make sure the scheme is designed and delivered in a manner that meets the real needs of homeowners in an efficient and effective way. My understanding is that there are more than 2,000 homeowners at various stages. The grant rates that were set and increased in 2024 are based on expert advice and based at a level to ensure homeowners will get the money they need to put their homes right.

In order to ensure that the grant scheme follows the most up-to-date science, changes were made to the scheme late in 2024 to take account of the most recent research and a forthcoming legislative Bill will make amendments to the grant scheme to allow these changes be implemented by the scheme's administrators.

Specifically on the testing standard, I will not profess to be an expert on the technicalities and I am certainly happy to revert to the Deputy via the Minister with further information. My understanding is that the public consultation on the NSAI standard has now commenced. I believe it commenced as recently as last Monday, 31 March. This is a milestone moment from a decision the Government made back in 2021 and funding provided by the State into the required research for the NSAI to undertake its work on revising the standards. The committees responsible for the research and drafting of the revised standard included officials from the Department. On conclusion of the public consultation period, the NSAI will finalise its review. It is expected to likely publish the revised standard in quarter 3 of this year. To assist in the evaluation of the new research and development underpinning the draft standard, the Minister's expert group has reconvened to provide advice on the implications for the defective concrete block grant scheme administered by the authorities.

I accept it is complex but it is also important for the reasons the Deputy has stated that we get this right. It has serious implications for homeowners. We will certainly keep in very close contact with the Deputy on this matter.

Deputy Charles Ward: One of the concerns is the breach of EU regulations. The recommended total levels of sulfur they are recommending in this new version of I.S. 465 breaches EU regulations for concrete aggregates, namely, EN 12620, which limits the total sulfur level for concrete aggregate to 0.1% if pyrrhotite is present. The NSAI has set a total sulfur limit of 3% for testing defective concrete in this revised document, which is higher than EN 12620's 1%, because the test is for concrete, not raw aggregate. Raw aggregate is the problem. As we

take into account additional sulfur contribution, it comes from the cement paste. Page 25 of the revised document states that 5% to 10% of this mass concrete would have total sulfur content of 0.1% where iron sulfides are absent. This is leaving it very vulnerable to needing to be revisited again. The NSAI has also recommended total sulfur levels of a threshold of 3%, despite the fact that anything higher than 2% means concrete aggregate would not comply with an EU standard.

The Tánaiste: I say sincerely that the fact he and constituents of Donegal have had to get into such a level of technical detail shows the complexity and seriousness of this issue for people in the constituency, and the seriousness with which the Deputy takes it as their representative. I would be happy to set up a technical briefing with officials from the Department of housing. I would also encourage the Deputy, his constituents and all Oireachtas Members from Donegal to fully avail of the consultation that is now open in respect of getting these standards right. The timeline is now clear. The consultation opened on Monday. It is expected that we will be in a position to adopt any revisions in quarter 3 of this year. There would be a number of policy matters to consider if the draft standard was adopted. For example, the scheme design has always had regard to scientific evidence. Decisions regarding the remediation of affected homes have been made in good faith on the basis of the current scientific evidence as set out in the existing version of the I.S 465 standard, which dates from 2018. As drafted, the replacement standard raises the issue as to whether scheme funding would need to be expanded to allow costs related to replacement foundations. There are a number of policy issues that we will have to address. In the first instance, we need to see the outcome of that consultation. I will certainly set up a briefing for the Deputy with officials on the technicalities.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last October, the former Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, announced that hormone replacement therapy, HRT, would be made free, which was widely welcomed. However, despite the scheme being scheduled to roll out in January, it has yet to be implemented, leaving women to continue paying for their medication. The Irish Pharmacy Union has highlighted several issues, including insufficient communication from the Department of Health, no IT system for the pharmacists' reimbursement and no fixed date for the scheme's commencement. Additionally, it looks like the scheme excludes GP consultation fees and pharmacy dispensing charges, leading to criticism that the term "free HRT" is misleading. HRT typically costs a woman between €30 and €70 per month, amounting to as much as €840 annually. The scheme was supposed to alleviate this financial burden for women experiencing menopause. Furthermore, the cost of getting a prescription from a GP for HRT includes a GP visit fee of €50 to €70 and some pharmacies charge a dispensing of €5 to €10.

Pharmacists have contacted me and raised several concerns regarding the free HRT scheme. These concerns underscore the need for clear communication, a robust IT infrastructure and a well-defined implementation plan to ensure the scheme benefits those in need. Pharmacists flagged problems with the scheme from the time it was announced, particularly the misleading name "free HRT", which has caused confusion for patients who thought it would cover all costs, like the free contraception scheme. Patients still have to pay for GP consultations and pharmacy dispensing fees, significantly adding to their costs. Maybe, in hindsight, calling it a free scheme was a bit of a long shot.

Hormone replacement therapy has significant benefits and impacts women's lives. It can alleviate symptoms of menopause such as hot flushes, night sweats and mood swings, improve bone density and enhance overall quality of life. Women undergoing HRT often experience increased energy levels, better skin condition and improved emotional well-being. In Ireland, according to one report, 78% of women report that menopausal symptoms interfere with their

daily activities and 31% use HRT to manage these symptoms. These benefits highlight the importance of making HRT accessible and free, as promised.

Time and again, we have heard the words “more”, “mná” and “equality for women” in the Dáil. While I fully support women, I suggest that instead of merely talking about helping them, we should take concrete actions to support them. This scheme was supposed to make life easier for women but, as we know, it is not as straightforward as we were led to believe. For women, the choice between paying essential bills, such as the ESB bill, or covering the ever-increasing cost of food takes precedence over their own health needs. This should not be the case. Given these delays and the financial burden on women, can the Tánaiste provide a clear timeline for implementation of the HRT scheme and detail the steps being taken to resolve these issues?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins for raising this important issue. I should say about the comment on mná na hÉireann and the likes, I am very proud of a lot of the work we have done together in this House, often on a cross-party basis, to make progress on women’s reproductive health, whether around contraception, repealing the eighth amendment or a number of other important steps. I accept we have much more to do. When I was Minister for Health, we established a new task force on women’s health. It has been working through ever since with quite a number of outcomes.

The Deputy is quite right that there is understandable frustration - anger, I would say - from many around the country that this measure has yet to be fully implemented. My colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is working intensively on this issue. In fact, we discussed it as recently as yesterday. She has had a number of direct meetings with pharmacists and their representative body to try to get this matter over the line. In addition, the Department and the HSE have engaged extensively with the Irish Pharmacy Union on the practical roll-out of the measure.

This measure matters for the reasons the Deputy outlined. When operational, it will cover any HRT medications and products that are reimbursable by the HSE and have been prescribed for the purpose of alleviating the symptoms of menopause. Reimbursement supports for the new HRT measure will be available to participating pharmacies from the date the measure formally commences. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and officials in the Department are actively engaged in the matter. They want to see this introduced as an absolute priority. I would ask everybody involved in this today - representative bodies, the Department, the HSE - to let us all have a bit of give and take in order to get to a point where the scheme can be activated once and for all in a way that supports our pharmacists, whose great work in communities across Ireland I acknowledge, and, crucially, fulfils the policy objective of making sure these HRT measures are funded and available to the women of Ireland.

Progress has been made on women’s health over the past number of years. It became clear in the work of the women’s health task force that menopause was a neglected aspect of women’s health. This led to an increasing focus on providing assistance to those experiencing menopause under the women’s health action plan. This has included: a GP clinical lead for women’s health, established in 2021 to lead on the improvement of women’s health supports in the community; development of a new menopause theory course for GPs and GP trainees via the Irish College of General Practitioners; and development of a quick reference on menopause for GP and practice nurses. The “It’s My Time” campaign was launched in partnership with Sport Ireland. It was aimed at encouraging women over 40 to increase physical activity levels, which can also be helpful in managing symptoms of menopause. We saw the launch of the

first ever national menopause awareness campaign. A second phase of that campaign is now in place. We have six specialist menopause clinics open for women with complex experiences of menopause requiring specialist care. There is much work we need to do in this area but I hope these are strong signs of our commitment to the area. Delivering free HRT will be the next important step.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Tánaiste. Last October, the women of this country were promised free HRT, with implementation set for January. We are now into April but nowhere nearer a start date. It is incorrect for the Minister for Health to place the blame on the Irish Pharmacy Union. The delays are on the side of the Department of Health. Many people are contacting pharmacists expecting prescribed medication to be free under the assumption the scheme has already been implemented by the Government. It is unfair to blame the pharmacists for this confusion. To be honest and fair to the women of this country, when will this scheme be rolled out and will it be entirely free?

The Tánaiste: I want to be very clear, in that I am certainly not, and I hope no one in government is - I have not heard anyone in government doing this, and the Minister for Health certainly is not - blaming pharmacists at all. Pharmacists have an important role to play. In fact, in our programme for Government, we commit to wanting to see an expanded role for pharmacists and a new pharmacy contract. When properly and robustly financially supported, there is huge potential for pharmacists to do more. I know that from calling into them across the country. There is no blame game here at all. What there is is a new Minister in a new Government determined to get this issue over the line.

I asked everybody involved, including the pharmacists, to let us all have a little give and take and try to reach a resolution quickly. There is a lot of active engagement going on. I do not want to say anything disrespectful to that process but I am hopeful that the issue can be brought to a speedy resolution. It is important that it is. I accept it is going on too long. I accept women expected the measure to be in place before now. It needs to be brought to a finality and that is the Minister's priority.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: It is a privilege to be able to stand on the floor of this Chamber and ask questions on behalf of my constituents in Wicklow-Wexford directly of the Tánaiste or, indeed, the Taoiseach.

It is critical to economic development that we invest in infrastructure. The Tánaiste will share my frustration about the pace of delivery of certain infrastructure, be it water and wastewater infrastructure, the national grid or transport. I wish to pose a question on transport to the Tánaiste. Obviously, he will be familiar with my constituency of Wicklow-Wexford, but this also impacts his constituency. The problem is faced by tens of thousands of commuters from counties Wicklow and Wexford every day. The Wicklow commuter study found that 46% of workers and 69% of students from County Wicklow commuted to Dublin daily. We know from census data that over 5,000 people commute from north Wexford through Wicklow every day. The problem is we are seeing an increasingly clogged M11. If leaving Gorey, you have to be on the M11 at 6 a.m. to get to Dublin at a reasonable time. In the other direction, Rosslare Europort is booming because of Brexit but we have not seen the M11 completed down to Rosslare Europort. If there is an incident, we have traffic chaos impacting on counties Wicklow and Wexford.

If the alternative is presented, people do not have to use the M11 but the Rosslare rail line, which is the most neglected rail line in the country. If you are travelling from Rathdrum, Arklow or Gorey, you only have six services on a weekday to Dublin on a single line. That is as opposed to Carlow, equidistant from Dublin, which has 11; Dundalk, which has 16; and Portlaoise, which is equidistant and has 32 rail services. I am asking that we ensure there is balanced regional development, that in the review of the national development plan regard is had to road and rail infrastructure, and that the M11 - the spine running through counties Wicklow and Wexford - and the Rosslare rail line are finally given priority. This week, I met with the NTA and I am not satisfied. It has not moved sufficiently on issues such as park-and-ride facilities along the route. I want an assurance that, when it comes to the questions of pace and delivery, it will be the Government telling the NTA to deliver and not the other way around.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Malcolm Byrne for raising this important issue, which affects his constituency and mine. It actually affects quite a number of constituencies and our region. In many ways, it speaks, as Deputy Byrne rightly said, to the issue of infrastructure. We are too slow at delivering infrastructure. This is why when we came together to form this Government, the programme for Government was very clear on expanding the mandate of the Department of public expenditure to also include a new division on infrastructure delivery and having, for the first time, a Cabinet committee dedicated exclusively to the issue of infrastructure so we can remove bottlenecks, if Deputy Byrne will pardon the pun, and try to drive forward these projects.

The Government is not anti-roads. Let me be very clear, in that there is a new Government and the Government made up of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, with the support of Independents, is a Government that wants to get on with the business of building roads. Even electric cars need roads to drive on. The buses also need roads to go on. Unless we are getting hovercraft, we need roads. There is road safety issue, a road maintenance issue and a quality-of-life issue. We need to do more, which I can see with the N11-M11 in a practical way.

Approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funds have been provided for national roads for protection and renewal and for new roads. In addition, €98 million has been provided for national roads under public-private partnerships. As part of various allocations, €12 million in capital funding was allocated to Wexford County Council and a further €3.2 million was allocated to Wicklow County Council to cover new roads and the protection and renewal of the existing national road network.

In addition to this investment in our national roads infrastructure, a number of significant improvements are also planned across Ireland's rail network over the coming years, including on the Dublin to Rosslare line. Last year, we saw some changes to timetables on the line, including a new late evening service between Wexford and Gorey. I look forward to similar timetable improvements being introduced. The Department of Transport is working to pursue the recommendations of the all-island strategic rail review, including an increase in services for Wexford and Rosslare to at least one train every two hours. I know this is an important measure.

Other measures further up the line will have a positive impact on congestion, traffic and commuters. As part of the DART+ programme, specifically the DART+ Coastal South project, it is planned to increase service frequency between Bray and Greystones and that portion of the Rosslare line from approximately every 30 minutes in each direction to every 20 minutes. The extension of the new battery electric DART carriages is also being looked at very actively, which would enable the DART to service Wicklow town. All of these measures will make a very positive difference in terms of being able to increase the frequency. I am told the NTA

is examining the issue of extending the DART service to Wicklow, which could increase the service frequency along that portion of the line from six trains per day each way to a train every hour. Taken in the round, these measures will see increased frequency on the Dublin to Rosslare line.

In addition to this, we need to advance the programme for Government commitments on including funding for new roads, including funding for the protection and renewal of roads and establishing distinct budgets for road maintenance and new road construction in order to give that policy direction to the NTA that Deputy Byrne rightly referenced.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I would love to have the Tánaiste's confidence that we will see all of this delivered over the lifetime of the Government. I would love to see all of that happening. For commuters stuck in traffic or on an inadequate rail service every day, delivery over the lifetime of the Government will be essential. What the Tánaiste is speaking about in terms of additional rail carriages will need to be delivered over the next four to five years. We will need to see the M11 completed to Rosslare. We will need to see the introduction of park-and-ride facilities. We will need to see some of the level crossings that have held up the train being dealt with. The Tánaiste, being based in Greystones, knows of some of these issues. He has been hearing about this from the NTA for more than a decade. I am not convinced that the NTA is listening sufficiently to the commuters of Wicklow and Wexford about the importance of the pace of delivery. The plans have been there for years. We are just not getting the delivery.

The Tánaiste: That is right, but in fairness to the NTA, the policy direction of recent years in terms of roads was regrettable. It delayed the delivery of the projects needed as regards the N11. There needs to be absolute policy clarity on this now, and I believe there is. All of us, regardless of party affiliation or of being in government or opposition, from Wicklow-Wexford and Wicklow should come together and meet the NTA on these matters. There are real issues for people living in commuter belts. The traffic congestion is having a direct impact on issues such as childcare, quality of life and being able to pick kids up from school and drop them off in the morning. There are challenges being felt by people in the wide commuter belt area that I am proud to represent in the Dáil.

On a positive note, I should say that the allocations for road projects for 2025 include the N11 Oilgate to Rosslare Harbour project, which has received an allocation of €4 million. This project, which is at design and environmental evaluation phase, will deliver safety improvements to the N11 corridor. It will also improve regional connectivity and ensure the increased volume of freight traffic using Rosslare Port can be accommodated. In addition, we have provided €2 million for the Rosslare Europort access road. Let us continue to work constructively on this matter.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I raised the issue of the Raphoe community playgroup a number of times last year. I had commitments from the Minister that funding would be available. The Tánaiste met the group. We were told funding would be available. It applied for the funding it was told to apply for but it has not been granted the funding. It has written to the Tánaiste and he has responded that the council rather than the group owns the land. Despite the fact it has a 22-year lease, it cannot rebuild the community playschool.

Why is this important? This is a community group funded by the EU and fundraising money. Its building has defective blocks and is condemned. Currently, the playgroup is in another building that is not fit for purpose. It has to take the tables and chairs and put them in a shed every evening. It is not acceptable. This was not something of the group's making. Defective blocks got onto the market because of a lack of regulation during successive Governments. Now, the funding the group was told would be there to help it rebuild its premises has been refused to it. How many times do we have to raise this issue? The Government has made pledges on community childcare facilities. There is a serious issue with childcare. This community group tells us it will not be able to function next year unless it gets the funding to rebuild the playgroup. Will the Tánaiste please intervene, knock some heads together and give this group the money it needs to rebuild a community playschool that is falling apart because of defective blocks?

The Tánaiste: I will endeavour to work constructively with Deputy Doherty and others in Donegal on this issue. As Deputy Doherty said, I met the Raphoe community playgroup. It told me about the great work it has been doing and I am in no doubt about that. It has been in operation since the early 1980s. It moved into a new purpose-built facility in 2000 and, as Deputy Doherty rightly said, that building has been condemned due to defective blocks. We all have sympathy for it but it does not want sympathy. It wants money. It wants to move this forward. It has been working very hard to come up with a solution. The Department of children has the building blocks grant scheme, which provides capital funding for new buildings and extensions. There is an issue with the ownership of the land. We need to find a way through that. I have written to the Ministers, Deputies Foley and Browne, on this. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is committed to working with the group through the Donegal county childcare committee and Pobal. I will keep Deputy Doherty updated on this.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Yesterday was World Autism Awareness Day. It cannot just have been another day of empty promises while families continue to struggle. Last night, families slept out for a second time, pleading for support. We must acknowledge their challenges every day. With this in mind, I acknowledge in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West there are 539 children who have waited for more than 12 months for their first contact with Balbriggan CDNT. This is the highest waiting time in CHO 9. I would imagine it is well up there in the country. We know children with needs benefit significantly from the access and inclusion model in early education up to two years before they enter primary school. Can these figures be used to inform the Department of Education when planning necessary supports, easing the transition and reducing the chaos of school places that we are seeing?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the constructive suggestion. He is right, in that we have to get a hell of a lot better at planning. The sense of surprise when a child seeks to move in a moment of transition in his or her life is not acceptable. We need to break down the silos. We have established the Cabinet committee on disability. We met last week, or the week before last, and a number of decisions were made, including to put therapists back in schools, starting with special schools. I see a lot of frustration from parents who get a place for their child in school and think it is great and they have finally made some progress only to realise that is just the education part and they are still not able to get speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or occupational therapy. That decision we made last week, on which the Minister for Education will shortly bring proposals to Cabinet, will allow the NCSE to hire therapists for schools, starting with special schools. That will make a difference. I know that no parent sleeps out at night if not for a very good reason. It speaks to their frustration and genuine worry. The Minister,

Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, met with a number of parents in the group last Wednesday. I understand there was positive engagement on the issue and the Minister wants to meet the group again to discuss their concerns and how progress can be made.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Government put on paper its commitment to progressively reducing the cost of childcare to €200 per month through the national childcare scheme. As the Tánaiste knows, young families are desperately struggling to get a place, and if they do they face crippling costs. Our childcare and early years education sector is in a precarious situation with regard to recruitment and retention. I hope the Government is considering pay parity with their colleagues in education for early years workers. The Tánaiste is on the record as saying that the model of childcare and early childhood education in Ireland need to be in the public space. Given that public commitment to the sector, the crucial importance of the sector and with committees being actively considered, will the Government consider the establishment of “páistecare”, a Sláintecare approach to what is very important work, and to spell out a cross-party and long-term vision for what childcare and early years education will look like in Ireland?

