



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 30 Aibreán 2025

Wednesday, 30 April 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

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

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly): 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 Joanna Byrne - To discuss unsafe working conditions at the ambulance station in Drogheda.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the lack of suitable after-school facilities in Dublin 1.

Deputy Brian Brennan - To discuss the Government's plans for the enforcement of measures and incentives to combat widespread dereliction across the country.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss boat operations to Sceilg Mhicíl.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss delays in applications to get a date for a driving test.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss public transport fare increases in Skerries and Balbriggan.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the environmental degradation of Lady's Island Lake, County Wexford.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss school transport issues in the Kilcredan National School catchment area.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the basic income scheme for artists and Government plans to extend and-or expand the scheme later this year.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss proposals to restructure District Court services in District No. 21.

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Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the ambulance service in Clare which will impact on coverage for the county.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the need for an inter-city train stop at Adamstown or Kishoge train stations.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for primary care services in Fingal West.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss organised crime in Limerick City, the resources needed by the An Garda Síochána and what additional steps can be taken to interrupt drug gang activities.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the removal of special needs assistant, SNA, supports for children at a school (details supplied) and changes to SNA allocations generally.

Deputies Thomas Gould, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the closure of the tenant in situ scheme in Cork city.

The matters raised by Deputies Joanna Byrne, Brian Brennan, James O'Connor, Paul Nicholas Gogarty and Robert O'Donoghue have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Ambulance Service

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The National Ambulance Service, NAS, is the State provider for pre-hospital emergency and intermediate care as part of the wider integrated health system. It is responsible for care from the point a 911 or emergency call is received, through treatment, transportation and handover of the patient to clinical teams at the receiving emergency department in hospital. As we speak this morning, serious challenges face the NAS and many paramedics are working out of substandard stations. Many stations have huge infrastructural issues, others are in a state of significant disrepair and there has been little visible investment in providing what should be a basic resource and home base for this crucial, life-saving service.

Drogheda ambulance station is one of the stations in a deplorable substandard state and it has been for a long time. The HSE commissioned a report in 2022 on foot of an inspection of the station and a subsequent inspection took place in 2024, which highlighted the dangerous conditions paramedics are working in. No report was published following the 2024 inspection despite the many complaints and concerns raised with the HSE by the paramedics. There was an additional inspection in February this year and I am not aware of any action being taken arising from that either.

The 2022 report clearly stated the station needs to be fully rewired and made a number of additional recommendations regarding subsidence issues, a green substance coming out of electrical outlets, mould present throughout the buildings and issues with vehicular access and the condition of the road in and out, which poses a risk not only to paramedics but also to the public due to impaired sight lines for access. To date, only patch jobs and essential cosmetic works have been carried out. Residents in nearby estates have noticed the off-run of wastewater

from the cleaning of ambulances as there are no facilities to do this on site that allow for the safe disposal of wastewater. There are also restrictions on when the vehicles can be washed due to noise and there is no adequate housing for vehicles to protect them from freezing and ensure windows do not require demisting in cold weather conditions, which massively affects turnaround times, putting lives at risk.

Numerous concerns have been raised about the security of the current site, noting that it is wide open to the public. On many occasions, intruders have entered and An Garda Síochána has had to be called. A bigger concern is the use of controlled substances in the station and by crews. The station is wide open to the public and they cannot be secured at the current site. There is no security operational on the site. Multiple violent incidents have been reported to the HSE without any real response or resolution. It has long been established that the current premises are unsafe and unsanitary and it is wholly unacceptable that the works have not been undertaken to date. Paramedics have advised that their preference is for a new station, which is fit for purpose but to date no suitable site has been identified or proposed insofar as they are aware. They feel this building is so dilapidated that it should be condemned and cannot understand why the HSE continues to indemnify it despite it being so unsafe and unfit.

None of this will come as a surprise to the Minister. I have written to her on multiple occasions since the middle of February urging her to undertake an inspection of the station and the necessary works and to consult the NAS on the securing of a new station. To date, no response has been received. I also requested a debate on this matter under Topical Issue Matters 11 times in recent weeks, but was unsuccessful until this morning and despite the obvious and urgent need for investment in Drogheda and in this station, my call has fallen on deaf ears, which is symptomatic of the Government's attitude to front-line workers.

Local paramedics have told me that they have no space to rest during their breaks and no room or even small space to gather their thoughts and compose themselves after attending and dealing with harrowing scenarios. Demand for the services of the NAS is growing and in the Dublin north-east region, which includes Louth, there has been a 19% increase in calls in a two-year period. Fourteen personnel are based in this station, which is an increase on the 12 who were there in 2022 when the initial report was written. Taking into account the additional vehicles, there is no capacity to house all these personnel.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): On behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, I thank Deputy Byrne for raising these important issues.

The Government continues to prioritise increased investment in the National Ambulance Service with an allocation of €285 million in 2025. Investment this year includes €8 million for new service developments to deliver 180 additional posts. This will help to support capacity building in our front-line emergency services, further expand NAS alternative care pathways and help to further develop NAS specialist services. As the Deputy may be aware, the NAS operates from more than 110 locations throughout the country. It actively assesses and prioritises its locations for improvement works with the aim of ensuring safe working conditions for its staff.

I am informed that a Health and Safety Authority, HSA, audit was conducted at the NAS station in Drogheda in December 2021. The HSA report highlighted some shortcomings at the station and an improvement plan was put in place to address the report's recommendations.

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Improvement works were completed in early 2023 at a cost of €110,000 and included modifications to traffic management, station access, egress and storage. Subsequently, in late 2023, the roof of a structure at the rear of the station, which was used as a storage area, developed a leak. Some initial repairs were carried out to address the issue, but the leak persisted. In response, the roof was replaced in October 2023 and the interior of the building was cleaned and repainted. In 2024, the HSE estates unit began a separate assessment of the ambulance station to determine the cause and severity of a number of building cracks. This process is ongoing. Should the cracks prove to be structural in nature, the intention is that funding will be provided this year for remedial works.

Turning to the matter of rapid response vehicles, RRVs, following enquiries made with the HSE, I am informed that there has been no reduction in the number of rapid response vehicles at the Drogheda station. It is important to clarify that the rapid response vehicles highlighted by the Deputy are not patient carrying vehicles. RRVs enable NAS staff to respond quickly to incidents in support of an emergency ambulance during working hours. As the Deputy will be aware, the NAS is conducting a detailed independent review of its policies and procedures governing the use of these response vehicles out of hours. This follows an initial review that identified a potential benefit-in-kind, BIK, tax liability for NAS staff using official NAS rapid response vehicles to travel between their homes and work. I understand that the HSE has written to the Revenue Commissioners to seek a ruling on whether the use of response vehicles by NAS staff outside working hours can be considered exempt from BIK regulations and a reply is awaited from Revenue.

As a matter of prudence, I also understand that in February 2025 the NAS informed all staff members of their potential BIK tax liability if they used an NAS RRV to travel to and from work. I am informed that the NAS has engaged with the relevant trade unions and that interim measures have been put in place to allow out-of-working-hours responses to emergencies to continue in a manner consistent with the Revenue Commissioners' guidelines. It is important to emphasise that the HSE is obliged to comply with Revenue Commissioner regulations on the personal use of publicly owned vehicles. It is expected that, following a ruling from the Revenue Commissioners and consideration of the review report, the NAS will update its policy on the use of NAS response vehicles accordingly.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Increased investment is very welcome and I acknowledge that aspect of the Minister of State's response. However, at the moment, none of it is being directed to where it is needed. This issue in the Drogheda ambulance station has been going on for more than four years, as the Minister of State referenced. He also referenced that HSE officials were themselves shocked at the end of 2021 at the state of disrepair in the station. Paramedics based in this station are majorly concerned about decisions being taken at senior level in the National Ambulance Service, which impact crews' ability to effectively and safely carry out their work. It is not just the unfit and unsafe conditions. It is soul destroying and heavily impacting staff morale. These are people we rely on to go out and save lives. It could be my life or the Minister of State's life the next time around.

I asked a couple of questions I do not feel were addressed. I appreciate the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, is not the Minister and is only representing her today. However, I have asked the Minister to undertake an inspection of this station. I would appreciate if that were brought back to her. I ask that she keep an eye and that these works are carried out as soon as possible. I do not understand why we are waiting for a report initiated four years ago to decide whether remedial works are needed on a roof this year when it has been falling down for four years.

There are also evident signs of major subsidence with cracks in the walls. I again ask that the Minister engage with the National Ambulance Service on a potential new site for this station. This was mooted a few years ago. There were a couple of false dawns, but to date there has been no concrete confirmation that a new site will be provided. We are flushing money down the toilet in my view.

I visited this depot. It is in a severe state of disrepair, and it is not fit for purpose to house the front-line services needed. Will the Minister of State take those three requests to the Minister? I spoke to her briefly last night. I understand she had a long day, but she said she would come back to me on it.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Deputy. In my opening statement I focused on the specific issues she raised concerning the National Ambulance Service station in Drogheda and the status of the rapid response vehicles at the station. I will now speak more generally about the National Ambulance Service's urgent and emergency ambulance performance and reiterate this Government's continued investment in this service. Demand for our urgent and emergency ambulance services rose significantly in 2024 with almost 430,000 calls received from the public. This represents a rise of almost 32,000 calls, or 8%, on 2023. Despite this increase the National Ambulance Service performance improved in 2024 in respect of both "purple" cardiac life-threatening, and "red" all other life-threatening calls when compared to 2023. The Government invested significantly in the National Ambulance Service in 2025 with an allocation of €285 million. Included in this investment is €8 million for new service developments, which will convert to a full-year cost of €16 million in 2026. As I said earlier, new ambulance service development funding in 2025 will deliver 180 additional posts in the National Ambulance Service for the front-line emergency capacity to improve access for patients to alternative care pathways, and to further develop essential specialised services such as the National Ambulance Service critical care retrieval services for critically ill patient transfers and the National Ambulance Service's aero-medical services.

The Deputy raised a couple of issues with regard to looking for a new site for the station. I will raise that with the Minister as well as the other issue of asking her to visit the site. I will convey to her that the Deputy raised it on the floor of the House this morning and would like if these issues could be addressed.

Derelict Sites

Deputy Brian Brennan: I raise the issue of dereliction in our cities, towns and villages. The blight of dereliction and long-term vacancy is prevalent throughout our country. According to the CSO figures for 2022, there are 163,000 derelict properties. I welcome the progress and the millions, if not billions, of euro invested nationwide clearly showing in the vacant property refurbishment grant statistics presented this week. However, I question the disparity in investment between local authorities and this needs to be addressed. I welcome the compulsory purchase orders activation programme from April 2023, which provides a planned, systematic and proactive approach by local authorities to bringing vacant and derelict properties into use when there is no successful engagement with the authorities. Again, I question whether all local authorities have been fully committed to following up on this. For example, despite there being not one but two separate Acts designed to mandate the registration of dereliction, a quick online search across multiple local authorities around the country show that these registers do

not reflect the reality we see with our own eyes. If we are not recording this information, how on earth can we take the next step? How can we get these properties back into residential or commercial use? For those owners who do not co-operate with their local authorities, penalties must be increased. Let us take France as an example. A tax of 17% on the annual rental value is imposed on a property vacant for one year. This is increased to 34% in year two. We need to look at better incentives for living above the shop. There is huge untapped potential on our high streets and side streets across the country. Not only will this increase housing availability, but the knock-on effects of bringing these properties back to life will bring more footfall to our cities, towns and village centres.

Overall, dereliction can only be described as a scourge, as it is having a detrimental effect on the social fabric of our towns and villages. We need to take control of the dereliction crisis. We must ensure those vacant property owners simply use it or lose it. Dereliction should be a source of national embarrassment. We pride ourselves as a hotbed of tourism, yet we are welcoming our tourists into towns that are falling down around us. However, more importantly, we are in the middle of a housing crisis and fighting tooth and nail to build more houses while there are tens of thousands of properties standing vacant and derelict on every street corner. This is a missed opportunity and while we are in the middle of this housing crisis, we must act.

The programme for Government states, “We will continue to tackle vacancy and dereliction with enhanced compulsory purchase order (CPO) powers and an ambitious grant system.” It lists several key measures to tackle this issue. We need to get moving and both empower and drive local authorities to act swiftly and decisively on this. We cannot afford to continue to take a soft approach. We need enforcement of vacant property fines and potentially increase them to give them more teeth. We can also do work to incentivise property owners to act. We need to look at the incentive packages that we have on offer and modify them to bring people with us to get these buildings back in use.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for raising this. It gives me the opportunity to address Members on this important issue. Addressing vacancy and making efficient use of existing housing stock is a key priority of mine and this Government. To address this, a number of structures have been established, including a dedicated vacant homes unit in my Department, a full-time vacant homes officer in each local authority, and the publication of a vacant homes action plan to draw together a number of vacancy-related measures across relevant Government Departments. In March this year, the Minister, Deputy Browne, published the 2025 progress report which shows the significant progress being made in tackling vacancy and it is available on my Department’s website.

A key focus in the action plan relates to the interaction with the Government’s town centre first policy approach, which was launched by my Department and the then Department of Rural and Community Development in 2022. It provides a whole-of-government policy framework to address the decline in the health of towns and supports measures to revitalise them. To drive the delivery of town centre first, dedicated town regeneration officers have been established within local authorities, supported by the national town centre first office in the Local Government Management Agency.

In addition, where local authorities find that the acquisition of particular derelict properties is an appropriate mechanism to return them to use, they are now supported through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, which has established a €150 million revolving fund for

local authorities to acquire vacant and derelict properties, be they residential or commercial, using their compulsory purchase powers where necessary, and to carry out any associated works needed to make them more attractive for reuse or sale. On completion of the most recent review of this element of the URDF programme, a total of 1,297 residential and commercial properties were approved by my Department for inclusion on the approved programmes list for all 31 local authorities. In my role as Minister of State with responsibility for local government, I am visiting local authorities across the country, and this is one of the areas in which I am engaged extensively with executive teams and chief executives.

As Deputy Brennan rightly pointed out in his opening remarks, it is true to say some local authorities are doing really well while others have a long way to go, and that is why I am engaging with them on it. Where I have seen exceptional work done is with small, dedicated and focused teams under one directorate within a local authority that is putting an enhanced focus on this area by using the carrot and stick approach - the carrot being the likes of the repair and lease scheme and the stick being the derelict sites register and the CPO. That has yielded positive results in areas where it has been deployed. We, of course, need that consistency of approach across all local authorities in the country and that is what I am focused on as Minister of State.

My Department also introduced planning and development regulations that provide an exemption from the need to obtain planning permission for the change of use of certain vacant commercial buildings to residential units, including former pubs and above the shop living, as the Deputy referenced. The most recent authority returns from 2023 show that local authorities have received notifications of 1,065 exempted development proposals to date, with plans for the provision of 2,716 new homes nationwide. I will talk about the vacant property refurbishment grant in my follow up remarks.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I thank the Minister of State and welcome his action plan, which is very much needed, and the further investment. I take the Minister of State's point about the involvement of the local authority, and how important that is. If we take Arklow, the town I am from and where I have spent all my working life of 25 years, it was a vibrant town, with a port and a buzzing main street. My wife, my two kids and I walked down that main street on the Saturday before Christmas and we were the only four people there on it. It was absolutely frightening. However, I do see green shoots in the town. I see the wastewater treatment plant opening up next week. I have to give credit to the existing owners of premises who are trying to keep the main street going. What we need is support. We have got engagement in the past couple of months from the local authority, shop owners and the chamber of commerce. It is key that we link all these people together and get them to drive the town on. There are huge green shoots for the town, but the problems in Arklow are being replicated across Ireland. The heart and soul of any town is the main street. If you do not have a main street, you have nothing. The key is to try to get that moving again in Arklow. That is our goal.

We have other cases like Arklow, including Shillelagh and Camolin. As I said, it is right across the board. We need to get our teeth into this. It is a real problem. It affects the social fabric of every town if it does not have a thriving main street. I have faith in what the Minister of State is going to do, but we need action and full engagement from all the parties. If the owners of these properties are not going to use them, we have to move them on, although let us try to engage with them. There is a serious health and safety risk also as some of the premises are literally falling down. I thank the Minister of State for his time.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Brennan. I addressed the URDF, CPO and the

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derelict sites register in my opening remarks. The other strand is obviously the vacant property refurbishment grant, which has been a hugely successful scheme. Towards the end of Q1 of 2025, more than 12,400 applications have been received under the scheme, with more than 8,600 approvals and 2,000 grants paid out to date, giving the owners of properties up to €70,000 in support to bring a derelict property back into productive use.

I referenced the repair and lease scheme, which has been deployed to huge success in my county of Waterford. I have seen how vacant and derelict properties on the main streets the Deputy spoke about have been converted into productive residential units for people on the social housing waiting list. We also have the THRIVE scheme, through the town centre first scheme, which is utilising ERDF EU regional development programmes to rehabilitate publicly-owned, vacant and derelict heritage buildings. That scheme has allocated more than €117 million to transformative capital projects in buildings in Cork, Galway, Waterford, Gorey and Wexford, as well as other parts of the country.

What I can say is that I am placing an increased emphasis and focus on this. I want to see all local authorities coming up to the level of the best-performing local authorities. I have seen what works and am trying to influence that as much as possible because I agree with Deputy Brennan that at a time of such need and want in terms of housing, we have to be seen to be delivering in respect of vacancy and dereliction and the quickest way to do so is to focus on the houses and buildings that are already there and that is what we are determined to do.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Bogfaimid ar aghaidh go dtí an tríú saincheist agus an Teachta James O'Connor.

School Transport

Deputy James O'Connor: I appreciate the opportunity to raise this important matter regarding my constituency. It is about Kilcredan National School, which is located in the peripheral regions of Youghal and Middleton towns. It is a rural school but it is also a very large school. It came about because of the merger of three existing primary schools in that parish into one. Although it was a very good idea and the school is excellent, run by a brilliant team of people, they have come under huge pressure in recent years from the Department of Education's transport policy on school bus transport, as a consequence of the village of Ladysbridge being a distance further from Kilcredan, which is the school of its parish, than Castlemartyr and Ballintotis national schools in the periphery. We have been having a Siege of Ennis-style situation where there is a dance every September and a panic, and we are having to bang down the doors of the Department of Education to try to deal with the situation. It is mercifully unfair on the parents and the children involved.

Ireland has changed completely in the past 40 years. Most households now are lucky to have somebody at home at all. Having an adequate bus transport system in place for kids in those areas is a really important part of the fabric of rural Ireland.

I am not happy, as a TD representing the people affected by this - those who have children attending Kilcredan, the children themselves and the school - who are all put in a very difficult position every year. What I am asking for, and I do not think it is an unfair ask, is in regard to locations that have gone through the process of amalgamation, where the school is of its parish boundaries and it is what the parents, the board of management and the local community and

area want. That has never not been raised with with me as a TD representing them. They want to have it reflected by the Department of Education, that is, that it is the school of that community, of the Fr. O'Neill's, Ladysbridge and Ballymacoda catchment area and that Kilcredan is their school of which they are very proud. Some of the great hurlers, such as Ger Millerick and Declan Dalton, who played on the Cork team at the weekend come from Kilcredan. There is a very strong, proud sporting tradition in the school.

It is very discriminatory what the Department is doing with the distance boundaries. In rural Ireland, people are very precious about where they come from, and rightly so. It is a nice part of the country that we live in. What I am asking for is that the Department of Education have some bit of compassion for a school community, which is among three schools that have been merged into one, and have some recognition of that. As I said, each September we are back in the same position and are negotiating for weeks. It is a complete waste of time and, ultimately, all it requires is the stroke of a pen. That is what bothers me most about it. As a TD, I do not like having to go back to those parents, trying to scrape around for updates from the Department, putting everybody under pressure when it could all be done very easily if it were raised at this time of the year. I would deeply appreciate it if the Minister of State could bring my points back to the Department. I am grateful to him for being here to listen to me this morning. I know that parents and children in that community would appreciate this matter being raised as a matter of urgency.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I welcome the opportunity to speak about Kilcredan National School. The school transport scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year, more than 172,500 children are transported daily in almost 8,000 vehicles across 10,300 routes to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country. These daily trips cover over 100 million kilometres.

The purpose of my Department's school transport scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the current terms of the school transport scheme, children are eligible for transport at primary level where they reside not less than 3.2 km from and are attending their nearest national school. At post-primary level, they are eligible where they reside not less than 4.8 km from and are attending their nearest post-primary school or education centre. Distance is determined by the Department-Bus Éireann and rules having regard to ethos and language.

Eligible children who complete the application process and pay or enter their medical card details on time will get a seat on a school bus service if a service is available. Children who are not eligible for school transport but who complete the application and pay or enter their medical card details on time will be considered for any spare seats available after eligible children have been accommodated. These spare seats are called concessionary seats, which are constantly discussed here every August, September and October when the schools reopen. There may be more demand than availability for concessionary seats. In such cases, Bus Éireann will use a selection process to allocate tickets for the spare seats.

The school transport system is over 55 years of age since it began with free education. The Deputy raised the issue of Kilcredan National School. A number of pilot projects were initiated over the past year or so. It is one of the pilot projects. We have to allow the full year to go through. The Department and Bus Éireann are evaluating all the pilot projects where they provide a valuable insight into the impact of increasing demand for the schemes and the poten-

tial for integrating public transport with the school transport system where it is possible, which is not always possible in rural areas. Rural areas do not have the public transport that is often sighted in urban areas or large towns. We are predominantly dependent on the school transport system. We are evaluating the 14 pilot projects, of which Kilcredan was one. I understand that the Deputy and others have raised this issue each year over the past number of years. When the pilot projects have been evaluated, we will try to find the best possible solution for students, parents and the entire community of Kilcredan National School.

Deputy James O'Connor: I welcome the Minister of State's statement. He understands rural Ireland and the issues I am raising because our constituencies are not that dissimilar. We share a county after all. I welcome the inclusion of Kilcredan in the pilot project by the Department of Education. I would appreciate if the Department would share that information with me so I can bring it back to the parents and the school and if the information was shared with the school. It is an easy issue to solve. There should be a recognition in the mapping the Department does each year with the bus provider - Bus Éireann - and the services it uses that this is a problem area because of what has happened there historically. People in Ladysbridge are very committed to the future of Kilcredan National School and want to see their children go to and support the school because it is the school of their community. I accept that there is a paradox there in terms of the distance. I am a realist. I have often discussed it with other groups across my area and said that we cannot have an *à la carte* solution to each problem but this one is particularly bad and more than worthy of attention. The principal of the school and his predecessor have been outstanding in terms of raising this matter with me. It puts a lot of pressure on the school board and school management. I can understand why parents are so frustrated. What happened last year and in previous years had a significant impact of people living in those houses. I thank the Minister of State for the information. I would appreciate him bringing my arguments back to the Department. I thank him most sincerely for his visit to Cork East, which was very successful. He was very sincere in his work in that regard.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I look forward to more visits to east Cork over the next number of years. When a rural school closes, there is a void and almost a grieving process within the community in which the school is located. One guarantee that was given way back when the amalgamations took place was that there would be an adequate bus service to get students from that location to the central school. It was always indicated that at primary level, we would guarantee that a bus service would be available. Boundaries, catchment areas and different regulations have developed over the past 50 to 60 years regarding transporting children to school so we must make sure we are looking at the here and now. School communities are hugely important. They are hugely important for children going to school and for the identity of the area but we must make sure we are doing the best with the resources that are available to us to make sure we accommodate every child insofar as it is possible.

I will endeavour to work with the Deputy on this issue. The Department and Bus Éireann are evaluating all the pilot projects around the country. When that is done, we will look at how best we can face the future in terms of providing a better service. We are unable to share that information until it has been pulled together and studied. When this has been done, we will share the information. I will keep in close contact with the Deputy over the next number of months. The closing date for payment is in June while the closing date for application was last week. We will be working throughout the summer to ensure we have the best possible service. We had a number of meetings with officials from the Department yesterday to outline the issues we have.

Dáil Éireann
Rail Network

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Maidin mhaith, a Aire Stáit. Is lá álainn é ag deireadh mhí Aibreáin. Ceapaim gur lá iontach é le dul ar thuras traenach. Is é sin an t-ábhar I am talking about today. It is a great day for a train journey but if one lives in the newer areas in my constituency, such as Adamstown, and if one is an IT professional who needs to go to the likes of Galway, one has to go all the way back into Heuston Station or wait a long time to get a connection to Portarlinton. It really is not worth one's while so we need an intercity stop. There is always a question as to where an intercity route would stop in suburban areas. About 12,000 people live in Adamstown. It is a strategic development zone that has a larger population than Portarlinton, which has a train station, and Kildare town. If you were to start in Adamstown and try to get a train to the likes of Galway, for example, it would probably take between 40 minutes and one hour to get to Heuston Station or you would be doing a lot of waiting around trying to time a journey in the other direction. Adamstown definitely has a need for an intercity train station or, if not Adamstown, Kishoge, which is in the Clonburriss strategic development zone. While Adamstown has 8,000 houses, Clonburriss will have between 8,500 to 11,000. Adamstown's projected population is 25,000. Clonburriss could have anything up to 30,000. Adamstown is a lot more developed.

Some €4 million was wasted on the redevelopment of the Kishoge Station because it was not opened in 2009 when it could have been to cater for the existing population of Lucan. The wider Lucan population is almost 60,000. In that context, there is a huge catchment area for train use but such usage will only be encouraged if it is convenient. I know quite a few IT professionals – there is a diverse demographic in the Adamstown area - who car pool regularly every week in order to go to Galway to do their work. Some people drive rather than car pool, however. They are clogging up the roads when they could get the train. No one is going to spend 40 to 50 minutes on a bus going to Heuston station to then get the train back out again. There is a pressing need for these towns on the outskirts of Dublin, although they are in Dublin, to be treated in their own right as part of an intercity service.

I note that, coming from Galway, there is one stop-off in the morning at nearby Hazelhatch and Celbridge. That area has a much smaller population than the already growing Adamstown population of 12,000 people. I ask the Minister of State and his colleagues, in discussions with the NTA, to look at this, particularly as he has his hand on the lever, so to speak.

I will talk more about departmental funding after the Minister of State's contribution. There is a pressing and worthwhile need to at least have morning and evening peak stop-offs at either Adamstown or Clonburriss, although probably Adamstown in light of the existing population. Try it out, see how it works and see whether it increases the numbers using our intercity train services.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I am delighted that Deputy Gogarty is talking about coming to Galway. We want people to come to Galway.

At the outset, I wish to clarify that while the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, neither he, the Minister of State or our officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services rests with the NTA. The NTA works with the public transport operators which deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. I reassure the Deputy

that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options. Public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. I agree with the Deputy with regard to giving a good experience to people and that if their experience is good, they will continue to use public transport. To support this objective, under budget 2025, a €652 million funding package was secured for the public service obligation, PSO, and Local Link services.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government is backing up its commitment to improving public transport with significant infrastructure investments across the network. Under the National Development Plan 2021-2030, the introduction of additional public transport infrastructure will help to relieve congestion on the transport network while also providing for new rolling stock to provide greater capacity for Iarnród Éireann's increasing passenger numbers into the future. This includes the Government's commitment to funding for initiatives, such as the DART+ programme, the new DART+ fleet, the proposed replacement of the current Enterprise fleet and the introduction of 41 new intercity railcars.

Adamstown and Kishoge stations, located in west Dublin, are served by a number of Iarnród Éireann services on the lines to Heuston. Adamstown Station is served by the Dublin Heuston to Cork, Grand Canal Dock and Dublin Heuston to Portlaoise, Dublin Heuston to Newbridge and Grand Canal Dock to Hazelhatch services. Kishoge Station is served by the Dublin Heuston to Cork, Dublin Heuston to Waterford and the Grand Canal Dock and Dublin Heuston to Portlaoise services.

The line between Hazelhatch to Park West is a four-track section, which allows intercity trains to operate on an express non-stop service. The commuter trains on this line stop at all commuter stops, enabled by the four-track section, without the intercity and commuter services slowing down as well. Iarnród Éireann provides an interchange between commuter and intercity services for customers travelling to and from commuter stations such as Adamstown and Kishoge. This typically happens at the following stations: Kildare, for connections to and from Waterford; Portarlinton, for connections to and from Galway and Westport; and Portlaoise, for connections to and from Cork, Kerry and Limerick. Such models of interchange are typical on rail systems internationally to facilitate the balance between demand for competitive intercity journey times and the provision of connections for a broad range of journeys. There are some occasions when intercity trains stop at additional stations such as Newbridge or Sallins where a commuter connection is otherwise unavailable. Stopping intercity services at Adamstown, Kishoge or other commuter stations would increase journey times by five minutes per stop on intercity services. Additionally, these increased stops would take up additional track capacity, reducing the overall number of trains which can operate.