The Tánaiste: I like “páistecare”; it is a good way of putting it. What emerged during the election period is that while all parties had different areas of focus, they all said that something significant needs to happen on childcare. I take the point, and while it is not for me to tell committees how to do their work, but as they are established, a focus on how we can advance a proper fit-for-purpose childcare system is crucial. I am proud of some of the work we have done on reducing the cost of childcare. I know it can still be too high but not being able to get a place is the real issue. That is why I am unashamedly on the record, and the programme for Government alludes to this, regarding need for the State to intervene in terms of public provision. We will of course be working with private providers too. They have a role to play, and I have no issue with that, but there are certain parts of the country and certain communities where there really is a lack of provision. I am happy to work constructively with the Deputy. Perhaps when the new Oireachtas committees are established, which I hope will be soon, this could be an area of focus.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Many, if not most of the people who broadcast the proceedings in this Dáil who work for Oireachtas TV are on precarious, or “if and when” contracts, where they basically do not get paid if the Dáil or the committees are not sitting during Christmas, during the summer and other breaks. Most of these part-time workers earn approximately €12,000 per year. I could not believe it when they told me. A big contract is given to the company that provides these services but these workers are asking they get some kind of retainer because they have to be available to do the work of broadcasting the proceedings, which is an important role for all the parties, democracy and the Dáil. However, they are on miserable pay and conditions and the company that has been given the contract is not currently entertaining in any serious way their request for improved pay and conditions and for a retainer during those periods when they are not working. I have raised it at the Business Committee and in the Dáil previously but I would like the Government to intervene in this. It is disgraceful that people broadcasting these proceedings should be on this miserable earnings and on “if and when” contracts.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I thank those workers and everybody who works in the Oireachtas complex for the important role they play in how this place and our democracy functions, and the broadcasting of all that to the public. It is not out of any lack of sympathy or respect for the workers and the issues the Deputy raised but this is a matter

for the Oireachtas. We have had significant debates about the difference between the Oireachtas and the Government in this House in recent times. My understanding is that we are shortly due to constitute the new Oireachtas commission. Perhaps that is a forum in which this could be discussed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government will have members on it.

The Tánaiste: The Government will have members on it too, and Government parties certainly take precarity of employment seriously.

Deputy Michael Collins: The people of Union Hall, Glandore and surrounding areas are rightly frustrated with the progress on promised improvements to their local pier. These promises are going on for years, and in that time, they have had visits from the Taoiseach and the former Minister for agriculture and the marine, looking at what needs to be done and raising the hopes of local fishermen and the tourism sector that funding would be given, but nothing has followed. The local authority has said there are three phases to the works that need to be done: first, refurbishment of the old pier; second, development of an additional 150 m of quay space for commercial fishing; and third, dredging of the channel for access to the pier facility. Councillor Daniel Sexton and myself attended a public meeting last Monday night, and I heard the same as I have heard year in and year out. The council is blaming the Department as it seeks clarity, and the Department blaming the council. Those who attended were rightly furious. I promised the people present that I would raise this issue with the Tánaiste. Will he speak with the relevant Minister to meet immediately with council officials to cut out the confusion to pave the way for funds to be delivered on these hugely Keelbeg pier works in Union Hall?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy, and I hear his frustration on behalf of his constituents. My understanding is that in April 2024 a delegation of Cork County Council officials and representatives from the Union Hall Save Our Pier Committee had a meeting with the then Minister and the assistant secretary general for the seafood and marine division in the Department headquarters in Agriculture House. At the meeting the council outlined that the development plan for Keelbeg pier consisted of three phases - the refurbishment of the old pier, the extension of the new pier and the dredging of Glengarriff harbour. My understanding is that the council was reminded of its own responsibilities to step projects forward to make them ready for delivery and that any costs associated with studies, design and consenting must be borne by the council. My understanding is the council was advised to apply to the Department once the relevant consents were in place and I will seek a further update on that. I will send the Deputy a note on the next steps. There is quite a bit of detail, but I am happy to engage with the Deputy directly on this to see if we can make progress.

Deputy James O'Connor: Household electricity prices in the EU in 2024 were the highest in Ireland and the lowest in Finland. The reason for this is that Finland generates 35% of its energy from nuclear power. Ireland has a growing economy of more than 5.3 million people. Do we need another Ardnacrusha Shannon scheme moment a century on where we decide how we are going to power our economy? In my constituency of Cork East, thousands of acres of agricultural land, the finest in the country powering our world-leading dairy sector, are being swallowed up for solar farms. It is generating huge unhappiness. Do we need a more sustainable, carbon-neutral approach, in the area of nuclear energy to power our economy for another century like the Shannon scheme and Ardnacrusha did at the foundation of the State?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Indeed, I heard him comment on

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it publicly this week as well. I first admire his guts in putting forward radical ideas on energy policy. That is worthwhile in this Dáil because energy and security of energy supply is really important for homeowners, businesses and for broader security reasons. The best advice available to me in Government is that the pathway to advancing the supply is through renewables and offshore wind development. However, I will ask the Minister for energy to respond to the Deputy's proposal directly.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Investment in infrastructure is a key part of the programme for Government. Housing and water infrastructure are key in that but public transport is too. Dublin Port is carrying out an expansion plan and is going to build a new bridge alongside the toll bridge that would facilitate the extension of the Luas to Poolbeg. I ask that in the lifetime of this Dáil we get that project at least to a stage where there would at least be planning permission sought for a Luas extension to Poolbeg via Ringsend and Irishtown, and we could build on the extensions already happening for Finglas and Lucan.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As he rightly said, the National Transport Authority, NTA, has a responsibility for transport planning in the greater Dublin area and the development of the Luas red line extension to serve Poolbeg is currently one of the projects they are giving real consideration to. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, is the sponsoring agency for the proposed Luas to Poolbeg project and the NTA is the day-to-day approving authority. I understand the NTA recently instructed TII to undertake a pre-feasibility analysis of the Luas to Poolbeg project. We are cognisant that an increased demand for travel from Poolbeg to the city will need to be catered for in coming years. The Deputy is quite right. The transport requirements of the area will need to be met in a variety of ways, and indeed light rail-Luas could well be one of those. These issues will all be considered in our review of the national development plan and what level of funding is available. However, the project will be considered in that context this summer.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Yesterday, on World Autism Awareness Day, parents of neurodiverse children slept outside the Dáil for the second time this year. I went out to them after the voting block yesterday, so taken was I by their hard-hitting presentation in the audiovisual room yesterday.

I o'clock

Many of these children have no school place for September. They are being denied fundamental human and educational rights by the State. One of the mothers said to me last night that although her child is non-verbal, she is not. These parents are a formidable force. The Tánaiste should take the demand seriously.

In my constituency of Kildare North, Scoil Mochua in Celbridge was granted approval to set up autism spectrum disorder classrooms in 2021 but is still without them. Yet, the Government says it cannot guarantee a school place for every child in September. When are these schools going to be built? When will the education of our special children be taken seriously?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I take those parents extraordinarily seriously. Parents are busy and have a lot going on, particularly parents of a child with special needs. To come and sleep out at the Dáil shows the sense of real frustration, worry and concern they feel right now.

Some 369 of the 400 classes for next September have been sanctioned as of today. The

NCSE continues to assess additional provision in local areas. My understanding is that the provision of those additional special classes for the 2025-26 year, that is, the next school year, will be confirmed in the coming weeks. I understand the Minister for Education and the Minister of State with responsibility for special education met with a number of parents of that group last Wednesday. I am told it was a positive engagement on the issues parents face when seeking a suitable special educational placement. The Minister said she would like to meet that group again to follow up and we will ensure that happens.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The geoblocking of RTÉ and TG4 programmes in Northern Ireland where many television and mobile app viewers cannot access RTÉ coverage of Irish sporting events must be stopped. The unavailability of RTÉ programming, including the broadcasting of GAA and other sporting fixtures, is the cause of much annoyance and frustration for many people throughout Northern Ireland. Last Saturday evening and Sunday, I had calls from people North of the Border who could not get coverage of the Division Two National Football League Final between Monaghan and Roscommon. This is totally unacceptable.

In 2010, the then-Minister for communications, Eamon Ryan, signed a memorandum of understanding, MOU, on digital television with the British Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. It was clearly stated at that time that the MOU provided for the widespread availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland and BBC services in our State. The MOU underpinned the key role played by public service broadcasting throughout our island. The BBC now proposes to block its audio streaming service to listeners outside the UK, which, if implemented, would be a huge loss for audiences in our State. Turning off BBC Sounds in Ireland is not acceptable. Many of us living in south Ulster will no longer be able to listen to BBC Radio Ulster in our own province.

Some of us, over many years, have advocated for closer and more intense co-operation on a North-South basis in all facets of daily life. These broadcasting decisions fly in the face of such positive developments. The blocking of RTÉ in Northern Ireland and the BBC in our State has to be in breach of the Good Friday Agreement, and particularly in breach of the memorandum of understanding of 2010.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the ongoing work he has done to promote closer relations and engagement throughout this island. Of course, he is right. The Good Friday Agreement committed to facilitating a number of initiatives, including the widespread availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland. I will certainly raise that issue, the issue of BBC Radio Ulster and all the other issues the Deputy has raised with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when we next meet.

With regard to the sports events the Deputy referenced, it is my understanding that TG4 had the right to broadcast that event on an all-island basis. As such, viewers in Northern Ireland may access these events on a free-to-air basis on the Freeview platform, which carries TG4. My understanding is, without sounding like some sort of technical person, that there is an issue when a viewer in Northern Ireland attempts to view an event on the TG4 online player. On a technical level, this is because there is no separate IP address protocol for Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and, therefore, the device assumes that the viewer is outside of Ireland. We need to work our way forward on this. I am assured that TG4 circulates this message on its Spórt TG4 website and social platforms.

On the broader issue the Deputy has raised, let me raise it with the Secretary of State for

Northern Ireland and I will then come back to him. I accept the seriousness of this issue for people on both sides of the Border.

Deputy John Clendennen: The promises President Trump made from the Rose Garden last night were essentially protectionism with thorny tariffs, presenting challenges and uncertainty for many sectors, including businesses, farmers and livelihoods in County Offaly. It is essential we maintain a sense of calm with a measured response, proactively working with our EU counterparts through trade, diversification and deepening relationships with other global partners. Thankfully, we come from a position of strength due the prudent management of our public finances. Every challenge presents opportunity. Our respective State agencies must renew their focus on introducing our high levels of quality, innovation and diversification to new markets. Will the Tánaiste outline the significance and plan of new free trade agreements, considering the tariffs imposed by the United States on the European Union? Can he provide a timeline for the ratification process of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada, CETA?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He is right. We are in a phase now when it comes to trade policy and our economy where we have got to keep influencing what we can influence, including the United States and the EU but we also have to control what we can control. As to what we can control, we can help companies diversify and help open up new markets throughout the world to Irish companies. This country is proudly a free trade country. We have always been a nation of traders and there are big opportunities in Singapore, Vietnam, Canada and, potentially, India. I had a good meeting with the Indian foreign minister in Dublin a couple of weeks ago.

The Deputy is right to reference CETA, which we endeavoured to progress in the previous Oireachtas. We know the difficulties we got into on that occasion. I have been working with the Attorney General and with my officials to find a way forward and I am pleased to tell the House that I intend to bring a memo to Government in the coming weeks - hopefully this month - that will set out a legislative path that will allow this country to ratify CETA by the end of this year.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Car insurance hikes are hitting the ordinary motorist, particularly loyal customers. Despite certain reforms that lowered legal costs and claims, these savings are not being passed on to the customer. The Government has given a commitment in the programme for Government to publish a new action plan for insurance reform. When will this plan be published and its recommended reforms implemented?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): As Minister of State with responsibility for insurance reform, I confirm to the Deputy that work is well advanced on the new action plan. I have met with a number of key stakeholders and it is hoped we will seek submissions from the public on the action plan in the next number of weeks with a view to having it finalised in the next two months.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I am sure the Tánaiste will agree it is essential that the ambulance service should be staffed, funded and equipped properly and operate from bases that are fit for purpose. A new base is urgently required at Tipperary University Hospital in Clonmel. The existing base is a 25-year-old prefabricated building built to cater for ten all-male staff. There are now 22 staff using the base with a 50:50 male to female complement. Facilities, as the Tánaiste can imagine, are totally inadequate with small, limited showering, changing and locker room facilities, especially for female staff, as well as very small rest rooms and almost non-existent

kitchen facilities. While this has been flagged for a number of years and is included in the HSE capital programme, it needs to be progressed urgently. I ask the Tánaiste to intervene to make sure that happens.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I agree with him that we need to continue to invest in the bases for our ambulance service. I will certainly seek an update from the Minister for Health on the plan for the new ambulance base at the Tipperary hospital in Clonmel. My understanding from conversations I have had is that the Minister hopes to bring forward the HSE capital plan this month. That, perhaps, will be a moment of update. I will certainly ask her to come back directly to the Deputy.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I raise the urgent medical case of Filip Kosacki, a 15-year-old boy from Midleton. I have consent to speak on his behalf. On January 16, Filip was diagnosed with a ureteropelvic junction obstruction in Cork University Hospital, CUH, and identified as being in need of emergency surgery. He is in constant pain and has not been able to attend school since early January. There has been confusion between CUH, the Mercy University Hospital and Crumlin hospital as to who has responsibility for Filip's treatment. Filip's mother, Kasia, was told last week that his care has been transferred from CUH to Crumlin hospital but Crumlin hospital said it was unaware of this and it redirected my representation back to Cork. Filip's mother was told this morning by Crumlin hospital that his referral had in fact arrived but that it was incomplete and was being sent back to CUH. Filip's family are extremely distressed and concerned for him. He is missing out on school and is suffering greatly. Filip's family and I would be very grateful if the Tánaiste could intervene in order that this surgery could be expedited without further delay.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for bringing this situation to my attention. It must be a very stressful time for Filip, his mother Kasia and the family, made all the more stressful by this confusion, to put it mildly. I suggest that the Deputy, with the family's permission, send the details to my office and I will link with the Minister for Health and the head of the HSE and I ask that they provide some clarity to the Deputy on a way forward.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Many families I represent in rural counties Carlow and Kilkenny have been granted home support services for their relatives, due to illness or advancing age. In theory, these families in Kildavin, Callan, Bagenalstown and Bennettsbridge have State support to care for their family members at home but in reality, in many cases, there are zero HSE staff to fulfil these home support hours. Hard-pressed, full-time working families are left to take matters into their own hands and draw up family rotas for covering the care of their loved ones. The issue is particularly pronounced in rural areas of my constituency, especially over weekends. Families have been told by HSE staff that if their mother was living in a town, she would be have home support but the organisation cannot get the staff to go up long lanes or into rural communities. This is not acceptable. It is not fair for people who have paid their taxes for their entire lives to not get the support they need, when they need it. What is the Government doing to ensure that there is an increased focus on recruiting and providing home support workers in rural areas and, in particular, to provide home support at weekends?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the important question. I will ask the Minister with responsibility for older people to meet her to discuss what more can be done. We are spending more on home support now than ever before. The home support budget for this year is the largest ever at €840 million, delivering more than 24 million hours of home support to more than 60,000 people at any one time. However, the Deputy pointed out the disparity between rural

parts of her constituency and less rural parts of the country and how we can recruit and retain staff in those areas. The work the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, is leading on is around the need to get to the statutory home care scheme. That will provide much greater clarity in terms of funding, employment and structures than the current situation. In the here and now, I will ask the Minister of State what more can be done to help people in Carlow and Kilkenny and I will ask him to meet the Deputy to discuss this matter.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: We know that Dublin's buses operate on very strict timetables and that reliability is a key element of operating a bus service but safety also needs to be a consideration. To keep delays to a minimum, we often hear of cases of bus drivers pulling away from bus stops five or ten seconds after passengers board but for individuals with mobility or balance issues, like those public transport users with cerebral palsy, this can be extremely dangerous and distressing. While I acknowledge the importance of keeping these buses on schedule, I would like the Tánaiste's support in emphasising how crucial that extra five or ten seconds can be for someone with cerebral palsy or a balance issue and to increase awareness of the just a minute, JAM, card initiative, which signals that a person may need a little more time or understanding. I also ask him to intervene with the Minister for Transport and the NTA to make additional driver training be made available so that it becomes standard practice for drivers to wait until any person using a JAM card is safely seated or stable before the bus moves off. We want to encourage everyone to use public transport, including vulnerable passengers, but we need to strike a balance between efficiency and compassion. I thank Colin Dempsey, a transition year student from Pobalscoil Iosolde in Palmerstown for raising this and educating me on this issue.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy and I join him in thanking Colin Dempsey for his work on this project and bringing it to the Deputy's attention, and the Deputy, in turn, bringing it to the attention of the Dáil. He is right that everyone wants to see an efficient public transport system but other issues also matter. Safety and inclusion also matter. As we go about our daily lives, all of us want people to access public transport in a way that is inclusive and safe. My understanding is that disability awareness training, DAT, is provided by all public transport operators. The PSO contracts have a condition that the staff DAT has to be renewed every three years. As part of DAT, they now also have to give consideration to the issue of hidden disabilities as well. I will follow up with the specifics in terms of what the Deputy raised for very good reasons and I will ask that the Minister comes back to him and Colin on this matter.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: As a County Wicklow man, the Tánaiste will be very familiar with the small, rural town of Carnew. This town is somewhat isolated, lacks basic facilities and services and has insufficient public transport. This week, local people were alarmed to learn that an investment fund, Quest Retirement Solutions, is applying to install an International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS, centre to accommodate 44 persons, who are usually young males, in a public house on Carnew's main street. Needless to say, as usual, there has been no local consultation on this. County Wicklow is already accommodating more than 1,500 IPAS applicants. Has an impact assessment been conducted to evaluate the effects of imposing yet another IPAS on a local community in County Wicklow? Will the Tánaiste intervene in this matter?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I do indeed know Carnew well as I represented it until the Electoral Commission took it off me. I am sure it is well represented now. Regarding IPAS centres, I am not familiar with that one. It is always important that communities are informed. However, I am also very proud to live in a county that has welcomed so many people from

migrant communities and people seeking international protection. Communities across County Wicklow have done that. The flow of information with communities is important and I will ask the Minister with responsibility for migration to provide the Deputy with an update regarding the issue he has raised.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I want to raise the issue of the report from Sheila Noonan, the negotiator, which is now in the possession of the Minister, Deputy Foley. When she was appointed almost two years ago, she was to report within six months. The report is completed and with the Minister. I have two issues that concern me. The first is the question of what the next steps will be. We need a clear outline of what is going to happen and the consequences of the negotiation that has taken such a long time. The second issue is that we are reading about section of the report in the newspapers, albeit not all of it. Once again, we have a leak. This is the second time now that survivors have been treated with utter disrespect. Back in 2020, the Government got the report on the mother and baby homes. In January, we discussed it in the Dáil and the only people who had it were in the media. There were comments and an interview with Deputy Micheál Martin at the time on a leaked report. The exact same thing has happened again. There should be an apology. I also want to know what is going to happen now and when the survivors will get the report.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right. Survivors should never read that information third-hand or in the media. The Minister, Deputy Foley, shares that view. I will speak to her about what can be done to update the survivors directly and to apologise for any way in which that information has been disseminated and put into the public domain in a way that is not sensitive to the survivors and does not attach paramount importance to their needs. My understanding is that the report is due to come to Cabinet but let me seek clarity on the next steps and I will ask the Minister to come back to Deputy Connolly directly.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It has been almost two years since the publication of Dr. Shannon's report on sex abuse of children at St. John Ambulance. The report makes for harrowing reading. The report found that a culture had facilitated the potential grooming of children and that the organisation had failed to intervene, despite knowing that the boys were at risk of abuse. It concluded that the organisation had failed to act against the perpetrator for years, despite "a significant degree of organisational awareness of the risk that he posed to children". Survivors who have bravely campaigned, spoken out about this and pushed for the report, including Mick Finnegan, have an apology but they have no accountability. There has been no accountability whatsoever. They are calling for a public inquiry into how this happened and how it was able to go on for so long. They want this to ensure that it cannot be repeated. Will the Government grant the survivors an inquiry?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and I thank Mick Finnegan for his incredible advocacy on this issue. He has been in Leinster House on many occasions because of his advocacy work. I sincerely thank him for that. I will speak directly to the Minister involved and I will come back to the Deputy.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.59 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.19 p.m. and resumed at 1.59 p.m.