I reassure the Deputy that the Department of Transport, the NTA and Iarnród Éireann are working to ensure the optimised deployment of resources across the public transport network match passenger demand. The points the Deputy makes need to be considered, however, and I will bring them back to the NTA.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a fhreagra. The reply mentions that there could be up to five minutes' delay. The whole selling point for Adamstown and Kishoge was that we have four tracks. Some of it was part of the strategic development zone scheme, as was the Phoenix Park tunnel interconnection. To put this in context, the people currently living in Adamstown and Lucan are badly served by the train service.

In the context of the suburban routes, I receive numerous complaints with regard to overcrowding, the lack of convenient times and the inability to get to the likes of Grand Canal Dock at the weekends. We have had an announcement from Iarnród Éireann that services along some routes, including those servicing Adamstown and Kishoge, will be curtailed up until October. While I have been told in meetings with the NTA that there will be additional carriages put on, those carriages will be taken from improvements to the northern line. They will be second-hand carriages. The roll-out of the DART+ South West could be in 2027 or 2028.

The overall train service is poor. Adamstown had a designation of no more than 1.25 car spaces per house. The whole idea of Adamstown is to encourage public transport and active travel. In this context, it makes absolute sense for Adamstown to be an intercity hub to go to other areas. It is worth trying at peak times. Put on one stop-off to Galway, mar shampla, or Cork and see how it works and see whether that increases the number of people using the train service overall. It only makes sense to increase the journey time if you are actually increasing the number of people using the service. I take that point. It needs to be pushed and tried out.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Deputy makes a strong case. I am listening. I assure him that the Minister for Transport recognises that transport connectivity is hugely important for people who live and work in Ireland and that expanding the public transport network and increasing service levels throughout the country will lead to more balanced regional development and greater connectivity. The Deputy spoke about Lucan and places like Adamstown. It is important that we provide a good service. Where the service is not good enough, we need to make it the best we can. We need to work on that.

Two initial orders for 185 electric and battery-electric carriages for the DART+ fleet were placed, with 95 carriages ordered in December 2021 and a further 90 ordered in December 2022. A total of 750 carriages will be ordered in the coming decade. That is a statement of intent.

Iarnród Éireann has begun to take delivery of the first order of new trains under the DART+ programme. Regarding the utilisation of the new DART+ fleet, 185 carriages are currently on order. The first order, of 95, will see 65 battery-electric carriages operating on the Drogheda commuter line. Charging facilities are being built at Drogheda. Thirty electric-only carriages will add to capacity on the existing DART network. The battery-electric carriages will begin to enter service in 2026 and will allow a cascade of commuter and intercity trains from the Drogheda line to other lines. The commuter trains would cascade to the Maynooth, M3 Parkway, Phoenix Park Tunnel and Heuston commuter services, allowing full-size trains on all services and replacing shorter and lower-capacity intercity trains operating on the route.

The 90 battery-operated carriages that comprise the second order will be built for the greater Dublin area, with route deployment to be determined. Upon the completion of each element of DART+, capacity for additional trains will be provided. Railway orders have been received for DART+ West and DART+ South West to Hazelhatch, and physical works are expected to commence in 2026.

Again, I thank the Deputy for raising this very important subject. I will relay his suggestions to the NTA.

30 April 2025

Public Transport

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Good morning, Minister of State. It has always been the Labour Party's vision to invest in public transport, to continue to progressively reduce the cost of public transport and to focus on increasing the reliability of our train services. In general, it is great to see the fare reductions and the expansion of the commuter zones that have come in this week. This is a positive step forward in making transport accessible and affordable for everybody and helping to ease the cost of living and encourage more sustainable travel choices. However, can the Minister of State please explain the rationale behind grouping the Skerries and Balbriggan train stations in commuter zone 2 alongside towns in Kildare, Wicklow and Louth rather than in zone 1 with the other Dublin stations? The decision seems unfair to the residents of the two towns, who are still part of north County Dublin, but also counterproductive from a climate action point of view by making train travel more expensive in the outer areas, which are often under-utilised. This encourages car use, resulting in more cars on the M50, leading to an increase in air pollution and additional barriers to promoting active travel.

I read last night an e-mail from a constituent who has been using the train since 1983. Her fare for her journey from Skerries, which is now being moved into zone 2, has increased by 30%. Another constituent, a student who goes from the Rush-Lusk station to Balbriggan for school, has seen her fare rise, under the new fare structure, from 65 cent to €1.95 – a threefold increase in a week. This is similar to what obtains for students going the opposite way, crossing zone 2 to zone 1, from Skerries and Balbriggan into town. While it might not seem significant in isolation, over a school week or year it adds up and places unnecessary burdens on families who are already struggling with food costs and utility bills.

A father called me last night over his daughter, whose Leap card ran out of money. Her friends were able to sort her out but there was unnecessary stress and panic while they figured out a way to get back from Balbriggan to Rush-Lusk. The hikes are not compatible with the Government's commitments to affordability and encouraging people to use public transport, despite this being the goal.

I put up a petition yesterday – I am not one for petitions generally – to test the waters on this and ask for Skerries and Balbriggan to be moved back into zone 1. The route used to be in the short-hop zone. After 24 hours, there have been up to 1,100 responses, despite my not being known for my social media wizardry. Could we tease this out? Can we examine again the inclusion of Skerries and Balbriggan stations in zone 1, rather than zone 2, where they are now, and at fare structures for students who travel across zones 1 and 2 – say, from Rush-Lusk to Balbriggan – who are being charged three times the rate they were charged a week ago for a two-station station journey? Can serious consideration be given to restoring across zones 1 and 2 the student fares that applied last week?

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for his very precise request and for raising this topic, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien. The Minister has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, neither he nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the NTA. The NTA works with the public transport operators that deliver the services and has responsibility for day-to-day operational matters.

That said, I reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing

all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays key role of the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2025 the Department of Transport secured €658.442 million in public funding for public service obligations and TFI Local Link services. That is an increase from €613 million in 2024. This funding also supports continuation after a 20% fare reduction in PSO services, the young adult card for both PSO and commercial bus services and the 90-minute fare until the end of 2025. Funding is also being secured to extend free child fares on PSO services to include those between ages five and eight and to support the roll-out of new enhanced bus and rail services under programmes such as BusConnects and Connecting Ireland.

The NTA has strategy responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect to public transport services provided under the PSO contracts. In this context, in April 2023 the NTA published a new national fare strategy. The fare strategy follows the implementation of the simplified fare structure in Dublin. This strategy aims to create a more equitable, consistent and easy-to-understand fare system based on distance travelled. In January 2024, the NTA published fare determinations covering the Dublin city zone, which extends 25 km from the city centre to Rush, Ratoath, Blanchardstown and Bray, and the Dublin commuter zone, which extends 50 kilometres, from the city centre, to Drogheda, Kildare, Rathdrum, etc. Phase 1 was implemented in June 2024 and focused on fares for shorter journeys within Dublin. Phase 2, initially scheduled for September 2024, was delayed due to technical issues with the rail ticketing system. The second phase of the previously announced fare determinations was implemented on Monday, 28 April, introducing new multimodal fare caps in Dublin and revised commuter rail services, with revised commuter fares to come into effect in mid-May. The implementation saw the roll-out of the new Dublin city fare zone and three new Dublin commuter fare zones. Communications campaigns in the form of posters at train stations, etc., commenced on Monday, 24 April. I will refer to this further in my next contribution.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State for his response. This is a good scheme but there are idiosyncrasies in it that need to be ironed out so the constituents of Dublin Fingal West will be encouraged to use public transport. I understand that distance travelled is one of the criteria in establishing zones, but it seems incredibly unfair that the fares of students travelling two stops from Rush-Lusk over the zone border to Balbriggan have increased three-fold since last week. I would be quite happy to meet and work with the Minister, who knows the area quite well, to try to work towards a resolution on this. I thank the Minister of State for his time this morning.

Deputy Seán Canney: Let me bring some balance to this.

10 o'clock

Single fares for some routes will be reduced significantly. Drogheda to Dublin Connolly will drop from €11.95 to €6, which is a 50% reduction. Conversely, some fares will increase, most notably in Greystones, Sallins and Naas, and Skerries, which fall outside the city zone. Within the Dublin city zone - the 25 km radius from the city centre - the fares determination will see a single monthly Leap fee of €96 and an annual fee of €960. This includes travel across all Dublin city bus, Luas and Irish Rail services within the Dublin city zone, representing a reduction of approximately 17%. The annual tickets on Dublin city bus and rail services will see a 9% fare reduction. The 90-minute fare level will be retained at €2. Fare caps will be revised, reducing the maximum daily, weekly and monthly expenditure for passengers in the Dublin city zone from €8 to €6 for adults.

30 April 2025

The Department is liaising closely with the NTA and Irish Rail on the matter and will continue to monitor phase 2. I will bring to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Deputy's request for a meeting to deal with this. It is important to return to the initial issue: there is no increase overall in the level of charges across services. The Deputy has said there are some anomalies in the service, which we will continue to monitor.

Special Education: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— there is an ongoing failure by the State to adequately plan for school places for children with special or additional educational needs;

— parents have resorted to sleeping outside the Department of Education to raise awareness of the lack of appropriate places;

— significant sections of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 remain un-commenced, and a review of the EPSEN Act was begun in 2021 with a public consultation in 2023 but to date no report or recommendations have been published;

— schools that have been assessed as requiring additional Special Needs Assistant (SNA) positions are being blocked from recruiting for these essential roles;

— there is no timeframe or sufficient budgetary provision in place for ensuring the national provision of in-school therapies through the Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS), building on the work of the School Inclusion Model pilot; and

— the training and supports provided to teachers, SNAs, and other educational staff have not kept pace with developments in the field of additional needs education;

recalls that:

— 126 children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) had no school place at the start of this school year in September, and the number of children accessing the Home Tuition Grant scheme due to the lack of an SEN placement has increased;

— there is no national centralised system operated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to determine sufficiently in advance the number of additional special educational school places required;

— there are no protocols in place for the sharing of information on SEN between pre-schools, primary schools, post primary schools and special schools to support children as they advance through the educational system; and

— 14,221 children were overdue an assessment of needs in December 2024, nearly 13,000 children are waiting for initial contact with a Children's Disability Network

Team, and tens of thousands of children are on primary care wait lists for treatment, adding further pressure on schools and educators to support children with additional unmet needs;

recognises that:

— parents and educators continue to have significant concerns about the current system of planning for SEN provision where schools are put under pressure at short notice to open classes without adequate resourcing, appropriate accommodation or training for staff, and with minimal specialised support; and

— 399 new special classes were announced for the 2025/26 school year earlier this month, but many children will struggle to secure places appropriate to their needs in their local community; and

calls on the Government to:

— ensure the right of every child to an appropriate school place in their general locality is fulfilled in September 2025;

— introduce a central application system for special educational places to commence for the 2026/27 school year, and develop protocols on the sharing of information at every step of the educational system;

— provide appropriate means of transport for children with additional educational needs to access their school place;

— guarantee that every school will receive sufficient funding for the full equipping of classrooms including modular builds, sensory and play spaces, and assistive technology when new special classes are opened;

— publish the finalised review of the EPSEN Act and commit to bringing forward amending proposals as necessary and to commencing the long delayed measures;

— provide a timeline for the national rollout of in-school therapists through the ETSS to provide certainty for schools and parents, and introduce play, art, music and other relevant therapies and in-school counselling where appropriate;

— lift the arbitrary cap on SNAs, and ensure that positions are funded when the NCSE has recommended a post is required, remove the 72 hour obligation on SNAs, and continue to support the professionalisation of the SNA role;

— introduce an initial teacher education programme for student teachers allowing them to complete at least one school placement in an additional needs setting, and introduce free upskilling in SEN for existing teachers; and

— ensure every teacher is fully trained in seizure first aid, amend the assault leave scheme, and develop a new position in schools of a Special Education Needs Officer.

I will start off with how interesting it is that the Government has chosen to oppose our motion so rigorously. The Minister knows as well as I do that what we are requesting is needed but I now question, looking at the Government's amendment, whether the Department realises or understands the extent of the concerns raised daily by genuine families.

30 April 2025

Since being elected to the House in December, one of the biggest issues brought to my attention has been that of school places, or the lack thereof, and special educational needs as a whole. Today, we are tabling a motion to support the families of children with additional needs, families who slept outside the Minister's Department, protested through the streets of Cork city and established equality and education groups right throughout the country.

In 2025, no child should be left without an appropriate school place within his or her own locality. There are two important parts to that statement, namely, "appropriate" and the words "within his or her own locality." We in the Labour Party will no longer accept figures being thrown around the place like the Taoiseach did yesterday regarding the number of classes being opened in mainstream or special schools and about having the highest number of SNAs we have ever had in our system. The reality is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have led Governments for the life of this State. It is a complete failure of the State to adequately resource our schools with infrastructure, teachers, SNAs and genuine long-term supports. Now, the Department finds itself scrambling at the eleventh hour to paper over the cracks of this Government's making.

We make nine requests in our motion. They are genuine and come from parents and the various educational organisations I met throughout the country in recent months. The word "appropriate" is essential when describing the sanctioning of new school places or classrooms for children with additional needs. I was lucky and grateful to get the opportunity up until not so long ago to teach in a special educational needs setting. Unfortunately, there were students in that classroom with varying needs. It was not an appropriate setting. We need to realise that just because opening a class adds to the figure of new classes, it does not necessarily mean every child's needs are being met.

Schools in the locality are vital. The greatest thing we can do for children with additional needs is to integrate them into their communities, show them the areas they live in and provide them with support to use their amenities. However, if they are travelling long distances in the morning and afternoon, that is not possible. Parents of these children met the Minister and the NCSE just last month and were informed that there was no central application system for children with special educational needs. When I spoke to them, they were horrified by this. It is an immediate and vital request. We need to be able to track the number of children who need support. We have the data but what we do not have is the political will. The Minister controls the purse strings. Unfortunately, we do not, so we are bringing solutions forward in this forum.

Children of schoolgoing age should be a priority. I guarantee that, if I went into the centre of Cork or Dublin or anywhere else throughout the country and stopped a person to ask if he or she believed this Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and regional Independents is doing enough to resource our schools, I could nearly guess the answer. The stories parents have shared with me and my colleagues in the Labour Party in recent months are harrowing. I have such sympathy and empathy for these families and children, but they do not want that. They want to see correct action. It should not have to come to a stage where they are forced to protest.

I was lucky up until recently to be in schools with such dedicated special educational needs co-ordinators. These are not stand-alone positions, as the Minister will know, but assistant principal roles. It is also important to note that the extra money for this role is pitiful. The role is so broad and intensive that I have seen at first hand these teachers coming in on their Easter, summer and mid-term breaks to cover the administrative work that goes with the job. That should not be the case. The SENCo role should be a stand-alone position. I spoke with a SENCo last Wednesday, who taught me previously. She said she was in the school and conveyed to me

that she was “inundated, tired, exhausted and worn out”, to use her words. That should not be the case. School staff are going above and beyond for their students and, more importantly, they are putting students at the centre of learning. Unfortunately, as we all heard at the teacher conferences last week, they believe they are not getting the resources from central government.

I have met several charities, educational and advocacy groups in recent months. Their requests are not being recognised. I implore the Minister to consult these groups on any new policy initiatives. They are the ones on the ground who understand the issues, are speaking with parents and students, and who must play an important role in developing policy.

Having worked with such dedicated and hardworking SNAs, I can see how undervalued they are in our education system. I ask the Minister to get rid of the 72-hour obligation on SNAs. I have seen SNAs being used for various tasks, mainly at the end of the school year, to meet these hours. They find themselves cleaning out school lockers, cleaning classrooms and doing administrative work that is not under their remit. How does the Minister think this makes an SNA feel? They do the work because they are hardworking individuals but if asked, they would all say they were undervalued and often went unnoticed in the work they were doing.

SNA provision can never be capped. If the NCSE and the SENO tell the Department that the school must be sanctioned an SNA, it must be done. I asked previously in this House about an SNA freeze. The Department and the Taoiseach assured me that no such directive had been sent out. Why did a school principal then come to me and tell me this was what the school had been told? Like many parts of the Government, there is a complete lack of accountability.

The school therapists initiative is a fantastic PR stunt. We cannot get therapists to fill our HSE roles, yet the Minister says we will roll them out in special schools. Where is the Government getting these therapists from? Please provide the figures and information on the incentives. We cannot allow schools to believe that they are going to get therapists when it is just not possible.

In its amendment, the Government will state that 3,700 new special classes will be available across the country for the coming school year, which should ensure that every child has access to a school place in his or her locality. The three words “which should ensure” are not the most comforting or confident language that parents contacting my office want to see. It is complete guesswork because there is no central application system. The Government does not know whether these special schools will ensure that every child will get a school place in the locality. That is a fault of this Government’s own making. It committed to introducing this application system in the programme for Government, but when will that be? Is it the next time academic year or will it be the academic year five years from now?

Another failure of this Government is the EPSEN Act. Failure to implement part of the Act is not acceptable. Section 13 outlines that the Ministers for education, children and health will provide the moneys and other resources as determined by the Minister for the purposes of the preparation and implementation of education plans. It strikes me that, since 2004, this has not been introduced. The Minister will have the power to provide the money needed. I do not want to hear any more percentages or a figure of how much of the education budget is going to special education. That is probably in the Minister’s speech. It is not enough. There is no point denying it. Until appropriate plans are in place, do not just keep throwing money at the issue.

Introducing Bills and motions is providing solutions, so the Government cannot beat us

with the “no solutions” stick. If the Government is not willing to take them on board, that is the Government’s mistake, not ours. We will continue to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I second the motion and commend my Labour colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, who has devised this motion and tabled it with such passion and strong advocacy. I welcome those in the Public Gallery who join us for the debate. We have quite a number of parents and groups campaigning on behalf of children who have been deprived of their right to an education by the State. I will single out from my own constituency the Neurodiversity - Irishtown, Ringsend and Pearse Street, NIRP, organisation, whose representatives are here, and one of our Labour councillors, Ali Field, who is in the Chamber. Six years to the day today, Ali was protesting outside Leinster House, calling for a school place for her son James. It also happens to be Ali’s birthday. Happy birthday, Ali. I hope she will hear some good news today.

I acknowledge the enormous campaigning work done around the country by many parents, local representatives and groups such as Education Equality, Involve Autism in my constituency and the national group AsIAM. They campaign tirelessly on behalf of their children, but they should not have to do so. The reason they are on sleepovers outside the Department of Education, lobbying us and in here today is because the State is failing their children. The Labour Party’s motion sets out nine clear requests of the Government. If it adopted those nine requests, or even if the Minister committed today to adopting them, it would give some positive news to parents like Ali Field and others that something would be done for their children. Instead, what we have seen, as Deputy Kenny said, is a disappointing amendment from the Government. With respect, it amounts to a gaslighting of children, parents and staff to table an amendment that is full of statistics and figures but does not really answer the primary issue for parents and children who are dealing every day with the Government’s failure to vindicate the basic right of every child to an education. I think of the many parents who have told me about the battles they have been having to secure that education for their children. Theirs are harrowing stories. A mother told me of the long months on a waiting list to achieve an assessment of need for her three-year-old daughter. A grandmother is in despair because her daughter cannot get a school place for her six-year-old son. We all hear about these issues every day in our constituencies.

In my home area of Dublin Bay South, there is a huge amount of voluntary effort under way, just as there is across the country, to try to provide a means of filling the gaps that the State has left. We have seen events such as the Sensoria festival on Merrion Square; initiatives like NIRP, which worked with Dublin City Council to secure autism-friendly and neurodiverse spaces; and Ranelagh Rockets, the fantastic GAA initiative in my constituency that has been working tirelessly to provide sports facilities and sports amenities for children who have no other outlets for sports. All these groups are showing the power of community and proving that it is possible to achieve an accessible society. However, they are filling gaps left by the State.

Look at the serious gaps in particular areas. I acknowledged to the Taoiseach yesterday that progress had been made. We have seen some good examples of new special schools and special classes opening - we will be the first to acknowledge that - but there are still enormous gaps across the State. In Dublin 6 and Dublin 6W where the Involve Autism group has been campaigning, there are serious gaps in the system. Children are still being bussed out of the area at enormous cost - a human cost to them and their families and an enormous financial cost to the State - in order to access special classes elsewhere. Even where special classes or schools are set up, there is a lack of wrap-around therapeutic supports. Involve Autism asked me to raise directly with the Minister its concern about the lack of recruitment of therapists and for support

services that are so badly required. Teachers and SNAs are not therapists. We need to see all of these measures in place.

I will finish by referencing a particular school in Templeogue, the Libermann Spiritan School, which opened in 2023. It was very welcome. It serves 43 children aged from four years to 18 years from across south and south-west Dublin. It does very positive work but has serious resource issues. The school principal, Vivienne Wynne, tells me she has never encountered a crisis as severe as the one unfolding now, yet the request for increased services has been denied. I understand that the Minister of State, Michael Moynihan, is visiting the Libermann school at 1.45 p.m. An invitation to local representatives only issued yesterday afternoon. We all fervently hope that that visit will be accompanied by an announcement of additional resources, particularly an increased allocation of therapy services.

This sort of last-minute action does not resolve the ongoing structural and fundamental problem for children across the State who require special education or have additional educational needs. We need to hear from the Minister a clear plan of action. Our motion with its nine clear requests sets that out and would offer hope to parents and children currently being failed by the State.

Deputy Ged Nash: I will focus my comments on the recruitment and allocation of SNAs. I recently submitted a parliamentary question on behalf of a local school in my hometown of Drogheda. Despite a clear recommendation from the local special educational needs organiser, SENO, to increase its SNA allocation, new posts were denied. That is because of some invisible and arbitrary national cap, an effective recruitment ban that is not a recruitment ban. This is Orwellian stuff, quite frankly. The answer I received from the Minister was certainly long and detailed. It went on at length about the wonderful things the Department was doing in this area but it failed to address the school's situation. It did not admit that there was a national cap on the recruitment of SNAs at all. What we will get from the Minister in a few minutes is a list of numbers detailing the investment in the sector and the additional SNAs that have been recruited in recent years. That is all well and good, but it is clear from schools in my constituency and around the country that it is not enough and that the system is broken.

My office has been deluged in recent weeks with contacts from students, staff and families at Marymount National School in Drogheda, in particular. The exasperated principal of that school wrote to me a number of weeks ago saying that students with additional needs in the school had once again been failed by a system that claimed to prioritise inclusion and support. She went on to explain that, despite a thorough review and a clear recommendation from the SENO that the school's SNA allocation be increased, the school was informed that the post would not be sanctioned. The intimation is that a national limit has been reached. The school principal described the situation as completely unacceptable, and I completely agree. The principal asked that I back her call for an immediate review of this quota or recruitment cap and demand that this school and others in the same position I am dealing with have their recommended allocations of SNAs sanctioned. That is what I am calling on the Minister to do.

The budget considerations are determining the allocation of SNAs, not the professionally assessed need. Otherwise the assessment of need of those needs is futile. The money must chase the need, not the other way around. This is the equivalent of saying that the emergency department in our local hospital is full, so people will not be allowed to access it and can go home. This is a demand-led service and it needs to be treated as such.

The motion calls on the Minister and her Department to lift the arbitrary cap on SNAs and ensure that SNA positions are funded, sanctioned and approved when the NCSE has recommended that posts are required. As the school principal rightly said, children with additional needs do not disappear because the quota has been reached. A teacher at the same school asked me whether our children suddenly stopped having additional needs and were they not worth the same as their peers in other schools? That teacher made the very valid point that it is not only children with additional needs who are impacted when a school has an inadequate number of SNAs. It affects every child in the school because human resources are stretched to cover the gaps.

The Minister will be familiar with Marymount National School in Ballsgrove, Drogheda. It is in a DEIS area and has additional needs. The State recognises that it is an area of disadvantage and has additional needs. The teacher told me that, when a child with additional needs did not have his or her needs met, it could lead to frustration, anger, meltdowns and violence. How can an adult looking after 20 plus children keep them safe while helping a child in distress?

A separate but linked issue is that of how the NCSE and the SENO system is operating on the ground. A large school in my area with just one SNA has been trying to get a second post sanctioned for the past four to five years with no success. I do not want the Minister to tell me that this school, which is one of the largest schools in the country, does not have additional needs and can manage with one SNA. It is disgraceful. The system as it is currently constituted is failing our children and has to be fixed.

Minister for Education (Deputy Helen McEntee): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

— a child’s right to education is enshrined in the Constitution and, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, must be accessible on an equal basis with others in the community in which they live; and

— the Government is committed to ensuring that each child with a Special Educational Need (SEN) has an appropriate school place, in line with their constitutional right and Programme for Government commitments;

further notes:

— the continued significant State investment of €2.9 billion in supporting the provision of special education, a 48 per cent increase since 2020;

— the significant increases in the allocation of special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to support children with SEN in our schools which facilitates the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in prioritising the allocation of all of these resources to children with the greatest level of need;

— the strategic initiatives introduced to provide for the continued accelerated delivery of special class places in mainstream schools and special school places with the number of special classes having doubled over the last five years, and 16 new special schools being established;

— Budget 2025 provided for up to 2,700 additional special education placements to include, 400 new special classes in mainstream schools and 300 additional special school places;

— the fact that 399 of these new special classes are now sanctioned for the coming school year, three months earlier than previously thought, and that significant progress is being made in relation to the establishment of five new special schools and the expansion of provision in other special schools;

— the intention to use Section 37A to compel a school who has available accommodation and has been engaged with over an extended period to open special classes;

— the fact that over 3,700 new special classes will be available across the country for the coming school year which should ensure that children can access a special class in their local area;

— the significant investment in the expansion of staffing at the NCSE to assist families of children with SENs in all aspects of their educational journey, including accessing a placement appropriate to their needs;

— the establishment of the D15 Taskforce to support forward planning for special education provision in the area, and similar initiatives in other areas;

— the commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce a common application system;

— the recent publication of a circular letter by the Department of Education setting out new guidelines for schools in relation to the review of special education placements and the removal of the need for parents to seek updated professional reports where a student is transitioning from a primary special class to a post-primary special class of the same designation;

— the intention to introduce a National Therapy Service (NTS) in education to be delivered by the NCSE, the NTS will commence in special schools and subsequently extend to schools with special classes and mainstream provision, and it is intended that the service will be rolled out on a phased basis in some special schools at a later stage in the 2025/2026 school year, with a wider roll-out for the 2026/2027 school year;

— the establishment of the Educational Therapy Support Service in the NCSE, Regional therapy supports which includes Teacher Professional Learning, and follow up in school support will be available nationally from September 2026;

— sustained in-school support delivered by Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists, based on the therapy element of the School Inclusion Model is currently being delivered to 22 schools in the Eastern Region, further schools will have access to this support in the Western Region in September 2025;

— the introduction of an integrated model of enhanced in-school therapy supports pilot, in conjunction with the Health Service Executive, this pilot ensures the educational, health and social needs of children and young people are met through the reinstatement of therapy services onsite in special schools;

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— the funding provided for the training and upskilling of teachers and SNAs who support children with special education needs;

— the request by the Minister for Education to the Teaching Council to include a mandatory assessed placement period in a special class or a special school setting in all initial teaching education programmes;

— the extensive review by the Department of Education of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 will be published in the coming weeks;

— the establishment of a new SNA Workforce Development Unit by the Department of Education which is engaging with SNAs, schools, unions and stakeholders, which recognises the essential role played by SNAs in our school and which is underpinned by a new national training programme for SNAs costing €1.9 million recently announced in conjunction with Atlantic Technological University;

— the work underway on a redeployment scheme for SNAs which for the first time, will allow SNAs in posts which may no longer be required for reasons such as falling enrolments, reduced care needs or changing demographics, to be redeployed to a school which has a vacant post;

— the provision of circa €264 million in 2024, to support over 21,700 children with SEN access school transport to attend school each day which is a 68 per cent increase since 2021;

— the significant level of funding and supports being provided to schools to deliver accommodation for special classes, including school building projects, the repurposing of available rooms, and the provision of modular accommodation;

— the review of the assistive technology scheme to ensure all children who need technology to access the curriculum receive it through a streamlined process which is underpinned by funding of €5 million, an increase of €2 million since 2020;

— the introduction of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot 2023-2025 to support children's wellbeing and mental health in primary schools and the recent introduction of the new national programme (Neart) of mental health and wellbeing resources and training for post-primary schools that is delivered by Jigsaw in collaboration with the National Educational Psychological Service;

— the Department of Education has commenced a review of the Leave of Absence following Assault scheme, and is also finalising the terms and conditions of a new Occupational Injury Scheme for teachers;

— the range of resources that has been or will soon be made available to schools to enable them to support students' behaviour, including the publications by NCSE Relate Behaviour framework, Tusla Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools and the Department of Education Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations Guidelines;

— the extensive programme of training in place, or planned, to support schools in managing student behaviour;

— the restoration of posts of responsibility in schools and the availability of additional hours from September 2025 to assist schools in coordinating their special education teaching provision; and

— the renewed focus of the Government on the area of disability services with a particular focus on improving the delivery of services for children with disabilities; and calls on the Government to:

— take any necessary steps to ensure that every child with SEN who needs an appropriate school place has access to one in a timely manner;

— progress work on the development of a more inclusive education system for children with SENs by supporting them to attend their local school;

— continue to expand the number of special school places, special classes and special education teaching hours as required across the State;

— improve communication and outreach to parents of children with SEN to streamline the process by which parents apply for specialist school places, reducing the burden on them and improving the timelines, including the introduction of a common application procedure;

— continue to increase investment into the area of special education to ensure that every child can reach their full potential;

— support additional schools and students to benefit from the Summer Programme; and

— ensure that the NCSE will continue to engage intensively with parents and all educational partners to continue to increase capacity.”.