Diverting Young People from Criminal Activity: Statements (Resumed)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies Coppinger and Boyd Barrett from the Independent and Parties Technical Group are sharing time. They have three and a half minutes each.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In this debate on youth crime, there has not been much emphasis on the huge danger of violent misogyny and the targeting of young boys to essentially hate women and blame them for the situation they face. “Adolescence”, a series on Netflix, has opened up a big discussion in society around this. The plot is very reminiscent of the horrific killing of Ana Kriégel in this country. We have to say that sexual crime among under-18s has rocketed. It has increased approximately sixfold. Fifty per cent of 13-year-olds have viewed pornography. The manosphere, led by the likes of Andrew Tate and company, has operated unchecked for years, promoting rape and violence against women. Sixteen- to 18-year-olds who set up accounts are, as has been found by research, targeted within 23 minutes if they are seen to be young men.

On the impact this is having, a survey on traditional views of manhood indicated that these were much higher among younger men. Two in five men overall had these views among 67% of younger people. This is extremely worrying. We know that Tate is facing sex trafficking charges. In a survey carried out in 2023, eight out of ten 16- to 17-year-olds had viewed Andrew Tate’s social media. Almost half of 16- to 24-year-olds had a positive view of him. This is not just imagination; it is very real. Half of young fathers had a very positive view of him as well. In a survey done by the Rape Crisis Centre, 46% of men believe women exaggerate sexual violence and rape. Women’s Aid conducted a survey which found that 52% of men believed they should dominate and control in a relationship. Some 46% said that real men should not care about women’s opinions or feelings. Why has there been no response to this real threat? Where is the Government education programme? We had a sex education Bill in 2015 in respect of which no real action, including the training of teachers and so on, has been taken.

We cannot leave it to parents and teachers to compete with a well-funded manosphere. Parents and teachers are no match for the social media companies. It is estimated that X, for example, previously earned £10 million a year from Tate-generated traffic. There is a clear ideological connection between Musk and Tate. Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook has argued for more masculine energy. What regulation is taking place? Why has the EU Digital Services Act not been brought into play to stop this hate and violent misogyny at source? Ireland is meant to be regulating this on behalf of the EU. Boys and men are finding the manosphere when they look for help on health and fitness. We need the Government to act and not just leave it up to parents to deal with this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: One absolutely key area for giving young people a positive outlet for energies that might otherwise go in worrying or dangerous directions is sport. This also has a great deal of relevance in the context of women and of challenging all the misogyny that one can encounter. One of the positive developments we have seen in the past few years is the tremendous growth in participation in sport, by young people in general and by women in particular, which has been enormous and very positive, including boxing, soccer, Gaelic, rugby and all sorts of other sports. However, there is a chronic deficit of facilities and pitches to cater for this huge growth in participation in sport.

I will speak to my area, but I hear it is much the same everywhere else. I will give one positive example. After a 20-year fight, Monkstown Boxing Club, on behalf of which I cam-

paigned for many years, in a disadvantaged area, finally opened its clubhouse this week. It was a 20-year fight. It has an Olympian this year, Jack Marley, and fantastic people such as Robin O'Reilly, a young woman who is competing at international European level, and many others. This is fantastic for young girls, women and men, but for years they were in totally inadequate facilities, with no showers and so on. They had to fight for 20 years. I am glad the council eventually got on board. It was a huge victory and shows the potential that exists.

I then look at Sallynoggin Pearse in the area where I live. This is a club that the legendary Paul McGrath began his career playing for. It has been fighting for almost as long, near enough 20 years, for a new facility. It was promised by the council that on giving up an owl's shack it had and a pitch on a public park that it would get a facility, but it is now being given the runaround. That club is partnering its senior team, which has been around since the fifties in Sallynoggin, with Granada's junior team, involving many young women in particular. It has a proposal for a new clubhouse but, to be honest, the council is giving it the runaround. It has been promised and promised. The club is willing to raise money itself and so on but there seems to be control-freakery and a negative attitude. St. Joseph's boys' team, which I used to play for, also in Sallynoggin, is fighting for an all-weather pitch and, again, is getting the runaround over it. Cuala, one of the most successful GAA clubs, is struggling for pitches. Dalkey United is struggling for pitches and facilities, as are teams in Shankill and Cabinteely. Cabinteely GAA has inadequate facilities for its club, as does Shankill FC and so on.

I appeal to the Minister of State to give an instruction for local authorities to positively engage with the clubs and not have a controlling or dismissive attitude to the provision of these vital facilities for youth participation in sport.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I marvel at Deputy Boyd Barrett's success in naming all the clubs in his constituency. I will add Ranelagh Gaels, Clanna Gael, Templeogue and Synge Street to that list of clubs looking for pitches. In fairness, the point was well made. It is one most people in the House would agree with.

I will touch on three matters. The first is youth prevention. I am not talking about the diversion programme, when somebody is entered into that programme and a JLO is appointed. I am talking about avoiding young people engaging in criminality in the first place. The second issue I will talk about is the legislation, its operation and things that could be done to update it. The final matter I will touch on is the age of criminal responsibility.

There are some superb projects, outside of the diversion programme, that act in this area. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, will be very familiar with the St. Andrew's Resource Centre in my constituency, which does extraordinary work to bring young people from south and north inner-city areas together. They work on projects together and are brought on trips together to try to de-escalate where conflicts have arisen, especially among young people, including antisocial behaviour and other types of crime. These are run by amazing people and youth workers. These need to be funded and to continue to be funded, but there is a lack of lessons being learned at a national level regarding what is taking place at local level and how successful programmes could be emulated in other parts of the country. That prevention side is something the Minister of State should carry out a review into.

The legislation is very clear. Young people are entered into the diversion programme if they admit criminal responsibility. For people under the age of 18, no matter what crime they have committed, their file will be referred to the director of the juvenile diversion programme. The

director has to make a decision on whether to admit that child to the programme, but an absolute statutory must is the child must admit to the crime he or she is alleged to have committed. One of the challenges of the programme is that while the legislation, which has been in place for a lengthy period, provides for regulations whereby the Minister can exclude certain offences that would not be eligible for the programme, no Minister has ever excluded any offences. In the annual review, for every single year of the monitoring of the diversion programme, the reports of the various offences of the thousands of children who have been diverted into the programme can be seen, which include very serious crimes such as homicide and sexual offences. The Minister should carry out a review into whether now is the time for regulations to be initiated that would exclude certain offences.

It is not appropriate that the director of the juvenile diversion programme is vested with the responsibility of determining, in the case of a person who is 18 or under and has killed somebody, whether he or she should be admitted into the programme. It should be left to the Director of Public Prosecutions to decide whether that person should be prosecuted or not. At the very least, that situation should be excluded and the Minister should make regulations in that regard.

The final matter I will touch on is the age of criminal responsibility, which has been 12 in Ireland for a long time. There were commissions that talked about raising this. I go back to my first point, namely that if you talk to the people who act in the area of youth diversion, the one thing they will say is that they are dealing with younger and younger children. The reality is that unless it is a criminal matter, there is only so much An Garda Síochána can do. Many community gardaí go around to parents and talk about antisocial behaviour orders and what might happen. However, if a child is under the age of 12, there is not much An Garda Síochána can do.

In the UK, the age of criminal responsibility is ten. I am not suggesting that this is the route we should go down. However, in conjunction with identifying and fully funding the type of programmes at local level that work in terms of getting people out of crime, we have to take a serious look, from an operational point of view, at how we can ensure An Garda Síochána can engage with children who are below the age of criminal responsibility but who are being used as drug mules in some cases or who are involved in pernicious and consistent antisocial behaviour and who know they will not face arrest or charges because they are underage.

These are the matters that require review and consideration. I have asked the Minister to examine all three.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024 makes it clear that grooming children into criminality is not just morally reprehensible, it is also illegal and punishable by law. This sends a strong message to gangs operating in Dublin and elsewhere that their days of hiding behind children with impunity are over. Just as we demand accountability, we are modernising how we monitor impact. Through strategic partnership with the University of Limerick and reforms to the Children Act under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, we are building a smarter, more effective youth justice system that ensures transparency, evidence and results. Let us be clear in saying that youth criminality is not inevitable. With the right investment, interventions and intent, it is preventable.

I agree with colleagues, especially on sport and youth diversions of all different types. Sport plays a huge role in this regard. I agree with my colleague that the council in our county has a lot of capital and that using some of it to fund recreational spaces would help enormously to

facilitate the clubs he been mentioned. There is a huge growth in youth sport, but it needs to be supported by the council.

In Dublin, where urban pressures often heighten the risk, the role of these projects is even more critical and we are backing that support with serious funding. Since 2020, the budget for youth justice measures has risen from €18 million to €33 million in budget 2025. This is not just an increase in funding; it is a statement of intent. It says to every child, parent and community leader that we are on their side. These projects now extend beyond intervention. They reach out to children as young as eight. They engage families, schools, and harder to reach young people. We are also tackling the problem at the root.

I will make a brief comment about the Greentown Project, whose early impact has been described by front-line youth workers in Dublin as transformative. By disrupting the power of criminal networks and replacing coercion with connection, it is giving vulnerable children real alternatives.

We have also taken strong legislative action in this regard. I particularly welcome the inclusion of Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard in the six pilot areas for the joint commissioning process, a collaborative approach that brings services together around the individual needs of at-risk children and their families. This is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. It is tailored, localised and grounded in the belief that with the right support, every child can choose the right path. In Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard, as many of us in this Chamber know, the community has faced difficult and high-profile challenges, but it has also shown tremendous resilience. This Government has listened. Through increased Garda visibility, the expansion of youth services and the continued funding of local youth diversion programmes, we are supporting community-led solutions that foster hope and change.

Myriad supports exist for youth diversion, and that is welcome. Investment has increased, and that is also welcome. However, what is important in the context of this debate is that the Minister and Department listen to youth leaders and youth development workers on the ground who know the challenges that exist, particularly in some critical areas, when it comes to the need to focus and tailor programmes to ensure there is a response to the communities. Every community has different needs and it is also important for the Government to be able respond to those individual needs. As I mentioned in the context of sport, in some communities there is a need to invest in sport. For those harder to reach groups and children, it is also important that supports and youth diversion programmes are available, be they through An Garda or youth work as they are invaluable in that regard. I commend the work that is being done by the Minister and the Department.

I spoke about Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard. They have been spoken about quite often in this Chamber, but it is worth noting that there has been a step change in the approach in those areas and that this is yielding a benefit, especially for young people. I welcome this discussion. It is important to have it, but the follow-up will be important too.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move on, I note that we have some students in the Gallery and it may be of note to them that we are dealing with statements on diverting young people from criminal activity. They may be able to read it on the board. Just in case they cannot, I draw their attention to it. The debate was adjourned yesterday and we are continuing with it today. It is an interesting topic for them.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This is a topic that really interests me so I have been listening to the debate. I sometimes I think I live in a parallel universe. I have listened to successive speakers on the Government side talking about things I absolutely agree with. I agree with everything people have mentioned, such as investment in youth services, prevention and making sure we do not get to the stage where we need to talk about diverting young people from criminal activity. It reminds me of when I worked in this field - for more than 20 years - and every one of the services they talked about from 2011 onwards were decimated. Some 20%, 30%, 40% and 50% of funding was cut. One project had 100% of its funding was cut. That is the low-hanging fruit when it comes to recession. The communities that most need it are the ones that are most devastated by cuts. Then we look at the situation and ask why and how we ended up here. The reason is that there was no investment in the areas to which other speakers have referred.

Things were working and were extremely successful. I worked in school completion. It is an amazing programme that works really well. Our project in Coolock suffered a 37% cut. Who can sustain that? Yet, we were asked to do the same thing every year and to try to provide support, which we did to the best of our ability.

With regard to what we are talking about today in the context of tariffs, economic shocks and certain things that are happening, I urge the Government not to do what was done the last time and not to cut services. I urge it to invest. Diverting young people is about investing in communities, sports, youth clubs and organisations that work directly with young people. It is about making sure that they have dedicated facilities. I will give an example. Dublin 15 has a population of more than 130,000 people. The most diverse and youngest population in the State does not have one dedicated youth facility. They are operating out of buildings, commercial premises, community centres and so on, but there is not one dedicated youth facility. I have worked in dedicated youth facilities that work. Sphere 17 in Darndale is a brilliant dedicated youth facility. Diverting young people is about investment and, as I said, it is about making sure that we not only divert young people from getting involved in criminal activity, we just do not allow it to happen. We cannot do it for everyone, but we can do our best try to prevent everyone else.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Dedicated youth centres work. Anybody who has visited The Base in Ballyfermot will have seen the work carried out there and the example set. As Deputy Donnelly said, we cannot reach everybody, but we can try. We can try to ensure there is investment in those services, whether in Ballyfermot Youth Service or the likes of the Targeted Response with Youth, TRY, project that was operating in Donore Avenue. These are services reaching out to the hardest-to-reach young men and women running amok in communities. The idea is that the services focus on how to divert these young people away from criminal activity and from drugs and alcohol and the abuse of their abuse. It is not possible for the services to do this if they are looking over their shoulders all the time to see where the next cut is going to happen, which will mean the marginalised communities they are trying to help will be facing into another round of cuts where services will be cut and the best youth workers will be looking elsewhere for work because they will not be able to pay their own mortgages if their jobs are cut.

Let us look to the example of St. Ultan's school, what work it is doing and how it is reaching out to the community as a whole in a disadvantaged area. It is an example of how this activity can work if the investment is there and if there is continual investment. Only last week, I was at the opening of a playground at Labre Park. This is another example of my point. Labre Park has existed for more than 50 years, but the playground has only been built now. One of the most

disadvantaged and marginalised communities in this city lives in Labre Park, yet the children there did not have a playground.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this very important subject. We have a major problem with youth crime and especially with child exploitation. There is a major issue with children being enticed into criminal activity by adults, especially in the drugs scene. Drug dealers are providing drugs to young people. Often, these are free in the first instance. Those young people and children then get hooked on drugs. They have no ability to pay for those drugs, so then they become drug runners doing the dirty work on the ground for drug dealers. This is a major issue and it constitutes child trafficking. We know that children in State care, in particular, are extremely vulnerable due to their own family situations and, of course, the shortcomings in State agencies. It is unthinkable that the Government brought in legislation last year to reduce the sentencing for adults who entice young people into drugs and criminality.

On the topic of drugs, there is a major problem right across this country, including in my constituency of Mayo, in relation to the drug dealers harassing young people for drug debts. Any of those young people cannot pay the drug debts. Many emigrate or leave their areas. Drug dealers then harass their parents and grandparents. I know of a family in County Mayo where an aunt and uncle have been harassed by drug dealers. We need to get to grips with this issue. We need tougher sentencing for drug dealers who seek to recoup debts from the families of the children, grandchildren and nieces and nephews involved. It is shocking that many families are living in fear. I know of some cases where farm equipment was stolen to pay for such debt. We need tougher sentencing on a whole raft of issues, but especially concerning the drug issue. Most especially, we need them for drug dealers and adults who use children as pawns to do their dirty work. It is happening on an organised basis. We all know it and we need to get to grips with it. What is the future for these young people we see in gangs around shopfronts doing dirty work acting as runners for drug dealers? What is their life expectancy? If we do not tackle this issue, we will create another generation of young people, young adults, who will be forever in the criminal justice system.

Deputy Michael Collins: The foundation of my political career lies in my beginnings within the voluntary community sector. I firmly believe everybody should engage with their communities in some capacity. Recently, I addressed the pressing issue of the lack of gardaí in rural Ireland. We have witnessed the closure of Garda stations without replacements. This has led to a decline in the sense of safety that once prevailed in the past. If people had an issue, they could visit their local Garda station where they would know the gardaí and they would know you and your family. This connectivity between the community and the Garda was always invaluable and should have been continued. We have had some exceptional gardaí in west Cork. I often mention their names here, such as Garda Jonathan McCarthy. I do this because he lives in the same community in which he works in Ballydehob. It is greatly important to the people of the Mizen Peninsula to have a garda living in the Garda station there. His family are there too. It is a great service to the local community. Damian White is another garda who comes to mind. He works with the youth. We have the An Garda Síochána Youth Awards.

The point I am trying to make is that not all young people are bad. An incredible number of great young people are out there. They have a great deal to offer and we need to squeeze that potential out of them. The only way we can do that is through the An Garda Síochána Youth Awards at divisional and national level to celebrate outstanding young people aged between 13 and 21 by recognising the positive contributions they make to their communities. The first Garda divisional youth awards were established by a local juvenile liaison officer in west

Cork in 1995. He recognised the tremendous efforts of young people in the community that deserved acknowledgement. Since then, the awards have grown significantly. We have some great young people and we should not always be down on them. I recently met one such lad at a St. Patrick's Day parade in Skibbereen, a 15-year-old kickboxing world champion named Evan Collins. There are many more great young people in this country and we must ensure they are involved in the community. We must give them something to do and encourage them to get involved. Independent Ireland advocates for increased Garda funding, housing support and recruitment initiatives. We also believe that repeat offenders should face appropriate consequences for their actions. Furthermore, we hold that non-citizens who commit serious crimes should be deported immediately. Applicants with violent or sexual convictions should not be allowed entry into our country. I mentioned quite a few young people. One young man in west Cork who has done quite a lot and whose work has probably gone unnoticed is Aidan Burke. He is a kind of a rap musician. I met him recently. He put together a song for young people who have mental health problems. He needs to be recognised. This is what we need to do. We must recognise the good young people out there.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: This is an important matter to speak on. One of the marvellous things about our jobs as elected Members of this House is that we engage with the community on so many different levels and we see such fantastic young people and organisations giving back to society. They are led by many community leaders. Some of them have gone on to become members of their local councils and Members of this House too. Many come from community backgrounds, a bit like Deputy Collins I think. He started off with perhaps about 30 organisations and this grew to approximately 120 organisations by the time he entered this House. I refer to giving back to communities. We see some tremendous people out there. We also see, however, that an awful lot of work now goes into setting up youth organisations, from drama to any sports. The amount of company regulation and paperwork it is necessary to go through is extremely cumbersome for many organisations. We talk in this House about getting people involved in sports, dramas, new types of clubs and new types of energy, and occupying them. Looking at the Icelandic model, which brought down antisocial behaviour from about 40% to approximately 3%, it was about engagement. It is about taking away boredom and giving people opportunities to do something after hours after school.

My colleague, Deputy Paul Lawless, mentioned the drug epidemic. It has not escaped Cork either. We have a situation in Cork where children as young as eight are being used as drug mules. Children as young as eight are knocking on doors and threatening people because they cannot be prosecuted. They are getting a couple of bags of sweets or a can of Coke after as their reward for threatening Mary and telling her they are going to burn out her car. This is what is going on in parts of this country. It is happening not just in Cork but also in Mayo, Dublin and everywhere. It is about time we stopped wringing our hands in here. There are Members of this House on the left side who almost have an idea of hug a thug and everything will be alright, and we will give them an antisocial behaviour order, ASBO, and it is all because "God, they came from a tough background". We have to make parents responsible as well, and there has to be a financial repercussion for parents whose children are involved in criminal activity and cause criminal damages. I am sick to death of going to community meetings and hearing "It is not my Johnny" or "It is not my Mary" and looking at photographs of them. I had a mother tell me, "I only dropped them to the cemetery because they were only having a couple of cans". That is antisocial behaviour. That is giving a child alcohol. That is unacceptable. We need to have the powers in this State for the Garda to prosecute parents who are indulging their children in antisocial behaviour and activity.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is good to have the opportunity to speak on this issue. To be quite honest, I would love an hour, no more than anyone else would.

To put it in the optimistic point of view, Central Statistics Office, CSO, information from 2022 suggests that only 2.3% of young people aged 12 to 17 were referred to the Garda youth diversion programme. Obviously, there were activities that did not get to that level and that were undetected and so on, but it shows that the vast majority of our young people are model citizens, and that has to be remembered. We also have to remember that many of the victims of assaults by young people are actually young people themselves. In fact, a young constituent today told me that, when he was 15 and with his friend in Palmerstown, he was hopped on by a bunch of 15 guys from wherever. They escaped and got on the bus. There were no gardaí around. Nothing ever happened. It was just a random attack. We have these one-punch attacks on young men quite often. Other Deputies have mentioned this, and we had a debate on the issue of gender-based violence and the toxic masculinity that is being promoted. That is something that obviously has to be addressed too. However, let us look at what is causing the issues of young people getting involved in crime.

Disadvantage is key indicator number one alongside peer pressure, gang influence, lack of positive role models, educational disengagement, substance abuse and the related drug debt that some of my colleagues mentioned, and issues like mental health, family breakdown and general neglect. At the same time, however, irrespective of what the causes are, there also need to be consequences for poor behaviour. I do not believe we have those types of consequences for people getting involved in activities under the age of 18 to act as a deterrent and equally, as Deputy O'Flynn mentioned, consequences for the parents involved.

We need to take a positive approach, however. Early years investment is a key factor. I met a primary teacher who told me she could identify someone getting involved in criminal activity by junior infants just by the background situation and the issues involved. That is a sad reflection on our society. It is, therefore, good to see that we have this roll-out of the diversion programmes. I note the Minister's announcement recently as well. Years ago, though, people used to be able to bring their friends along. It was a more interesting project for the young person who was going. Due to cutbacks, though, it became just the person himself or herself. It kind of stigmatised people to a degree whereas we are trying to keep them from getting involved in the first place. We need to look at this from an holistic point of view. As I said, I would love to talk about it much longer, but it is about issues of leadership and support in the community and more investment in sports, as others have said. They all make contributions.

On the whole, our young people are good, and they need to be encouraged. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We will move to a Government slot, beginning with Deputy Brabazon.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. I have a lot of sympathy for what many of the speakers said, in particular the contribution Deputy O'Flynn made today. There is a lot of youth crime, certainly in the constituency I represent. There are young lads going around on scramblers and e-bikes, masked up so their identities cannot be known. They are effectively untouchable; they are above the law because they are not being chased by An Garda Síochána. When they are pursued, they are viewed as being too young to be prosecuted, notwithstanding the fact that they are behaving like adults and are causing major

disruption to local communities, certainly in the area I represent. I could tell stories to keep the Minister of State here for several hours about the effect this horrendous behaviour has on communities.

I would not be a big fan of Tony Blair's, but we have to look at crime from two perspectives. We have to be tough on crime - I am all for that - but we equally have to be tough on the causes of crime. It is clear that when I look across my constituency at the hot spots where we have high figures of youth offending, these are certain areas that have been neglected for long numbers of years. In some of those areas where serious investment has been put in over the years, though, we still have that behaviour, so it is not all about investing. It is a combination of investment and supporting sports clubs, youth clubs, drama groups, art, you name it, but anything that gets kids together so they can enjoy one another's company and not feel like they are under constant peer pressure.

We have to consider influences. I believe it was Deputy Gogarty who mentioned role models. Many of the role models people are seeing now are online, including TikTok, and some of the behaviours we are seeing involve children in groups going out and assaulting other children and adults. This is happening for the purpose of making TikTok videos and so on.

Youth diversion is one part of a whole jigsaw of approaches we need to make. We certainly need to be tough on the causes of crime, but we equally need to be very tough on the crime itself.

Deputy Emer Currie: If we are going to have a debate about the diversion of young people from criminal activity, then we have to look at the whole picture of youth work and youth services. It is an entirely lopsided system if youth services only kick in for the vast majority of young people when something goes wrong and criminal behaviour is involved, especially when it has been well established that youth work is an effective form of prevention and early intervention, as well as a means of cultivating a multitude of positive outcomes for young people. Unfortunately, a lopsided system has been allowed to emerge. As well as investment in justice-driven youth investment projects, we need wholesale investment in universal youth services, including capital works.

As to why, let us look at the numbers. Figures for the years 2019 to 2023 show funding for our 23 Dublin Garda youth diversion projects increased by a massive 143%, but the number of participants only increased by 11%. Funding stood at €5.18 million in 2019 and increased to €12.6 million in 2023, but the number of participants increased from 1,092 to just 1,212. These are figures that I received from the Department of Justice last year, and I have asked for 2024 figures. Questions must, therefore, be asked about value for money where there is spiralling funding but a diminishing return. Youth diversion is work intensive, requiring direct engagement with participants to make it a success. That goes some way to explaining the imbalance, but a factor that cannot be overlooked is the feedback from youth workers on the ground in the greater Blanchardstown area when they say they have never felt more under pressure. I believe this is because they are propping up the entire youth services system when they should be concentrating on targeted youth services.

Persistent low-level crimes is becoming a major issue on suburban Dublin communities. This does not just include youth crime. This includes theft, open drug dealing, antisocial behaviour, increased knife crime and the threat and consequences of involvement in gangland crime as well as a corresponding perceived lack of consequences for youth offenders. Communities

want this low-level crime to be tackled before it becomes normalised. As policymakers, we must ensure the public have confidence in our youth diversion strategy because it does work.

I believe some issues need to be addressed. For the third time since I have become a Teachta Dála, I am raising the Garda numbers in the K district versus other districts in the Dublin metropolitan region. The difference could be as high as one garda for every 531 people in the K district versus one garda for 397 people in a neighbouring district. That district also has 40% lower crime statistics than the K district. Out of the 150 new recruits in March, only four went to the K district. The district is potentially the busiest policing district in the country and it cannot afford to continue to lose out to the city centre and other areas.

In 2023, The Wheel found overall investment in our youth work sector was down 16% compared to 2008, with a shortfall of 15 million. Since 2008, however, our needs and population have exploded. We require a major step change in youth policy far beyond targeted youth services and diversion programmes. We need after-school facilities and youth clubs which should be opened in every community, supporting children, young people and families. This is achievable. We need our youth workers and volunteers from organisations like Foróige and YMCA to do what they do best, as well as interventions where they are required and where there already is an ecosystem and community of services.

We need local community safety partnerships up and running, bringing together the local stakeholders, such as youth workers, juvenile liaison officers, the HSE, community groups, residents and businesses so that we may have local community safety strategies for the community by the community, including our youth.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy Ó Muirí, I first welcome some visitors from County Wexford in the Visitors Gallery. We have Louise Byrne who is very used to youth work, and her brother Jude, who are here with their granny from County Mayo. They are very welcome and I hope they find this debate on how we can divert young people from criminal activity very interesting.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I want to raise youth facilities. Deputy Currie mentioned all the important facilities we need to make available, including youth cafes, youth clubs, skate parks, music clubs and astro pitches. These are the best ways to divert younger people, get them engaged and keep them involved in the community. In our area, there was a fabulous plan 20 years ago to build many community facilities into the north fringe but then the crash came along and all the building activity stopped. It has recently started up again but there is absolutely no plan, with the exception of a small element to be done by the city council, to comprehensively build community facilities there before it is too late and the population density gets too large and all those children get older.

I have a couple of issues to mention. The first is that there is a lot of social housing, AHB, development happening at present but as I understand it, they are exempt from section 48 development levies. The very tool a local authority like the city council or others would use to fund the installation of community facilities upfront is not available to them. The Government needs to try to fix that. Equally, I recall visiting a couple of projects a few years ago in our area and URDF funding where Dublin communities were effectively locked out of this funding. It was not available to Dublin communities. The only way we could do a particular project at the time seemed to be through the sports capital programme - which, by the way, is very welcome and it is vital that we keep those sports capital grant calls coming - or an active travel programme and

this did not fit into the active travel model. It was not active travel; it was a place in the community we wanted to renew. Those community facilities are really practical and important; we just need capital and money to build them upfront rather than at the end.

The LDA is getting involved in the north fringe in Clongriffin and again, I am hoping to meet agency officials, as I am sure others will. It is so important the LDA, as a State agency, is building and planning those community facilities upfront for the north fringe, Clongriffin and all those areas.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move on - they may have left - I welcome Edna Craig, Maggie Kiernan and Emer Murray. We now move to Sinn Féin and begin with Deputy Devine.

Deputy Máire Devine: To quote a wise man I know, “Inequality is our Trojan horse.”

Adolescents in our inner cities face harrowing challenges in their environments due to inequality and disadvantage brought on by neglect. The term “age-friendly cities” must be expanded to include adolescents in particular, who presently have no input into the amenities and features of their surroundings in their public realm and are often left with little to no safe activities to avoid falling into troublesome behaviour, which then forms their adulthood. Most of these kids are good. They are not all angels but who was when we were growing up? Their experience as a result of socioeconomic factors and being alienated by poverty has corrupted their childhood and we know childhood lasts a lifetime.

Many of the antisocial behaviour reports I receive in Dublin South Central concern young people in Pimlico, Weaver Square, the Liberties, and Inchicore. Last Halloween, a group of young people hoarded wooden pallets and tyres intended for a bonfire. Some burnt the pitch in Michael Mallin House, the only one we have. Some of the kids involved contacted me via social media and I engaged with them openly and honestly. They apologised for the pitch damage they had caused and said, “Missus, we didn’t think of it as destroying community property; there is just f-all for us to do here.” They are not malicious; they look to provide for themselves as there is no community centre in the area. Donore Community Centre and Notre Dame in Paris both burnt down at the same time five years ago, but guess which one still remains closed?

There is practically nothing these kids can do to help gain perspective on how they fit into their community and therefore they feel no ownership or care for it. Their homes are literally moulding and falling down around them. When we do not look after their environment, it is a small wonder they do not feel inclined to either.

A multiagency approach is needed. Yes, we need more gardaí, visibility, accountability and responsibility but we cannot police ourselves out of this problem created by austerity and deliberate neglect of our working-class communities. An holistic approach must be taken to engage young people on terms they understand. These kids bear the brunt of inequality and our task is to level the pitch.

Deputy Pa Daly: Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom beagáinín a rá mar gheall ar Mick O’Dwyer.

Mick O’Dwyer was like a god when I was growing up in County Kerry; he was the greatest of all time. He was so famous that I thought for many years the anti-internment song, “The Men Behind the Wire”, was about the Kerry football team. Lots will be said about how he transformed Kerry football and won eight all-Ireland medals, but after being an outstanding minor, he won four all-Ireland medals and had a very long playing career. He is still, as I understand

it, the highest scoring Kerry forward in national league history. He also managed Railway Cup teams and the under-21 team. Déanaim comhbhrón ó chroí le John, Karl agus Robbie, lena ghaolta, lena chlann go léir agus lena chairde uile.

GAA and other sporting bodies are the best diversion away from criminal activity. There have been recent meetings in the Department of Justice on following penal reform recommendations. The Irish Penal Reform Trust report in 2014 stated youth diversion projects should be extended to the age of 24 and I hope this will be progressed by the Department. Ireland has the third highest recidivism rate in Europe and recidivism must be attacked. Young people are most likely to change and I have seen it many times over the years. One inspector told me once about a young fella he was convinced would kill someone at some stage. However, work was done with him and he has not been in trouble for years and is a good, upstanding member of the community. The interventions have to be made in education, employment, housing and health. There also has to be some sort of restorative approach that can be of great benefit in turning lives around.

There is currently a pilot in-court accompanying project in conjunction with the University of Limerick. Some 33% of people who attend the Kerry community youth diversion service in the Kerry diocese and Kerry community youth service have a neurodiversity issue, which may not be diagnosed in some cases; either they are not taking medication or there is no proper support.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pa Daly: However, with disability service improvements, properly resourced occupational therapy, assessments and mental health-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pa Daly: -----that can be addressed. We were in Mountjoy Prison last week. The prison governor was saying exactly the same thing about people who have issues such as that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I reiterate all of our sympathies in regard to Mick O'Dwyer's family. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Is fíor an seanfhocal sin. I commend and thank the youth diversion project teams, particularly in County Meath, and juvenile liaison officers Garda Barbara Kelly and Garda Aisling Connor in Meath north and Meath south, who are doing fantastic work. I also commend the probation service officers, Louth Meath Education and Training Board, public representatives and the young people themselves who engage. We are grateful for the investment and increased funding in County Meath received towards the end of last year. However, the common thread in the room is that more resources are necessary. It is not necessarily the big ticket items; it is funding towards buses, tickets to the cinema, hiring astroturf, hiring sports halls, activity centres and yes, it is the increase in Garda resources and the wraparound services. As has been said, this is about the mental health supports, the youth workers themselves, drug awareness programmes and the Comhairle na n-Óg programme through the local authorities as well. I learned today at an excellent briefing in the audiovisual room on a publication by Trinity College Dublin about untreated ADHD and the risk factors with substance misuse and then following on from that the likelihood of engaging in crime. These are the themes we have discussed this week regarding the overlap with special education provision, family resource services, special community employment schemes. That

is the common thread here whereby we must have inter- and intra-government and State and semi-State agencies working together because ultimately, mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I also add my voice to the condolences for the great legend, Mick O'Dwyer, and offer my sympathies to his family and the GAA community. The GAA community does so much, as do rugby, soccer, boxing and all the different sports, to divert young people away from harmful behaviour. In my area we are lucky that the diocese of Waterford and Lismore provides a youth service that covers much of south Tipperary, and indeed the Cashel and Emly diocese does great work in youth services and is building in Tipperary town on the main street. Of course Comhairle na nÓg is active as well. I compliment all involved there especially a friend of mine, Joe Higgins, in Elm Park, Clonmel who is doing great work in the community. It is important, as Deputy Toole said, mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. I believe that is a profound seanfhocal. We must do that because the carrot is better than the stick. Praise the young people because they are great. They have such pressures today that we never had, such as the Internet and mobile phones and rudaí mar sin.

I give thanks to the youth liaison officers. We do not have enough of them and they are pulled away from their duties because of traffic duties. There are two wonderful gardaí in my area, Garda John Walsh and Garda Philip Ryan who are both off work long term due to vicious assaults against both of them. They are fine officers. It is a pity because they have the ear and the confidence of the community. As a parish priest once said, if you want to fill the churches, you must stand in the kitchens of the houses. It is important to have gardaí on the ground. When my kids were small, gardaí used to visit the national schools. I do not now whether they do that anymore. It is very important they should have a relationship with gardaí before they get into trouble and go down a slippery slope. I thank my GAA club in Newcastle, Caisleán Nua, for the tremendous work it does, and all the GAA clubs and all sporting clubs. I have to single out Clonmel Boxing Club, Martin Fennessy and the team there, including Shauna O'Keeffe. There are many great young people in sport and boxing with great achievements. They do great work.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: When we talk about crime and antisocial behaviour among young people, we often focus on the consequences but we need to ask what is causing it in the first place. It reminds me of a story I heard at an event by Peter McVerry. It is a story I come back to which goes, if you see people floating down a river, you jump in and rescue them. Then you see another person floating down, and you jump in and rescue them. Then you see another and eventually you ask yourself, "Where are they coming from and how are they falling into the river?" You walk up the stream and find the source of the problem. That is what we need to do with our youth. We need to stop pulling people out of the river and go up the stream to fix the reason they are falling in and getting involved in crime.

Recently I asked the Minister for Justice about the number of young people referred to the Garda youth diversion programme. In 2022, there were 8,434. However, in 2023 that number dropped by 7%. That is fewer children being prevented from falling into the river and engaging with the Garda, giving them the alternative to crime. We need to support the Garda and give it more resources for encouraging community engagement.

What I have been seeing and hearing from the meetings I have been having is that young people are being pulled into violence at a younger age than ever. They are organising fights on Snapchat, WhatsApp, TiKTok, sharing videos online of bullying. These are 13- and 14-year-old children crying out for structure that they are not getting. If they are not getting it at home, they need to get it through the youth diversion programme, youth clubs and sports clubs.