I thank my Labour Party colleagues for tabling this motion. I welcome and acknowledge the many parents in the Gallery, many of whom I have met in the past while.

It is a priority for me, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the wider Government to ensure that children with special educational needs not only get access to the school places they are entitled to, but also get access to supports in the place that is most appropriate to them. We all agree on that. I have met many parents and children, not just as Minister for Education, but over the past number of years. I acknowledge them and that all they want is to ensure that every child has access to that place and support. That is why we are here.

We have tabled an amendment in order to reference the work that has been done. Let me be clear, however, that there is nothing in the Labour Party motion that we do not agree with or support. We will work with the party. As a Government and a Dáil, we will work collectively because we have the same goal.

There has been significant investment in special education over the past number of years. It is important to say that because we have 250,000 children who are supported firstly in our mainstream schools. Approximately 97% of children who go to school are in mainstream schools. Some 250,000 of those have special educational or additional needs of different variations. Many of them are supported in our mainstream schools. Approximately 28,000 children are

supported in a special class or a special school. From the parents, teachers and students I meet, the most important thing to do is to ensure that we find a place that is appropriate to each child, as what is appropriate to one child might not be to another. It is about ensuring that children have access to the place that is most appropriate to them and that they have supports in place that are most appropriate to their needs.

As many of these parents and children were, I was happy to attend the teacher and SNA union conferences last week for the first time. The issue of special education and improving teaching and learning supports for children with special education needs was a key focus and, understandably, key priority for everybody at those conferences. I wish to touch on a number of issues that arose last week but also on many of the issues raised in the motion. I will outline for the House the work that is underway on these issues and the progress that is being made. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, will touch on the remainder of those issues.

As regards ensuring that we have the places, classrooms and spaces available for every child, the Labour Party motion rightly recognises that the NCSE has confirmed that 399 of the 400 special classes that we had committed to are being provided for in the coming year. These have been sanctioned. This has happened earlier than in 2024. Obviously, we want to do things even earlier this time next year. This means that there will be 3,900 new places available for children. I am not throwing out figures for the sake of it. These are 3,900 places that children will be able to avail of. It is important that they were sanctioned. Of most importance is that these classrooms open and that the admissions process continues as quickly as possible.

The Minister of State and I have been meeting with the NCSE and departmental officials weekly. In fact, we met just last night and will meet again next week. While I am happy that the new special classes have been sanctioned, it is imperative that these classes be established quickly and that those schools that have not done so yet - many have - begin to open admissions to students seeking special class places. I have requested my Department to write to all of the 399 schools asking them to progress the admission of students as quickly as possible. We have also asked the NCSE to support them in establishing these new classes to ensure that enrolments can happen as quickly as possible, and to provide those places to the children who are known to the NCSE and not those who are not. Of course, we need to ensure that every child who has an identified need can be supported. It is important that this work progresses quickly so that parents have confirmation of where their children will be enrolled and they can begin planning and preparing for this transition.

The necessary funding is in place to support schools in establishing these classes, for the provision of the accommodation which is also required, for the repurposing of existing accommodation, and for training teachers and SNAs as regards these new special classes.

It is a priority for me to ensure that, come this September, every child has access to that place. While special classes have been confirmed earlier this year, I know from talking to families that that is not good enough. I want it to be the situation that, come January when children learn where they are going to primary or post-primary school in September, it means every child and not just some children. That is why the Minister of State and I have insisted that the NCSE identify what provision is required for next year and the 2026-27 school year even earlier so that we can identify where that need is, engage with parents and then engage further with schools where more places need to be made available. My Department and the NCSE met school management bodies and patron bodies before Easter in a first step for forward planning of next year.

Regarding the five new special schools opening in the coming school year, all of the schools are progressing the recruitment of staff. Two schools are completing their admissions procedures and the other schools will be commencing their admissions processes quickly. Capacity has been expanded in a number of other special schools for the coming school year to ensure that we can provide placements for children in the places that are appropriate to them and in their local communities.

In addition to the 399 special classes sanctioned, it is intended that steps will be taken to compel one school to open a special class under section 37A. None of us wanted to do this but this school has available accommodation and, despite significant engagement over a considerable period of time, the school has not agreed to open a special class to date. The Minister of State and I are fully committed to ensuring that the 400 new special classes are in place for the upcoming school year but, above all, that everybody plays their part here. There should not be a choice. If there is a need and a demand in an area, then a school needs to work with us. We will work very closely with it in that regard.

On the common admissions process, we are making progress on the delivery of a common application system for admissions to schools as set out in the programme for Government, particularly for children with special educational needs. As Deputies, we are all too familiar with the stress parents face come school time in applying to many schools and, unfortunately, receiving many negative letters back. We want to remove that stress and I believe that a common application system can be a game-changer in this regard. It must and will change.

We will receive the report of the D15 task force on special education before the summer. As part of that, there was a trial process involving 13 schools at the outset that had a common application system. I understand that will expand even further come this September. My Department, the NCSE and the D15 task force are working closely to that. We hope that it will not just apply to special schools, but also to the mainstream where there are also special classrooms.

Much work has been done to ensure that children with special complex educational needs have a special school place and we accept that we need to do more work. We also need to ensure that the teaching, learning and supports in these schools are of a high quality.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank our teachers, special education teachers, SNAs and every part of the school community because each person plays a part. I saw that last week at the various conferences and in meeting with our teachers, principals, our secretaries, caretakers, SNAs and special education teachers. Everybody plays that important role.

We also understand the importance of therapy services for our children and young people with additional needs and there have been significant developments in this area in recent weeks. A new provision in schools this year is the educational therapy support service. This is about building capacity for teachers and our school staff to provide as effectively as possible for the needs of students. This service will see therapists working in classrooms with teachers. Building on this, the programme for Government clearly commits to a new therapy service where the therapist will provide direct supports to our children. I confirm that work is under way to establish what is a necessary support for our schools. We will be working to advance this as quickly as possible. I brought a memo to Cabinet only three weeks ago, setting out that my Department, working with children and the HSE, is now designing a new therapy service. We are working to make sure this can be introduced later on in this school year, starting with our special schools but making sure we move beyond special schools into our special classrooms and, of course,

mainstream. We know the benefits of this. If children are accessing therapies, it provides them with a greater level of support in schools so they can work with their teachers and their teachers can work with them in a setting that is much more conducive to learning. It is about providing the supports in the place that is appropriate to them. Not only will this benefit children because they will get the direct therapies, but there will also be a level of support provided for teachers for the other children in the classroom. Parents will also be brought in. We will make sure this is a whole-of-school response and environment. It is very important and we are prioritising this so it can be introduced as quickly as possible.

It is important that we have the buildings in place, of course. Some €5.7 billion has been invested in schools throughout the country, involving the completion of more than 1,150 school building projects. These have included the provision of new and modern accommodation for approximately 7,500 children with special educational needs right across the country. This has allowed the number of special classes and special schools to grow. We are committed to making sure that where the need is growing, the demand is in place, and those provisions and buildings expand and be provided for as well.

I will touch on another issue for a few moments. It is important that we put in place training for our teachers. We heard this very clearly last week at our conferences. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I wrote to the Teaching Council to ensure that when teachers are being trained initially in universities and colleges, there is a clear focus on special education and mandatory placements but that there is also increased continuous training for teachers in our schools already, those who are now in our newly opened special education classrooms, to make sure they have the supports and resources they need.

We all have the same objective here. We all want to make sure that every single child has access to the school place they are entitled to and that they have the supports and provision in that place. I thank the Deputies. I look forward to working with colleagues.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister for the response. I will touch on some of the points she made. Schools are very concerned that they are not sufficiently funded to open new special classes. There are issues with space, staffing, resources and appropriate sensory spaces, among other things. The majority of our traditional schools do not have the appropriate facilities for spaces that they need, like sensory spaces, to enable children with additional needs to thrive in a mainstream environment.

I am slightly concerned about the common application system being seen as a panacea. It has been in place for secondary schools in Limerick for more than 20 years, and we consistently have an issue every year with schoolchildren not getting places.

Regarding the provision of in-school therapists, a number of principals in Limerick have told me they are concerned about the number of in-school therapists proposed. I note there is a pilot coming for Limerick and Tipperary this year. One principal told me he is slightly worried they could be too sparsely spread and there is a concern they may see the in-school therapist maybe one day a week over three weeks. That is what principals have told me.

In the time remaining to me, I will talk about the principal of St. Michael's Infant School in Limerick, Tracie Tobin, and the fact that her SET hours were cut by 12.5 this year. This school, one of only five schools in the country whose SET hours have been cut, is in one of the most deprived areas in the entire country. Ms Tobin has 127 children on her books. It is a DEIS band

1 school and it needs the highest level of support. This very successful infant school has fewer SET hours now than it had five years ago when it had half the number of children. As an infant school, many of the children are Covid children and may not have had developmental checks. They are on waiting lists for assessments of need. The school has many Ukrainian and international protection pupils, who, as we all know, can arrive on a rolling basis throughout the year. The enrolment number on 30 September, at the cut-off date, is often lower than the number at the end of the year. The Department uses the number on 30 September for the school's SET allocation.

Ms Tobin also very concerned that results from standardised testing are being used as one of the criteria. The school must return these results for second, fourth and sixth class but because it is an infant school, these classes do not exist. These are being used as part of the criteria to support the school's special education hours. As this is an infant school, the results from adjacent schools are being used but the children in Ms Tobin's school do not necessarily continue to these schools.

There is also an issue with number of children who have been diagnosed with ASD. A special class was recommended but the school was too late to apply as the closing date had passed. These children are in mainstream and require and deserve the highest level of support. The school does not have the space for them in the special class.

Deputy George Lawlor: People feel the lack of school places means that places are being just thrown at them. These are not my words; these are the words of the manager of the Collective Sensory Group, Shona King, who works closely with families and children in this area.

Children need appropriate places but that is certainly not always the case. Often, we see children in autism classes when, in fact, this is a wholly inappropriate setting for them. A child can have autism and an intellectual disability and, in many instances, these children require places in special needs classes. They also need appropriate places without needing to spend an inordinate amount of time getting to and from their schools. What is needed for these children is person-centred access. That is the key to everything – person-centred where a child may have autism and an intellectual disability. It is not just about access to a place, which we all know is hugely difficult to secure anyway; it is also about the quality of life for students – the children.

Many children have complex medical needs. Many children have an intellectual disability. Yet, once we have placed them in a class, no matter what their needs, we declare that we have met those needs even though they may not be in an environment that is conducive to their well-being.

In County Wexford, we have just two special needs schools, namely, St. Patrick's Special School in Enniscorthy and Our Lady of Fatima School in Wexford town. Despite the wonderful efforts of the principals of these schools, Lee Rogers in St. Patrick's Special School in Enniscorthy and Glenda McKeown in Our Lady of Fatima School in Wexford town, these schools are under huge pressure and are hugely oversubscribed, with little or no capacity to increase. In Our Lady of Fatima School, we have children with mild to moderate special needs and at St. Patrick's school in Enniscorthy, we have children with moderate to profound needs. These are the only two special needs schools serving a county with a population of 165,000.

Wexford is lucky to have many autism units in mainstream schools. However, as I said, many of the children who are placed in classes in these mainstream schools are in inappropriate

settings and their education is far from person-centred.

The issue of school refusal is also at an all-time high in mainstream schools. Once again, students of varying abilities and needs are in inappropriate settings in mainstream schools and, as a result, refusal is a huge problem. I spoke to a therapist this week who told me that in one second level school alone in Wexford, she is dealing with 16 pupils who are school refusers. In fact, they are not refusing to go to school. Rather, they just cannot go to school because their needs are not being met. These are highly intelligent, high-functioning children who can offer a lot to this country, yet we fail them time and again through the lack of provision of appropriate education.

Our country, as the Minister knows, has gone through a lot in recent decades. We have come from economic bankruptcy to a flourishing economy with billions in reserve. We have the resources to, at long last, cherish all the children of the nation equally. If we do nothing else in this House, please, let us give all our children the opportunity they so richly deserve.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: We have a large number of parents in the Gallery this morning who come from brilliant groups like the NIC Side by Side group, FUSS, the ICON FAACT group and Embrace Autism D9. Many of these are part of the Equality in Education in Dublin Central group. These groups were set up out of sheer desperation because of the lack of health and education services for children. They have provided a lifeline to many parents, who bear the scars and the exhaustion from a health system that fails far too many of their children. A total of 11,552 children in CDNTs across the country have been waiting more than a year for psychology appointments. A total of 10,476 children have been waiting more than a year for speech and language therapy. The list goes on.

These children are being failed by the system and the education system is adding to their torture. Far too many families have to go through the same nonsense every year of applying to 20 or 30 schools. One mother told me she applied to 40 schools over a three-year period to ensure her child could access the constitutional right to an education. Jasmine, who is mother to Lewis, is here this morning. Lewis will be seven this year. He has autism. His mother said she is looking forward to him making his first communion next year, yet he has no school place. She has had 40 refusals. Crystal is also here. Her son Charlie will turn six in August. He has nowhere to go this September. He started mainstream school and, as his mother said, it was the worst year of their lives. He is now in an ASD preschool class and he is thriving but he has nothing for September. I also think of Kyle Mae. She is four and facing into her third year of preschool but, again, she has no prospect of a school place.

We have been pleading for years for a matching process whereby the NCSE would allocate children to an appropriate school place. It is not rocket science. The health system knows about these children, as does the education system, yet far too many parents must blindly apply and take up places that often are not appropriate. At a minimum, a central applications process for special classes and special schools must be rolled out across the country. The Dublin 15 pilot has worked brilliantly. Some 25 places were allocated in 13 schools in one day. We need to see that rolled out, but we understand there has been strong resistance within the Department of Education. That needs to change.

When children finally get into a school, we then see another example of how broken the system is with regard to the lack of SNAs. I am dealing with the school principals of two schools in Dublin 7 who were asked to take on two children with additional needs on the basis that they

would get additional SNA support but they got no SNA support. They have been told there is a cap of 23,179 until the end of this year. The NCSE cannot do anything. The schools have been forced to put these children on rolling reduced school days over many weeks. That is simply wrong.

While we rightly focus on the thousands of children with autism-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: This is my final point. While we rightly focus on the many children with autism, there are other children with learning needs such as dyslexia. There is an inherent hostility within the Department of Education that we have seen for many years with regard to the opening of new reading classes in schools. That needs to change.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish to share time with colleagues.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion. I advise visitors and people watching the debate that it is not usual for a Minister to come here and say she does not disagree with anything in the motion and then oppose it. What is the difference between the Government motion and the Labour Party motion, which is similar to the Sinn Féin motion that was tabled in recent weeks?

The first call on the Government by the Labour Party is to “ensure the right of every child to an appropriate school place in their general locality is fulfilled in September 2025”. What is the first call of the Minister? It is to “take any necessary steps to ensure that every child with SEN who needs an appropriate school place has access to one in a timely manner”. What is the difference? The Labour Party motion refers to “September 2025” and the Government motion refers to “location”. The Government’s position is that it is providing enough school places. That is the Minister’s position. It was the Taoiseach’s position yesterday that 3,900 places will be provided for a demand of 3,275. That is the Government position.

Anyone watching who represents a community or who works with parents and children knows that the reality is very different. The number of children who were notified that they did not have a school place last September was 126. If we factor in the number of children who are in receipt of home tuition, the children who must take inordinately long bus trips every single day, the number of children who are on reduced school days or the children who are in inappropriate settings, we know that it is a very different picture. The Minister should withdraw her amendment. To be frank, that is what she should do if she does not disagree with the Labour Party motion.

A number of factors need to be expedited. The Minister touched on buildings and teaching hours. We must invest in teachers to ensure they are adequately trained and that there are enough of them. It is the same with special needs assistants. We will have a session at 12 noon on injury leave. We must look at the 72 hours and the July work. We must deal with the cap. The Minister and I share the same constituency. I have been talking to the parents of 15 children in St. Patrick’s National School in Stamullen who have had their SNA support withdrawn because of the arbitrary cap that is in place. That needs to change following the new interpretation of the 2024 toolkit and guidelines.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Gabhaim míle buíochas le Páirtí an Lucht Oibre as ucht an rún tábhachtach seo a chur os comhair na Dála inniu. Tá sé thar am dúinn éisteacht le guthanna na dtuismitheoirí atá ag fulaingt i gcóras a bhfuil ag teip orthu. Tá mé tar éis bualadh le han-chuid tuismitheoirí thar cúpla mí anuas, go háirithe North Kildare SEN Action Group, agus tá obair na gcapall ar siúl acu ar son a gcuid páistí. Inniu, I would like to share with Members the voice of a mamaí in Kildare whose words speak for hundreds, if not thousands, of families around the country. Her daughter attends Scoil Mochua in County Kildare. Her four-year-old autistic son hopes to one day attend school alongside his sister and within his community and with his friends. He is currently 12th on the list for a school don chéad scoilbhliain eile. His mamaí is not confident that he will have a place come September.

Scoil Mochua in Kildare was approved for two autism classes for 12 children with additional needs in 2021. Right around this time, this mother's son was born. It would have been a perfect place for him to attend but, almost four years on, those classes still do not exist. That is not because of a lack of will on the part of the school but because of a Land Registry issue that remains unresolved. While the Government claims it is doing everything in its power to ensure no child will be left without a school place in September, 12 children are being locked out of special education places in Kildare, and locked out of educational rights, and their human rights. How can we claim that special educational needs placements are at an emergency level when red tape is allowed to stand in the way of children's rights to an education?

This mother's family has been forced into debt as a result of paying €220 week privately on therapies because the CDNT failed to deliver early intervention. Tá sé de dhualgas ar an Stát tacaíocht cheart a thabhairt do na daoine is leochailí sa Stát, ar nós na bpáistí seo. Ní hé sin atá á dhéanamh, áfach. This mother told me her little girl asks her every morning why her brother cannot go to the same school. She does not understand, because there is nothing wrong with her brother. She is right. There is nothing wrong with these children, it is the system that has wronged them.

Now is the time for action. We need immediate transparency on school buildings and classes. We need a real emergency response team to cut through the red tape and the reform of the CDNT model, which is failing far too many children. These families do not want special treatment; they want fair treatment.

What is being done for this family and for Scoil Mochua in Celbridge, County Kildare, and many other schools that are in a similar situation across the State? Ní féidir leis na tuismitheoirí nó na páistí seo fanacht a thuilleadh.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this important motion. I want to use the opportunity to raise an ongoing allocation review in Lisheenkyle National School in my constituency, which is due to be completed in mid-May. The school currently has ten SNAs, who are a fantastic support to the children there. Parents have been informed by the SENO and school staff that the review is likely to reduce the number of SNAs in the school to just three or four. This school has a significant number of children with special educational needs. Needless to say, parents are extremely concerned at the prospect of such a drastic cut in support. I have had parents in touch with me saying that if supports are cut to this extent, their child will no longer have an appropriate school place. One parent, who was recently able to go back working because their son was doing so well in school, feels they will have to leave their job if this goes ahead. This is absolutely disgraceful. The parents have a number of concerns about the process of this review and its timing. Why has it been left to May, at the very end of

the school year? Behavioural care needs of children are not being taken into account as part of this review, only primary care needs. The impact on children with autism and other conditions is not being considered. According to the NCSE, the school is not a priority for opening a special class as there is no demand known in the area. How is demand known to an area? There are many children already in the school and in the local area who would avail of special classes. This is an absolutely unacceptable situation where children with additional needs will be left without the supports they need and without an appropriate school place. I ask the Minister to address this in her comments and to look into the specific case of Lisheenkyle National School. I ask her to ensure that a drastic cut in SNA support does not happen in the school and that it receive an adequate allocation or appropriate special classes. It would be an absolute failure of these children if that does not happen.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is totally unacceptable that in our State in 2025, children have no guarantee of an appropriate class place to meet their needs. An appropriate class place for children with additional needs will ensure that they can engage and fully participate in the classroom the same as any other child, and an appropriate class place must also be in the child's community. Why would we be busing our most vulnerable children around, expecting them to travel long distances to go to school and receive an education? Every single year, earlier and earlier, we start to hear from parents who are frantically ringing around schools asking for a place for their child. Parents should never be put in this position.

The motion brought forward by the Labour Party, which I welcome, also references the arbitrary cap on SNAs. We are hearing from parents now whose child has had a full-time SNA but will not have one from September. Why is this happening? I received figures last week showing that over 81,000 children are now on waiting lists for psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy under primary care. That is not to mention the over 14,000 waiting for an assessment of need or the thousands of children waiting under the CDNTs. We have thousands of children on waiting lists. We need to train more therapists and we need them in our schools yesterday. As I have said before, everything for these parents is a battle, whether it is about school, waiting lists or therapies. It should not be this way.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Parents in Cork were promised in 2022 that a new special school would be delivered in Carrignavar. Three years later, and only because of the campaign led by parents whose children will have no school place this August, and those parents campaigning and sleeping outside the doors of the Dáil, has the Government finally acted. Now there is work being done. Does the Minister know what was not done? There is no capacity for water treatment. Since 2013, Carrignavar has had no capacity. We are talking about putting a special school in. We are doing up an old primary school building that is available, but we have no water treatment. In the meantime, as the Minister knows, children are being bused or taxied from Knocknaheeny down to Fermoy, as they will be in August. That is the bones of an hour's drive. These are children with additional needs, children with autism. They are going to spend their lives driving in cars. I raised the case of a woman in the Dáil over a year ago whose child is leaving the northside to go to Carrigaline. Nine hours the child is on the go, at six years old, between the car, the school and the car back. Nine hours is longer than a day's work and that is what the Government is giving these children and families. Many other families will have nowhere in August.

The Ministers have come in here and opposed the Labour Party's motion. Why would they oppose it? This is an honest to goodness attempt to give every child their rights. This is about rights. Every child has a right to an education. No child should be discriminated against be-

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cause he or she has additional needs. That is what the Government is doing, either blocking them from education or sending them on spins for hours on end. It is a disgrace. The Government should withdraw its objection to the motion.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: What parents will have heard from the Minister in her response is a lot of reasonableness and trying to empathise with the situation. I suppose that is better than denying there is a problem. The reality for parents on the ground is that reasonable words will not put a single child inside the door of a school. I am dealing with the families of 13 children who do not have a place for this autumn. I was contacted by a parent just last night. One of the things I cannot understand is how we have this debate every year. Every March, April and into May we are talking about this. For neurotypical children in most parts of the county it is not a problem and it carries on, although there are many parts of the education system that could be better for them. Every single year we seem to be in this place where TDs from every part of the country are bringing forward examples of children and families who do not know where they are going. The anxiety, stress and worry that this causes for parents are enormous. They have fear about the impact on their children's potential to achieve the best they can in their lives and reach their full potential. I mean that in the broadest possible sense. Education needs to be about ensuring every child reaches their full potential, no matter what that may be. So much of education now is about careers, opportunities and all that and that is important. However, this is about ensuring children can reach their full potential. I referred to 13 children who do not have a school place at all. The Minister can multiply that by any amount for the children who do not have an appropriate school place, who are in a special class when they should be in a special school or are in mainstream when they should be in a special class, or who are at home when they should be in a special school. It is a profound failure of these children. The problem continues to escalate. While progress in respect of Carrignavar is welcome, there is still a huge amount needed in Cork.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: We need to cast our minds back five years to Covid and look at what we were able to achieve when people came together, in a very short period. All of the norms were overturned in a weekend to do what we needed to do to keep people safe, yet we come in here on this issue year after year. I am here six years now and we have raised this issue for six years and before that. I have been with parents on the protests, sometimes week after week, and I see some of them here. We brought up the issue in Dublin 15 in 2017 and 2018. There were big protests, big meetings, the same issues, questions and excuses. Year after year we see newer parents coming in and asking why their child does not have an appropriate school place. There is no reason whatsoever that this State, with billions of euro in the coffers, cannot provide a child an appropriate school place.

I appreciate the motion that came forward again. We have brought this to the House time and again, as have other people. We, all the parents here and all the children, are asking for students to have an appropriate school place; for the schools to be supported when they are providing the special classes and special schools; for the students to have an appropriate wrap-around service; for the assessments of need to happen when they are needed; and for the supports to be given when they are required. Those are the simple requests. There is no need to go around in circles time after time.

11 o'clock

We have the answers. We need the Government to do it.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Labour Party for bringing this motion forward. As the Minister knows, families in County Monaghan have been campaigning for access to appropriate and adequate education for their children with special educational needs for years. They are entitled to it and should not have to fight for it. They campaign for new and additional classrooms within existing schools and the establishment of a special school. The announcement of an interim school with 18 places is welcome. It is 18 places more than we had previously. This has offered a better quality of life for 18 children who now do not have to travel to County Cavan every day, with return journeys taking upwards of four hours daily. When will the Minister be willing to commit to ensuring that every child in counties Monaghan and Cavan will be able to access an appropriate school place in their own community?

I will also highlight what is often a source of frustration for families, namely where gaps exist in services that are entirely foreseeable. We know the number of students who are due to transition from primary to secondary school every year. We also have an idea of how many will require ongoing support after they complete post-primary education. Families in Cavan and Monaghan whose children use special schools should not have to resume campaigning for day services when primary and secondary school education is completed. We need more planned services in both Cavan and Monaghan. Following representation from families, I appeal to the Minister to adopt a whole-of-life approach to additional needs supports and to plan for each child.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I welcome the motion, which focuses on the challenges that thousands of parents and children throughout the State face all the time. Children with additional needs and their parents have plenty of obstacles to overcome but, in this day and age, access to education should not be one of them, although, unfortunately, it is for many people. I deal with them, as do my colleagues. Education is the foundation of everything. It opens doors, minds and learning. It also encourages future learning. It is the right of every child to have access to education. Unfortunately, not all children are being guaranteed that right. Not all children have the resources they need to achieve all they can in school.

I recently attended the research launch of the sky is the limit project at Corpus Christi school, Moyross. I commend Lindsey Liston, the chairperson of Corpus Christi Family Centre, and all those involved in this brilliant project. The sky is the limit programme has been an initiative since 2015 and is co-ordinated by an assistant psychologist based at the school. The primary aim of the programme is to provide psychological support to Corpus Christi primary school students and members of the surrounding community. It works really well. The Minister would do well to visit the school to meet the great staff and pupils and, importantly, support its ongoing efforts and see whether it, or a version of it, can be rolled out throughout the State, as it clearly works.

Le Chéile National School, on the south side of Limerick city, is a school I have spoken about on a number of occasions here. Senior staff at the school have highlighted time and time again major concerns regarding the absence of supports for children there. The school serves the Southill and Galvone areas of Limerick and has an enrolment of 186 children. According to the Pobal deprivation index, that area is the second most deprived in the whole State, with a label of “extremely disadvantaged”. From in-school assessments by the school, it is estimated that 72% of its children have at least one additional need, with almost 40% having two additional needs. I ask the Minister to personally intervene in respect of this school, which has not got the supports it has been promised for years.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I very much commend the Labour Party on its motion. We have a situation in this country where families are increasingly having to become almost full-time campaigners for their children's basic needs because of a failure by successive Governments to forward plan. The impact of this failure on the families of children with additional needs is immense. It is bringing many parents to breaking point.

Transitioning to primary or secondary school is a very significant stage in any child's journey through life. It can involve many challenges around fitting in with peers, adapting to a different structure of study and generally moving forward in his or her development. For a child with additional needs, even in the best of circumstances where supports are in place and there is a good school near home, the challenges are often far greater. What we see throughout the country are children making that momentous step into primary and secondary school with no clarity for many months in advance regarding where they will attend school or how long their school commute will be. There are huge quality of life implications for those children and their families, including mental health implications.

We are seeing children dislocated from their communities for their schooling at a very sensitive stage of development, as a result of which their parents come under enormous additional strain. We need an emergency response to the crisis in special education. We need to see special education placements and staff funded on a systematic per population basis, not according to whether there happens to be a group of families in a position to campaign for a school in their local area over many years. In some cases, the children of those campaigners will have aged out by the time the school materialises. This haphazard way of planning for our communities, where we have a patchwork of school placements that are repeatedly over capacity and under-resourced has to end.

Other aspects of our special education system add immense unnecessary stress and tedium to parents who are already under so much pressure. These need to be addressed urgently. The advocacy group Families Unite for Services and Support, FUSS, has highlighted, for instance, the administrative burden of not having a centralised application process. That means some families are forced to fill out multiple lengthy application forms because each school has autonomy over its enrolments. FUSS, which is made up of parents of children with disabilities, has done enormously valuable work in this area, drawing on its experience of navigating a broken system, and has set out a range of actions that the Government could pursue to resolve the interconnected crises across disability services and special education. FUSS has backed that up with extensive data and in-depth analysis. The Minister and Minister of State could relieve themselves of much of the burden on their shoulders if they were to give FUSS, and ground-level clinicians, teaching staff and SNA representative groups, leading consultative roles in reforming our special education and disability services.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Labour Party for its motion on special education. I have heard so much pain, frustration and determination from families throughout my constituency and many constituencies in this country. I have travelled to different places to hear from families. In my constituency of Dublin South-Central, from Ballyfermot to Drimnagh, Inchicore and Crumlin, there are parents who at crisis point with their children. They are worn out trying to get a place for their child in a special education class or school. Not only do they have to fight for everything for their children, but they also have to fight for the basic right to an education as well. It is heart-breaking and is not good enough.

I ask the Government to look at the human side of this. I know the Minister and Minister of

State do that as individuals, but I urge them to please try to stop the Department with its “computer says no” version of what is going on. Children are being sent to schools miles away that are not in their community and which they have to travel to. Some of these children being sent far away are only little. Parents fought hard for the Libermann Spiritan School in Templeogue. It is fantastic that it opened but it does not have enough resources. It does not have everything that needs to happen in a special school. It is brilliant and fantastic that we are going to open special schools and special classrooms, but resources that need to come with that for everything that needs to be decked out in those schools and not as an afterthought. It needs to be planned out in advance. We also need to make sure that every single member of staff working in those schools is fully trained before they go in.

Another matter I am concerned about and about which I asked the Minister previously relates to when she will have more places at third level for students going into occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and all those courses. It is very important that happens this year. Students are sitting the leaving certificate who would love to do those courses. There are students who are siblings or family members of those with special needs who would love to go into those careers. I would love to have an answer to this as it has not made clear: are those places in place for this September-October when college starts? If not, is there anything that could be done to hurry that up?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward the motion. In particular, I commend the recommendations made in the motion, where we see outlined the upholding of the vision of inclusive education to which we should all aspire. Unfortunately, it sometimes seems to become a little lost in our discussion that inclusive education is where we need to be at. All of us are sharing experiences today. It is the same in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown, including Stillorgan, Foxrock, Dundrum, Goatstown and Kilmacud. I have spoken with families who at their wits’ end from the intensive campaigning they have had to do for many years to simply realise their child’s right to education.

What is inclusive education? Inclusive education means that, as an individual, I access the right to an education with choice. I look at my local community and find an educational pathway that matches my needs, my values and my ideology, and somewhere that does not other me from peers in my age group and locality. That is what inclusive education is. I fear that we often lose sight of this. It is what we all should be striving toward.

We are talking about special education. Really, we should have moved beyond use of the word “special”. We should have a mainstream education system which meets the needs of everybody within it and which prevents us from othering people in the disability community. We have a roadmap for this. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which we ratified in 2018, states clearly that a state’s obligation is to provide an inclusive education system which is directed to:

- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

Unless we keep our eyes on that prize of truly inclusive education, that is what we will lose

out on. We are losing out, as individuals, as families, as communities and as a society, on the contribution of all of our people.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Labour for bringing forward this important motion. I bid a huge welcome to the parents and guardians who are in the Gallery, many of whom I recognise from my community. There also people who have had to travel to the Dáil previously and who have slept outside the offices of the Department merely to vindicate their child's rights. Each time I see those very same faces, hear their stories and feel their pain, the question I am repeatedly obliged to ask is "Why does it have to be so difficult?" Why does a parent have to sleep outside the Department of Education to get their child a school place? Why would a school that is told it needs an SNA be blocked from hiring one? Why are teachers and SNAs expected to do more with less in antiquated classrooms that were never designed to cater for those with complex needs? Why, 20 years after the EPSEN Act was passed, are we still waiting for key parts to be commenced? There is no mystery here. We know how many children are born each year. We know how many have additional needs. We know the supports they require, and still matters are left until the very last minute. Every year, a scramble for school places throws schools and parents into crisis. It is a repetition of trauma, a pursuit merely for the basic need of obtaining a school place.

This is not about a lack of information. Clearly, that is not the case. It is about a lack of planning, foresight, urgency and political will. I do not want to individualise it and focus on a particular person - I do not for one second believe that is the case - but I want to understand the culture in which these decisions have been made and allowed to fester for decades, to the point where children do not have school places.

Four hundred new special classes were announced for next year but already we know they will not be enough if the Department does not come with the therapists, the sensory supports and a trained and supported workforce. If these classes are located miles from people's homes, this will force children into making long, exhausting commutes. We would not accept this in mainstream education; we should not accept it in this instance either.

It should not take a media campaign. It should not take parents having to sleep on the pavement outside Dáil Éireann. It should not take parents having to consistently call public meetings, advocate and learn to become legal professionals in their own right just so that they can vindicate a child's right. It should not have to be that hard. Ultimately, what we are talking about is simply access to school places.

This should be a great crusade. I cannot understand the scenario where budget time will come around in a couple of months and people will be talking about tax cuts at a time when we do not have school places or therapists. This needs to be the great goal, and we are all want the Minister working rapidly in respect of it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Moving on to the Independent and Parties Technical Group, I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, states parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live. Think of the multiple ways in which those rights are denied to children in this State. I refer here to the 100-plus who were left without school places last

September, the many who were pressured to take inappropriate school places, those who were pressured to do extra years in preschool, the 20,000 children who were transported every day outside of their own communities and those who were forced into home tuition. It is a scandalous failure of children in this State.

The Government is under pressure on this issue. There is no question about that, which is good to see. It is because of the action of the parents in the Gallery and the many thousands like them across the country. That is why we have the promise of the 400 classes in September, but it has to be met. We have to see it happen. It has to be in September; it cannot be later. The parents will not give up.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this progressive motion. It is a case of here we go again. We have a shortage of school places for children with special needs, and there are huge gaps. In addition to the obstacles with the lack of nearby school classes in their catchment area, children are experiencing exclusion and extended absences from school. In some cases, they are receiving no supports. The impact of that disengagement from schools is catastrophic for the children and for their families. If a child does not have a place and he or she has a special need or disability, he or she is more likely to be placed on reduced hours. While there has been some investment in this area, we need to see more.

In County Laois, the Government is constantly announcing special classes. There are press releases issued. There are emails sent to all the Government TDs. Nine such classes have been announced, but where will the Minister put them? Many of the schools have made it clear that they do not have the space to provide them. This has to be rectified by September. We have 16 or 17 weeks to get this right. Announcements are no good if there is no space for classes.

The Rock National School, for example, is going to have to find space in the playground for modular classrooms. Management at the school has stated that it will be a challenge to get the new buildings in place by August. The families have contacted the school already. If the classes are oversubscribed, which is likely, the school is on record as stating that there will be a problem. Castlecuffe National School is happy that it is getting the first special needs class but it is facing a situation where it will have to put the children involved into a general purpose classroom or use the PE hall. It is the same in Killeslin. The school there is working to put a contingency plan in place due to the lack of accommodation and is being pressurised to set up in the PE hall. Modular buildings need to be put in place. That is the message I want to give the Minister this morning. Laois is happy to have new classes but the schools involved need the physical space to accommodate them.

Deputy Charles Ward: We welcome this motion from Labour. There has been a complete failure on the part of the Government to adequately plan for school places for children with special and additional educational needs. This comes up every year without fail. It is across the whole country and yet the Government fails to plan for it. Every year, there is no change.

Parents should not be forced to try to ensure that their children are not denied an education. Schools should not be forced to turn any child away on foot of a lack of places. This has been happening across the entire country, but especially at Little Angels in Letterkenny. I am very grateful for the Minister's intervention there. Little Angels, the children and their parents should never have been forced into this situation in the first place. It should never have got to the point where parents had to start the Don't Forget Our Little Angels for September 2025 group to take a stand in respect of the education and the future of their children. It should never

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have got to the stage where mothers had to sleep outside the Houses, as we all have been saying, constantly campaigning and bringing it forward. As children go to their beds every night, their distraught parents are crying down the phone for help. We have done our utmost and I acknowledge the Minister's contribution to that too.

No child should ever be left behind. I would encourage the Minister, during her term, to make sure that this does not happen year after year and get children their right - their place to an education.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Labour Party for bringing the motion forward. Danu Community Special School in my constituency of Dublin West agreed last summer to take an additional 12 children - two new classes - to deal with a school places crisis we were experiencing in Dublin 15. Those children were due to start in the school in September of last year. They are all now on the books of Danu school. However, not one of those children has started their educational journey in Danu because the two modular classes have not been provided. Some of them are in inappropriate school places elsewhere. Most are still at home. When are the modular units for Danu Community Special School going to be provided? There is no planning permission in place and no final design has been agreed. All we have right now is a soil test.

Those kids were meant to be in Danu last September. I do not know if we can say they will be in the school in September of this year. I appeal to the Minister of State to engage with his officials in the Department to see what we can do to unlock this process to ensure those modular units are delivered. He has spoken about the delivery of new school places this September but we have not built the units that were promised last September. This makes it hard for parents to believe they will be delivered. I ask that the Minister of State work to ensure the 12 children in Danu get the appropriate school places they need and deserve.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The question of disability services for children with additional needs is now a very significant national issue. It is second only to the housing emergency. The State is failing these children every day. Over 14,000 are waiting for an assessment of need, which is in breach of the law. Some 41,000 are waiting for therapy services and well over 100 are waiting for school places. If we are honest, thousands of children are in inappropriate school places. Parents are at their wits' end and are completely frustrated in their search for places for their children. I recently raised the case of Michael Joseph Barrett, a young boy with autism. His family got 16 rejection letters before eventually getting a school place. Of course, the family is relieved but the school place is 15 miles away, which is completely outside the area and away from his community and friends. This is not good enough. Parents are sleeping out in search of school places for their children and others are being dragged through the courts in search of them. At the same time, there are schools that are ready, willing and able to provide places but, for some reason, the Department has refused to approve these schools. In particular, I refer to Bansa National School in County Tipperary. The number of children in inappropriate school places is absolutely huge. It is in the thousands. That is a result of assessments of need not being done. It is not good enough.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome the parents and campaigners to the Gallery. I have seen these women at the Dáil more than I have seen some TDs. That is how often they are here. They are absolute heroes for campaigning for their kids in this way.

I will mention Dublin 15 because some may be under the illusion that the pilot project in the

area has done something magical. It absolutely has not. As has been mentioned, the 12 places that were allocated last September still have not been provided. From talking to people on that task force, I know there is a need for four to six classes immediately. We also need another special school in Dublin West because of the demand from those with autism and complex needs.

Words are losing their meaning with this Government. We hear that places are allocated but these are fictional and never actually materialise, as we see in the case of the 12 children in Danu. The Minister stated that schools are progressing recruitment but the Minister of State knows there is a severe shortage of teachers and that it is even harder for special needs schools. The amendment to the motion indicates there are 3,700 special classes. There are that number of schools in the country. In fact, you would need six special classes in most big urban schools rather than one. You would need one for each year. The amendment also states that the Minister of State will issue a section 37A instruction to one school. That is it. After all the hemming and hawing and blaming principals for not opening schools, the Minister of State is only issuing one such instruction.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Will the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach remind me how long I have? Is it one minute and 30 seconds?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): It is 1.5 minutes.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: That is short enough, but it is sufficient to say that I support the motion. I have been around as an elected representative for a long time and was involved with the education committee when the original Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act was enacted. As others have said, it is shocking that so many aspects of that legislation still have not been enacted. I was checking my notes as I was starting to speak and the only sections that have been enacted are those regarding the promotion of an inclusive approach to the education of children and the establishment of the NCSE. That was very welcome but I have heard reports from my own area of assessments done by the NCSE as to what is required not meeting the demand on the ground. Many other sections of the Act have not been brought into effect. I refer to sections 3 and 13, parts of section 14 and sections 15 to 18, which relate to the independent appeals process. There is a lot more to be done.

While I am here, I will welcome the establishment of a special school in south Lucan. This will initially take 30 students. It is very welcome. However, without the overall framework through which we can properly assess needs, we will still be catching up. I know there have been arguments made that the requirements for special education have changed and that some aspects of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act have to be reviewed but I believe it has ultimately come down to finance. We need to find that money to invest in our children.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I know the issue of special needs is close to the Minister of State's heart. We see delays in assessments for children. If we cannot get assessments on time, why can we not put in place a reimbursement scheme for people who can get them? We have done it for hips and knees. In the interim and until we get the assessments done, why can we not have a reimbursement scheme for those who are able to get an assessment somewhere else? That could speed up the process. We could get the children assessed and looked after faster.

On equipment for children with special needs, we need to audit the sector. Equipment is being put into warehouses when people are finished with it. This could be repurposed, reused,

recycled and brought back out again for somebody else. I am talking about buggies, wheel-chairs and other things. In certain places, there are warehouses full of stuff that has come back after being used and which has not been repurposed. It could be checked over and modified. It is the same as buying a second-hand car. If someone is waiting for something, this could keep them going in the interim. It is about using what we have to hand. I am looking for a small bit of common sense. Yesterday, I spoke about a woman who had a buggy for her ten-year-old child who is non-verbal and does not walk. She has a buggy suitable for a child up to eight years of age but her son is ten. She has to go to the emergency department and put him into a buggy sized for someone two years younger than him. I guarantee there are loads of buggies of the correct size that could be repurposed and reused in these warehouses around the country where the HSE is storing this stuff. I would like an audit of all of the stuff the HSE gives out and of the stuff it never gets back because people do not hand it back when they are finished with it. This could be repurposed, reconditioned and given back out to people while we wait for things for them.

Deputy Michael Collins: This motion highlights real failures in special education, and Independent Ireland says it is long overdue. We agree that too many children have been left without places. That is not just a statistic; it is heartbreak in every community. We have said loudly before that a national plan for special education is needed rather than sticking plasters. We support Labour's call for a centralised system but it must also be kept local. Cork needs and solutions can be different from those in Dublin. Transport for children with special needs is critical and I am glad it is mentioned but there should have been a national guarantee years ago. Let us be clear; we need to put parents and schools at the centre rather than just having the Department in Dublin shuffling papers. Independent Ireland backs lifting the barriers on hiring SNAs. Kids are missing out because of penny-pinching in the system. We say more. We should stop making SNAs jump through hoops. They deserve permanent and respected jobs rather than second-class treatment. The motion speaks of in-school therapies. We back that but we also demand proper investment rather than vague promises.

Independent Ireland is proud to have called for play, art and music therapies to be fully part of every child's school day. We support a full review of special education law. The delay relating to the implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act is a national scandal. Let us remember that no review or paper will fix this without money or manpower.

I am aware of a constituent who has a physical and intellectual disability and despite repeated requests from her family she has had very little input from disability services since 2019. Most recently a particular organisation has not accepted her for a referral for a placement. That organisation has not provided adequate explanations for why it has not accepted her. Several emails have passed between our offices and the organisation seeking clarity. The woman is at home six days a week with her elderly parents. It is terribly distressing. I agree with the push on better training for teachers for special needs but training alone without real world practice is useless. We deem that every new teacher has experience with children with different abilities.

To the Government I would say no more pilot projects. Roll out proper therapists, proper teachers and proper spaces now. I support much of this motion because parents have waited long enough. We will also hold every Minister's feet to the fire. It is about common sense. Every child matters, not next year and not with a consultation, but now.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and I welcome

the parents here in the Public Gallery. They are the warriors who have been fighting so hard. They have been fighting, taking legal action and pitching tents outside Leinster House. What are they fighting for? They are fighting for their basic rights and their constitutionally enshrined rights for access to education.

I was at a fair in Mayo over the Easter holidays and I met a beautiful family. The mother was nearly in tears because her child has no place in the education system. The child is locked out of the education system. There are 14,000 children across this State waiting for assessments of need. Some 13,000 children are waiting for their first contact with the children's disability network. There is a window of opportunity where children are undergoing rapid development from the ages of five, seven and ten. That age is critical. It is critical because to lose this opportunity for these children is a devastating loss. We know that early intervention and early resources at this critical age will have a dramatic impact on the ability of these children to live their lives independently. It is a sin and a crime that these children are being failed at such an important developmental time in their lives.

The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, stated recently in a response that children do not require a diagnosis or an assessment of need to access services. While this is technically true, it shows an extreme lack of understanding of what is happening on the ground. Children without assessments of need are very often left at the bottom of the queue. That is the reality.

I know of a school in Mayo where children have an assessment of need and yet, due to the lack of resources, prioritisation is necessary. In this case, prioritisation was given to the younger child because it was believed that he would be longer in the school system. The older child was, essentially, left. That is what is happening on the ground. It is very disappointing that the Minister, Deputy McEntee's statement shows such a lack of understanding of what is happening on the ground.

I could go through years of statements where the Government and the previous one, and the Government from 2011, made commitments and realised the importance of early intervention. However, so little is happening on the ground. When are these endless promises going to be met?

The Government has made commitments this year. There is a huge shortage of psychologists and speech and language therapists and yet there is major bureaucracy around qualifying for the people, including young people, who want to access these careers. I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, to prioritise these vulnerable children.

Deputy John Connolly: I recognise the Minister of State's full commitment on this. I have engaged with him on this issue. I have heard him talk about it at parliamentary party meetings and he has shown great commitment and enthusiasm in this role. There has to be some recognition that in the space and time he has been allowed 400 special classes will be introduced from September. I am not sure if that is a record but it is certainly significant. I understand fully and I agree - and the Taoiseach says it frequently - that it is no consolation to anybody or any family that has no place for their child from September, but I know the Minister of State will continue to work in that area and, hopefully, we will continue to roll out further places in special schools and further special classes for those children who need them.

I want to confine my comments to the one service mentioned in the motion and in the counter-motion, which is the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS. I recognise that

there will be further evolution of NEPS with the counselling in primary schools pilot scheme over the next two years. That is to be welcomed. Traditionally, NEPS would have been solely responsible for the assessment of a pupil. Perhaps I am going back some time but in my own teaching career that is what we would have associated NEPS with. That has changed a lot and unfortunately NEPS no longer has the wherewithal, in terms of personnel, to make sure it is carrying out all assessments that are needed of children in primary schools. I believe schools would have a preference that NEPS would be the assessment authority or provide the assessment person and that parents and families would have the same preference. They would get great consolation from knowing that an assessment has been undertaken by a State service as opposed to a private psychologist. Given the volume of assessments taking place and the volume and the needs of children, I recognise it is not possible for that to be the case but we need to look at the cost of the private sector psychological assessment for the family of the child. There is a shortage of such psychologists. We are all familiar with hearing about the various scales of costs but certainly it is not cheap. It is costing families a lot of money to have that psychological assessment.

NEPS does seem to be stretched, although I say this while recognising, and in the knowledge, that NEPS has been embellished with further psychologists in the past year or two. Given the increased demand for assessments and the increased need, NEPS needs be further resourced and the number of psychologists within the service increased. I will give the Minister of State an example from my community. A NEPS psychologist was on maternity leave but unfortunately could not be replaced during that time.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: When I raised this through a parliamentary question on 10 April, I welcomed the Government's commitment to special needs assistant numbers with new posts by 2025 but good intentions are not enough. I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, how the numbers were proposed to be distributed, and specifically for me how they would be allocated to schools in Dublin Bay North where families continue to face serious delays. Hundreds of people are getting in contact with me and my office about this. Behind the national figures are real children, many with autism and many complex needs, who are still without appropriate school places. Parents in my constituency and across the country are exhausted from fighting the system that should be there to support them.

I also highlighted delays with the Minister of State. We are told it is being streamlined but schools are still waiting too long for decisions. When support is recommended, too often the recruitment process is blocked due to funding constraints. I thank the Minister of State for engaging with me regarding Belmayne Educate Together and the plan for a special school there and for the effort he made with the Department. We do, however, need transparency in the allocations, we need faster reviews, and we need funding to follow the needs not the headline. Every child in this country deserves this. That is the standard we should be aiming for.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for engaging with all of us in Tipperary. I thank him also for meeting a parent recently, Tina Barrett. Her son recently got a place in St. Michael's and I thank the Minister of State for his involvement there, albeit in Tipperary town. There are two excellent special schools in Tipperary, Scoil Aonghusa and Scoil Chormaic, but they are at capacity. They had to turn away 17 children. There is a real problem in providing sufficient numbers of second level classes. It is really a failing on the part of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCSE. I know the Minister of State knows this, although I also know he is committed to this. We really need a new special school in south Tipperary and west Waterford. We have the two excellent schools in Cashel. The Minister of

State visited one of them recently and I appreciate that. I could not say enough about the boards of management of those schools, the volunteers and the parents here today and the fight they have to have for their children. We need some place in Clonmel. Ferryhouse is a wonderful institution, and is no longer being used for what it was. It is just east of Clonmel, between it and Carrick-on-Suir. It would make for a wonderful location. I ask the Department to examine its potential as a new special school, which would cater for people from west Waterford and south Tipperary, because people should not have to travel long distances. It takes them away from their hinterlands and their siblings in school. I appeal to the Minister of State - I do not have much time and I do not want to take time from my colleagues - to continue with his good work. I thank him again for his engagement.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Labour for tabling the motion before us today. It is important. Nothing is more important than this.

A large burden is placed on parents when they see their child developing autism. They have to fight for primary school education and special needs teachers. Then, when they move on to post-primary school, they have to do it again. Surely, when a student is diagnosed, the supports should follow through from primary to post-primary education automatically. They should not have to fight for this again. Every child has a right to education. If it is special education, so be it.

I should have thanked the Minister of State for visiting St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, our special school, and indeed other schools, but especially St. Mary of the Angels. We have a lot more work to do there.

Another problem arises, in that the Department says it has X number of SNA places and that the country is covered but in many cases it is not. The Minister of State's constituency is the same as mine, in that there are big distances between different schools. A school with an SNA for a child seven or eight miles away is no good if there is no transport, which often happens. We need to ensure that these SNAs are placed locally where the children are. They are entitled to receive support locally. Recognition was given to-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am sorry, but it is very important.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis an Aire as a bheith anseo inniu. I will be brief, in case my colleague comes in.

There is agreement and unity across the House on this most serious and life-changing issue for the youngest in our population. I will confine my comments to suggestions of things that are already working in communities in Meath East and can be extended. This suggestion is not in place, but why can the treatment purchase scheme and treatment abroad scheme not be extended to the purchase of the assessment of need from the private sector, with parents refunded retrospectively? If we can do it for health and operations outside the State, why can we not do it for the services of professionals within the State, to whom we have given their credentials? There are colleges of further education and training offering speech and language therapy and occupational therapy courses in Dunboyne, County Meath, for example. Can their work placements be extended to local national schools?

I wish to reference nurture rooms for time out. I am making my comments primarily about

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mainstream schools. We all appreciate the efforts that will be made and the allocation of therapists to special schools, but there are children in mainstream education who require interim and intermittent supports. There are also wellbeing classes that can be operated that are already in existence, for example, in St. James's in Dublin 8. I can provide the Minister of State with a list of schools in County Meath. There is a school where there is a practitioner - a primary school teacher with additional training - who is training others. Such initiatives can be implemented within two to three months.

We have the general agreement and support. What is missing? Is it competency or an attitudinal problem at senior levels within the Department? I am not saying it is, but I am asking the question. To me, that is the reason we are not moving beyond good intentions, experience, lived experience and working models and that we cannot put them into action. If it is the case that it is an attitudinal and competency problem, I am afraid that is a nettle the Minister of State and his colleagues, whose commitment I do not doubt for one minute, must grasp. As others have said, this is a repetitive subject. Children's futures cannot wait because of incompetency, if that is the case.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I welcome the opportunity to contribute on the debate. I thank the Labour Party for this motion. I also thank my colleagues across the House for their meaningful contributions. I welcome parents and guardians to the Gallery. I know the challenge, anguish and difficulties they are facing to try to ensure that there are places for their children in September.

Long before I took on this role, I worked extensively with people with disabilities, but from a personal level over recent years, I know full well the challenges that many families are facing. I want to bring that personal story. I want to bring the passion that I have in this regard to the job that I hold.

Many contributions have been made about providing education for our children. We have to make sure that we are driving as hard as we can, that we take the pain, suffering and challenges from the families, that there is certainty in it. In the role I have had over the past number of weeks, I have worked extensively on the 400 extra classes. Section 37A was mentioned earlier. We have agreement on 399 classes and one is outstanding. That is the one in which we will have to go with section 37A because we were unable to get agreement. These are places that will be additional from 1 September.

We have a huge amount of work to do regarding special schools and to ensure that people have places in it. I am committed. I do not say it lightly, but since I got this role, I have worked night and day on this. I have had many sleepless nights thinking of the challenges that are faced by families. I assure the House, the people listening in and the people in the Gallery that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I are working as hard as we can to ensure that we have the proper services and education systems for the children of this country that they so badly need.

I want to put a number of issues on the record. The Government has been working hard on a number of issues. Building on my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee's earlier contribution, I want to welcome and outline the Government's unwavering commitment and to highlight some of the significant steps that we have taken in recent times to ensure that children and young people, particularly those with educational needs, are genuinely supported to reach their full potential. I refer to the 1940s, when Maslow's hierarchy of needs was written. It has been 80 years or more since that was conceptualised. That theory showed that it was not just not food

and shelter that we needed, but an education system that would develop us to our full potential. I believe that we need to have a system in place that will fulfil the full potential of children with additional needs in order that they can become members of their communities, whether those be urban or rural. It is vital that we recognise the importance of resourcing this area, as it is with resources that we will make sure that there is improvement throughout the system.

I emphasise that we have made significant financial commitment. I know Members have said that they do not want to listen to statistics, but we have. More than a quarter of the Department of Education's budget is now dedicated to supporting children with additional needs. That is simply how seriously we are taking it. I know the Minister provided important updates on special educational places, the common application system and teacher training. Of course, there are now new therapists going into special schools and special classes. That is an important piece that was agreed by the Government recently.

Special needs assistants were mentioned. The school communities that have engaged with special education have been completely enriched by it. All students have embraced special education and it will build into society and life. These special needs assistants have been a huge resource right through. Unfortunately - or fortunately, I am not sure - I am long enough in this House to remember when the special needs assistant was a community employment, CE, worker, way back in the day before special needs assistants were established. The work these special needs assistants do in every school community the length and breadth of the country is simply breathtaking. It is on their backs we have built an integrated special education system in special classes. The work that is being done by the special needs assistants, but also by the teachers and the school leadership, has to be recognised.