Social media are warping developing minds and with adolescents, tá sé i mbéal an phobail faoi láthair. It is addictive, damaging and corrosive, especially for kids of that age when their identity is being formed. We are social beings and we are always looking to fit in. I am 26 and I saw it creep in when I was 13 or 14 but it has only become worse. These multinationals have designed this to be as addictive as possible. We all see it ourselves. I can barely walk down the street without whipping out my phone.

We need to be bold enough to act. The Australian Government is leading the way on banning social media for under-16s. We should look into alternatives. This is not about censorship; this is about protection and giving parents an alternative. If we want people to be prevented from going into crime, we need to give them alternatives.

I would love to talk about a particular incident in Dublin Bay North where we need to have the options for children to have something else to do. That is what it is. They do not have anything else to do. Kilmore Celtic football club lacks basic amenities. There is no water, no electricity, children have to get changed in the bushes and go across the road to use other people's toilets. We are not giving the children an alternative to getting involved in crime or standing on street corners. Please therefore, can we go up the river? Give more investment to youth clubs and sports clubs in north Dublin. If we are not going to do that and have the courage to walk up we are not going to solve this. Can we look into Kilmore Celtic and all the community centres and sports clubs in north Dublin and give them the facilities they need?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Deputies for the opportunity to discuss efforts to divert young people from criminal offences and criminal activities. This is an issue of fundamental importance. It is very clear from the contributions both today and yesterday that this issue moves and impassions many Deputies across the House. All of us will agree that we must continue to provide opportunities for young people to contribute to society in a productive and meaningful way. This will benefit both the well-being of our young people as well as society in the overall context. The variety of contributions from Deputies not only shows the passion there is for this area but that they also had expertise and experiences themselves before they entered and indeed have gained some since entering the House. We have heard from now-elected TDs who are legal experts, who were involved in various football clubs and GAA clubs and who worked previously in home-school liaison services as youth workers and social workers. It is really useful for us to have that level of expertise in this House, for it to be shared on the floor of the Dáil and for it to be used to help to shape our strategies.

3 o'clock

Those of us who contributed to this debate did so with the very best motives. We all have that shared interest. It makes it clear that we need a whole-of-government approach. Things like sports clubs, youth cafes, education and social media all fall under the remit of different Departments, which is why the whole-of-government approach is so important. We must be mindful of the fact that a multifaceted and agile approach is needed to support young people who may come to rely on the State for help. Of course, diverting young people away from crime is vital. However, it is important to address what the State can do when individuals do engage in criminal activity and are detected by An Garda Síochána. That is why we must continue to deliver restorative justice. This was mentioned a number of times today and yesterday.

At its core, restorative justice aims to enable all those affected by an offence to participate

in repairing the harm done and to find a positive way forward. The Probation Service delivers restorative justice directly and through several community-based organisations that receive referrals at specific points in the criminal justice process. The service currently provides funding to five community-based organisations to provide dedicated restorative justice programmes. In Budget 2025, the Probation Service received an additional €4 million aimed at expanding crime diversion programmes. Its total budget is now over €60 million. This money supports step-down facilities, restorative justice and community-based alternatives to imprisonment. These are all part of where that money is being spent. The Minister intends to set out a roadmap with a view to increasing the uptake and availability of community service orders, which will further contribute to the provision of non-custodial sanctions.

In devising our approach to diversion, we must remember that no two young people are the same so the services we provide must be tailored to different needs. That is why a core principle of the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 involves embedding a multidisciplinary approach. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, opened this debate by outlining some of the work being done to progress the youth justice strategy. I will not repeat what he said, but I will discuss the strategy more generally to highlight the Government's vision of youth justice.

The Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 provides a framework to address key ongoing challenges as well as new and emerging issues in the youth justice area. The focus of the strategy is very much on children in contact with the justice system but it also examines more closely why a proportion of young offenders go on to become adult offenders and how this can be better addressed. The strategy examines how youth justice policy might be more closely aligned to other child and youth policies and towards the promotion of community and local development. This approach echoes the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, which the Minister commenced this week. It is important to understand how the strategy is being delivered so that we can change our approach if needed. This is especially the case given the strategy is now at its mid point. It is the perfect time to have this debate and see what feedback can be taken on board. I understand that feedback has been sought from all stakeholders on what has worked well so far and on future priorities for the strategy's implementation. Once this feedback is received and evaluated, we will ensure that the strategy is as responsive and adaptable as can be to meet the needs of young people across the country.

I commend the great work done by youth diversion projects, YDPs, around the country. YDPs are critical to how we connect with young people. Youth workers attached to YDPs can and do change lives every day across the country. The impact they have on young people cannot be overstated, and I am sure every Deputy is aware of the great work done by youth workers in their constituencies. It was great to hear people place on the record some really positive experiences regarding youth workers and community gardaí and the success of youth development projects in their constituencies. In 2023, an evaluation of youth development projects was published. This evaluation confirms the vital role youth workers play in bringing the youth justice strategy to life. This evaluation acknowledged a great many positives, including a strong alignment between the youth justice policy and the objectives of individual YDPs. The people working in YDPs were found to be experienced and highly qualified. They reported strong levels of satisfaction in their work. This is brilliant because their work is so important. Key relationships such as those between youth justice workers and juvenile liaison officers are strong across the board and it is positive to see this being the case. The report also found that the range of interventions offered by YDPs continues to be responsive to the diverse and complex needs of individuals, their families and local communities.

In short, we know that diversion works. The Minister of State, Deputy Collins, provided statistics that back this up, but we have also heard and know in our own constituencies about the lived experience of people who avail of these services and go down different paths as a result. I encourage all Deputies to continue to support their local YDPs and youth workers. The Government will be resolute in its support of YDPs. Two new YDPs have been commissioned in east Clare and north Tipperary. When these projects are fully open, which should be by the end of this year, we will have achieved full nationwide coverage of our youth diversion programme. This means that any child in the country who needs to avail of these services will be able to do so. This expansion has occurred in the context of and has been enabled by, substantial funding increases. Deputy Currie alluded to that earlier. Youth services were allocated €18 million in 2020. Since then, the amount has doubled. It was allocated just over €36 million in Budget 2025.

As well as increasing the footprint of YDPs around the country, this funding is increasing opportunities to access services. Making use of the increased funding, services can open at weekends and late at night. This was a recommendation not just of the YDPs but feedback from those accessing the services.

We all want our communities to be safe places that provide young people with avenues to realise their potential. Youth justice interventions contribute to this environment. Youth justice is not a way around punishment or consequences. It is about redirecting that young people who may stray from the proper path. Most young people simply need support and direction to put their lives on the right track. We know that young people can make better life decisions when given the chance. I strongly believe that improving outcomes for young people at risk of a life of criminality can make a real and long-term difference to the quality of life of these young people, their families and the entire community.

We know that diversion is working. We know how to make improvements in the system and we will invest in those improvements. This Government, through the ongoing work of Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Collins, will resource and support interventions designed to improve the lives of our young people. I look forward to the continued implementation of the youth justice strategy, seeing that feedback we all had here brought to life and the development of a subsequent strategy to build on the successes we have already achieved.

Deputy Coppinger said that parents and teachers are no match for social media companies. That is an interesting point. She went on to talk about that culture of toxic masculinity that, thankfully, is predominantly online and that we know is being spearheaded by particular individuals. She sought a response in terms of an education campaign for that. That is a very worthwhile suggestion. I will take it back to the relevant Minister.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need to provide a new maternity unit at University Hospital Kerry.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss the establishment of the local community safety partner-

ship.

Deputy Martin Daly - To discuss modern methods of construction to meet housing targets.

Deputy George Lawlor - To discuss CSO figures indicating a 30% decrease in foreign visitors compared with the same month in 2024.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the Mountmellick relief road in County Laois.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the transport needs of the growing population in Fingal West.

Deputy Frankie Feighan - To discuss the serious threat to the rural economy of the north west posed by the threatened EU-USA trade tariffs.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss capitation funding for DEIS band 1 primary schools.

Deputy Dessie Ellis - To discuss the need for a permanent building for Gaelscoil Cholmille, Coolock, Dublin 17.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - To discuss the upgrading of the water treatment plant in Macroom.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss the extension of the Luas to Poolbeg.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss unsafe working conditions at the ambulance station in Drogheda.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the lack of affordable childcare facilities in Dublin Central.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the future of Raphoe community playgroup in County Donegal.

Deputy Paul Lawless - To discuss the waste water treatment plant in Newport, County Mayo.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the need for a preschool to continue to operate in Lucan given the shortage of childcare provision in the area.

The matters raised by Deputies Aindrias Moynihan, Dessie Ellis, Brian Stanley, George Lawlor, Paul McAuliffe, Paula Butterly, Louise O'Reilly, Paul Nicholas Gogarty, Martin Daly and Gary Gannon have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Water Services

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: There is great need to upgrade the drinking water plant in Macroom. The plant in the Castle Grounds supplies water from the Sullane river to over 4,100 people in Macroom and east around Carrigadrohid and Canovee. Boil water notices have been

put in place in the area during each of the past three winters. This due to turbidity in the water. This is not just a water quality issue. It is also heavily influenced by the older design of the plant. These boil water notices have been a constant source of difficulty for residents. They either have to buy bottled water or boil water before they use it. There is hassle associated with that, for example, not being able to brush one's teeth or wash a head of lettuce.

These prolonged and repeated boil water notices also undermine confidence in Irish water supply. These notices are extending from four to five months at a time through the winter. Last winter, we saw the longest boil water notice so far at six months. That notice began as early as August, there was a brief reprieve for a week in September and then it was back to boiling the water again until February.

These boil water notices involve a cost and create hassle for residents. I cannot over emphasise that. As I said earlier, it is also heavily influenced by the older design of the treatment plant and the way it filters the water in particular. In recent winters, we found changing the filters typically leads to lifting the boil water notice. By the way, there are no consequences for Irish Water while a boil notice continues. It does not appear to act with any great urgency either. For example, a freedom of information request from late last year indicated its own technical staff recommended changing the filters as early as last autumn yet it was February before that was done and the boil water notice lifted. Locals carried the cost and the hassle in the meantime.

Irish Water has known for some time that an upgrade on this plant is needed and it is down as part of its capital plan but it appears to be progressing very slowly and there is even a reluctance to share information. It had agreed to a meeting, for example, to discuss the situation last December which has been put off until later this month. There needs to be greater urgency by Irish Water in advancing this new drinking water plant, a plant that would provide reliable, clean drinking water to more than 4,100 people in the Macroom, Carrigadrohid and Canovee area.

Macroom is a growing town especially after the bypass construction. New homes are under construction in Rás An Mhuilinn and in Meadowlands, for example. There is an upgrade under way in the wastewater treatment plant. There will be increased demand on the water network in the town as it grows. The drinking water plant needs to have capacity for future growth as well as the delivery of quality water. It needs to advance with urgency. The current situation is not fair on locals where there is are prolonged boil water notices and the hassle and costs associated with it.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Emer Higgins): I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for local government who would like to thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is a shame he was not here because were he here he could hear the passion with which the Deputy has spoken on behalf of his constituents. I thank him for bringing this important issue to the floor of the Dáil.

The Deputy will appreciate that the operation of the public water supply, together with operational issues locally are matters for Uisce Éireann, which has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local level. Under section 7 of the Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013, neither the Minister nor the Department has operational function in the matter to which the Deputy refers. However, the Minister has made inquiries and is informed by Uisce Éireann that an upgrade of the existing Macroom

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water treatment plant is planned to commence in the next few weeks. This upgrade will provide critical investment of more than €6.5 million which will benefit Macroom residents and businesses by ensuring compliance with current drinking water regulations, improving the drinking water quality and providing a safer more reliable water supply. The Macroom water supply is included on the Environmental Protection Agency's remedial action list, which identifies water supplies that need improvement. The planned upgrade will address these issues.

The Minister understands that Uisce Éireann provided an update on Macroom water treatment plant directly to the Deputy last month and has committed to continuing to provide updates to the Deputy as the works commence. Uisce Éireann has also committed to providing regular updates to the community and elected representatives regarding the progress of the water treatment plant upgrade.

The Minister welcomes this upgrade of the water treatment plant which, he understands, supplies a population of more than 4,000 across County Cork. The proposed upgrade will address the frequent boil water notices that the people of Macroom have experienced over the last number of years. In addition, Uisce Éireann also continues to progress a major €21 million upgrade to the Macroom wastewater treatment plant to protect the environment and support the long-term sustainable growth and development of Macroom. This project has reached a major milestone with more than 50% of the works now complete.

Throughout 2025, Macroom residents will begin benefitting from the upgrade as part of the new wastewater treatment plant comes into operation, improving the quality of treated water discharged into the river. This year, the old wastewater treatment plant will be decommissioned, allowing the new infrastructure to become fully operational next year. These two projects represent major investment by Uisce Éireann to support the long-term sustainable growth and development of Macroom.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for the update. I acknowledge the progress that has been made on the wastewater treatment plant and the works under way there. I will focus on the drinking water and the supply there and the hassle and associated cost for locals who have endured boil water notice after boil water notice each winter. It is essential that those works and the new plant be advanced as quickly as possible. It is positive to hear that the works will be quickly under way. It is unfortunate that it has to be raised here to get such an update. As I said earlier, it required freedom of information requests late last year to extract information from Irish Water. It was not forthcoming. It does not willingly share information. That is a big aspect of confidence and trust in its supply. That needs to move as quickly as possible.

Is a contractor being lined up to carry out the works? Can Irish Water identify who that will be and how quickly they will be expected to be on the ground? We know this project has been on the capital programme for some time. If there is information that they are willing to share, we would be keen to get that. The sooner this new plant and the upgrade are in place for the benefit of the people of Carrigadrohid, Canovee and Macroom the better so that they do not have to face another winter of possible boil water notices.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I appreciate the Deputy's frustration about the lack of information from a State body or a body working on the ground. Ultimately, however, there is good news. The upgrade of the existing water treatment plant is a very welcome development for the residents and businesses represented by the Deputy. Uisce Éireann has committed to holding an

elected representative briefing to mark this commencement. The Minister has been informed that an invitation will be issued shortly to all those in the Macroom municipal district and a communication on this has been sent to the Deputy directly. That is probably the best opportunity for the Deputy to engage directly with Uisce Éireann to be able to answer the specific questions he has about contractors and when ground will be broken.

With the existing wastewater infrastructure in the village overloaded and out of date, it is really positive that the works are now progressing on schedule to modernise and improve the performance of wastewater treatment in Macroom. The next phase of the project is now commencing. It will bring significant benefits to the communities the Deputy represents and the surrounding areas in terms of growth, health, environmental protection and improved water quality in the river as well. Uisce Éireann has a dedicated hotline and email address. I appreciate the Deputy has had trouble getting information from that. I am glad that there will be a meeting and a briefing set up with Uisce Éireann and all representatives from the area. There have been record levels of investment in water services by Uisce Éireann in the last five years which will continue over the funding period of 2025-2029. The overall investment will deliver significant improvement in our public water and wastewater services. I am pleased the Deputy's constituents will see the benefits of that.

School Accommodation

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Táim an-bhuíoch den Aire as an seans labhairt faoi Ghaelscoil Cholmcille, a bunaíodh in 1996. Gaelscoil Cholmcille was founded in 1996. Its first years were spent in the upstairs rooms of the football club St. Kevin's in Santry, Dublin 9. It is a very successful Gaelscoil and has a great academic reputation. It is a very popular choice for parents in the area. More than 80% of its pupils live within 2 miles of the Gaelscoil due to its popularity. Unfortunately, the school has to turn away a large number of local children due to the lack of spaces in the school.

In 2008, the school moved into temporary accommodation at its present location in Coolock Lane. This accommodation consists of fast-build prefab-like structures. The Gaelscoil was promised at the time that this move would last for a maximum of five years and that a permanent school building with all of the necessary amenities would be built to accommodate the it. Tá an scoil ag feitheamh 17 mbliana ar fhoirgneamh nua. There is not even proper road signage outside the school to identify that it is there. In itself, this is hazardous for parents, pupils and staff. In fact, there have been a number of incidents and near misses and one serious accident outside the school.

Due to the fact that these are temporary structures not designed for long-term use, the Department continues to waste money on emergency works to keep them operable. The school is basically firefighting because maintenance problems continually arise. One January a few years ago, the boiler failed and there was no heat in the school for the whole of that month. The Department of Education ended up spending €50,000 to replace it. The building is so old that the school cannot replace bulbs in the lighting fixtures and has to spend a lot of money replacing the fixtures in their entirety. The school's plumbing is progressively failing. Every year, money is being spent on replacing pipes, fixing water heaters and general maintenance. Tomorrow, someone is due to visit the school to survey it for the installation of solar panels, another potential huge expenditure in respect of a structure that was supposed to be temporary.

There has been much back and forth about a permanent site for the school. The management was originally told that the site next door would be where the new school would be built. This was discounted because, apparently, the area was designated as a no-fly zone. A swap was then discussed between Dublin City Council and Department of Education in respect of another parcel of land nearer to Oscar Traynor Road. This was discussed for years without any decision being made on the proposal. Even if a decision is made on where the building would be built, it could still take at least another five years for a brick to be laid once all the planning processes and so on are completed.

In 2004, my former colleague Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin raised this matter with the then Minister for Education. In 2017, it was raised again as a Topical Issue. In 2018, the parents put up three billboards at the entrance to the school to highlight their campaign for a permanent structure when the Minister for Education paid the school a visit. This has been an ongoing campaign, and parents and staff are very frustrated that no decision has been made regarding a site for a permanent building. Tá naoi seomra sa scoil agus thart ar 274 dalta. Tá siad ag lorg 16 seomra agus cúpla seomra speisialta san fhoirgneamh nua.

This situation is unfair to the staff, the pupils and to the parents. If the Department really cares about staff and pupil well-being, it needs to make a decision on a site for the construction of a permanent school that has the basic facilities a school needs, such as a sports hall and buildings that can accommodate the growing and diverse needs of its pupils.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I can hear the Deputy's frustration loud and clear about the fact this issue has gone on for a long time. It has been raised by him, by Deputy McAuliffe and by others in this Chamber on multiple occasions.

I am here to take this matter on behalf of the Minister for Education. Quite a lengthy response has been provided, but I will skip to the bit that is going to be of most interest to the Deputy. He spoke about confusion over the site. What I have today is confirmation that an agreement is in place with Dublin City Council regarding a proposed land swap. This will facilitate any future development relating to the school based on the outcome of the national energy and conditions survey, evolving demographic requirement and allocated capital funds. As the Deputy may be aware, the Department is examining demographic requirements across the country including in the context of current and planned residential development activity. Any major capital works for Gaelscoil Cholmcille will be considered in the context of the review of demographics for the Beaumont-Coolock Dublin 5 school planning area.