I chaired the disability matters committee in the previous Dáil and I used two words regarding the challenges that were facing people with disabilities, namely, "culture" and "attitude". Unfortunately, there is still a level of culture and attitude out there that we have to break down and continue talking about. Sitting here over the past two hours and listening to the genuine passion and concern shown by Deputies of all colours and creeds has been refreshing. I encourage in every way, shape and form that they continue to do that, not just here in Dáil Éireann, but across the country because we have to continue breaking down the barriers that are still out there in terms of disabilities and the attitudes towards disabilities.

Over the past number of months, we have worked with the National Council for Special Education. As the Minister said, we have met weekly to ensure that the special classes are in place and there is a weekly progress report on special schools and the identification of the challenges we face. Needs have been identified to the National Council for Special Education and it has been working through those. We have been trying to provide places in the areas where the need is greatest, in so far as possible.

There are a number of matters. We are looking forward to the SNA workforce development. A lot of work has been done by the Department, education bodies and education partners over the past while in that regard.

Mention was made of the EPSEN Act. We are looking forward to the review of that Act. That will be fundamental to education.

School transport is an important part of this. All the Deputies will know that parents of children with additional needs who have school transport, be it through a transport grant or a

transport place, will be contacting Deputies to engage with the Department. We must do an awful lot better on it. Sometimes, when transport is provided for a family, it takes a number of months for that to be put in place. That is hugely frustrating and challenging. We have to make sure that we and the school transport section of the Department are working hard to ensure that it takes less time and is dealt with in a timely manner.

A number of issues were raised about several schools. On Danu Community Special School, work will commence in May this year. Members spoke about the assessment of need. I know from my previous role that the Government is buying private services. I believe approximately 2,500 private assessments of need have been paid for over the past while, but I will get those facts to the two Members who raised the issue.

All I can say in the minute that I have remaining is that I am deeply committed to my role. I am deeply passionate about it and I believe we have an awful lot of work to do. We are almost at May Day and we still have families who do not know where their children will go in September. One of my driving forces is that, over the past year or two, I met a family whose child was finishing up in primary school. I met them at the school gate and they did not know where their child would go in September. As a parent first of all but as a public representative, I walked away from that saying we had to do an awful lot better. It should not be the case that the family did not know. They had to fight right through the summer. Everybody else knew in September or October of the previous year where they would be going.

My commitment to this is extremely strong. I will work with all Members of the House on any queries or challenges they have. The Minister and I will work night and day to ensure we have the best possible education system for people with special needs into the future.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I for one do not doubt the Minister of State's personal bona fides in terms of his approach to this role, the success of which everyone in the Gallery and beyond wants to see. If the Minister of State is successful, it will improve the lives of families and children that need special education. However, one of the first acts that the Minister of State could do today is to encourage the Minister to withdraw this insulting amendment to our motion.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is not insulting to us as such, but to the families, the parents, the SNAs and the activists in the Gallery, outside and throughout the country. It is insulting to the 126 children who are without a school place now, one of whom, Frankie Edgeworth in my constituency, has been refused 83 different forms of education from preschool to primary school. He is six years of age and severely autistic with intellectual disabilities. He has a huge array of ancillary needs and is still without a school place. It is not the SENO's fault. It is the Department's fault and the Minister's fault. It is not the fault of schools such as St. Cronan's in Swords, whose students I welcomed for a tour here today. That school is doing everything it can. Schools like Broadmeadow Community National School put their hands up and say they have their own grounds, want to provide autism classes and are willing to ease the waiting lists in their localities, but what is the response I got from the Minister? It was that the Department would put Broadmeadow on the list. Apparently, the Government is looking for schools to put their hands up and saying it will give them facilities. Obviously, there is a staffing need and that will only be met if schools have time to do it, but the Minister is putting those schools that are putting their hands up on the long finger. It is disgraceful and goes against every public pronouncement that the Minister makes.

The amendment is offensive to SNAs. We have spoken about the work they do and the arbitrary cap. The Minister of State said that they were the backbone of special education, but SNAs have been shown a lack of respect over many years. I acknowledge the work Fórsa and other unions have done about respect for SNAs and SNAs know there could be a potential hazard in the job. Some of them require assault leave. There is one case I am dealing with that is embarrassing to the Minister of State and the Government because of what the SNA has to go through just to get that an entitlement to assault leave to ensure the SNA can recover and get back to work quickly, which is all that person wants to do. It is an administrative bungling that is embarrassing for any State organisation to stand over. It is something I have raised, but the parliamentary question responses have been nothing short of disgraceful.

Our motion, written by Deputy Eoghan Kenny and supported by the Labour Party, has the support of the Opposition. It should have the support of the Government but there are others in special education who are just forgotten by the Government as well. There is actually no policy for children with dyslexia. They are unable to get the supports they need within mainstream schooling because of the ratio and there is no policy to support them. It is a failure from top to bottom.

I wish the Minister of State well. I do not doubt his personal bona fides but there is a huge lot of work to do. The first thing he could do is withdraw this insulting amendment.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, for tabling this important motion. I thank and welcome all the parents and guardians who are in the Gallery today. If we cannot value the things that matter the most, like a right to education, how can we build a future for our children? Our Labour Party motion does exactly that. It highlights a right to education as a basic value of Irish society to truly deliver on the constitutional right of every child to an appropriate school place.

12 o'clock

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, in her speech said that she does not disagree with any part of our motion. The Minister of State acknowledged that. Yet the Government continues to oppose the motion with its amendment. Like my colleague, Deputy Smith, I ask the Minister of State to withdraw the amendment and give a bit of hope to the parents who came out today to support the Labour Party motion. The Minister of State can still do that.

Centralised applications are key to so many parents whom I deal with. My office, like those of many Members of this House, is inundated with calls from parents who cannot get school places for their loved ones. Centralised applications were mentioned by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in her speech. She spoke about waiting on a report and about hopefully rolling it out. That is simply not good enough. We need centralised applications now. Too many parents are making 40, 50 or, as my colleague has just said, 83 calls. It is happening day in, day out. It is simply not good enough. We also have parents putting their loved ones into transport each morning, crisscrossing other parents because there is no cohesion as to where the school places are being offered. We need a centralised application system and we need it now. It is too late to be waiting for more reports. In my constituency, in Newbridge, the average waiting time is 32 families. I acknowledge, as all my colleagues have done, the great work the SNAs do and acknowledge the work that my colleague, Senator Laura Harmon, has done along with the campaigner, Sophie Cole. I hope the Minister of State will be able to support the assault leave Bill the Senator brings forward.

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Again I raise the need for a special school in south Kildare. The special school was opened in Craddockstown, Naas, in north Kildare. We have had promises that the school would open in south Kildare. It needs to open in south Kildare. The school in north Kildare that was opened is already full and parents are crying out for places. It is simply not good enough that we have no school in south Kildare.

I also raise once again the Sensational Kids project in Kildare. A new national child development centre lies in blocks in Kildare town. We spoke about the need for therapists. One of the key reasons for bringing this forward was to train therapists so they can help the children, yet we have a school that can provide 18,000 therapist hours per year lying in blocks in Kildare town. The Government needs to act on this. I acknowledge the work that has been done by my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny. I take the Minister of State's bona fides but we need action now.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I welcome the parents and activists in the Gallery and thank my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, for bringing this important motion forward. In my constituency, Fingal West, I regularly hear, like all Members do, from families deeply concerned about the severe shortage of appropriate education placements and supports for children with special needs. Accessing school settings remains a major challenge in my area, compounded by long waiting times for psychological assessments and interventions. These delays often leave children without a formal diagnosis or the support they urgently need. We must act with urgency to ensure that every child gets the right support in the right place. Inclusive accessible learning environments must be supported from early years right through to adulthood. The Department, the NCSE and relevant Ministers should conduct a full reassessment of the national demand for special schools with a view to establishing ones where necessary. We often talk about lifelong learning. The same principle must apply to special education. Traditional supports between early years, primary, post-primary and third level are inconsistent and this harms long-term outcomes. A centralised admissions system like the successful pilot in Dublin 15 should be rolled out nationally at both primary and post-primary levels. There is also a continuing shortage of qualified special education teachers and SNAs. Localised training hubs co-ordinated by the NCSE could support schools with strong SEN experience to train others, creating local communities of practice and reducing the need for travel.

I mentioned this to the Tánaiste about two or three weeks ago, but the access and inclusion model has supported more than 7,000 children annually in accessing early childhood care and education programmes. However, due to inadequate data sharing between the Department of children and the Department of Education, crucial information is lost when children move to primary school. Establishing a data sharing mechanism would give the Department of Education up to two years' notice to plan for SNAs, ASD classes and resource teachers, ensuring a smoother transition and better outcomes for all.

Finally, we need a publicly-funded ASD preschool in every town so families are not forced to travel long distances. Education begins at birth. By investing in inclusive care and early education, we can give children the fair and equal start they deserve.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the weekly division time this evening.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: My understanding is that the audit into unnecessary hip surgeries carried out on children at CHI hospitals is now complete. Can the Taoiseach confirm for the Dáil that this is the case? If so, can he tell us when that audit will be published? When I raised this scandal of unnecessary hip displasia surgery on children with him four weeks ago, he was unable to shed any light on the matter. He gave me no further information and he certainly gave me no answers. So, a month on, I ask him again, how many children are caught up in this emerging scandal? Are we talking about hundreds or is it more? How many letters have been issued by CHI to parents? What was the reference period for the audit? Is it years or is it decades?

Every single day, our offices receive communication from parents in distress. They are left asking themselves the gut-wrenching questions, was my child one of those operated on unnecessarily, and what are the consequences of this for my child?

In the case of one parent who has been in touch, their child was only three when they had surgery. This is the first parent to tell me that they have now received clinical confirmation that their child did not need the operation performed on them at a CHI hospital three years ago. This parent has now been told by a surgeon, having reviewed the scans from three years ago, that their child's hips were fine. The surgeon says that they would not have performed the surgery. We need to let this sink in - clinical confirmation that this child's surgery was not needed. This parent is absolutely devastated. She told me that she cannot believe what has happened. She describes it as like a horror film. She asks why her child was diagnosed with a condition they did not have and why her child was put through the trauma of surgery if it was not needed. She just keeps asking herself why.

Another of the mothers who reached out after she received the letter tells us that her son had his left hip operated on in 2018 but was told his right hip was fine. He was called back, however, in 2021 and told that the right hip did in fact require surgery, despite displaying no issues. She took the medical advice. She describes this as a devastating decision. She tells us her son's life deteriorated dramatically following this operation. He now suffers serious health development complications and catastrophic consequences from the surgery. The mother is overwhelmed thinking that her child's surgery might not have been needed at all. We have also received confirmation from a parent who received a letter whose child had the surgery in 2010. That is 15 years ago. The child is now a 20-year-old adult. Does this scandal, this issue, go back that far?

Tá scannal na leanaí a ndearnadh obráid gan ghá orthu ag fás gach lá. Tá soiléiriú agus freagraí ag teastáil anois. Cé mhéad leanbh atá i gceist? We have one parent who has clinical confirmation that their child's surgery was not required, and this scandal and stress are growing by the day. It should be remembered that the Taoiseach's former health Minister, Stephen Donnelly, knew about this a year ago and yet he delayed and parents are dealing with this only now. They can no longer be left in the dark. They need answers; they are entitled to that. I ask him again about the reference period of the audit, how many children are affected, whether the audit is complete and when it will be published.

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, aontaím go bhfuil sé seo an-phráinneach agus gur ábhar buartha é. Is olc an scéal é an rud atá ráite ag an Teachta McDonald. Is é an príomhrud ná go mbeidh an audit cuimsitheach agus go mbeidh sé againn chomh luath agus is féidir. At the

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outset, this situation is extremely serious and has necessitated an external audit. That is the first point. For any child to go through surgery is in and of itself a trauma. For parents it is also a trauma. If it emerges that children went through surgery that was not required in the first instance, that will not only be very traumatic in itself but a scandal. It is important we await the completion of the audit and its presentation to the Minister. I spoke to the Minister yesterday. She has not received any final draft or the completion of the audit. I have spoken to the Minister and she made that point to me. That then makes it very difficult all around, in terms of commenting in a piecemeal way or on an individual case or a case-by-case basis. I am not in a position to do that until the full, comprehensive audit is finalised, presented to the Minister and the Government and obviously shared with this House, as it will be.

The Deputy is correct that CHI and Cappagh hospital have issued letters in recent weeks to families who may have concerns to provide information and so forth but, ultimately, it is the completion of the report that is key here. I understand there may have been drafts or whatever published, in *The Ditch* or elsewhere. I do not know. I cannot speak about the provenance of that other than to say the sensible thing for us to do is to enable Mr. Thomas and facilitate them to complete the report as quickly as possible given the anxiety and concerns that are undoubtedly out there. It is accepted those concerns will be there for families whose children will have gone through this particular surgery over a significant period of time.

I understand the audit process is in its final stages. Feedback on the draft report has been received, I understand, by the expert author and is being reviewed. We simply have to assemble all the facts on a comprehensive basis, await the outcomes of the clinical audit and then decide on actions resulting from the outcome of that. The entirety of what took place needs to be understood and laid out fully and transparently. We would then follow through on actions that would be necessary.

There are multidisciplinary teams in place in these hospitals in terms of pre-operative decision-making right across CHI and Cappagh hospital. That process commenced from March onwards. The hospital authorities are obviously taking on board the concerns and so on. It was raised initially via a protected disclosure in September 2023 relating to different thresholds for surgery being applied in CHI and the national orthopaedic hospital in Cappagh. The Department was notified in 2024. The clinical audit, as the Deputy knows, is being conducted by Mr. Simon Thomas, consultant surgeon to the staff of the children's orthopaedic unit at Bristol Royal Hospital for Children. We simply have to await the completion of that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I hope it will be sooner rather than later to help deal with the concerns and anxieties, but also to deal with the issue itself.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tá an scéal go léir scannalach gan dabht. Tá sé scannalach freisin go bhfuil tuismitheoirí agus páistí fágtha gan freagraí. This thing has dragged on and on. As I said to the Taoiseach, his Minister knew a year ago. Families then received these letters and there is an audit under way. Then there is this unbearable, almost cruel waiting and waiting. I have spoken to a parent who has told me they have clinical confirmation the child underwent surgery that was not needed. That is one. I do not know whether there are more.

The Taoiseach says we have to wait for the process be completed. My information is that the audit is in fact completed. The Taoiseach told me four weeks ago, by the way, that this was

in “its final stages”. That is not good enough. It is not good enough to issue letters on something of this magnitude that Government knew about for a year and more and leave families in that position. That is unacceptable. Can I ask him again about information he does know or should know?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He should clarify, please, the reference period of the audit, how many letters have been issued and how many children are affected. When will we see the audit?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: It is regrettable the Deputy would seek to politicise the issue, as she is attempting to do. The first people who should always be contacted in a situation like this are the families who are affected. That is why correspondence goes from the authorities - in this case, the hospital authorities, that is, CHI - to the families. That is as it should be. They should not be hearing about it in a piecemeal way or whatever because, first and foremost, they need full transparency.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And that is done.

The Taoiseach: Second, the Deputy must know in her heart it would be unacceptable to try to release piecemeal and case by case in this case. The sensible thing to do is wait. It is frustrating that people have to wait, but we have to wait for the full audit. I know the Deputy is well aware of all this, but it does not suit in terms of the politics of it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Have you spoken to the parents who are waiting?

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is that a draft report gets sent to all who have been involved.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How many letters issued?

The Taoiseach: The feedback has come back.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How many letters?

The Taoiseach: The audit will have all of that information available for everybody.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach know how many letters were issued?

The Taoiseach: That is the proper way to do this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Last Friday, we learned 15,418 people were recorded as homeless in March, another shameful new high. Nearly 5,000 children are now growing up in Ireland without a home. Each homeless child is a tragedy. There are now 22 more children homeless than there were last month. This is a national scandal. It is the civil rights issue of our generation. As legislators, we must do all we can to see this housing disaster addressed. We must build affordable and social homes, protect renters and tackle vacancy and dereliction, but the Government is not doing enough of any of this.

The Taoiseach's party, Fianna Fáil, has held the housing brief for nearly five years. For most of that period, it has simply doubled down on failed Housing for All policies. More recently, it seems, the party is diversifying. It has not launched anything like the "radical" reset the Government's Housing Commission sought and that we in the Labour Party offered. Instead, Fianna Fáil has adopted a new strategy. It is a flying-by-the-seat-of-your-pants approach to housing, with a series of solo runs, none of them based on evidence. Let us take some examples. This year alone, the Government has said it might get rid of rent pressure zones and might give tax breaks to developers. It is flying kites and no one can keep track. We are trying to figure out what the Government is planning to do on housing. Even the junior coalition partner, Fine Gael, is being kept in the dark. Earlier this month, I think we all read with interest that Fine Gael councillors from Cork as well as Deputy Colm Burke had signed a cross-party letter to the housing Minister calling for urgent funding for the tenant in situ scheme to ensure it is effective to keep renters out of homelessness. Today, Fine Gael Councillor Tom O'Leary from Fingal told the *Dublin Inquirer*, "I just cannot get over that they didn't maintain the same level of funding", wondering "Why would you mess with a successful scheme that keeps people from being scattered into the wind?". He is right. The Government's changes to this scheme will render it unworkable. We are hearing from councillors around the country that evictions from the private rented sector are driving the monthly increases in homelessness. With the Government's changes to the scheme, it seems it has given up on it. Has it given up on ending homelessness altogether?

Of course, there is another new policy, shrouded in secrecy so far and announced by the Minister, Deputy Browne, who said he was going to create a new housing "maverick", a fixer-in-chief. The Taoiseach does not like the name "tsar", and nor do I, with its Russian connotations, so he is calling it the new housing activation office. However, it is another new policy that is clearly putting Fine Gael noses out of joint, as the Tánaiste has made clear. It also comes at an extraordinary and unjustifiable price tag. Maybe the Russian name is appropriate because it is a price that might be approved of by a Russian oligarch, but it is not acceptable. What exactly is the housing activation office? What will it do? Will it be underpinned by legislation? All we have been told is it will put boots on the ground and co-ordinate delivery of housing. This is meaningless and already the job of the Minister for housing, the housing Department and the Land Development Agency.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: This move looks like nothing more than an exercise in the evasion of accountability. What will this body actually do?

The Taoiseach: I disagree fundamentally with Deputy Bacik's analysis in terms of housing policy more generally. Fianna Fáil and the previous Government did not double down on the policy of the last number of decades. The bottom line is, in 2023, for example, we saw the highest level of delivery of new build social housing since 1975. That is not doubling down on previous policies. It represents a step change in the building of social housing, which has happened over the past three to four years. The Deputy cannot deny that. We have higher targets but you simply cannot deny the fact that 48,000 new social homes is a step change from where we were before 2020. Whatever other hyperbole the Deputy will engage in, we have to deal in facts. The only agenda I as Taoiseach and the Government have is to build as many houses as we possibly can as fast as we can; that is it. I will do everything I can to make that happen across a number of fronts.

The Deputy said we ignored the Housing Commission. We did not but the Labour Party did. The Deputy made a false statement when she said I said we might get rid of RPZs. I never once used those words. Go and check it, please, find the quotation and come back to me. I said a review of RPZ was under way. Guess who suggested there should be a review of the RPZs - the Housing Commission. I knew when the Deputy feigned interest in the Housing Commission's report that she did not really mean it because if she looks at the chapter on the rental market, it criticises the Oireachtas for its approach. It makes clear that we should explore issues with RPZs and so on - not get rid of them but explore the matter - and give certainty to private sector investment. I have said we need private sector investment in addition to public sector investment. Public sector investment this year will certainly go to €7 billion. Others estimate we will need approximately €20 billion. The State cannot do it all. We need private sector investment. Deputy Bacik's party and others have rubbished institutional funds as a vehicle for private sector investment in the housing market. It simply is not credible or sustainable to suggest that the Labour Party has a credible housing policy if it rules that out as a funding option for housing. Yet, that is what the Labour Party, the Social Democrats and others are doing and have been for the past four to five years because it is populist. It is good short-termism but it will not build a house. We need all hands on deck in housing. We need to unblock barriers on the ground. The housing activation office is not a secret; it was in the programme for Government, which was published. There was no secret about it at all.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There is so much to challenge in what the Taoiseach just said, with respect. First, he cannot stand over his Government's figures on delivery of homes when it promised 40,000 homes last year and the actual delivery was 10,000 short, a shocking shortfall. It is utterly indefensible. No one, even in the Government or in Fianna Fáil, will stand over that figure.

Second, the Taoiseach said we would never get rid of the RPZs; I did not say he did.

The Taoiseach: You did.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I hear every day from renters in my constituency-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Check the record.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----who are desperately worried because of the review of RPZs announced by the Government. The reason is there are so few homes available to rent. If they cannot afford to pay their rent any longer, they have nowhere else to go. It comes back to delivery of homes. The Government is ignoring the crucial recommendation of the Housing Commission that the Government should introduce a radical reset of housing policy. We in the Labour Party called for the State take a far more active role in direct delivery-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----of homes through the Land Development Agency, ramped up-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Deputy. Your time is up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to provide State-built homes, as was done in the seventies, which the Taoiseach keeps referring to as the golden age of house building.

The Taoiseach: In the past three or four years, the then Government, and the Fianna Fáil Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, gave power and resources to the Land Development Agen-

cy. Its work is under way.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: He promised 40,000 homes.

The Taoiseach: The Land Development Agency will get more equity and support to build more houses. That will happen but that is not the full story. We have to do much more. The bottom line is we have made a step change in the past three years. From approximately 20,000 houses built in 2019, we are now building approximately 30,000 plus. Housing for All targets were exceeded but everybody said they were not high enough.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: You said they were not high enough.

The Taoiseach: Now, we need to get to 50,000, which the ESRI said. The real challenge for the Opposition and the Government is how to go from 30,000 to 50,000. We will not get there with the populist, popular soundbites I hear every week we come into Dáil Éireann. That will not build 50,000 houses. We need real solutions that can deliver. The Government will do everything it can across all aspects to get solutions. I am not interested in the short-termism-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----that passes in here for housing debate all the time. I am interested in getting real solutions and getting to the 50,000 per annum we need.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, time is up.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yesterday, the Social Democrats put forward a real solution to increase the finance available to build affordable homes. I hope the Taoiseach will look at that seriously. Not content with creating a new €430,000 post for the housing czar, this Government now wants to increase pay for senior executives in semi-State organisations. Yesterday, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, announced plans to change rules, which will see salaries soar. The heads of 30 semi-State bodies, from Horse Racing Ireland to RTÉ, are now potentially in line for massive increases. This is despite the fact that these CEOs received a combined €75 million in pay and perks over ten years, according to *Village* magazine.

Strangely, even though I carefully studied the Minister's statement yesterday, I did not see any reference to economic headwinds, tariffs or global volatility. When it comes to gold-plated salaries for those at the top, it seems these concerns are not worth mentioning. Compare that with how people on low pay are treated and the Government's shameful decision to postpone the introduction of a living wage. Improvement in sick leave for ordinary workers has also been put on the chopping block. In a triple whammy, plans to introduce pension auto-enrolment have also been kicked down the road yet again.

While all across the county people are struggling to make ends meet, keep their homes heated, rent paid and bills from piling up, this Government has mounted a despicable attack on low-paid workers. People should be able to live a full and dignified life and not just scrape by day to day. How can someone on the minimum wage afford housing costs that are more than double the EU average? How can they afford bills that have increased by 80% since Russian invaded Ukraine? How are they supposed to put food on the table when prices for goods and services are 42% higher than in other European countries? The cost of living is skyrocketing and the Government expects people to get by on €13.50 an hour. Why does this Government believe those at the top deserve bumper salary increases while low-paid workers are thrown

under the bus? How can the Government justify this to low-paid workers struggling to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table?

The Taoiseach: Over the past three to four years, significant improvements were made to the minimum wage, workers' rights and sick leave pay. In 2022, for the first time, a statutory right was given to employer paid sick leave in the sick leave Act. The Deputy made the exaggerated comment that we are engaging in despicable action against workers. Sick leave has gone from three to five days. That was introduced in January 2024. The minimum wage has been increasing significantly over the past number of years as a result of Government decisions. It will continue to increase. To net out two issues, we decided to delay going from five to seven days and on the minimum wage, there is a delay in respect of matching the living wage. It will be a matter for Low Pay Commission to determine the increase. Those are the only two issues. The Deputy created a narrative around them that somehow there is an enormous undermining of workers' rights about to take place, which is not true.

The Deputy mentioned auto-enrolment. Is he honestly saying that delaying auto-enrolment from September to January is a trampling of someone's rights? We spent years putting it together. The two main parties in government spent the past three to four years building up what was a very substantive programme in terms of getting auto-enrolment ready.

In the context of the logistics involved, the payroll providers and so on, the view was that it should start with the tax year in January as opposed to in September. That is all. Let us not pretend that this is some massive undermining of workers' rights or anything like that. I am a complete convert to the idea of auto-enrolment. Sorry, I am not a convert; I am a believer. I passionately believe in it, and 800,000 workers will benefit from it. We are going full steam ahead with it as a government. Probably the most significant thing we will do for workers in this generation is auto-enrolment. It has been talked about for 30-odd years, and we are going to do it.

The Deputy understands the context as well because he and his party fought the recent general election. Members on that side came into the House talking about the retail industry, which could not deal with the cumulative costs. Those involved blamed the Government. They had a point, because we did increase costs through improving rights for workers and other things. Many retail and many hospitality SMEs said that the cumulative impact of all of that was damaging both employment and their capacity to continue. We had people in this House talking about the closure of restaurants, etc.

It is always about striking a balance in terms of how fast we go with progressive improvements. We did bring in the pay-related jobseeker's benefit scheme, which is a significant improvement on anything that we had for the past two or three decades. That is a significant additional right for workers and is well deserved.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: A living wage is not just good for low-paid workers, it is also good for the local economy. Money that is put in the pocket of workers gets spent in the local economy and boosts local businesses and jobs. There is a very strong economic case for it. Can the Taoiseach not see that it is an absolute kick in the teeth for people on low pay to hear about Government proposals to increase pay for those at the top while excuses relating to tariffs, global headwinds and economic conditions are cited when it comes to delaying promises for low-paid workers in respect of the living wage? Can he not see that this puts people under huge pressure to see that double standard in terms of the talk the Government comes out with? Will

the Government reconsider its position-----

The Taoiseach: On what?

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: -----on the living wage. Will it bring forward the living wage, as it has promised? Why can the Government do it for top-paid workers but not for people on low pay?

The Taoiseach: I am sorry but we have significantly increased the minimum wage. We have significantly increased it over the past number of years, and it will continue to increase. The Deputy talks about the living wage. The Government does not pay the living wage. He does not pay the living wage. Employers pay the living wage. Shops pay the living wage. The Deputy’s local Centra pays the living wage, which is what he is saying. During an election campaign, the Deputy will go into the local Centra, talk to the person there and say “Oh yeah, you’re dead right. I’ll talk to the Government about that”. That is what everyone in the Opposition did in the recent election. They said costs were too high and that we must do something for small businesses and for hospitality. This is an attempt to try to balance how fast and how rapid we make progress. That is it. The Deputy should not try to conflate this with some major agenda that is anti-worker because that is not what this is about, in any shape or form. We are moving ahead with auto-enrolment. The pay-related scheme is a very significant additional benefit that we can improve upon on in time. The State will take on a significant proportion of that, which is important.

In terms of the semi-State sector, rather than the *ad hoc* approach which has gone on for the past ten or 11 years, it is important to create a framework in terms of how senior executives in that sector are paid.

Deputy Michael Collins: A few weeks ago, I raised with the Taoiseach some scandalous transactions by a number of financial advisers that have led to genuine investors getting stung for millions. Since raising this issue, I have been contacted by numerous people who have had their honest savings robbed. The last time I spoke on this, I knew of around ten people who were affected. Now, I have at least 60 people who are in this situation. The number is rising.

The regulation of standards and practice is the norm for many areas of work in this State. In healthcare, we have HIQA, which conducts regular inspections of our health service to ensure standards are met and users are safe. In the food and hospitality industry, the Food Safety Authority ensures that standards are met by means of carrying out regular inspections of premises. In the pharmaceutical industry, the European Medicines Agency regulates medicines for human use, ensuring their safety, quality and efficiency. In the financial services sector, regulation is the remit of the Central Bank but regulation of financial advisers appears to be practically non-existent, leaving the ordinary investor at the mercy of some unscrupulous individuals. How can a financial adviser take money from clients for investment in a company that is regulated by the Central Bank, provide loan notes which are not covered by the Central Bank, and put the company into receivership, while the client loses his or her money? That same adviser can then set up another company and start all over again, with no repercussions. Some advisers have done this 11 times already.

I reached out to the Central Bank seeking a meeting but to no avail. That led me to think whether this is a further cover up. The Central Bank is, in my view, equally culpable here. This raises a number of questions for the bank. What is the Central Bank doing in terms of regula-

tion if financial advisers can fleece investors with impunity? How many audits of financial advisers does the Central Bank carry out each year? Will the Central Bank disclose details of these audits? Why are loan notes unregulated? Why does the Central Bank allow financial advisers to behave in this manner without sanction? Many people in my constituency and in many other constituencies face financial ruination having been let down by the Central Bank while the financial advisers, who they trusted and who they understood to be regulated the Central Bank, have run off with their money to another country under the guise of bankruptcy. The amounts for which constituents have been caught include €750,000, €500,000, €350,000, €52,000, €50,000 and much more.

It is now obvious that regulation by the Central Bank does not exist. Does the Government have the power to launch an investigation into the workings of the Central Bank? Will the Taoiseach work with me to get a meeting with the Governor of the Central Bank in order to get answers to the many questions that are out there about Central Bank-regulated advisers who have robbed millions of euro of people's savings?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy raised this a number of weeks ago. There are laws in place and there is a regulator. The regulator is the Central Bank. There is a tendency in the House to keep asking if we can investigate this and investigate that, but the established regulators have a function and an obligation to investigate if they receive complaints. I am not clear whether the individuals who have been defrauded, as the Deputy asserted, have made formal complaints in respect of the adviser to whom the Deputy refers or the companies in which that adviser was involved in establishing. Have actual complaints been sent to the Central Bank in respect of that? It is important to establish that, particularly as there are Central Bank registers. It is extremely important that customers are aware of the risk of fraud and related scams and that they ensure that the person or entity they are dealing with is registered with the Central Bank of Ireland. Those registers are available free online. The Central Bank also publishes warnings about unauthorised firms and will sometimes list such firms.

I presume this person was a registered broker. I will ask if the Deputy can meet with the Minister for Finance in relation to this, to take him through the details. The Minister has, from policy perspective, some interaction with the Central Bank, which is independent in terms of the conduct of its work. If a business has shut down - and the Deputy has suggested that a business closed down and then another business was established by the same person - any new business would also require authorisation by the Central Bank before it can undertake activities which are regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland. That authorisation process requires and includes a Central Bank fitness and probity review in respect of all of the key roles to lead the business and so forth.

There are individual accountability frameworks within regulation. The Central Bank (Individual Accountability Framework) Act 2023 sets out clearly and fully where responsibility lies in regulated firms and includes conduct standards. If the Central Bank suspects, on reasonable grounds, that a subject has committed a prescribed contravention, it is in a position to hold an inquiry to determine whether the subject has committed such a contravention. There are strong sanctions in relation to individuals.

It would be useful to know more. The Deputy sent me some documents in the past hour but I have not had a chance to go through them. I will read that material. I am not clear why the Central Bank has not engaged. I do not know if the Deputy has written to the Central Bank to make submissions to it on the people he has spoken about here.

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Deputy Michael Collins: Yes. I wrote to the Central Bank two weeks ago and I have heard nothing back since. There are legal cases being taken at the moment. The fraud squad is also involved. When I raised this question in the Dáil the last time, the fraud squad contacted people immediately afterwards. I sent the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance two sample cases this morning. I respect that the Taoiseach needs to look at that in his own time.

When I talk about financial advisers, I do not want to tar all of them with the one brush as most are honest in their dealings. I want to talk about those who are scam operators and who, as I said the last time I spoke to the Taoiseach three weeks ago, drive around in top of the range SUVs and are seen drinking champagne outside bars or on the side of the street, laughing at those who now cannot retire or who have retired and who have been robbed of their savings because these despicable people cannot be touched. It is time to hit the untouchables. They have ruined innocent people's lives. It is time to have these people put behind bars. The only way this can be done is to have a full investigation into the Central Bank's procedures and weed out the reasons how these scam financial advisers were able to play nod-and-wink with the Central Bank and avoid any regulation.

The Taoiseach: I welcome that the fraud squad seems to be, or is, involved, as the Deputy said. That is good news. It is reprehensible for anybody to defraud another person of funds, particularly their savings, through fraudulent investments. Nobody is untouchable. They can be touched and investigated and there is a process for doing it. We in this country are always going back to investigate the investigator. We do not need an investigation into the Central Bank, I suggest, but an investigation into the individuals whose fraudulent behaviour the Deputy has highlighted in the Dáil. That is what we need. That is why we establish regulators and resource them. We put a lot of funding into regulators. Fundamentally, into the future, the country must use existing regulatory authorities to do the majority of investigations. We love setting up commissions of investigation - inquiries that cost millions of euro, spend years at it and not getting the closure that people want in all cases. There is real law and sanctions here. We should pursue those avenues.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy John Clendennen: Offaly and the wider midlands have powered this nation for generations, first through peat and now through renewables. We have led from the front but today we face a critical turning point in our energy and economic future. Midlands just transition was meant to ensure that no community was left behind in the move to a climate-neutral economy but for many in Offaly it has felt like a promise made but certainly not kept. With almost 700 job losses, we have lost more jobs in the energy transition than any other county and the promised replacement of jobs is yet to arrive in any meaningful manner. We have seen plans, strategies and frameworks but what we have not seen are payslips, tangible employment and tangible momentum on the ground.

Yet, we remain determined. There are positive signs with State-funded projects such as the EU LIFE Peatlands and People initiative, the Clonmacnoise visitor centre redevelopment, the refurbishment of Fiesta Hall renewables centre in Kilcormac, the enhancement of Lough Oulra trails and cultural initiatives like Film Offaly, to name but a few. However, let us be clear: these projects must match the scale of disruption Offaly has endured. So far, they simply do not.

Even so, Offaly has pushed ahead. While the just transition has faltered, we forged ahead

with renewable energy. Ireland has made impressive goals in onshore wind, double the EU average, and Offaly has punched well above its weight. With just 2% of Ireland's landmass and population we have delivered up to 7% of national wind energy output in recent months with over 1.5 GW of wind and solar projects are permitted or near permitted and with nearly 600 MW of battery storage already in place. That success was not luck. It was strong local leadership, ambitious planning and community buy-in. We stepped up to the mark when we needed to most. Now, under article 15b of the EU renewable energy directive, the Government must publish maps identifying future renewable zones and grid infrastructure in only a matter of weeks, by 21 May. This is both a moment of opportunity and major threat. One might ask: what is the danger? A bureaucratic reset that treats all counties equally, ignoring heavy lifting already done by early movers like Offaly, cannot be let happen.

I urge the Taoiseach that we start this mapping process by recognising reality and by mapping all existing and permitted renewable energy sites and follow that by clearly identifying areas of future potential. This is not only fair; it is essential. We need to reward progress, protect ambition and honour leadership. I ask the Taoiseach to give that commitment here today.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a key issue for the country and Europe, which is the development of renewable energy and the mechanisms to enable us to do that. There is no doubt that Ireland is a wind energy success story, particularly in onshore wind, but because of a lot of controversy around locations in certain aspects that narrative does not often get told. We get a greater share of our electricity, 35% on average, from onshore wind farms than anywhere else in Europe. We are world leaders in integrating renewables onto our grid which can now take up to 75% of total electricity demand from wind farms. Irish wind farms provided 48% of Ireland's power last February. Last January a significant milestone was achieved when the State reached more than 5 GW of installed wind capacity. That is half way to the State's 2030 onshore climate action targets for renewable wind energy. The big challenge ahead is translating that into offshore wind and ensuring we reach our targets for the offshore wind agenda. That is what we will do.

It is true the midlands, and the Deputy spoke about Offaly, has experienced the greatest economic disruption, including the closure of power plants. Just transition has been a help but I take the Deputy's point that it has not fully met the losses of good industrial jobs which people had and the work they had in Bord na Móna. However, there is a transition going on in the midlands, without question, which is quite exciting and interesting and which will power the economy of the midlands into the future. The National Just Transition Fund has disbursed about €16 million. The EU just transition programme is providing up to €169 million. The programme has announced a selection of 91 operations totalling about €91 million so far.

The Deputy mentioned tourism infrastructure. There has been about €36 million in grants from Fáilte Ireland for trails and supports for businesses which are trying to grow the visitor economy in the midlands area. About €12 million is being provided under the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tóchar wetland restoration project towards survey and restoration planning. There is also a network of electric vehicle charging funding of €18 million. That is across the country.

The mapping is part of the renewable energy directive, RED. I have asked the various Departments to accelerate the transposition of RED as it is critical on several fronts - first, to deal with the planning issues around offshore wind but also, critically, in relation to the mapping issue the Deputy spoke about.

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Deputy John Clendennen: I fully agree that in our renewable energy journey, we have hit many important milestones. As part of that journey, Offaly has been to the forefront. In addition to mapping, we also need to see a greater level of community recognition. In tandem with renewable zoning, we must overhaul the community benefit fund under the renewable energy support scheme. The current €2 per MW/h is too diluted. There are too many small pots, too many committees and too little impact. The more infrastructure, the more complex it becomes when there is an overlap of a cluster of wind farms, in particular. Yes, retain the near neighbour scheme and support local community groups but we also need to be bold with strategic investment. Let us use this fund to deliver real change and lasting projects, whether it be road upgrades over peat foundation, employment hubs, business parks or modern community centres and playgrounds, and to empower our towns and villages to ensure further enhancements. These are all projects that will leave a lasting legacy and truly make a difference. Offaly did not just endure transition; it led that transition. We now need support that reflects that leadership.

The Taoiseach: I again thank the Deputy. On the mapping question, as part of the RED, there is, as the Deputy knows, a legal obligation on member states to carry out co-ordinated mapping for the deployment of renewable energy and related infrastructure at a national territory level by May 2025. The directive requires that we show those areas available for renewable energy and those that have the potential to be developed for renewable energy. The Deputy wants that which has already happened to be mapped. I do not see an issue with that. I will relate that message to the Minister.

We can review the community benefit fund. Many countries have spoken positively about the fact we have that community benefit dimension to our renewable strategies, particularly for wind energy. The Minister would be open to reviewing the community benefit fund. I am particularly interested in getting the mapping done. The RED is particularly significant in terms of being able to have an overarching clause which states it is for the benefit of society as a whole that we build an offshore wind farm because of climate change and so on. That is what we need.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I return to the Government's housing tsar and the proposal to pay this individual €430,000. Paying somebody a salary of almost €500,000 to take up the responsibilities of the housing Minister is cracked, to tell the God's honest truth. Most people who jobshare take home half a wage. The Government wants this individual to take home almost €500,000. I do not know if the Taoiseach is on a solo run in respect of this matter. His friends in Fine Gael seem to think he is. I raised the issue with him yesterday and asked him to confirm the salary of €430,000. More importantly, I asked him to justify that salary for people who are struggling hard and many of whom cannot afford housing or rent. He failed to do that. Having had the night to sleep on it, I ask the Taoiseach to come to his senses and put a stop to this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy, your time is now up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If he wishes to pursue it-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I ask you to comply.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----I ask him to set out clearly the salary level and his

justification for it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, can you not see the clock or hear me? Thank you.

The Taoiseach: I dealt comprehensively with that issue earlier. The Deputy chose not to raise it during Leaders' Questions, which is fair enough. The housing activation office has been established. It is in the programme for Government. I made the point yesterday that no decision has been made as to the person who will head up that office. I said that to the Deputy yesterday. I also said to her yesterday that within the public service, there can be secondment. There are people in public service, working in State agencies-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Are there people earning €430,000? How many?

The Taoiseach: There are people earning substantially above that. The Deputy knows that well.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How many are there?

The Taoiseach: Has the Deputy heard of the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA? It is has been in existence since its establishment in 1989. The Deputy knows that but comes in here and feigns not to. Of course she knows the NTMA has been there for 30 years. No decision has been made to appoint any individual. The Government will decide and the Minister will progress that in the time ahead.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Almost €500,000 on a job share. That is shocking.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I raise with the Taoiseach the ongoing issue of policing levels in our communities. Across the country, we all hear from communities who have immense concerns about the shortage of gardaí on the streets, a lack of community gardaí and problems of low morale within the Garda. In my constituency of Dublin Bay South, this week alone we have seen an appalling incidence of antisocial behaviour and quite serious criminality, with gangs congregating around the City Quay and Pearse Street areas. There is a shortage of Garda resources to deal with such matters.

My colleague Deputy Kelly is attending the Garda Representative Association, GRA, conference today. It is unfortunate that the Minister for Justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, will not be there. Deputy Kelly told me about the stories he heard from gardaí at the conference. They told him about rock-bottom morale, a lack of resourcing and the collapse in the numbers of gardaí. The Government is failing to recruit the numbers of gardaí that are so badly needed-----

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to ensure we have visible and effective policing of our streets.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Garda numbers are increasing in terms of the numbers being trained through Templemore. People have commented on the increased number of gardaí on the streets of Dublin. In more recent times, people have commented positively about that. I have been talking to the Minister for Justice and we need to ensure that as people are coming through Templemore, we spread them out across the country. That is the agenda and that is what we are going to do.

We are making progress. Covid-19 had a big impact because we lost a vital two years in the context of getting a proper throughput from Templemore. Now the number of applications is high and a great deal of progress is being made. We need to do far more and we will.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Yesterday, the solicitor representing the disabled woman known as Grace released a shocking statement on the Farrelly commission report. Ms Marie-Claire Butler said her “considered and extensive submissions” to the commission were not included or referred to in any way in the report and that she felt the need to bring this to light. Grace is the person at the centre of years of many reports into her neglect and prolonged exposure to risk of abuse in a foster home in County Waterford. She has been tragically failed over and over. She has been at the mercy of years of concealment, deflection and neglect by the HSE and successive Governments. There has been no accountability for any of this. There were already so many questions about the Farrelly commission before this statement was released yesterday. Does the Taoiseach agree that we urgently need to see Ms Farrelly SC and the Minister, Deputy Foley, appear before the Joint Committee on Disability Matters to answer questions on this issue?

The Taoiseach: The Minister is not responsible for the inquiry or how it was conducted. Let us not try to politicise this. Let us look at the fact that the commission of investigation was established. The statement by the General Solicitor for Minors and Wards of Court is very serious. There are limitations around the Commissions of Investigation Act. I have made the general point that commissions of investigation sometimes do not give the closure or outcomes that people correctly expect, notwithstanding the spending of millions. This is worrying.

The Minister is meeting the General Solicitor for Minors and Wards of Court on behalf of Grace. I will get a report of the outcome of that meeting. We are in very challenging territory because of the legal framework governing the establishment of the commission. A commission is independent. Everything that transpires within it is within the legal framework, including in respect of confidentiality and so forth.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The move to renewable energy should be centred on allowing consumers to benefit from lower electricity prices. That is why, as part of the previous Government, the Green Party legislated to give customers a legal right to dynamic pricing whereby they can benefit from changes to electricity prices and only use electricity at the cheapest rate. That right of consumers to benefit from the low price of renewables is being undermined by the regulator, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. It has bowed to pressure from electricity suppliers and given them over a year longer to bring in a scheme from which consumers could benefit. When the cost of living is still so high for so many, does the Taoiseach agree with the Climate Change Advisory Council, which stated earlier that the Government and regulator must ensure that electricity suppliers offer customers price plans that allow them to save money? Will he ask the Minister to engage with CRU and make it clear that the regulator needs to protect consumer rights over the profits of suppliers?

The Taoiseach: The fundamental review of the regulatory framework governing energy prices did not happen. The Deputy knows that as well as I do. It relates to the user pays principles, be that user a commercial entity or a household. On investment in the grid, price review 5 fell on the user of energy. The Minister has established a group to look at the regulatory framework. There will be enormous investment in the grid. In the time ahead, we will need to more than double what was invested over the past five years. If we want to achieve what the Deputy suggests on a sustainable basis, it will require an amendment to the regulatory frame-

work. That is how I see it. That will take some time to bring about, but it is an issue we must deal with because Ireland has high energy prices and is likely to continue to have them, given the level of investment that will have to be made in respect of the grid.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Representatives of the national Meals on Wheels programme are across the way in Buswell's Hotel. They are looking for more funding. Some 2.8 million meals were provided in 2024. There were 228,000 users of the service.

1 o'clock

When the service provides a meal and delivers it to someone, the cost of the meal is €7, and the service charges the person €7. The service does not have funding for the running cost of its vehicles. If anyone goes to any restaurant anywhere, even to get a sandwich, it costs a serious amount. We have people delivering a valuable service, meeting people in their own homes twice a week every week and giving them good nourishing meals, but they are underfunded. We need something to enable them to get extra funding, deliver more services and not do it at a loss.

The Taoiseach: The Meals on Wheels service is outstanding for a number of reasons in terms of the food and nutrition made available and the contact and engagement in the neighbourhood or community. The Minister of State, Mary Butler, has done exceptional work in substantially increasing the funding to Meals on Wheels. The funding allocation for the service has increased by close to 80% in the past three years. It is difficult to think of any other service where there has been an increase of that scale. Back in 2022, it was €3.5 million but it has gone up 80% since then.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The number of users has gone up.

The Taoiseach: The amount of users and also the costs I accept have gone up, but 80% is a fairly significant increase. The programme for Government commits to further increased funding for the national Meals on Wheels network and to developing a plan to ensure that we support providers in every town in the country. Then, €10 million was made available in capital funding for community capital funding initiatives.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The Land Development Agency claims it is committed to meeting the need for affordable homes for purchase and rent across the country. In Dundalk, we have had no workable affordable housing scheme available to the people of Louth as yet. We have three sites identified at which the LDA says it can build up to 1,000 homes. To date, we have seen no real action on making this a reality. Dundalk is a thriving town and a home of very important economic growth for the country. Housing is key to unlocking more growth in the area. I want the Government to make Dundalk and towns like Dundalk a priority by ensuring that they have affordable housing schemes.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy is saying the LDA has identified the sites, I will talk to the LDA about where current plans and progress are in terms of advancing housing on those particular sites. The whole idea of the housing activation office is, if there are issues with the sites in terms of water, grid or whatever, to unblock those at a local level. I will certainly pursue that. Existing cities and towns are the obvious places where we can make progress.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Serious questions surround an IPAS contract recently signed with Dundrum House Hotel, putting 277 IPAS applicants into a village with a population of

only 200. There are four real concerns. First, there are ownership disputes currently before the High Court. Second, the contract was signed with a company that was only incorporated in January this year and has no Irish shareholders or directors. Third, the section 5 is currently the subject of judicial review. Fourth, the site is under investigation by Tipperary County Council for significant unauthorised development. In my view, the process is completely flawed. There is a lack of transparency and, apparently, due diligence. The programme for Government is clear that we need to reduce the number of hotels providing IPAS accommodation. I want to speak on behalf of the people of Dundrum and of the taxpayer. I know the Minister for Justice is taking responsibility tomorrow. Will the Taoiseach ask him to review this contract urgently, please?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is a lot of work happened during the time of the last Government. It would have been, I think, the Department of children at the time. I will ask the Minister for Justice to examine the issues the Deputy has raised. I presume he or other people have written to the Minister.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Yes, and to the PAC.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy is suggesting there are irregularities or whatever, I am not familiar with those and I cannot comment on that. I will raise the issue with the Minister.

Deputy Mark Ward: I do not normally talk about my personal life in the House but today I will. I am one of over 10,000 people in this country with multiple sclerosis, MS. I was diagnosed with MS 18 years ago. The past two years have probably been the most challenging of those 18 years but right now I am probably in the best physical and mental condition I have been in for a long time. I have been critical in the past of how to get into the system for treatment but I want to commend the neurology team in Tallaght hospital on the record because, once I managed to get into the system, their care was excellent.

The reason I am speaking about this today is that tomorrow begins MS awareness month. I will do 150 km throughout May for MS Ireland to raise awareness and support for people like me living with MS. Will the Government complete the national roll-out of community neuro-rehabilitation teams as committed to in the programme for Government?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue in the frank and honest way he did. I wish him personally the very best as he responds to the condition of MS. It is very important that we create national awareness around this issue and related conditions. Is it 150 km the Deputy is going to do?

Deputy Mark Ward: Yes.

The Taoiseach: That is fair going. The best of luck on that. I will talk to the Minister for Health. I think it is her ambition to complete all the neurorehabilitation units. This is very important. Neurology has been a challenging area for quite a while in terms of neurologists. We have made a lot of progress in the past couple of years compared to where we were. Neurology and neurological conditions cover a wide spectrum. We are learning an awful lot more about it. The greater awareness and the greater funding we can allocate to the research, the better the outcomes will be.

Deputy Brian Brennan: Regarding Irish tourism, I am concerned about the figures that have come out for March. The number of inbound travellers is down and I would like to know

what plan is in place to reverse this downward trend. The programme for Government clearly states a commitment to growing the tourism industry and I ask for strong action to support this growth. It is imperative that, as a Government, we continue to develop the offering of Ireland as an international tourism destination.

Last week, an individual went on worldwide media and claimed many things, including a ridiculous and untrue statement that County Wexford had no hotel beds available. This type of misinformation is damaging to our tourism industry and, in turn, could impact employment. I have no interest in this individual but my concern is the vast audience he is speaking to. I would like to put on the record that County Wexford has 1,000 hotel bedrooms available nightly and Wexford is open for business.

The Taoiseach: Wexford has always been open for business and has many high-quality hotels across the spectrum of accommodation. One of the great marketing steals of the century was the “sunny south east” logo, if I can call it a steal. It has stuck.

It is interesting. There seems to be some dispute between the industry and the CSO, which is unusual, in terms of the figures. Nonetheless, the Government has transferred tourism from the parent Department it was in and moved it into enterprise to perhaps have a greater coherence and complementarity in terms of the business end of it and also to try to create additional resources at an administrative level in terms of tourism policy. Fáilte Ireland is there and so on, so it has been a success story for quite a long time. We have to drill down into the figures and understand what is happening in the industry, and then respond with appropriate measures.

Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere: Kilkenny is also open for business. Last year, we got great news in the sunny south east region with the announcement of a new veterinary medicine programme to be established in the campus of Kildalton agricultural college in Piltown, County Kilkenny, a venue the Taoiseach visited with me last year. It brings with it a multimillion euro capital expenditure for Kildalton, which will be a huge boost to south Kilkenny, including Kilkenny’s agri and education sectors, and a game-changer for veterinary students who no longer have to leave the region, and in many cases their country, to study veterinary medicine. There is a large shortage of qualified vets for farm animals and pets and a high demand for existing veterinary courses. As a Government, we need to prioritise the acceleration of accreditation by the Veterinary Council of Ireland through the inclusion of the new programme in the CAO listing in the 2025-26 year to provide for an annual intake of 40 students, commencing in September of next year.

The Taoiseach: Absolutely. It was a very impactful visit, if I say so myself, and very worthwhile. Fantastic work is going on at Kildalton college. As the Deputy knows, Kildalton college will split the delivery of the programme with the Waterford campus of South East Technological University. Its engagement with the Veterinary Council of Ireland is currently ongoing in regard to the professional accreditation of these new programmes. This is a very significant programme for the south east region and nationally. There is a demand for veterinary places and many students are travelling abroad to study these courses. We want to get this up and running. There are issues around regulatory and curricular approval, staffing, equipment and lab facilities. All of them have to be open, so there is a tight timeline. I can assure the Deputy that I will speak to the Minister for higher education with a view to progressing this as quickly and effectively as possible.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I respectfully ask the Taoiseach to look at the decision to stop

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elderly people from getting a grant to replace a stove, range or oil burner that has broken down. Since 1 December last, this grant has no longer been available to elderly people, the people who worked to put this country on its feet through the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. These people are being denied a grant. Councillor Johnny Healy-Rae, a councillor of 14 years' standing, raised this at Kerry County Council last week and he was told the Department had stopped this grant since 1 December 2024. I am asking the Taoiseach respectfully to restore that grant to these people. What difference is it going to make to have a little fire?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. You have asked the question of the Taoiseach.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What difference is that going to make to the climate, when we have bombs going off all around us in Gaza and Ukraine, and satellites and vehicles going to the moon?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask you to be fair to your colleagues.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am sorry but I am very exercised about this. We have planes in the sky and all kinds of emissions but we want to stop little old people from having a fire to heat themselves.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you have taken almost double your time. Be fair to your colleagues.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I understand from a certain perspective why the Deputy is concerned about it. My understanding is that it stems from an EU directive in respect of grants for fossil fuels essentially, for installations that have a fossil fuel dimension. However, I will examine it. I understand there is some leeway in terms of purchasing second-hand boilers and so forth, but that is not responding to the totality of what the Deputy has said. I will have it examined to see what can be done, if anything can be done, but there is an EU directive, which governs all of this.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In December 2015, Aoife Winterlich, who was 14 years of age, went on a trip organised by Scouting Ireland. They went to Hook Head, where there was no assessment of the risks although it was a very stormy day. There was no guidance, no warning and nobody watching. Aoife was swept out to sea and died. It took eight years and the bringing of a court case for Scouting Ireland to finally acknowledge liability in this circumstance, but the scouts have failed to offer an apology for their failure in their duty of care to Anne Winterlich's daughter. They have offered an apology for the tragic loss of her daughter but not for their role in the tragic loss of her daughter. I have been in correspondence with the scouts on this. The last response I have says that they want to confirm that an apology has already been offered, which it has not been, and, therefore, they do not anticipate further correspondence. Will the Taoiseach will join me in asking the scouts to apologise and does he agree that we need to have an independent investigation into the circumstances of the death?

The Taoiseach: It is a very sad and shocking situation for the family of Aoife Winterlich. I believe a full and comprehensive apology should be given in respect of this. My understanding is that this has been in the courts as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They have acknowledged that.

The Taoiseach: There would have been a full assessment of this during the court process.

In my view, when something like this happens, the response should be fulsome and it should be without conditions.

Deputy Grace Boland: We know that domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is an epidemic in this country. The research bears this out, the reports from the Garda bear it out and I have no doubt that we have all listened to the experiences of constituents. It is still a great taboo in this country. It is not spoken about openly but it is something we urgently need to address. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, made great strides in this area in her previous role as Minister for Justice and we need to continue that work. Does the Taoiseach agree that the Government needs to continue the Minister's work, urgently deliver on the programme for Government commitments to appoint specialised judges for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and deliver enhanced training for gardaí and those working in the DPP's office so that we can better support victims? The Taoiseach might give me an update on this work and a timeline to deliver on these commitments.

The Taoiseach: Very significant work was undertaken by the last Government and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in respect of gender-based violence. Indeed, I would have launched the first strategy as Taoiseach with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is absolutely committed to continuing to progress this agenda in government. The programme for Government is very clear in respect of the prioritisation of this issue, particularly in terms of refuge services and centres, which I think we need to accelerate progress on.

Deputy John McGuinness: Before the general election, the Department of Finance was in the process of drafting legislation to wind down IBRC and a discussion was held at the finance committee regarding the Butler family, who had difficulties with their particular loan and circumstances. I note that the draft legislation suggests that the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, and the complaints that that office has, will be transferred to a resolution office. Will the Taoiseach ensure that the outstanding cases before the FSPO or the Central Bank are included for consideration before the IBRC special liquidator is wound down? It is essential that those who are claiming fraud and misconduct are heard and the Central Bank is aware of that particular case.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. Perhaps he can send me a note on it. I presume the Minister for Finance is aware of the case. I will speak to the Minister for Finance in respect of the content of the Bill and in terms of the inclusion in the resolution office of all outstanding issues to which the Deputy has alluded.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Yesterday, the Taoiseach made a statement in the Dáil that he could not understand, regarding the €20 million that Cork City Council got for the tenant in situ scheme, where it was gone. I have a report that the chief executive gave to Cork City Council last night at a special meeting called by Sinn Féin. It got unanimous support to write to the Minister for housing to give the money for the 33 families who were sale agreed but are now facing homelessness. Deputy Martin is a Cork Taoiseach. I know a lady in Gurrabraher, Annette Hawkins, who has to be out of the house next week. She has been living in the house for 21 years and she is going to be at risk of homelessness next week. Jason Cashman, who the office of the Taoiseach is dealing with, is another person who was sale agreed. There are 33 families. The council wants to buy the houses, the landlords want to sell the houses and the people want to stay there. The only people blocking this are those in the Government. Will the Taoiseach commit to Annette, Jason and the other 31 families that that funding will be given to Cork City Council to save them from homelessness?