As the Deputy will be well aware, Gaelscoil Cholmcille is a primary school in Coolock under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta. The school had an enrolment in September 2024 of 221 pupils. The school has a current staffing allocation of a principal, ten mainstream class teachers, two special education teacher posts and one shared SET post. The school is located in the Beaumont-Coolock Dublin 5 school planning area. There are currently ten primary schools in this school planning area, with Gaelscoil Cholmcille being the only school providing all-Irish-medium education.

All applications from schools for major capital works must be considered in the context of capacity requirements and climate action commitments. The priority of the Department continues to be the provision of required additional school places to meet demographic requirements as well as for children with special educational needs. The Department is required to manage the allocated capital funding across all schools in the country. The Department's approach is to

maximise the usage of existing capacity in schools and, in tandem with this, to manage the progression of the existing pipeline of projects within available budgets and in line with the Government's infrastructure guidelines. The Department can identify opportunities to transform existing schools as part of energy retrofit projects, and the Department's pathfinder programme has been developing effective solutions in this regard, as we plan for a future wider roll out.

The plan for working this through at national scale will be informed by the outcome of an energy and condition survey of all schools which is currently under way and is due for completion by the middle of next year. The subsequent analysis of this significant amount of data will take some time but it will help determine priorities going forward in respect of retrofitting and refurbishment projects. The overall process is particularly valuable in facilitating a proportionate assessment of a school's accommodation upgrade needs relative to all other schools, and allowing effective prioritisation of capital investment. Prioritising allows the Department to keep a strong focus on the provision of additional capacity to cater for demographics, new housing developments and the roll-out of additional special classes for children with additional needs. This approach reflects the Department's fundamental objective of ensuring the availability of a school place for every child.

The pace of delivery of additional residential developments in school planning areas like the Deputy's, along with the updated enrolment and demographic data, needs to be kept under review and to inform strategies. As stated, we have confirmation now that an agreement is in place with Dublin City Council regarding a proposed land swap for this school. I hope that is welcome news to the Deputy, to Deputy McAuliffe, to the parents and to the school community.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister of State. I am delighted that the land swap has been agreed, there but I am worried about the Minister of State's comment to the effect that there are a lot of surveys to be done. The Oscar Traynor Woods complex is right beside the school. Some 895 apartments and houses are being built there. In nearby Whitehall, Santry and Coolock, vast numbers of apartments are also being built. It is an absolute necessity to get this school going. I know the Minister of State is saying it will take until the middle of next year. People have been waiting more than 19 years for this. It is getting to the point of ridiculousness that we have not got any further. I hope the Minister will listen and speed up this process.

Tá an scoil seo an-cháiliúil ar fad agus tá sí ag dul chun cinn freisin. Tá a lán páistí ag feitheamh ar áit sa scoil seo agus tá liosta feithimh fada ann. It is really frustrating that we have such a long list of people waiting to get into the school. We need the 16 classrooms that are going to be built there. At present we have nine and it is not enough. We need to get this moving. If anyone values the Irish language, this is an opportunity to put in place the facilities that are required in this area. The demand is there. Tá an-éileamh sa cheantar seo ar Ghaelscoil Cholmcille.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta. The Government absolutely values the Irish language. We have had a record level of investment in school buildings this year again. This will increase the number of school places, significantly increase provision for special education and upgrade and modernise our school infrastructure. The impact will be felt in communities right across the country, including in the Deputy's constituency.

The key drivers of capital investment in the school sector are going to include demographic growth, particularly at post-primary level. Demographic growth absolutely covers the Oscar Traynor Woods site the Deputy has spoken about and all the new homes and families we will

be welcoming there. Increased demand for special education needs provision will also be one of the key drivers. So, too, will the alignment of school place provision with new housing developments, such as Oscar Traynor, and climate action objectives, including deep energy retrofit. The programme for Government recognises the importance of strong capital investment in the school building programme and supporting this with enhanced allocations through the national development plan process. The Department is committed to continuing to update An Foras Pátrúnachta in relation to the factors influencing capital investment for the new school, Gaelscoil Cholmcille.

Road Projects

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask the Minister of State to address the situation of Mountmellick, which has been promised a relief road for a long number of years. It still has not happened and it is very important we get it.

Mountmellick town has been neglected badly over the years in terms of infrastructure. This has been talked about and promised for about 30 years. Various options have been looked at for the route to take. There was a route from beside the mill on the Portlaoise road. That has changed and a better route has been selected. It needs to happen.

There was an announcement a couple of weeks ago of €663 million for roads projects and I was delighted to see it. When I checked down along the list, it had everywhere from Ballyhaderreen to Middleton and Youghal, but nowhere does Mountmellick figure in that long list. Limerick has four pieces of substantial infrastructure, Cork also has four and Laois has zero.

This route is badly needed to connect the Portlaoise road to the Tullamore road out of the town. This is the main route - the N80 - to Rosslare, which the Ceann Comhairle is very interested in. Vehicles coming from the west of Ireland use it, particularly HGVs. There are over 8,500 vehicles per day going through the centre of Mountmellick town, many of them HGVs. There are significant bottlenecks, particularly at the junction of Pearse Street and Sarsfield Street. It is difficult for them to get articulated trucks around it. The local hauliers association complains about it. It is also holding back the town to have HGVs and traffic trundling through every day and the middle of the town hollowed out from a business point of view. That is the simplest way I can put it. You cannot stop to do anything in the town. It is not friendly to walk around and it badly needs to be bypassed.

The feasibility study has been done, with €105,000 spent on it. The county council has done its job, it has done the assessments and studies and the preferred route is there. There are benefits to this. In the previous Government, there may have been a bit of an ideological thing about not putting in a bypass, but this would shorten journeys in distance and time. The relief road would shorten the journey by nearly 60% because you are cutting across country and not having to go into the town and wiggle in and out through streets. It would be a far shorter journey.

Like all new roads, it will have cycle lanes, and I fully support that. You cannot put cycle lanes on the existing streets of the town. That is just a fact of life. It is too dangerous. We need to get people using cycle lanes and bicycles.

It is an important project. Mountmellick is a substantial town with a large population. It is lacking in industry and infrastructure. This would benefit Mountmellick as well as travellers

and drivers, particularly HGVs. We need to get this moving because there is now much more freight going to the port of Rosslare, particularly with Brexit. The number of HGVs going through Mountmellick has increased, so this is important. The port has been upgraded and new infrastructure has been put in. We need to put in the roads to feed into that. This road is part of that.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Minister for Transport has asked me to take it on his behalf. The Minister has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding in respect of the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, under the Road Acts and in line with the national development plan, NDP, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned, in this case Laois County Council. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and, most importantly, the NDP.

The Government has earmarked €5.1 billion for capital spending on new national road projects from 2021 to 2030. That is all under the NDP. This funding will enable improved regional accessibility across the country and compact growth, which are key national strategic outcomes. The funding will provide for the development of numerous national road projects, including the completion of projects that are already at construction stage or close to construction stage, as well as the development of a number of other projects.

Since the greater portion of this funding will only become available in the second half of the decade, there is a constraint on the funding available for new projects this year. However, approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funds have been provided for national roads through TII to local authorities so far this year.

Regarding the Mountmellick relief road, Laois County Council has completed a preliminary appraisal of bypass options. An allocation contribution was provided to Laois County Council in 2020 to carry out a strategic assessment report. However, a proposed bypass of Mountmellick is not included among the projects identified for development during the period of the national development plan. Therefore, advancement of the proposed scheme cannot be accommodated in the national roads programme at present. However, a review of the NDP is being undertaken and the outcome of this review will inform TII on the schemes to be progressed over the coming years, pending the availability of sufficient funding.

It is not included in the NDP at the moment. That is the constraint, but the NDP is up for review. I urge the Deputy and the organisations and residents associations he is working with in Mountmellick to take this opportunity to engage.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State. She mentioned the billions of euro that will be there between 2026 and 2030. The bypass did not make it into the 2025 period. We have come to the end of that now. The new funding announced a number of weeks ago did not include it either. I know some of those on the list, such as the Adare bypass, are badly needed, but there is a long list of other ones there as well. Mountmellick and Laois did not seem to figure in it at all. It needs to be considered for inclusion in the review.

The Minister of State outlined the amount of money due to be spent between now and 2030 and I welcome that. The national development plan is the opportunity and that will be signed off on by Ministers. The Minister of State knows that. It will be signed off on by the senior

Minister and the rest of the Cabinet. This project is ready to go. The Minister of State mentioned that projects were being funded that had started or were almost ready to go, but this is ready to go. The studies and the groundwork have been done.

The Minister of State's party leader was down just before the election. I always like to take people at their word. Along with Deputy Aird, he gave a firm commitment - I saw it quoted publicly before the election - that this would be built under the national development plan. Will the Minister of State remind the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and her party leader, Simon Harris, of the fact? I have already said it to Deputy Aird. The Minister of State might remind the Tánaiste of the commitment. Local people really want to see that, particularly all the people who voted for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in Mountmellick.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy will be pleased to hear Laois did figure in funding this year. An allocation of €1.147 million has been provided to Laois County Council for national roads so far this year. That comprises €701,300 for capital protection and renewal and €445,949 for current protection and renewal. Approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funding has been provided to TII for national roads so far this year, and almost €1.2 million of this has been allocated for Laois County Council, which I am sure Deputy Stanley is pleased to hear. This is in line with the NDP and Government policy.

In line with this, TII has sought to allocate national road funding to local authorities in a manner which seeks to achieve the protection and renewal of existing national road networks, and the progression of major projects in or near construction. I appreciate Deputy Stanley saying this could be a shovel-ready project if it were to be in the national development plan. It is not in the NDP so the next step is to get it there, if this is what Deputy Stanley is looking for, and I will absolutely remind the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, that it is not in the NDP at present. It also looks to progress major projects at an earlier stage of development in the pipeline. A number of the new road projects included in the NDP have already been delivered. They include the N22 project, the Dunkettle interchange, the N5 Westport to Turlough route and the bypasses of Moycullen and Listowel. The programme for Government commits to increased funding for new roads as part of the NDP review and to the maintenance of existing roads.

Tourism Industry

Deputy George Lawlor: In light of the recent statistics released by the Central Statistics Office, which indicate a very concerning 30% decrease in foreign visitors to Ireland year on year, it is clear the Government simply must acknowledge the gravity of this situation and must commit to addressing the underlying causes and implications of this decline. A total of 304,000 foreign visitors completed a trip to Ireland in February. This was down from 433,000 in the same month last year. As we know, tourism is one of the largest indigenous industries and the biggest employer in Ireland with 257,000 people working in the sector. Ireland took in €6.2 billion from overseas tourists in 2024 despite a 3% reduction in bed nights. It has been said by observers in the industry that last month's decline represented an acceleration of the downward trend in foreign visitor numbers that saw first indications last September.

The tourism sector is one of the cornerstones of our economy, particularly in a county like my own of Wexford, contributing significantly to job creation, community development and cultural exchange. A reduction in foreign visitors not only impacts businesses reliant on tour-

ism but also affects local economies, indigenous jobs and the vibrancy of our communities. As such, the Government simply has to recognise the need for a strategic and multifaceted response to challenges faced by the industry and everyone involved. We must conduct a thorough analysis of the factors contributing to the decline. Is it the geopolitical situation? Is it the cost of visiting Ireland? Why is it happening and why is there such a big reduction? Understanding these dynamics will enable us to formulate effective strategies to attract visitors back to our shores.

In response to these findings we must actively work to enhance our marketing efforts to promote Ireland as a premier travel destination. This includes a renewed focus on digital marketing campaigns targeting key international markets, as well as collaborations with airlines and travel agencies to incentivise travel to Ireland. We must also emphasise our unique cultural heritage, our natural beauty and our hospitality to entice potential visitors.

The Government must commit to investing in infrastructure and services that enhance the visitor experience. This includes upgrading our transport links, looking at regional airports such as Waterford, improving accommodation options and ensuring our attractions are accessible and appealing. A positive visitor experience is crucial for encouraging repeat visits and fostering positive word of mouth recommendations. Additionally, there should be engagement with stakeholders in the tourism sector to gather insights and recommendations on how to better support businesses in coping with the downturn. This may involve exploring financial aid programmes, grants and training initiatives aimed at helping businesses to adapt to the changing landscape of tourism. There must also be collaboration with our international partners to promote safe travel practices and restore confidence in international travel. By fostering a co-operative approach with other countries we can ensure Ireland remains an attractive and safe destination for travellers.

A 30% decrease in foreign visitors is a significant concern. We must remain steadfast in our commitment to revitalising the tourism sector. Through comprehensive analysis, strategic marketing, infrastructure investment and stakeholder collaboration we must all put our shoulders to the wheel to restore Ireland's position as a leading travel destination and support the recovery of our economy. Will the Government commit to supporting all these urgent requirements in an effort to reverse the radical downturn we have seen in the number of foreign visitors coming to our shores?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Lawlor for raising this important matter. My very first job after I graduated was working for Fáilte Ireland so I have been following these statistics with great interest. I am taking this matter on behalf of the relevant Minister.

The latest CSO figures for overseas visitor numbers were published last Friday, as Deputy Lawlor said. These figures were specifically for February 2025 and showed that 304,300 foreign visitors completed a trip to Ireland in that month, and these visitors spent €196 million in Ireland, excluding their fares for getting here and leaving. The visitor numbers and the associated revenue represent an approximate 30% reduction compared to February of the previous year.

In relation to how the data provides an insight into the outlook for Irish tourism this year, it is important to recognise that the figures published to date for 2025 only cover January and February. In recent years, these two months typically have accounted for less than 10% of the total annual overseas visitor spend. Furthermore, I understand that sentiment from the tourism

sector itself is far more positive, with research showing that 39% of businesses anticipate an increase in visitor levels this year, while 47% expect growth in overseas visitors.

Earlier this week, officials from the tourism division met with the CSO and the tourism agencies to discuss these overseas visitor figures. I understand a meeting with tourism industry representatives, the tourism agencies and the CSO will take place tomorrow to consider other sources of data that could assist in gathering a more complete picture of the recent overseas tourism performance. This will assist the tourism agencies to put in place targeted activity for the rest of the year to ensure we achieve our long-term growth targets. In this regard, it is worth remembering we are coming off the back of a strong year for tourism in Ireland, when overseas visitors spent more than €6 billion, representing an increase of 11% compared to 2023.

I am, however, well aware of the challenges that lie ahead for Irish tourism. With macro-economic uncertainty in the world now, there is a risk that consumers will become more cautious, including when it comes to travel. On the positive side, there are also many opportunities to take advantage of our wonderful tourism offering. As Deputy Lawlor is aware, the Dublin Airport cap is on hold for the summer months, and it is encouraging to note that we will have 110% of the air seat capacity we had last summer from key source markets such as the United States and Canada. Tourism Ireland will be supporting partners operating new routes, such as Indianapolis and Nashville, with demand generation and partnership activities.

In the longer term, the review of the Dublin Airport cap is an important commitment in the programme for Government alongside our support for regional airports. We can ensure the air capacity is there to enable real tourism revenue growth in the years ahead. We can also look forward to major sporting events that will bring significant tourism benefits to our shores. The hosting of The Open at Royal Portrush in July will ensure golf enthusiasts travel to other areas of the island to experience at first hand our exceptional golf courses. We will also be playing host to significant US visitors on foot of the American college football game in August and the NFL game later in the autumn. We know ongoing Ireland's selling points to visitors are our scenery, culture, history and craic. Tourism Ireland will be launching a new campaign in June, focused on helping people get around the regions and explore the island.

Earlier this week, the Meitheal event was held in Killarney. This is a flagship tourism trade event. The Tourism Policy Framework 2025-2030 was published by the previous Government last November. I understand my colleague, Deputy Peter Burke, to whom ministerial responsibility for tourism is transferring, has asked officials to consider how commitments in the new programme for Government align with the policy framework, and to prioritise the finalisation of a new tourism policy which reflects the programme for Government and other commitments. Once this work is complete we will have more insights into this.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State for her response. I mentioned in my opening remarks that I wondered if the geopolitical area was the reason for the difficulties we were seeing with foreign visitors coming to Ireland. With President Trump and President Putin's antics, the war in Ukraine and other disturbances and wars and atrocities around the world, is that playing a role in the American market particularly? I was in Savannah a few weeks ago and the level of interest in Ireland, albeit over the St. Patrick's Day weekend, was immense. Savannah has a population of approximately 150,000 people and three quarters of a million people attended the parade, such was the level of interest. When we talk about roots and things like that, we should be looking to identify areas in the United States to which we can have direct flights to enhance the possibility of visitors from those areas returning to Ireland.

I appreciate the Minister of State saying that it only covers January and February, but I sincerely hope it is not a trend, because if it is, we are in some difficulty. I welcome the meetings between the various agencies, and this should be an ongoing event to ensure we have our finger on the pulse. The distraction of what is going on in the world with the tariffs and so on coming down the tracks may have distracted us and we may have taken our eye off the ball, given these figures.

I extend an invitation to everybody to Wexford. It is a wonderful county with wonderful beaches and heritage, particularly this year when we again host Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. I know the Minister of State has a social event coming up in the next couple of weeks and maybe she would see Wexford as a destination for that. I thank her for her response, and I look forward to the improving statistics.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for that kind invitation. I attended the Fleadh Cheoil in Wexford last year and it was fantastic. As the Ceann Comhairle will be aware, it was fantastic to see the town buzzing and to see so much activity and spin-off trading.

I thank Deputy Lawlor for raising this important issue. Since the Covid pandemic, tourism has shown its resilience time and again and it has played a significant part in our economic recovery. Last year was a strong one from a tourism perspective. More than 6.5 million overseas visitors came to our shores and, in terms of tourism sentiment, it is encouraging to note that the strategic research and insight findings from Fáilte Ireland's tourism barometer earlier this year showed that 39% of businesses expected their visitor levels to be up this year. Overseas visitors underpin the positive expectations, with 47% of businesses expecting an increase from that market. While CSO figures for the first two months were disappointing, like the Deputy, I look forward to being updated on the engagement between the CSO, the tourism industry and the tourism agencies to further examine this data and the context to give us more insights into it.

There are real grounds for optimism in the months ahead. In this regard, intensive marketing campaigns are underway in all our main overseas markets to ensure growth returns while Fáilte Ireland continues its domestic activity. As we approach peak tourism season, the tourism agencies are continuing to work hard with all their partners, including air and sea carriers, to ensure Ireland is seen as a must-visit destination. From a Government perspective, what we discussed earlier around the cap is important and it is also important to see those new routes coming onstream. I take the Deputy's feedback about Savannah and that is perhaps something we should look at. The programme for Government comprehensively sets out the Government's ambitious plans to strengthen and enhance the tourism sector, and I look forward to working with the Deputy on that.

Educational Disadvantage

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I raise a significant issue, which is the funding of DEIS band 1 schools. Over the past number of years, we have seen significant funding go into education. Obviously, the free schoolbooks scheme and the free school meals scheme have been important for parents and education. In some cases, they have been a significant anti-poverty measure. I remember the first year the free school books scheme was brought in, the Society of St. Vincent De Paul said it noticed a 20% reduction in calls for back to school supports.