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The Taoiseach: First of all, I never used the phrase “where it was gone”. I never used that phrase.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Sorry. The Taoiseach did not understand.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: I made the point that it was now April, €20 million had been allocated to Cork City Council and the city council was saying the €20 million was all gone. My view is that there have been issues around the operation of the tenant in situ scheme nationally and they have to be dealt with. Fundamentally, we have to target it at those who are in danger of homelessness because of eviction, an owner selling the house or whatever.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Those 33 families-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: There is an issue here and it is not just in Cork. The scheme was brought in in 2023 and it has been very successful and very effective. We want to continue to ensure it is effective.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Can we get a commitment for those 33 families? They are watching the telly now.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The driving test situation is appalling. There are 81,000 people on a waiting list. Many of them are in my county of Tipperary. There is only one tester in the town of Clonmel, which is a large town with a huge hinterland. This is causing enormous strain for families who now have to accompany drivers with L plates. Those drivers cannot get apprenticeships. I know many young people who have got jobs but must have a licence. There is one tester. We were told last year that 75 new testers were being appointed. I want to know where they are. I want more appointed in rural areas because we do not have the DART, Luas or other forms of public transport. People are hindered. The RSA has made a pure hames of this. It should be taken out of the hands of the RSA, which should just look after road safety and not driver testing or the issuing of licences. It is in it for the money, I think. It is miserable to have one tester in a town the size of Clonmel. People are doing their lessons, paying that expense and doing their best to get on the road to get to work, college and everything else, but there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy raised a very legitimate issue in terms of the testing backlog, which has been there for quite some time. I will speak to the Minister again in terms of talking to the Road Safety Authority. Decisions have been taken on reform of the driver testing aspect and responsibility for that. I will talk to the Minister again, given the urgency of this.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: We are set to see the roll-out of the free HRT programme on 1 June. I commend the work of the Government on trying to progress this. However, I must represent the significant concerns raised with me about the feasibility of the implementation of the programme as it currently stands. Independent pharmacies are not seeking to profit from implementing this programme, but the Taoiseach must admit that they should be able to break even when doing so. The Irish Pharmacy Union has published independent research that suggests that €6.50 is the appropriate service fee that should be available to pharmacists when implementing this programme. As it currently stands, the fee is set to be €5. Will the Taoiseach

commit to listening to independent pharmacies and review a programme that, potentially, will not be implementable, according to many pharmacists?

The Taoiseach: We come to the House and we talk about value for money for taxpayers and everything else. I respect the IPU. It has a job to do, which is to advocate for pharmacists, but just because it says a certain figure, do we all just say that is the figure?

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I have it. I have the breakdown of it.

The Taoiseach: I know all of that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: It is a loss.

The Taoiseach: The HRT product was offered free to people. The IPU said it wanted a dispensing fee. There has always been a dispensing fee for other medicines and so on. It falls to negotiation between the Minister for Health and the IPU. The Minister for Health has offered €5, plus €1,000 for signing up. In my view, it is not a bad deal at all.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Department of Health said it was €6.50.

The Taoiseach: If we are going to arbitrate every negotiation in the House, it will be no basis for negotiating with professional bodies or businesses and so on. Pharmacies have a key role to play. We need to roll out the service for women. I have concerns about how this is being arbitrated.

Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Mark Ward: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to regulate and licence the sale of nitrous oxide to exempted purchasers, to prohibit the sale of nitrous oxide and nitrous oxide products to a person who has not attained the age of 18 years, and to provide for related matters.

I welcome yesterday's comments by the Taoiseach that legislation was needed to tackle the misuse of nitrous oxide. Today, I introduce the Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025 with my colleague Seán Crowe.

You only have to walk through any park or housing estate in Dublin and beyond to see discarded nitrous oxide canisters. When I first noticed them in my area, they were small, silver, one-use canisters known locally as "silver bullets". Over time, this has changed to large industrial-sized canisters known as "fast gas". These large canisters are sold on the street by unscrupulous dealers making fast profits from the sale of nitrous oxide. Manufacturers are also marketing their product to children so they can sell to them. A report published by the HSE's adolescent addiction service showed a 22% increase in the number of young people attending that service who were taking nitrous oxide, which was a 175% increase in a year. That only captures young people who have to the attention of addiction services.

The widespread use of nitrous oxide is resulting in antisocial behaviour, litter and damage to people's health. Young people are playing Russian roulette when they use this gas. Inhaling nitrous oxide cuts off oxygen to the brain and gives a light-headed, giddy effect. This is

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where the term “laughing gas” comes from. I will tell the Minister of State that laughing gas is no laughing matter. A neurology specialist in the Mater hospital has warned of an increase in the number of patients suffering severe nerve damage after inhaling nitrous oxide. It was also reported that the gas causes a range of sensory issues, including numbness to the hands, feet and extremities, serious issues with balance, problems with heart rate and mental health issues. Earlier this year, we saw reports of an increase in young people presenting at health services after getting frostbite from using nitrous oxide. Some of the patients presented with burns around their lips and fingertips, which can take some months to resolve.

There is also an environmental impact. Several incinerators and waste management facilities across Europe suffered major damage when canisters exploded in their furnaces and compactors.

This legislation will restrict the sale of nitrous oxide for commercial use only. This is similar to legislation introduced in Holland, where authorities are regulating the use of nitrous oxide outside the medical and catering industries. This Bill will not criminalise the young person simply for possession of nitrous oxide, but it will give the Garda more power to seize-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am not sure whether the Deputy is sharing time.

Deputy Mark Ward: I am sharing. I am well aware of the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay, but I am not. That is all.

Deputy Mark Ward: Okay. This Bill will enable members of An Garda Síochána to seize nitrous oxide products from those without the appropriate licences. I call on all Members to support this common-sense Bill.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I am pleased to co-sponsor this legislation with my colleague Mark Ward. Reduction of the abuse of nitrous oxide is something I have been highlighting and working towards for some years. I introduced legislation to that effect in the previous Dáil. I am glad to have the opportunity to do so again.

The abuse of nitrous oxide is something that flies under the radar for many people. It is incredibly common. Many people have seen the rubbish left behind, as Deputy Ward said, especially the large black canisters, but not known what they were. “Where did these things come from?” is what many parents will ask. These canisters litter our green spaces and roadsides. Pressurised canisters can present a hazard to council workers going about their jobs and many volunteers who give up their time to keep communities tidy.

The easy accessibility and low cost of nitrous oxide make it a dangerous substance for misuse, particularly among young people. It is a gateway drug for them, especially young drug users, many of whom are children. Recreational use of nitrous oxide can lead to serious health consequences, including hypoxia, nerve damage and even death. The long-term neurological harm due to the depletion of vitamin B12 can be debilitating. Many young people who huff this gas may be signing up for serious problems later down the line. Regulation, as outlined in this legislation, can help curb the use of this gas, ensuring it is used for legitimate purposes. This is all aimed at protecting public health and reducing the environmental impact we can see so plainly in our communities.

This is a real health challenge that has been ignored for too long. The Garda want certainty

and young people need to be made aware of the dangers they are facing. This gas is not harmless. A temporary high can have very permanent consequences. We should highlight the misuse of this gas and try to get some sort of ban on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): Not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: For the motion on leave to introduce to be agreed, will one of the Deputies move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time?

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

Question put and agreed to.

Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on Orders of Reference and Establishment of Committees: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): I move:

That-

(1) the Select Committees as contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled "Orders of Reference and Establishment of Committees", laid before Dáil Éireann on 30th April, 2025, are hereby appointed pursuant to Standing Order 102, with the Orders of Reference as contained in the report, including the remit, powers, number of members and quorum of each Committee; and

(2) each Select Committee listed in the report shall be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to form a Joint Committee, to carry out the functions set out in Standing Order 103, other than at paragraph (5) thereof: provided that, pending the appointment of Select Committees by Seanad Éireann, Select Committees may consider all matters set out in Standing Order 103 and otherwise in their Orders of Establishment and shall have the relevant powers as defined in Standing Order 104 for those purposes.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I move amendment No. 1:

In paragraph (1), to insert the following after "quorum of each Committee":

" , save that the footnote ' 3 National Security encompasses cyber-defence, sub-sea critical infrastructure and related hybrid threats' on page 5 be deleted."

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will move the vote on the amendment to the weekly division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.30 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.31 p.m.

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Sitting suspended at 1.30 p.m. and resumed at 2.31 p.m.

EU Regulations: Motion

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2015/848 on insolvency proceedings to replace its Annexes A and B, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 12th March, 2025.

I very much welcome the opportunity to address the Dáil on this motion to exercise Ireland’s option to opt in to an important EU measure under Protocol 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The opt-in we will discuss today is a concise but important one concerning the insolvency regulation from 2015, No. 848. On 15 April last, I received approval from the Government to arrange for Ireland to participate in the adoption and application of a proposal for an amending regulation of that insolvency regulation and to move this motion in the House today.

Deputies will be aware that if Ireland wishes to take part in an EU measure with a legal basis that falls under Title V of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Oireachtas is required to give its approval under Article 29.4 of the Constitution. The measure before the House is one relating to judicial co-operation in civil matters. This proposal for an amending regulation has its legal basis in Title V and so it is subject to the provisions of Protocol 21 attached to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

It is proposed that we now notify the European Council of our wish to take part in this proposal to make updates to Regulation (EU) 2015/848 on insolvency proceedings recast under Article 3 of the protocol and to opt in to the proposal within three months of its presentation by the Commission. The three-month period for this proposal is due to end on 1 May 2025. While Ireland has already opted in to the original recast insolvency regulation, under the protocol a fresh opt-in is required in respect of any measure amending it.

As Deputies may be aware, the recast insolvency regulation provides for mutual recognition and enforcement of insolvency proceedings between European Union member states in cases with a cross-border dimension, for example, where an insolvent company or individual has branches, assets or liabilities in more than one member state. The 2015 recast regulation also updates EU law to strengthen recognition of pre-insolvency procedures and debt restructuring. It sets out strengthened rules on insolvency proceedings which involve groups of companies based in different member states. It also clarifies and extends the rules on secondary proceedings, that is, where the main insolvency proceedings are before a court in one member state but the company or individual also has a base, with different assets or obligations, in a different member state.

This proposal for an amending regulation of the 2015 recast insolvency regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending regulation on insolvency proceedings to replace its Annexes A and B makes some technical updates to the first two annexes in the 2015 insolvency regulation. It is important for me to stress the current proposal merely modifies these annexes to accurately reflect the content of national notifications and adapt the annexes containing the lists of national procedures or types of insolvency practitioners, respectively, in this field. These changes do not affect any of the obligations and rules set out in the regulation itself.

The proposal for an amending regulation to update and replace Annexes A and B of the recast regulation on insolvency proceedings with updated versions was presented to the Council by the European Commission on 14 February this year. Annexes A and B are decisive in defining the scope of application of the EU regulation. Specifically, Annexes A and B to the regulation set out definitive lists of the respective different types of insolvency proceedings, and the different types of insolvency practitioner, in each member state. Those proceedings and practitioners are to be recognised by other member states for the purposes of the recast regulation. It is, therefore, important that these annexes are regularly updated in order to reflect the actual legal situation in the member states.

The changes made by the amending regulation, which I am proposing Ireland opts in to, replaces Annexes A and B to the 2015 regulation with updated versions. These updates are required to take account of new types of insolvency proceedings and insolvency practitioners arising from changes to national insolvency law in seven member states. In July 2022, Slovakia notified the European Commission on recent changes of its domestic insolvency law introducing a new preventive restructuring procedure as well as a new type of insolvency practitioner. This was followed by notifications from Estonia, Spain, Malta and Italy in September 2022, from Belgium in July 2023 and from Luxembourg in January 2024.

It is important to emphasise that the amending regulation does not make any alteration to the lists of Irish insolvency proceedings and Irish insolvency practitioners in the annexes that are to be recognised and enforced by other EU member states under the recast insolvency regulation.

The efficient treatment of cross-border insolvencies of debtors with their centre of main interests in a member state requires that the scope of the regulation reflects the actual state of play of domestic insolvency laws. This proposal aims at ensuring that the scope of the regulation is adjusted to the actual legal framework of the member states on insolvency by the time of its application. I believe it is desirable that Ireland should opt in to this proposal for several reasons.

The recast insolvency regulation is an important and well-established part of civil justice co-operation between EU member states. The recast regulation ensures a more coherent and predictable approach in cross-border insolvency cases and avoids unnecessary legal uncertainty and added litigation costs. The amending regulation is a useful updating measure to ensure the effective and efficient operation of the recast insolvency regulation across EU member states.

As Deputies will appreciate, it is desirable for Ireland to apply the same, updated rules as other member states. Deputies may wish to note that the last amending regulation that made technical updates to the two annexes was adopted in December 2021 and in May 2022. Ireland exercised its right to opt in to that amending regulation, post adoption, in accordance with Article 4 of the protocol.

As this regulation also relates to company insolvency, I can confirm that my colleague, the Minister for enterprise, tourism and employment, Deputy Peter Burke, has noted this technical amendment, and supports the opt-in.

I commend this motion to the House. For the reasons I have outlined, I am requesting Members' approval to opt in to this proposed regulation. In conclusion, I should point out that, in effect, what is happening here is that a slight amendment is being made to the 2015 insolvency regulation. The amendment is minor. All that is happening is that two annexes to the regulation, Annex A and Annex B, are being amended. The reason they are being amended is that the law in respect of insolvency and insolvency practitioners has been changed in seven EU member states, although not Ireland. We want to ensure that the changes in the domestic law of those seven countries are reflected in the regulation so that we can continue with co-operation between member states in respect of insolvency matters. I look forward to hearing what other Members have to say.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister for the update. The opt-in before us facilitates the mutual recognition of changing insolvency practices in different European Union member states. As Ireland and other EU member states update, adjust or develop different civil mechanisms, it is generally right that we should continue to facilitate mutual recognition. Sinn Féin will be supporting this opt-in as we believe that, where such mutual recognition exists today, ordinary people and businesses should continue to avail of its benefits. However, I appeal to the Minister to bring any such opt-in proposals before the House in a timely manner so as not to deny needed scrutiny at any stage for the sake of expediency, which is usually necessitated by Government delays in bringing forward proposals.

When discussing insolvency, we cannot avoid discussing what is actually driving insolvency for both businesses and individuals. This includes the high cost of living, the cost of insurance, the cost of rent and sky-high utility bills in this State, all of which the Government has failed to tackle. These costs are the reason so many businesses are struggling, which unfortunately leads to many subsequently facing insolvency.

In addition, we have the specific problems caused by the failure to crack down on vulture funds. Recent Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments have not changed our insolvency framework for the better. I note the original 2015 regulation applies to both companies and legal persons and that it specifically states that "The scope of this Regulation should extend to proceedings which promote the rescue of economically viable but distressed businesses" and give them a second chance when needed. That is a worthy endeavour. Mutual recognition being the purpose of the regulation and given that the foundation of this regulation is to support that second chance, it is a shame that, in 2019, the Government approved changes to legal aid in personal insolvency cases, removing a debtor's automatic right to funding for a barrister. The Minister may recall that my party colleague, the Sinn Féin spokesperson on Finance, Deputy Doherty, described this as an attack on the most vulnerable and a coup for the banks and the vulture funds. In effect, it limited the ability of people, particularly ordinary people, to enlist the aid of a barrister in taking the fight to the banks. Sinn Féin opposed this measure and highlighted the fact that, when people actually brought the banks to court, they won nearly two thirds of the time. This lays bare the fact that this measure was intended to disarm ordinary people and to protect the banks.

It is clear that, where insolvency is involved, successive governments have left ordinary people at the back of the queue because, despite the Government having made some improve-

ments for workers via the Employment (Collective Redundancies and Miscellaneous Provisions) and Companies (Amendment) Act 2024, a crucial area that remains unaddressed is that of workers being treated as unsecured creditors for the purposes of collectively bargained redundancy agreements.

The Government's failure to reform and rebalance our own insolvency framework continues to have real-life consequences for people today. It particularly impacts on the 27% of people who managed to work themselves out of arrears and get their mortgage back on track since the financial crash and who are now facing an undue financial burden because they have been forced back into arrears arising from exorbitantly high interest rates. More than 100,000 struggling mortgage holders are paying interest rates of 6%. Some 7,000 of these are paying interest rates of more than 8.5%. These are the people whose mortgages were sold off during the austerity years and who, through sheer grit and playing by every rule, managed to get themselves back on a solid footing but who once more find themselves in a precarious position as result of the greed of vultures. The banks gave these people loans but, when the banks got into trouble, they off-loaded the loans to vulture funds at a significant discount. Those same vulture funds have been fleecing those customers ever since. Those people are now being charged absolutely crazy sums of money. Many of them are suffering as a result of that greed. That greed has been facilitated by the inaction of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments.

Scrutiny of proposals coming from the European Union is crucial because what the European Union does is not always in Ireland's best interests. We learned that the hard way during the banking crisis when the European Central Bank and European Commission were quick to burden Irish people with 42% of Europe's bank debt. When I was a Member of the European Parliament, I campaigned strongly against a proposed vulture fund directive. This was a proposal from the Commission to develop a secondary market for loans, whether they were performing or not. It is disgraceful that the proposal was supported by the Irish Government. At that time, I warned about the dangers of moving hundreds of billions of euro of bad debt into the shadow banking sector through the securitisation of non-performing loans. That approach is incredibly misguided and I warned that it would cause major new risks to financial stability. After all, mortgage-backed securities played a key role in the 2007-08 crisis.

I welcome the updating of the regulation that facilitates mutual recognition of insolvency across European Union member states. However, we have to focus equally on what is driving people into insolvency. The cost of living and the cost of doing business must be addressed and there must be a crackdown on vulture funds to ensure they are forced to provide interest rates at the same levels as banks. The Government needs to ensure that all mortgage holders who have played by the rules have the right to transfer back to the banks regardless of the status of their mortgages. Otherwise, all we will have to offer those people is assurance that any future insolvency they may have will be recognised in Malta, Luxembourg or another EU member state. We have to do everything in our gift to ensure that businesses and families are prevented from entering insolvency, wherever possible.

Deputy George Lawlor: The Labour Party has no difficulty with this motion and will not be opposing it. It is noted that, in July 2022, Slovakia notified the Commission of recent changes to its domestic insolvency laws that introduced a new preventative restructuring procedure and a new type of insolvency practitioner. That notification was followed by notifications from Estonia, Spain, Malta and Italy in September 2022, from Belgium in July 2023 and from Luxembourg in January 2024. All of these related to recent changes to these states' domestic laws, introducing new types of insolvency proceedings or insolvency practitioners. These new

types of insolvency proceedings and insolvency practitioners comply with the requirements set out in Regulation (EU) 2015/848.

As I have said, we in the Labour Party fully support this and have no difficulty with it but we must also look at many of our own domestic insolvency issues. A company may choose liquidation when insolvent and unable to meet its financial obligations. Liquidation allows for the orderly sale of assets to repay creditors. A company can be dissolved either through liquidation or the strike-off process. Once a company has been dissolved, the assets of that company become State property.

I will highlight the issue of Hookless Village, Hook Head, County Wexford. The company was declared insolvent and subsequently liquidated in the 2000s. Since that time, the premises has lain empty. It is a derelict and extremely dangerous eyesore. A once modern swimming pool, gym, bar and fully equipped restaurant today resembles something you would find in a deserted ghost town. Around it sit approximately 100 homes that were part of the original holiday resort. These homes are fully used by private owners and a number of Ukrainian families. There are many children and youngsters in the community and this dangerous eyesore forms the perfect adventure playground for them. Who is the owner of this dangerous property? We are. It is owned by the State or, to be more precise, by the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. In response to a parliamentary question I submitted in March of this year, the Minister of State said:

I am informed by the Commissioners of Public Works (OPW) that Section 28 of the State Property Act 1954 (the Act) provides that property held by a company at the time of its dissolution becomes state property, in the name of the Minister for Public Expenditure; National Plan Delivery and Reform (the Minister), unless it was held on trust for another. The OPW deals with legal/ownership issues arising on real property (land / buildings) that devolves to the Minister under the Act. This provision mainly exists to ensure that land is not ownerless. The OPW, or the Minister, does not occupy or take control of what is a large volume of property that falls under this heading.

The OPW cannot conclusively establish if property which was registered to the company referred to has vested in the Minister. The company has been dissolved since 19th October 2007 and can be restored to the Companies Register up to 20 years after that date. If restored any property it held will revert to the company as if it had never been dissolved. Any interest that may currently be held by the Minister is defeasible by restoration.

The Minister has limited powers under the Act but he can, under Section 31, waive any interest he has to another if appropriate in all of the circumstances. The Minister has in the past waived his interest in properties to Local Authorities and the OPW, on behalf of the Minister, is always willing to engage with any Local Authority to try to resolve issues arising with property of dissolved companies.

In other words, after insolvency and dissolution, the State, despite having ownership of the property which could possibly be salvaged so that someone could make a decent go of it, is not letting it go until after 20 years. We have to wait 20 years before we can do anything and even then, we probably will not bother. Wexford County Council has effectively shown no interest in this property despite the council having spent a deal of money trying to secure it against the perils it comes up against from the youngsters who are invading it. This is simply crazy. How many more of these dissolved and insolvent properties are lying around the country in the own-

ership of the Minister for public expenditure? We have effectively allowed them to become dangerous derelict sites and eyesores for want of legislation for the common good.

We have no difficulty in supporting the motion before us but let us get our house in order when it comes to insolvent company lands and property in State ownership.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the motion on Ireland's opt-in to the EU's amending regulation on insolvency proceedings. This might appear to be a technical matter and just another adjustment to European legal frameworks, but to those of us who believe the law should first and foremost serve people, it is anything but abstract. Insolvency law, at its core, governs what happens when things fall apart, a business collapses, debts cannot be paid and livelihood is on the line. This is the system we rely on to provide order, fairness and, hopefully, justice.

While I recognise and agree with the intention of the motion to streamline cross-border insolvency, prevent jurisdiction shopping and protect creditors, where necessary, we should also consider who it actually benefits and who might be overlooked. In this country, we have seen how financial systems can bend under pressure. We have been destroyed by it. We have seen individuals use foreign jurisdictions to resolve debts under more favourable conditions, something that is not available to most people struggling under the same weight. It is one thing to reform insolvency laws to facilitate smoother procedures across Europe but it is another ensure that reform benefits everyone equally. Let us not pretend that access to cross-border insolvency protections is evenly distributed. Those with knowledge, means and connections are far more likely to benefit than a small business owner or family who have fallen behind on their mortgage payments.

If we are to support the opt-in, as the Labour Party will in this case, it must be done with full awareness of the gaps in access and fairness that persist. We should not allow this to become a tool used more effectively by the wealthy than it can by the vulnerable.

I also caution that insolvency laws must never become a convenient mechanism to dissolve responsibility, be it financial, ethical or social. When creditors are protected workers must be protected too. When insolvency allows debts to be cleared safeguards must be in place to ensure it is not done at the expense of wages and pensions or with disruption to communities.

While Ireland is aligning our framework with Europe, we should take the opportunity to ask whether our domestic insolvency system is fit for purpose. Is it humane and accessible and does it provide a real path forward for ordinary people, not just corporations or those who can afford teams of advisers? This moment is an opportunity to reflect on what insolvency proceedings should look like in a republic that claims to value dignity, justice and equality. If we support this motion, let it be part of a broader commitment, one in which reform does not stop at compliance but goes further into fairness.

I support closer European co-operation but not at the cost of turning away from the lived experience of those in financial distress at home. Let us make sure that this is not just a bureaucratic tick-box exercise but a step towards a system that works for all, not just for those who know how to work it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will not oppose this amending regulation. It ensures the importance of the establishment of civil justice between European states.

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With regard to insolvency in this country, we have to look at how many businesses were forced into insolvency as a result of inflation or Revenue interest and penalties? We are talking about small businesses as well as large businesses. How many companies entered insolvency once, twice, three times, four times or five times and reopened each time under another name? How many had a sister company into which they moved the assets before going through insolvency and starting all over again? Protections need to be put in place to ensure the directorships of such companies leave a trail across showing the same people in the same companies coming back. We need to make sure regulation is in place to deal with that.

Small businesses going into insolvency as a result of Revenue interest and penalties should be looked at to see if they can be saved. Small businesses have inflation costs, employment costs and running costs. They will not have ways and means of getting funding from their banks to keep them going because the banks look at them as only small entities or as non-viable. These small businesses are very important to their communities, however.

I will not oppose the motion. This amendment is needed to make sure that insolvency is updated for all the European Union member states. We need to have provisions in place at home to deal with rogue operators that go into insolvency two or three times or more.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am grateful for a few minutes to speak on this very technical but necessary rubber-stamping of amendments to Regulation (EU) 2015/848 to modify its Annexes A and B, following the changes in seven EU member states, as the Minister outlined. It will ensure that the regulation continues to facilitate effective civil and judicial co-operation at EU level.

The Minister mentioned that we must do this within three months and this was issued in February. It is important and technical. In July 2022, Slovakia notified the Commission of recent changes to its domestic insolvency law introducing a new preventative restructuring procedure as well as a new type of insolvency practitioner. This was followed, as the Minister outlined, by notifications from Spain, Estonia, Malta and Italy in 2022, Belgium in July 2023 and Luxembourg in January 2024. The Commission went through all these notifications to ensure compliance and this is where the regulation needs to be amended. Essentially, if the Dáil approves the motion, it means we can apply the amended recast European insolvency regulation, ensuring that Ireland's insolvency laws align with the updated scope of the European framework.

The amendments make no substantive changes to the regulation but the efficient treatment of cross-border insolvency and of debtors with their centre of main interest in an EU member state requires regulation to reflect domestic insolvency laws. The proposal allows this regulation to be continued. As the Minister stated, it adjusts the legal framework of the member states on insolvency by the time of its application. This is why it is a three-month process. It is a rubber stamp and I support it.

3 o'clock

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank Deputies for their contributions to this important debate. We have listened carefully to what has been said today, and we can all agree on the importance of this opt-in.

In summary, this proposal was presented by the European Commission to the Council on 14 February 2025. It is for an amending regulation that will update and replace Annexes A

and B of recast Regulation 2015/848. These annexes are decisive in defining the scope of the application of Regulation 2015/848 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2015 on insolvency proceedings. They set out definitive lists of the different types of national insolvency proceedings and national insolvency practitioners in each member state that are to be recognised by other member states for the purposes of the regulation. It is important therefore that these annexes are regularly updated in order to reflect the actual legal situation in the member states.

The specific changes made by the new amending regulation are designed to replace Annexe A and Annexe B of the 2015 regulation with updated versions to take account of new types of insolvency proceedings and insolvency practitioners arising from changes in national insolvency law in seven member states. These member states are Slovakia, Estonia, Spain, Malta, Italy, Belgium and Luxembourg. The European Commission has analysed the notifications of the said member states in order to ensure compliance of the notifications with the requirements of the regulation. It is important for me to emphasise that this amending regulation does not make any change to the lists of Irish insolvency proceedings and Irish insolvency practitioners in Annexes A and B that are to be recognised and enforced by other EU member states under the recast insolvency regulation.

As already stated, it is desirable that Ireland should opt into this proposal for several reasons. The recast insolvency regulation is an important and well-established part of civil justice co-operation between EU member states and ensures a more coherent and predictable approach in cross-border insolvency cases, and avoids unnecessary legal uncertainty and added litigation costs. The amending regulation is a very useful updating measure to ensure the effective and efficient operation of the recast insolvency regulation across EU member states. As Deputies will appreciate, it is desirable for Ireland to apply the same updated rules as other member states. As a result, what we are asking the House to do today is to approve the exercise by the State of the opt-in or direction under Protocol 21 to take part in the adoption and application of the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation 2015/848 on insolvency proceedings to replace its Annexes A and B. It is important to reiterate that the current proposal merely modifies these annexes to accurately reflect the content of national notifications and adopt the annexes containing the lists of national procedures or types of insolvency practitioners respectively in this field. These changes do not affect any of the obligations and rules set out in the regulation.

The relevant three-month period to opt into this proposal will expire on 13 May 2025. It is desirable that Ireland should exercise its right to opt into this amending regulation. Therefore, I ask the House to approve the opt-in in this amendment to the proposed regulation.

Question put and declared carried.

Final Draft Revised National Planning Framework: Motion

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Final Draft Revised National Planning Framework, as approved by the Government on 8th April, 2025; a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd April, 2025 together with the Strategic Environmental Assessment Envi-

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ronmental Report, the Post-Consultation Natura Impact Statement, the Post-Consultation Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Report, and the Appropriate Assessment Determination.