The operating costs of the school remain the same, though. That is the issue I want to raise.

I have been contacted by three different DEIS band 1 schools in our area. They are having difficulty balancing the books in terms of operating costs. It has always been the responsibility of the schools and patrons to manage their own finances and I do not take from that responsibility, but I have had a hands-on opportunity to look at the balance sheet of one of the local schools. In one school, there was €17,000 left in the account for between now and the end of the year. An insurance payment of more than €10,000 was required. There was a payment for gas and electricity and then there was a payment for cleaning staff. There was not enough to pay all of those outstanding bills. The schools in question have been dealing with the FSSU, which is the financial support unit in the Department. In fact, they have been doing it for more than a year.

While all schools would welcome increased capitation, there is an issue in schools that may previously have accommodated large numbers. In places like Tallaght, Finglas and many others, schools were often built for 700, 800, 900 or even 1,000 pupils. Unfortunately, in some cases they are operating at 15% or 20% of that capacity, so there are large campuses, but the capitation is now at a much reduced rate. The Department needs a bespoke tool for those schools. While capitation is an important mode of funding and ensures it follows the pupil, schools still have to fund the overall cost of their campuses. If that is not enough, then there needs to be a bespoke solution or we need to look at the long-term viability of the building. Maybe a new building over time on those campuses would be more desirable.

I urge the Minister of State to revert to the Minister of Education. I raised this yesterday with the Taoiseach under questions on promised legislation. The benefit of Topical Issues is that we can have more of a discussion about it. The Taoiseach recommended that there be a bespoke solution, and that is where the solution should lie. Principals have enough to do without worrying about cash flow. Some schools might have a little more cash flow because of a sale of land or whatever. Some schools will have more cash flow because they are in a more affluent area and are able to do fundraising. DEIS band 1 schools have a lot of challenges on their books. Some of this may be about shared support for schools, like a group communal insurance policy or a better insurance deal. Some of them are coming off three-year energy and gas deals and that is now having an impact because costs are increasing. In many cases, they have already gone for local solutions for cleaning contracts rather than using contract suppliers and so on. It is an issue that affects all schools across north Dublin and many schools on the southside. In big schools with smaller numbers, capitation is not working. We need to come with a bespoke solution.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the position relating to financial funding for schools.

The Department is committed to offering all available and appropriate supports to the schools that have contacted the Department or have been referred to the FSSU. The Department is committed to providing funding to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the free education scheme by way of *per capita* grants, as the Deputy mentioned. The two main grants are the capitation grant to cater for day-to-day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance and general upkeep, and the ancillary grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. Schools have a flexibility to use capitation funding, provided for general running costs, and ancillary funding, provided for caretaking and secretarial services, as a common grant from which the board of management can allocate according to its own priorities, except for the employment of relevant secretaries, as per the circular of 2022.

The current standard rate of capitation grant is €200 per pupil in primary schools and €345 per student in post-primary schools. Primary schools with fewer than 60 pupils are paid the capitation and the ancillary grants on the basis of having 60 pupils. As part of the capitation package in budget 2025, the Department is pleased to have secured more than €30 million as a permanent increase in capitation funding to assist schools now and in the longer term with increased day-to-day running costs. This represents an increase of 12% on current standard rates and enhanced rates. This increase is on top of a 9.2% increase from last year's budget. This will bring the standard rate of capitation grant to €224 per pupil in primary and €386 per student in post-primary from September 2025.

4 o'clock

Enhanced rates will also be paid in respect of pupils with special educational needs and Traveller pupils. Schools should also ensure they are availing of the available Office of Government Procurement frameworks and getting best value for money for all school expenditure. I acknowledge the Deputy mentioned that is being done by a number of schools.

In addition to these grants, €45 million in cost-of-living supports was issued in November 2024 to support all recognised primary and post-primary schools in the free education system. This additional funding announced in budget 2025 is designed to assist schools with increased day-to-day running costs such as heating and electricity. This funding was paid at a rate of €36 per pupil in primary schools. Enhanced rates were also paid in respect of pupils with special educational needs and Traveller pupils.

The Department of Education is aware that costs and funding can pose a very real problem for schools and is constantly working to address this matter and to enhance the financial and other supports available to schools. While not wishing to pre-empt the outcomes of any future budget negotiations or fiscal parameters agreed by Government, the Department of Education will continue to seek to prioritise the funding required to meet the ongoing costs of running schools.

The financial support services unit, FSSU, funded by the Department, is an important source of advice and support to schools on financial matters, including budgeting and cash flow management.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I agree with the Minister of State that the FSSU is an important source of advice. It is the reason two of the schools took part in an analysis of cash flow last summer and again in October. Some recommendations and changes were made. The schools are anxious not to cause concern among parents and the community and wish to engage with the system. The Minister of State will note that I have not named the schools for that reason. There is, however, something else going on. While the capitation grant has increased to €224, if the number of pupils in the school over a short period of time is down 20%, 30% or more, then any sort of cost-of-living or inflationary increase is never going to keep up with that. Equally, if the school is designed for numbers that are four or five times the size of the current school population, the current capitation grant will never deal with that.

I know the FSSU was involved in drafting the reply for today's Topical Issue. I hope officials will take back the suggestion I have made, namely, that a bespoke solution is needed for these large campuses that have significantly reduced numbers. It is not one school or one location, rather something that is common throughout those housing areas that were built 50, 60 or

70 years ago that have these large campuses. Demographic changes have meant that school numbers have changed. While that is not the responsibility of the schools, they are doing their best to try to live up to the issues. We know that in the programme for Government, the Minister has identified DEIS plus, which is really exciting and would be a real support. While there are all these other supports I have mentioned, such as free school meals, free school books and DEIS plus when it is implemented, when it comes to the day-to-day bread and butter, you cannot butter parsnips if you do not have butter. In this case, we need funding for these schools.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I fully hear what the Deputy is saying. He is making an important point on that funding issue. I am more than happy to take that back to the Minister. The Deputy mentioned our constituency, which has a similar situation with regard to school funding. It is important. Obviously, the FSSU plays an important role. It is an issue I will highlight to the Minister and I have no doubt the Deputy will continue to do so as well.

Local Community Safety Partnerships

Deputy Paula Butterly: I welcome the news that the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act will be commenced in the coming days. Following that, I welcome the news that the secondary legislation required for these regulations will also be enacted shortly thereafter. These regulations cannot come soon enough. The establishment of the chairs and the committees are sorely needed in counties like Louth. Without going into a history lesson on crime in County Louth, to say that we, as a Border county, have had a unique relationship with crime is no mystery to anyone. In recent decades, however, we have seen a shift in the manner of crime being committed within the county. We have seen gangland and rural crime, not to mention drug crime within the county devastating communities and trying to tear them apart. The community spirit in the county is very strong, however. Places and communities like the Redeemer Family Resource Centre and Moneymore in Drogheda, despite the challenges they have faced in recent decades, have a strong spirit and are still standing strong. I visited Moneymore in Drogheda this morning where staff are in the process of fund-raising for a new community centre. They are openly there not just to revive and face the challenges of their own community but also to welcome in the other people of Drogheda and all the communities in the hinterland. We need to be supporting communities like these as they face these challenges. Towns like Drogheda, as the mayor of Drogheda, Paddy McQuillan, has urged me again and again, need support. How do we get that collaboration? It is through the key stakeholders and the leaders of the community, along with An Garda Síochána. This has been very effective. We have seen that with the Drogheda implementation board, which received investment of €16 million. It has brought about changes, investment in youth diversion programmes, extra policing and also key, crucial programmes for community groups. The establishment of the new local community safety partnerships, LCSPs, is not only crucial to towns like Drogheda and Dundalk, but also to Ardee and Dunleer in their hinterlands, as well as the smaller villages like Castlebellingham, Tallanstown and Louth. I urge for these regulations to come fast and furious.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I am well aware of the incredible work the Deputy does with local communities on this issue and how she has championed it. On behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I thank the Deputy for raising this matter today. The Government is committed to building stronger, safer communities and community safety as a whole-of-government responsibility. Community safety is about much more than policing. It is about how we look after and support each other and the most vulnerable in our society. It is about the provision of

services that focus on prevention and early interventions, such as addiction support and early childhood interventions. It is about supporting businesses and how our communities in which we live look and feel. It is also about State services working with each other and the community to take a shared approach in solving issues relating to community safety.

High-visibility policing is, of course, an important factor in communities feeling safe but our gardaí are not solely responsible for safety in our communities. This is what the new whole-of-government community safety structure is central to and what LCSPs will aim to address. It will bring the relevant service providers and An Garda Síochána together to work with each community in a collaborative manner to focus on tackling the concerns identified and prioritised by the local community itself. That is really important, as someone who has come through this from a council background right the way through to being a TD.

The Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill 2024, which Minister O’Callaghan enacted yesterday, provides for the establishment of these local community safety partnerships, which will operate at each local authority level. The partnerships will replace and build upon the good work of the joint policing committees, supplementing this by bringing together a broader range of relevant stakeholders including local councillors, An Garda Síochána, local residents, community representatives, business and education representatives and a range of statutory agencies, including the HSE, Tusla and each local authority. As someone who was on a joint policing committee for many years, I acknowledge and thank all the people who worked on those committees over the years. Those people did an incredible job.

Three innovative pilot LCSPs were set up in Waterford, Longford and Dublin’s north-inner city in 2021. The pilot process was accompanied by an independent evaluation to help inform best practice for the national roll-out. We see how the model can succeed in different contexts and settings. Each newly established local community safety partnership will be required to develop and implement its own tailored community safety plan and will take a strategic approach to their work so that issues arising can be dealt with in a co-ordinated manner, addressed collectively by relevant service providers in partnership with the community.

A total of 36 partnerships will be established, based in each local authority administrative area. Each LCSP will be supported by a full-time co-ordinator and a full-time administrator, resourced by the Department of Justice. Section 114 of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 provides for making of regulations to establish the LCSPs. My Department is working with the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, to facilitate drafts of these regulations, which it is proposed will commence shortly.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan. It very much reflects my own thoughts regarding these community safety partnerships. As I said at the outset, these cannot come about quickly enough. The partnerships are part of the community and policing coming together to work for the betterment of the community. Towns like Drogheda are now on the cusp of returning to their former glory. The town has always been vibrant and once attracted people from near and far. We need to get these regulations in place and get the committees and partnerships set up. We also need to follow through with the investment, which will be vital to ensure that Drogheda and Dundalk, but particularly Drogheda town receives all the investment it needs to make it a safe place and safe community to work and live in.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I agree with the Deputy that it is really important to get them up and

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running quickly, to get community buy-in and to get that feeling that we are moving forward in this area. I think we are. The implementation of the Act will have a tremendous effect. The resourcing of it is there and I have no doubt, from my own community where I have dealt with a host of issues in this area, that there is a real desire in community groups to see this work and succeed. I know the Department is determined, through the resourcing being made available, to see that happen as well.

Public Transport

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue. I represent one of the youngest and fastest-growing constituencies in the State in Fingal West. Many of my constituents are served by the train, which runs alongside the side of my constituency, and some by bus. Unfortunately, for my constituents, most of the existing transport routes only bring them in to town. They need dynamic connectivity to bring them from one town to another. We know there is a link from Rush to Lusk to Balbriggan to Skerries to Loughshinny, which is good. These towns are linked by a bus service, but the outlying, smaller towns and villages are not linked up by a bus service.

Equally, many of my constituents experience difficulties accessing the train inasmuch as they do not have public transport that will take them all the way there. We do not have connected cycle routes either, so it is very tough for my constituents to get to the main source of transport. For elderly constituents who simply want to move around within their towns and villages, it is very tough for them to do so.

Some new housing estates are being built in north county Dublin now. Given the scale of the Government's housing crisis, any house building is, of course, to be welcomed. However, there is no joined-up thinking. There is no bus route. Every time a new estate is established, as sure as night follows day, a couple of weeks after people start to move in, a campaign has to be started to get a bus. There has to be some type of forward thinking. If people are moving in to the houses, they are not staying in them forever and for always and for 24 hours a day. They will need to get out. On the one hand, the Government says that it wants us out of our cars and to use public transport, which is a very noble and worthwhile endeavour. However, I do not know how the Minister of State imagines my constituents feel when they are told that the station that serves Rush and Lusk is taken into the Dublin city commuter zone. This is really welcome. It means reduced fares, which is really important. However, those people who use trains that leave from Skerries or Balbriggan have been taken out of the Dublin city commuter zone. It is not that far and the trainline is just a straight line up - I am sure the Minister of State is familiar with the area. They will now have to pay higher fares while towns in Wicklow, Meath and Kildare are being brought into the Dublin city commuter zone.

I am sure the Minister of State will appreciate that my constituents are very angry about this move. Like the Government, they share the aspiration to leave their cars at home. However, a disincentive is being created by making sure they have to pay extra. I mean no disrespect to the people who live in Kildare, Wicklow and Meath. I wish them the very best. I do not begrudge them the reduced fares. It is a good thing that there are reduced fares. In fact, I think it is such a good thing that I want more towns to be included in the Dublin city commuter zone. However, I would like if those towns were in Dublin as well since the scheme appears to be accommodat- ing enough to include towns outside of Dublin city and county. We want to see people using the

trains. I will not get into the issue of overcrowding with the Minister of State now. We really want to see people using the trains but they are getting a mixed message from the Government. On the one hand people are being told to leave the car at home but on the other hand, train fares are being increased.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I would not be quite as nice to Meath people at a Leinster final or on an All-Ireland Sunday, as the Deputy was there. I thank her for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport. Improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving citizens' quality of life and achieving our decarbonisation goals. Achieving these goals has been set out in the programme for Government.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for transport planning in the greater Dublin area, including in Fingal West. The NTA's greater Dublin area transport strategy, which was approved by the Minister for Transport in January 2023, sets out a framework for transport investment across the region over a 20-year period from 2022 to 2042, and it provides a clear statement of transport planning policy.

This strong policy support has been backed up by increased levels of Exchequer funding, which is supporting the roll-out of initiatives such as MetroLink, BusConnects Dublin and DART+. The delivery of these projects had been delayed due to delays in the planning approval process. However, there have been some positive developments recently, with An Bord Pleanála approving 11 of the 12 BusConnects Dublin core bus corridors, including the Swords to the city centre scheme, as well as the conditional approval of DART+ West and full approval of DART+ South West projects.

These projects will continue to advance in the coming years. It is anticipated that the first of the BusConnects Dublin core bus corridors will enter construction later this year, which will represent a significant milestone in the delivery of the major public transport projects. The first six phases of the BusConnects Dublin network redesign have also been rolled out in recent years. These new spines, including the A spine via the airport to Swords, will continue to be rolled out on an incremental basis in the coming years.

Two orders for the new DART+ train fleet have been placed so far. The first order is for the purchase of 95 additional DART carriages, which comprise 65 battery-electric carriages and 30 electric carriages. These carriages started arriving into Ireland last year and are currently undergoing testing, prior to entry into service. The battery-electric carriages are planned to enter service on the northern line from Dublin to Drogheda in 2026.

MetroLink will provide improved access to employment, education, leisure and healthcare facilities. This includes Dublin Airport, the Mater hospital, the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, and numerous other locations in Dublin city centre.

The Government approved MetroLink under decision gate 1 of the public spending code in July 2022. This enabled the project to enter the planning system. In September 2022 Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, submitted a planning application to An Bord Pleanála. The railway order consultation period, following the submission of the railway order application, provided the opportunity for stakeholders along the MetroLink route to raise concerns about the project. The statutory planning consultation for the project closed in January 2023.

In 2024, An Bord Pleanála held an oral hearing and an additional round of public consultation in relation to MetroLink. A planning decision from An Bord Pleanála is awaited. In addi-

tion to the above, TII submitted a planning application for Luas Finglas to An Bord Pleanála last November. The statutory consultation period for this project closed in January.

This major public transport project will extend the existing Luas tram network northwards by almost 4 km from Broombridge to the Finglas area, shortening journey times to and from Dublin city centre to approximately 30 minutes or less. This route will provide interchanges with Broombridge train station, which is on the planned DART+ west line, as well as bus services. These projects represent a major improvement to public transport offerings in the west Fingal area.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am very annoyed. MetroLink does not serve my constituency. Neither do DART+ west and DART+ south west. The only DART+ project that will serve my constituents is DART+ coastal north, which has been a very long tale. I do not have the time to tell it all, but suffice to say that it has been a decade since the bridges were raised. A little like draining the River Shannon, it gets wheeled out every once in a while, but it never actually seems to happen.

I fully appreciate the Minister of State being here and I thank him for the reply. However, that reply relates to people who live in different areas and not the people I represent. The people I represent in Skerries and Balbriggan are being taken out of the Dublin city commuter zone and will now have to pay more to get in. The Department has not even included the DART+ coastal north project in the reply. That will drive my constituents up the wall, as I am sure the Minister of State will appreciate. While it is brilliant that the metro will come, and I am sure some of my constituents will use it, people will have to travel in their cars or by another form of public transport to get to the metro, which will stop in Swords. That is not in the constituency of Dublin Fingal West. It is in the Minister for Transport's constituency, which might lead people to believe it will be built, unless they are familiar with his record in other areas.

I understand the limitations of the Minister of State's reply, but I would very much appreciate if he would get a comprehensive reply for me from the Minister for Transport. This should not be a reply that tells me why he cannot deal with the matter but a reply that provides an explanation for me and my constituents as to why commuters from the towns of Skerries and Balbriggan will have to pay more to get into town and use the public transport service, while at the same time, as the Minister of State said, improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving quality of life, achieving decarbonisation, and is part of the goals that have been set out in the programme the Government. These things do not make sense. If the Government wants people to use public transport, it needs to make it accessible, frequent and affordable. More money is being charged to my constituents to use public transport while at the same time they are being told that they have to play their part in decarbonisation, which they want to do. They are Dubs. They live in Dublin. They want to be in the Dublin city commuter zone.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will of course convey the Deputy's views to the Minister. In summary, transport connectivity is obviously highly important for people who live and work, as we know, throughout Ireland. It is key to our villages, towns, and to Dublin and our other cities to encourage urban centres and have strong local economies. I believe, as does the Minister, in expanding the public transport network and increasing services throughout the country, including in the west Fingal area. The ways we have set out to do that are included in what I said, such as BusConnects and Connecting Ireland. That will lead to a better facility overall for public transport users. I will take note of the Deputy's request and pass it on to the Minister.

Early Childhood Care and Education

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I have been raising this issue, including through parliamentary questions, for quite some time. It is the matter of Wombles Pre-school at Scoil Mhuire, Airlie Heights. While the Department correctly acknowledges that it has no direct role in the provision of childcare services based in the school, everyone acknowledges that the service is essential. There were 46 early childhood care and education, ECCE, and 54 after-school places but a total of 66 places are at risk of being removed, because a classroom was due to be taken out of the school as the NCSE was looking to get an additional autism class in. I tried to get a win-win situation where some form of modular room could be brought into the grounds of the school, which would mean the autism class would not be taken away while Wombles Pre-school could continue where it is. It is a valuable source of income to Scoil Mhuire in employing therapists. Many of the children who go to Wombles have siblings in the primary school at junior or senior level.

In that context, it was interesting to hear very recently that the autism class might not be proceeded with this year. That would take away the immediate risk to Wombles, but I would like some clarity on a couple of issues, including in the supplementary response. Will a modular build be put in to facilitate an autism class? If so, will it be in place for this September? I know I am putting the Minister of State on the spot. He is aware of south Dublin from our shared time on the council, but there are plans for a 32-classroom school in the Adamstown strategic development zone, which should be built on a vacant site. It has full planning permission. There is no reason for the Department not to push ahead with this, which would also facilitate a number of autism classes and help parents in some of the neighbouring estates who cannot get into Scoil Mhuire because it is already full as regards its catchment area.

There is a mixture of issues here. We need to get some of the schools that were promised built. We also need to make sure that the autism classes in Lucan open as quickly as possible because they are not in every school in Lucan and there is a huge demand. Given the fact that quite a number of preschools in the Lucan area have closed down or left the scheme, and it is very hard to find alternative facilities, it is of the utmost importance to ensure that a long-standing and successful preschool should be able to continue to operate. As I said, it should not be case of either-or.

While I welcome the special school that is being brought into north Lucan, I reiterate that moving Lucan East Educate Together at Easter does not make any sense at all. South Dublin County Council is not prepared for that in respect of its traffic management plans.

I ask for whatever information the Minister of State has about the autism classes. Are there any details of discussions held between the Department and the patron of the school regarding Wombles Pre-school? The most recent response I got to my parliamentary question indicated that such conversations were under way.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy for asking the question. I stress that enabling students with special educational needs to receive an appropriate education is an absolute priority for the Government. It is the Government's priority to ensure that all children have an appropriate school placement and that necessary supports are provided to our schools to allow children with special educational needs to flourish and prosper.

To ensure schools can open new special classes as quickly as possible, the National Coun-

cil for Special Education, NCSE, is examining which schools have capacity to expand and is reaching out to medium and larger primary schools with available accommodation, and no existing special class, to open a new special class for the 2025-26 school year. This will not only ensure that classes can open quickly, as existing accommodation can be reconfigured in a more streamlined and efficient manner, but it will also provide more options for parents in local areas as more and more schools open specialist provision. However, as in other years where schools have no available accommodation, particularly at post-primary level, and there is a known demand in a local area, the Department of Education will continue to provide additional classroom accommodation to provide necessary places.

At local level in Lucan, and indeed nationwide, the NCSE continues to examine where provision is best placed to meet demand. I confirm that the council has ruled out sanctioning a special class at Scoil Mhuire for the coming school year. The council is confirming this directly with the school now to avoid any confusion. As new special classes are sanctioned in other schools, it will inform parents and provide advice and support on how to apply.

Of the 400 new special classes to be sanctioned for the next school year, the NCSE has sanctioned more than 350, with classes provided in every county. A total of 66 of these classes are in Dublin, with a number in the Lucan and broader west Dublin area. The council continues to sanction classes. These will be added to in the coming days. The Minister for Education, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, Deputy Michael Moynihan, both meet the NCSE and senior Department of Education officials on a weekly basis to track the progress being made on securing additional classes and special school places.

I will raise the other issues the Deputy mentioned here.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I thank the Minister of State. Scoil Mhuire is well equipped to provide autism support. For example, two staff members recently completed a master's of education in autism. It is a capable school, which does its best for students of all backgrounds.

I am still looking for further clarity, if it pleases the Minister of State, on whether we can say that ten years down the line Wombles Pre-School will still be able to operate from Scoil Mhuire. I am looking for some kind of guarantee in that respect.

If the autism class does not open in Scoil Mhuire this year, can we get clarity for any parents looking for a place that they will be offered a place elsewhere in the Lucan area? Can we get a guarantee on how quickly we can put a modular building on the site? There is some demand in that part of Lucan so I would like some more clarity on that if there were any plans. I heard on the grapevine that the NCSE would look at putting a modular building at Scoil Mhuire, Airlie Heights, but that it might not be for another year. Why can that not happen in September, for example?

Will the Minister of State communicate back to the Minister for Education the absolute urgency of the need to open that 32-classroom school and get things moving at the Tandy's Lane site which is close to Scoil Mhuire in Adamstown, strategic development zone, SDZ. There is a shortage of primary school places in general as well as an ongoing requirement for autism classes throughout the Lucan area.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy again for raising the question. I will of course convey back to the Minister the additional points he raised here. I thank him for giving me the

opportunity to reassure the House that the Department of Education and the NCSE are committed to ensuring that all children have access to education suitable to their needs. The Department of Education continues to engage intensely with the NCSE on forward planning for new special classes for the 2025 to 2026 school year and future years. More than 28,000 children are now being supported in special schools and classes with the number of special classes increasing by 100% since 2020. It is the statutory responsibility of the NCSE to work with schools to provide sufficient special education provision each year. As already outlined, budget 2025 provides funding for another 400 new special classes, up to 300 additional special school places. The NCSE continues to assess what additional provision is required in local areas and which schools have capacity to accommodate the required provision. As the NCSE progresses the sanctioning of new special classes in the coming days, it will in turn advise parents of the location of any new special classes for the 2025 to 2026 school year.

Housing Provision

Deputy Martin Daly: As we know, housing production is the number one priority for the Government as is reflected in the programme for Government. Ireland's housing need is real and we need to consider all methods of construction to deliver the targets we set out in the programme for Government. We have to increase housing supply, improve sustainability and boost construction productivity. A recent report by the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, published last autumn, which was welcomed by the Government and the industry, was the first critical review of modern methods of construction in the landscape in Ireland. It looked at a template for the forward planning for modern methods of construction, but today, I am specifically asking about modular housing. It is coming at a crucial time because it is clear that the traditional methods of construction will not meet the ambitious targets set out in the programme for Government so we need to involve all aspects and foster all areas of construction in Ireland, not just on-site, but off-site construction.

One of the strengths of the report is that it adopted the UK's definition framework seven categories of modern methods of construction, which will bring much needed clarity to what constitutes modern methods of construction in Ireland. One hundred off-site manufacturing companies operate in this country with 27 providing complete housing solutions. In my constituency, there is a company called Lidan Designs that has recruited 40 people into its manufacturing facility, including master carpenters, plumbers, electricians, architects and engineers. It has taken on 8 apprentices from the local school starting in September. It is a vibrant company with an investment in the region of €10 million, most of which came from its own resources and private equity with very little support from the State. It has built schools for the Department of Education, including St. Flannan's and a school in Birr and it is constructing a national school in Kildare. Its problems are crystalised in what was identified in this report.

As modular housing is a disruption of the traditional methods of construction, it will require a different approach. Institutional leadership - that is us; standards in innovation - that is us; and the building industry are mentioned. Ambitious targets were also mentioned - that is us. Innovative finance must be us because a different financial model is required for modular housing. Much of the finance has to be front-loaded. Supply lines cannot be set up without predictability and consistency. Multi-annual planning is needed. I am talking about the Department of Education in this respect, but also the housing sector. We need to review our relationship with modular construction so we can bring on smaller Irish indigenous companies, especially in this

climate, that offer high quality jobs in provincial towns throughout Ireland. I spoke last night at the parliamentary party meeting and another Fianna Fáil TD from another part of the country identified the exact same issues around modular housing and its ability to get a foothold in the provision of housing.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and providing the opportunity to update the House on this important matter.

Modern methods of construction are a key measure to support the delivery of housing under Housing for All and the programme for Government and have the potential to boost productivity, increase efficiency and improve sustainability in the construction sector. Modern methods of construction is the term used to describe a range of compliant manufacturing and innovative construction including modular systems as alternatives to traditional construction.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Government's commitment to modern methods of construction has been clearly outlined in the new programme for Government, including binding targets for its use in at least 25% of all State-backed housing and an innovation fund via the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF. Initiatives already in place under Housing for All to promote modern methods of construction include: the accelerated social housing delivery programme, the Roadmap for Increased Adoption of Modern Methods of Construction in Public Housing, the Construct Innovate technology centre, the National Demonstration Park, the Build Digital project, the built to innovate initiative, the development of standardised approaches to the design of housing and training for industry and public sector professionals.

In December 2022, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage approved funding of €94 million to address legacy land debt. The funding was contingent on the local authority committing to the early development of a housing proposal that would commence construction in 2023 or no later than 2024 and utilise modern methods of construction. A total of 26 sites received funding as part of an accelerated social housing delivery programme. This programme is being led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and will see the delivery by 13 local authorities of at least 1,500 social homes using modern methods of construction across approximately 36 sites. It is intended to expand the use of the design and build procurement approach to enable greater use of modern methods of construction in social and affordable housing delivery. Separately, the Department is engaging with Wexford local authority on piloting several three-dimensional modular units, which are expected to tender in the first half of 2025.

A standardised design approach is key in facilitating the ease of adoption of modern methods of construction. To support this standardised approach, the Department has identified a number of designs from the design manual for quality housing, adjusted to allow for ease of delivery utilising different forms of modern methods of construction, including three-dimensional modular systems.

Deputy Martin Daly: One unfortunate phenomenon in recent years has been the conflation in people's minds of prefabricated housing and modular housing. High-quality modular housing is a permanent housing solution. Prefabricated models like the prefabs provided for Ukrainian refugees were expensive and had a poor BER rating of C. These modern modular housing units are permanent solutions and are extremely energy efficient. By setting up a supply and manufacturing line, it is possible to manufacture houses every day of the week for 12

months of the year. This is the beauty of this approach. One of these homes can be provided five times faster than producing an on-site house.

I have looked at some of the research internationally and obstructions are pushed in the way of modular housing. Traditional building companies are slow to adopt the idea of modular housing. It is seen as a threat or disruption to traditional building supply. We must look at the provision of modular housing or off-site housing construction in a different light.

I am going to focus on the financial aspect. In a time when we are under threat from tariffs from Trump and we need to be counterintuitive and invest in our economy, especially in our indigenous industries and particularly where there is an identifiable need to provide homes, we must look at a different relationship between the State, including the Department of housing, the Department of Education and the OPW, and the modular construction industry. The financial model is different. It must be front-loaded. There must be cash flow because people are continuously employed on site.

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Government approved new housing targets up to 2030. Some 303,000 homes are expected to be delivered from 2025 to 2030. This equates to an average of approximately 50,500 homes, building up to 60,000 homes in 2030. To meet these very ambitious targets, it is necessary to use many different ways of delivery. Modern methods of construction are a key pillar in this housing delivery programme. This year, the accelerated social housing delivery programme and the Government initiatives described will continue to support the delivery of housing using modern methods of construction. Additionally, under the programme for Government, further initiatives will also be implemented to support the key pillar that accelerates the delivery of quality housing. I take on board all the comments the Deputy made about modular housing, too.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): I thank Deputy Daly. I must say I agree with a lot of the points he made. I should not say that as the Chair, but anyway.

Childcare Services

Deputy Gary Gannon: I wish to talk to the Minister of State about the absence of childcare provision in Dublin Central. I use the example of Dublin Central because it is the area I am proud to represent, but I could be talking about any community to be found the length and breadth of Ireland.

Childcare provision and access to childcare, where it exists, is simply too difficult. The Government made a commitment before the election, promising to progressively reduce childcare costs to €200 monthly under the national childcare scheme. In reality, parents in Dublin Central are still facing the same crippling costs. This is only, though, if they can even get a childcare place at all. In communities across Dublin Central, families are scrambling for places. Some parents are registering their children before they are even born and still cannot secure a spot. What good is a childcare subsidy, however good it may be to the parents lucky enough to get a place, when most parents cannot even find a place to look after their children?

Childcare provision is about communities. Parents cannot go back to work if they cannot find anywhere for their children to be minded. Even before I came down to the Chamber, one of the last emails I received was from a constituent in East Wall. She and her partner recently had

a child and they are now scrambling to find a place. The fear is even greater because they see a 600-unit apartment block being built above them and know this is going to limit their ability to find a childcare place even more. There was genuine fear in the community in Stoneybatter in recent months because an afternoon childcare service was at risk of closing. It is very much on-off as to whether that is going to happen, but even the prospect of removing such an afternoon service sent the community into a spiral. Protests were held outside and the matter has been raised in the Dáil several times. This is the reality of what we are dealing with now, be it in East Wall, Stoneybatter, Cabra or the North Strand. When we are knocking at doors, the most important issue coming up all the time is access to childcare provision.

Some crèches are closing because the community providers are not so much walking away as they are closing their doors because circumstances mean they have to. Their workers who deliver incredible care and education - it is an education they are delivering - are underpaid and burned out. My colleague, Deputy Farrelly, rightly asked in the Chamber when the Government would consider pay parity for early years professionals with colleagues in education. I do not think we are anywhere close to that happening.

The Tánaiste, whom I want to take at his word, said Ireland's childcare model should be brought into the public sphere and linked more closely to education. I agree fully with that view. I am sure we all do. When will that process start? I ask because this principle is nowhere to be seen around the streets of Dublin Central. Deputy Farrelly also suggested a "páistecare" approach, this being similar to the all-party platform we had for the implementation of the Sláintecare model. In the lead up to the election, I think we all agreed we needed some form of publicly funded model of childcare provision, so why do we not all get around a table and decide how that could best happen? That would be an excellent solution and would demonstrate to the public, exasperated by this issue, that their elected representatives are doing all we can in their service. In the absence of such an approach, what we have is a two-tier system where childcare is expensive even if people are lucky enough to get it.

There are solutions to this problem. On Dublin City Council, for example, my colleagues, Cat O'Driscoll and Daniel Ennis, asked for an audit of buildings derelict around the city centre or in the possession of the council to see which of them might be suitable, with the right level of work and investment, for childcare facilities. In the absence of this being done, we really are struggling. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response. I know he is not the Minister of State tasked with special responsibility in this area, but I understand he is here in that capacity and we can have an exchange.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank Deputy Gannon for raising this important issue and offering me the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Minister. Improving access to quality and affordable early learning and care and school-age childcare is a key priority for the Government. Early learning and childcare capacity is increasing. An annual sector profile demonstrates an 8% increase in enrolments between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 years. Within the Dublin city local authority area, enrolments grew by 2,235. Core funding application data shows that, between year 1 and year 2 of the scheme, the annual place hours increased by almost 8%. The Tusla register of services demonstrates a net increase in the numbers of registered early learning and childcare services in 2024.

However, it appears that demand for early learning and care and school-age childcare remains higher than available supply, particularly for younger children and in certain parts of the country. Demand for early learning and childcare beyond sessional preschool provision is

highly elastic and shaped substantially by families' individual composition, circumstances and preferences; employment patterns and income; and the price and availability of services. A forward planning model is in development, which will be central to the Minister's plans to achieve the policy goals set out in the programme for Government to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system, with State-led facilities adding capacity. The Government continues to support the ongoing development and resourcing of core funding, which has given rise to a significant expansion of places since the scheme was first introduced. Core funding funds services based on the number of places available regardless of whether they are filled. This provides stability to services and reduces the risk associated with opening a new service or expanding an already existing service. For the current programme year, the allocation for core funding allows for a 6% increase in capacity. Additional funding was secured in budget 2025 to facilitate a further 3.5% increase from September 2025, in the fourth programme year. The Government is also supporting the expansion of capacity through capital funding. Capital funding has been allocated to the early learning and childcare sector under the revised national development plan. This will enable significant investment in early learning and childcare. The building blocks capital grant schemes are operating over 2024 and 2025. The primary focus of these schemes is to increase capacity in the one- to three-year-old, pre-ECCE, age range for full day care.

The building blocks expansion grant scheme was operated by the Department last year. Twenty-three services were awarded capital grants of between €25,000 and €100,000 for projects to undertake renovation of or upgrades to existing space to cater for more children. This funding has delivered almost 300 affordable new places for one- to three-year olds, with approximately 100 of those places in Dublin.

The building blocks extension grant scheme was launched on 4 November 2024. Applications for this scheme have now closed and an appraisal process is under way. The primary focus of the extension grant scheme is to increase capacity in places for one- to three-year olds, with early childhood education range for full day care. Some €25 million will be made available this year to deliver additional capacity under the scheme, and the Minister expects to announce the outcome of the application process in the coming weeks.

The Department funds 30 city and county childcare committees, which provide support and assist families and early learning and childcare providers. Parents experiencing difficulty with early learning and childcare needs should contact their local city and county childcare committee for assistance.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I do not doubt for a second that there is a genuine commitment across the Government to address the issue. How could there not be? It is a fundamental issue. However, I do not think it is working. The ECCE rates of €69 per week per child have clearly not been sustainable. I do not doubt the level of money that is being pumped into the childcare sector, but the outcomes are still the same. We have a crisis, and a crisis requires innovation in terms of how we respond. The páistecare model outlined by Deputy Farrelly is one workable solution if we can get around to developing a plan that is co-ordinated and agreed from all political parties because it is something that impacts all of us.

Audits of buildings through our city councils where there might be sites available is something we need if we are to make sure there is proper capital investment and identify locations in which childcare facilities can emerge where there were none previously. We must make

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childcare core infrastructure as part of every new development. There are 600-unit developments going up around the Docklands and no childcare facilities are being included. That is something we need to address.

I represent a constituency that is growing all the time, where women who are eager to get back to work need childcare places provided. This comes up as the number one issue at public meetings and at doors we knock on. We require a hell of a lot more innovation. Where we have childcare providers, we cannot lose them. There are examples of that in Stoneybatter. We certainly cannot lose anymore. Where operators are removing themselves from the market, the State has to step in and provide adequate childcare provision. We need innovation. We need to do more than just throw money at a bad system. We need proper planning, co-ordination and implementation.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Early learning and childcare is an area that has seen rapid and significant developments and has had a substantial increase in investment in recent years. In particular, we have made good progress in affordability for parents, pay for staff and the inclusion of children with disabilities. However, we need to go further in the coming years. We need to support parents and educators and make provision right across the early learning and childcare sector, with a focus always on ensuring there is a positive experience for children.

The national childcare scheme has increased subsidy rates paid to families, which, along with fee controls and other reforms to the scheme, are delivering much greater affordability for parents. Out-of-pocket costs for some families remain much too high, though. That is why the programme for Government builds on the initiatives we had in recent years. For the first time, the Government is committing to introducing an element of public provision with State-led facilities to add capacity. Taking a more strategic approach to forward planning and the option of public delivery options, there is a much greater scope to influence the types and number of places available and to better align those with families' needs. Importantly, we are committing to progressively reducing the cost of early learning and childcare to €200 per child over the lifetime of this Government. Officials are examining this ambitious commitment and exploring approaches on how to most effectively achieve this objective.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 4.55 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 8 Aibreán 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 4.55 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 8 April 2025.