I welcome the opportunity to come before the House to discuss and seek approval for the final draft of the revised national planning framework, which was approved by the Government on 8 April 2025. The finalisation of the approval process for the revised national planning framework and plays a key role in the delivery of our broader objectives across the Government. It reflects the importance and the urgency of a co-ordinated, plan-led approach for the effective delivery of critical development, such as housing, employment and climate-resilient electricity generation. This is an addition to the facilities and services required to meet the needs of our citizens.

I wish to give a brief overview of the revision process, which began formally on 20 June 2023. The Government gave approval to commence the process of undertaking the first revision of the national planning framework, in accordance with the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. The revision processes provided for a wide-ranging consultation, including stakeholders and the public. The process also included the reconvening of the planning advisory forum, the establishment of an expert group, a cross-departmental group and an environmental assessment technical steering group. Engagement was also undertaken with the joint Oireachtas committee on housing on two occasions during the revision process.

The draft first revision of the national planning framework and the associated environmental assessments was published in July 2024. A national public consultation ran from 10 July 2024 until 12 September 2024. An information campaign, including broadcast, print, digital and social media also ran to raise awareness of the consultation process and to encourage the public to engage with the first draft revision. A total of 272 submissions were received during the draft consultation stage. On 5 November 2024, the Government agreed to progress and publish a draft schedule of amendments to the first revision to the national planning framework arising from the public consultation on 8 April 2025.

The Government approved a final draft revised national planning framework following the conclusion of the environmental assessments. One of the key drivers of the revision process related to the real need to reflect updated population and housing projections further to census 2022 and subsequent demographic changes. It is essential that we pull in the real numbers to inform this work. The revised national planning framework strategy sets out the need to plan for a projected population of 6.1 million people in Ireland by 2040 under the baseline scenario provided by the ESRI, and a possible requirement to plan for a high migration scenario of 6.3 million people by 2040. Taking pent-up demand into account, the strategy sets out a need for a plan for the delivery of approximately 50,000 additional housing units per annum nationally to 2040. The original timeline for the revision of the process in order to ensure that the updated ESRI projections were available, noting that this independent and peer-reviewed report was a critical input to the revision. The targets draw on the ESRI's demographic and econometric modelling of population growth and structural housing demand to 2040, but also includes estimates relating to unmet demand, including homelessness data published by my Department. In parallel with the national planning framework, the Government approved revised housing targets on 5 November 2024, for the period of 2025 to 2030. The targets are set out at a national level, and provide for the delivery of at least 303,000 new homes over the period, at an average of 50,000 per annum, rising to an annual delivery of 60,000 by 2030. Work on translating the revised national housing targets into local authority and tenure-specific targets for social, affordable and private rented and owned homes is ongoing. In that context, we will use data from

the CSO, including census data, geographical profiles of income, the residential property price index and housing completion data, data from the Residential Tenancies Board on rental prices and data published by my Department.

The impact on development plans is also extremely relevant. This will result in the need for a plan for more housing delivery than the capacity currently available within development plans across the country. The strategy sets out the spatial planning policy approach to accommodate the projected population growth to 2040 in a manner which continues to deliver balanced regional development. This includes an even split of growth between the eastern and midland region, and the southern, northern and western regions combined, based on a city focus and a compact pattern of development. This aims to reverse the patterns of sprawl that have been a feature over recent decades. In terms of identifying locations for further growth and housing development at scale through transport-oriented development, a new element of the strategy, it is critical that planning for these opportunities is aligned with phased infrastructure investment.

Another critical element of the revision is the incorporation of the new policies in relation to renewable energy development, in particular the inclusion of regional, renewable electricity capacity allocations. This is in order to facilitate the accelerated roll-out and delivery of renewable electricity infrastructure for onshore wind and solar generation development. In addition to the related necessary grid development intended to support the achievement of the national targets set out in the climate action plan, the spatial planning system can play a key role in mitigating against climate change through the reduction of carbon emissions in sectors such as electricity, planning for renewable energy generating development and transport through the continued integration of land use and transport planning to support reduced commuting patterns and promotion of public transport, cycling and walking.

Areas of focus such as district heating, biomethane, biodiversity and the circular economy are flagged for particular attention. The national planning framework revision will ensure that our planning system can adequately reflect these important Government objectives. The revised national planning framework also acknowledges the clear link between climate action and the potential for investment generation and employment, including in connection with the offshore wind industry and green technology. The national planning framework highlights the need to plan for jobs and employment at locations that are integrated with the planned distribution of population and aligned to the development of the green economy and smart specialisation strategies that allow all regions to focus on their economic strengths.

The final revised national planning framework continues to support the overall development of urban and rural areas in Ireland and to deliver strengthened and diversified rural communities consistent with Government policy. In relation to supports for rural towns and villages, the draft revised framework has been updated to take account of the town centre first policy approach, and other Government initiatives such as the urban and rural regeneration funds, Croí Cónaithe towns and the continuation of the village renewal scheme and the vacant homes action plan.

In the context of the rural economy, the circular bioeconomy, rural enterprise, the agrifood sector and diversification are strongly supported. The development of tourism and other industries suited to rural areas are addressed throughout the document, aligned with the Department of Rural and Community Development's *Our Rural Future*, the Government's blueprint for rural development. Single rural housing based on social or economic need will continue to be supported.

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The final draft revised national planning framework continues to reflect the commitment to achieve the objective set out in the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 and retains the policy support for the implementation of language plans in the Gaeltacht language planning areas, Gaeltacht service towns and Irish language networks. The revision reflects on the ongoing co-operation and collaboration that exists between Ireland and Northern Ireland, with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland engaged in the revision process through membership of the planning advisory forum. Notwithstanding the challenges that exist in respect of the implications of Brexit, the draft revised national planning framework reflects on the opportunity for the strategic co-operation and investment for mutual benefit on the island of Ireland.

This includes, for example, continued support for the commitment of local authorities and other stakeholders to developing a co-ordinated approach to the development of the north-west city region comprising Letterkenny, Donegal, Derry and Strabane. The revision includes objectives for transport connectivity, health, education, investment in research and innovation, as well as reference to the PEACEPLUS programme, which is a major driver for cross-Border investment and co-operation. Approval of the revised national planning framework will ensure the most up-to-date policy position becomes formally imbedded as national planning policy with which the regional strategies and local level plans are required to be consistent.

The revised national planning framework will provide the basis for the reviewing and updating of regional strategies and local authority development plans to reflect matters such as updated housing figures, projected job growth and renewable energy capacity allocations, including through the zoning of land for residential, employment and a range of other important purposes. The plan-led approach to development that was further enhanced under the Planning and Development Act 2024 will continue to provide the basis for the identification and prioritisation of infrastructure delivery. The enhanced delivery of key infrastructure projects is a core objective of Government and a particular focus has already been placed on identifying blockages and ensuring they can be removed. In this regard, priority actions from the programme for Government are already being progressed, including the establishment of a new housing activation office. This office will enable infrastructure to support public and private housing development, while providing solutions to infrastructure blockages. It will draw on the towns and cities infrastructure investment fund to support strategic investment in housing orientated infrastructure.

Noting the urgency associated with the scaling up of housing delivery I, as Minister, have already signalled the intention to issue a policy direction to local authorities following finalisation of the revision process in order to enable rapid implementation of the updated planned housing requirements, by local authority area, into the current development plans. This will give a clear direction to be followed by planning authorities in updating their plans, allowing for stakeholders in the planning system to have clarity on the location and scale of the development proposed to meet housing need across the country.

I look forward to hearing the contributions from the Deputies in discussing and debating what is a very important revision.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I welcome the opportunity to come before the House to discuss and seek approval for the final draft revised national planning framework, which was approved by Government on 8 April 2025. As already outlined by my colleague the Minister, the ap-

proval process for the finalisation of the revised national planning framework plays a key role in delivering on our broader objectives across Government and will allow the significant policy changes that have taken place and other factors that have come into play since 2018 to be integrated into the planning system.

I wish to provide an overview of some of the key policy responses that have been incorporated into this revised NPF to ensure there is a robust strategy and a comprehensive national plan in place to guide and inform Ireland's future growth and development for many years to come. The revised NPF reaffirms the plan-led approach that is now firmly enshrined in legislation through the Planning and Development Act 2024, implemented at a regional and local level through our three regional assemblies and 31 local authorities. The importance of this plan-led approach cannot be underestimated as it aligns strategic planning policy from national level through to regional and local levels, giving effect to real sustainable outcomes for our regions, our cities and our communities, both urban and rural.

In 2018, the NPF recognised that continued investment in Dublin and the east coast is critical to support the future growth of Dublin as an international city of scale in the national interest but that this needs to be supported by a more balanced distribution of growth across all of Ireland's regions. The strategy recognises that a business-as-usual approach will not make the most effective and sustainable use of national and regional assets and resources. In contrast, more balanced and effective regional growth will harness the attractiveness and assets of all regions and places to a greater extent than it has to date.

The cornerstone policy of both the existing NPF and the revised version is the achievement of a greater regional balance in future population and employment growth. The goal is to see a roughly 50-50 distribution of growth between the eastern and midlands region and the southern, northern and western regions combined, based on a city-focused and compact growth pattern of development that will reverse the pattern of sprawl that has been a feature of recent decades. The ongoing shift to a more regionally balanced growth, supported by urban centres of scale, will be important in ensuring effective regional development and in supporting competitiveness, economic prosperity and environmental sustainability.

A number of specific projects to support better balanced regional development for the regions are referred to in the revised NPF, with such projects required to be advanced to delivery through the national development plan. The revision also includes objectives to improve interurban transport infrastructure, for example, through supporting the Atlantic corridor as part of the wider trans-European transport network, which link Ireland to the passenger and freight transport networks in continental Europe, in addition to examining recommendations in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review and key road projects that are essential for improving regional and interurban connectivity.

The compact growth policy approach of the revised NPF specifically addresses the need for a more sustainable form of development in Ireland's cities and towns. Its introduction was in response to an identified need to counter the trend of urban sprawl, to support the targeted delivery of infrastructure services and to promote cities and towns to be self-sustaining and viable places to live and work in. City-based population and employment growth is an important target of the NPF. The strategy sets a target of half of future population and employment growth to be focused in the existing five cities and their suburbs as a means of ensuring that cities deliver as accessible centres of scale. The proportion of national population growth achieved in 2022 in the five cities was 32% of overall growth. In order to achieve the overall increase in city-

based population growth, the NPF sets out ambitious growth targets to enable the four cities of Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford to grow by at least 50% each to 2040.

To support the achievement of these targets, a new element of the NPF strategy included in this revision results from the possible requirement to plan for population growth that would exceed the baseline of 6.1 million set out by the ESRI in line with the high migration scenario the Minister, Deputy Browne, referred to of 6.3 million, provided in the same report. This is to be undertaken and delivered in line with longer term strategic planning for transport-orientated development in Ireland's five cities to support the delivery of new sustainable communities at brownfield and greenfield locations along existing or planned high-capacity public transport corridors. This will allow planning authorities to identify areas with significant potential for development within development plans and thereby provide medium- to longer term certainty around the status of those lands.

As regards identifying locations for future growth and housing development at scale, it is critical that planning for these opportunities is aligned with the phased infrastructure investment that will follow. Greater clarity is provided for as part of the revised NPF as to what the definition of a built-up area is, and there is a signalling to the monitoring system that will track implementation of the targets in a consistent way for all major settlements. The alignment of the NPF with the national development plan through Project Ireland 2040 governance provides a solid foundation for sustained growth and investment.

Policy coherence and co-ordination of investment programmes have been identified as critical elements for the successful implementation of the NPF strategy. The programme for Government has emphasised the delivery of essential infrastructure as a key driver in attracting and retaining investment in Ireland, growing our economy, fostering regional development and delivering on our housing targets, and achieving our ambitious climate goals. Given the strategic role of the NPF, any reference to specific projects or enablers is restricted to those that are of a strategic nature such as transport, water and grid infrastructure projects that are of a national or regional significance. It is also important to note that the NPF provides the spatial policy framework but in itself does not directly provide for investment but, rather, is aligned with the national development plan.

There are metropolitan area strategic plans for all of our five cities, and a MASP has been prepared as part of the three regional spatial and economic strategies for each of the regions. The MASPs set out a framework to guide development in the wider city region. The revised NPF indicates that, as part of phasing in the transition to achieving urban consolidation and brownfield targets, a proportion of up to 20% of the phased population growth targeted in the principal city and suburban area could potentially be accommodated in the wider metropolitan area - in other words, outside of the city and suburbs or the contiguous zoned area. This can be in addition to the growth identified for the metropolitan area itself.

As regards the potential for improved institutional arrangements to deliver on the NPF strategy, a new national policy objective has been included to highlight the commitment to reviewing reforms that may be necessary in terms of the governance of metropolitan area strategic plans, in recognition of the important role they will play going forward.

I reiterate the importance of this body of work and thank everybody who has engaged in the process recently, including the Oireachtas joint committee, of which I was a member prior to being elected to Dáil Éireann. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Deputies.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I will be sharing time with my colleague, Deputy McGuinness.

Statutory planning frameworks are enormously important. They not only set out a clear and legally defined basis for the entire hierarchy of plans, including the regional plans, the city and county development plans and local area plans, but they also provide a long-term strategic framework for investment and delivery of much-needed infrastructure and for housing. Getting it right is crucial and getting it wrong is more than damaging. In order to get the plan right, the process has to be got right. It gives me no pleasure to say that, having been through the previous national planning framework process, I believe the Government has made a number of mistakes in the process, which, unfortunately, is impacting the quality of the plan in front of us. The consultation period over the summer last year was too short. We had written to the Department's officials at the time asking for a short extension and that was denied. Notwithstanding the fact that there have been a significant number of submissions, having it over the summer made it difficult for many, ourselves included, to facilitate or participate in that.

Of greater concern, however, is that there should have been an enhanced role for the Oireachtas. The document itself should have been brought into committee. There should have been an opportunity for detailed scrutiny, not just in our housing and planning committee but in other committees as well. Instead we got a very brief session several days before the dissolution of the Dáil. I was very grateful to have had the benefit of at least some exchange with the Department's officials. However, we also had no opportunity to hear the view of sectoral organisations and third parties on the revised draft. Crucially, we had no opportunity to amend or even suggest amendments for consideration by the Government. When we received the revised draft in November, the Department's officials did give us a change-tracked version of it from the original NPF, which was very useful, but when I sought an updated version of that in advance of today, I was told it would not be available until after the vote. That has made it genuinely difficult to know what changes, if any, have been made between the document published in November and the one agreed by Cabinet only a week ago. As a consequence, this document is very weak. There are things that could have been done to make it better. I will go through some of those and colleagues throughout the course of the debate will refer to others.

The first issue I will raise is a concern about the calculations of population growth. The process, as the Minister of State knows, starts with a census. Two years later, the ESRI undertakes an assessment, and then, a year later, we have the review. That means a period of three years passes between the census data and the figures in the document in front of us, and a lot can change during that period. This was one of the fundamental flaws of the national planning framework in 2018. It was based on outdated census data and did not take into account changes between the 2016 census and the 2018 document. I think there is a risk of making the same mistake again. We argued during debate on the Planning and Development Bill that there should be more frequent reviews and they should be more timely on foot of the updated data becoming available from the census. Therefore, notwithstanding my concern, there needs to be a more frequent subsequent review to take account of whatever changes may happen in terms of population and migration patterns over the coming years.

This is particularly relevant when it comes to the housing needs assessment of the document. In fact, this was one of the strongest criticisms of the last NPF not just from us in the Opposition but also from the building industry, housing organisations and housing policy experts. The 2016 census was out of date by the time *Rebuilding Ireland* was published. The housing targets that then fed into the national planning framework were simply too low. It took the Government far too long to accept what everybody else knew. The Minister is making the

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same mistake with this. I had a detailed exchange with his planning officials at the committee in November. The census was in 2022. There have been significant changes, as we know from subsequent ESRI migration and population reports. However, there has also been no adequate consideration of the issue of unmet demand. The ESRI report that has informed the planning framework is based on emerging demand, that is, future demand that will come. The only estimate we have of pent-up demand, as the Minister knows, is the Housing Commission's. I understand some officials in the Minister's Department do not agree with that and that is fine, but despite our having asked for the Minister and the Department to publish the methodology upon which their assessment of the deficit in its numbers in front of us today is based, that has yet to be published. We have a structural demand of 44,000 units per year, according to the ESRI, and an estimate of the unmet or pent-up demand that is about half of the Housing Commission's. That is too low. The figure of an average of 50,000 new homes a year is too low. My reading of the report of the Housing Commission suggests it would need to be at least 60,000 per year. Every year, the Government misses that, the deficit grows and the overall targets need to be raised. This is not just a criticism of mine, as senior members of the Housing Commission are publicly on record saying the same. This is an issue that must be revised. There is a big difference between the targets Government set in the housing plan and its objective assessment of need. The latter should tell us what is required in the form of unmet demand and emerging demand. Then it is up to whoever is in government to say how that Government will meet that. The two are not the same but, for political reasons, they have been conflated, fatally undermining this plan.

I am also concerned about national planning objectives 2 and 3. I am not convinced that the 50:50 population distribution is balanced regional development. When we discussed these matters at committee, my colleagues and other Deputies, including Government Deputies, from Cork, Limerick, Sligo and Galway challenged and questioned the rationale of the 50:50 development. It is something that needs to be constantly revisited. I appreciate it represents significant growth in some of those regional cities but I am concerned it is still too Dublin- and greater Dublin area-centric, with all the problems that brings for the city, the greater Dublin area and balanced regional development more generally.

I acknowledge there has been a small change with national planning objectives 7 to 10, inclusive, on compact growth, but I am genuinely concerned "compact growth" still is not properly defined and allows outer existing settlement rather than focusing on inner urban genuine compact growth. The problem is if it is poorly defined and, as is currently the case, there are not adequate supports for public and private sector higher density inner urban development residential projects, then we are going to see continued suburban sprawl. The majority of what has been built in Dublin and the GDA over the past few years is on the other side of the M50 where I represent and in north Wicklow as well as east Kildare, Meath and south Louth. I am not arguing against housing there, but very little is actually happening in our inner urban cores in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Waterford and that is a fundamental problem.

Regarding national policy objective 45 on vacancy and dereliction, which relates to the conversation I just referenced, the crucial thing here is the NPOs, as they are the things that have legal impact, rather than the fluffy text around them. They are too weak and too ill-defined.

I bring to the Minister's attention an ongoing concern I have with national planning objective 57 on the housing needs demand assessment. This is an important tool. If the data going into it is accurate and up to date and the methodology employed is correct, it cannot only tell us the total number of homes we need, but the tenure breakdown of those right down to county level, local electoral area and even below. However, when I met the Department a year and a

half ago on this, nobody could tell me, for example, what data went into determining the social and affordable housing targets and what the actual methodology was. It seemed to almost be a mysterious black box where some stuff went in one side but very few people could explain how the numbers came out the other. I suspect if the Minister and I were to sit down with it, we would both struggle to understand where the numbers were derived from. We need to get that tool right. While the operation of the HNDA is a matter for the Minister and the Department, if it is not got right, everything that follows, including the targets for social and affordable housing, whenever they are announced, as well as targets for age-friendly accommodation and accommodation for people with disabilities, will be wrong.

I am also concerned there is no greater clarity on rural housing, Gaeltacht housing, housing on the islands or age-friendly housing from a planning point of view. We are still awaiting the guidelines. I think the Minister is the fourth Minister I have stood in front of discussing the rural guidelines. My colleague, Deputy McGuinness, will be raising both those and the Gaeltacht planning guidelines. What is in the NPF is too vague. It is too open to interpretation. There is too much inconsistency across Departments and that needs to change.

There is still no adequate attention to the spatial distribution of disadvantage. We asked for it to be mapped in the original NPF but it was not. That has all sorts of implications for ensuring investment helps us tackle disadvantage spatially. Chapter 8 on the all-Ireland dimension is vague and unclear but other colleagues will deal with that. In chapter 9, there is virtually no mention of embodied carbon in the built environment. There is lots of good stuff on energy efficiency but unless we are actually constructing a lower carbon built environment, it is going to be a problem.

This is a disappointing document. It repeats many of the mistakes of its predecessor as well as creating new mistakes. It does not have my party's support at this stage and we will continue to make the case for a planning framework that will meet the social, economic, cultural and environmental needs of our people. This does not and it is on that basis we will be voting against it.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: A national planning framework should be a road map for fairness, decent living standards, balanced development and a future where no community is written off. What we have before us in the draft framework falls far short of that. It is a framework that gestures at ambition but lacks the backbone to deliver. It reads more like a vague wish list than a serious plan for action. This Government has failed to close the gap on many fronts, but especially in this document, between policy and delivery. Whether in the inner city or the rural parish, communities are battling for school spaces, access to a GP and gardaí, and left dealing with outdated and inadequate public transport links. The housing crisis is impacting all communities, rural and urban. By every metric, it is getting worse by the week.

The draft framework marks a slight shift by acknowledging these problems but offers no urgency, no binding targets and no real change in how power or funding is distributed. For years, rural Ireland has been neglected rather than supported. The current approach to rural housing is a case in point. It is often restrictive, inflexible and dogmatic. If a young family wants to build a home in the community they grew up in, then the State should support that. We need real investment in the basics in housing, connectivity, accessible public services and a planning system takes into account the needs of rural communities. A future in which rural communities thrive requires more than fine words. It requires the political will to back them with action.

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Tá pobal na Gaeltachta fágtha ar lár arís agus arís eile. Tá sé soiléir nach bhfuil an Rialtas seo sásta ár bpobail Ghaeltachta a chosaint. Níl sa phlean seo ach ráitis agus gealltanais bhriste. Tá treoirilínte pleanála don Ghaeltacht fós gan foilsiú. Tá teaghlaigh óga ag fanacht, ag éirí mífhoighneach agus ag imeacht óna gceantair dhúchais. Tá an Ghaeilge agus pobal na Gaeltachta i mbaol má leanaimid leis seo. Ní leor focail. Tá gá le gníomh, le spriocanna soiléire do thithíocht shóisialta agus inacmhainne, le suímh sheirbhísithe sna Gaeltachtaí, le maoiniú dáiríre agus le polasaithe a thugann tús áite do phobail atá ag iarraidh maireachtáil agus fás trí Ghaeilge.

We cannot talk about planning without talking about power, including who holds it and who gets left out. Where is the emphasis in this document on community development and social inclusion? Where is the vision for a better, fairer and more inclusive Ireland? I do not see it. Sinn Féin believes community-led development is not optional but essential. Funding must flow directly to communities, both urban and rural. LEADER, regeneration funds and youth services are not luxuries, but the difference between vibrant communities and places drained of opportunity.

This framework is silent on coastal and fishing communities. That silence is damning. These communities are being hammered by EU quotas, underinvestment and the loss of young people, yet they are rich in potential for renewable energy, marine tourism and sustainable seafood. Sinn Féin believes in our coastal communities and our maritime potential and we have articulated that over many years. Successive Governments have failed to recognise the potential of our hugely valuable maritime resource. Sustainable and community-driven initiatives to exploit that resource need to be developed. The NPF should reflect that but it does not. It has no fleshed-out plan on maintaining and expanding our working harbours, supporting small-scale fishers or investing in other infrastructure. The blue economy - fishing, tourism, aquaculture, renewable energy, sea safety, trade and maritime defence - are neglected in this document. The draft framework needs clearer targets, named projects and guaranteed delivery in every county, not just in the major cities and their commuter belts. Otherwise, our time is being wasted again. There is no reference to the development of Waterford Airport, for example, the port or the main routes of the N24 and N25, which are becoming more dangerous, congested and inadequate every day. There are harbours that barely have water due to a lack of dredging. Developing offshore wind energy was spoken about, yet one cannot even get a punt out of a harbour. This draft lacks urgency, vision and a tangible plan for rural communities. Sinn Féin will not support any version of the NPF that does not place the needs of communities front and centre. It is time to deliver more than promises; it is time to deliver real change.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The national planning framework is a critical piece of work that underpins everything in regional planning, development plans and local area plans. It is vital we get this right, as this document goes to the very essence of how we do planning, development and infrastructure in this country. This plan should be an opportunity to set out and better reflect the need for a more balanced distribution of economic activity and population growth to close the gap between Dublin and the regional cities. The NPF should also set out a baseline for our ambition and not act as a ceiling on future development. We need more compact, low-carbon and balanced regional development.

The NPF refers to transport-orientated development. It must be clearer in the document that this refers primarily to rail-oriented development. Limerick and Waterford are ripe for transit-oriented development. Investment in the rail network is the most efficient, effective and climate-resilient way to move masses of people. The spine of our rail network should underpin

the NPF, particularly in Limerick. This would allow us to maximise the benefits of increased compact growth, which is vital in solving the housing crisis and meeting our transport goals.

Regional cities outside of Dublin cannot continue to suffer as Dublin expands at an unsustainable pace, with infrastructure in the Dublin region in particular unable to cope. Cities outside of Dublin must be allowed more ambitious growth targets to achieve their potential to become regional cities of scale, particularly my city of Limerick. Limerick has potential for growth in excess of 60%, with existing third level institutions, road and rail infrastructure and access to a deep-sea port and international airport. The stated aim of Project Ireland 2040 is to develop regional towns and cities as viable urban centres of scale that can act as alternatives and a counterbalance to the continued growth of Dublin and its surrounding region. Project Ireland 2040 envisages that the population of Limerick city and its suburbs will grow by between 50% and 60% by 2040. Limerick has huge potential to develop as a regional city of scale and become a counterpull to a sprawling Dublin metropolis. This potential cannot be realised unless growth targets in the plan are revised upwards for cities outside of Dublin. We need stronger and more ambitious targets for compact growth. Alternative targets are needed, such as densification targets for urban areas, including mature suburbs.

The NPF also needs to be stronger on the role of regional airports, in particular Shannon Airport, the biggest and most underutilised infrastructure in the State. It has the longest runway in Ireland and the capacity to take double the number of passengers it currently takes. At a time when Dublin Airport takes nearly 91% of air traffic into the State, the role of Shannon Airport and the Shannon campus in balancing national economic growth must be better recognised and reflected in this plan.

I call for the boundary of Waterford map to be expanded to include Waterford Airport, as Deputy Conor D. McGuinness referenced, and Tramore. Similar has been done in Cork and Limerick. From talking to my colleagues down there, there is a strong feeling that Waterford was treated differently when the NPF was first done.

The Labour Party believes the national planning framework must better reflect our climate goals and the need to reduce emissions from fossil fuels by 51% by 2030. I am concerned about the aspects of the NPF that pertain to energy, particularly LNG, after the recent policy reversal by the Government. My colleague, Senator Cosgrove, tabled an amendment yesterday concerning the national energy policy referred to on page 132 of the framework, which insists that all energy policy relating to planning should be built on the pillars of sustainability, security of supply and competitiveness. We support these goals and want to work with the Government to achieve a just transition. The target to cut greenhouse emissions by 51% by 2030 will be very difficult to achieve as is, with the SEAI report telling us that nearly 86% of our energy still comes from fossil fuels. We have five years to get this down to 51%. This will become completely impossible if the development of LNG infrastructure is allowed. This flies in the face of all three pillars of the national energy policy. I have other concerns that need to be addressed.

Colleagues from rural constituencies have contacted me about their concerns regarding the impact of the NPF on rural Ireland. There is no acknowledgement in the framework of the ongoing disaster of the defective blocks scandal in Donegal. Planning is required to restore the homes of thousands of people. It is not just in Donegal; there are people in my constituency. The shortage of housing in Gaeltacht areas is being made worse by the problem of holiday homes and short-term lets. Senator Cosgrove yesterday spoke in the Seanad about the role of Sligo as a regional city. Sligo does not receive the correct level of support to grow and develop

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in a sustainable manner. My colleague, Deputy Wall, has told me Kildare County Council does not yet have exact figures on the population targets under the revised NPF broken down by county. There is no doubt that strategic plan-led development is needed regarding population growth. The plan must identify locations that have or are about to have the correct infrastructure to support population increases. We cannot see the situation at the moment, particularly in rural Ireland, where homes receive permission without the proper basic infrastructure in place such as transport, schools and other necessary infrastructure.

They must be front-loaded. I welcome that the Minister referenced rural Ireland. Too many of our rural communities are in trouble because of constraints on current county development plans. Many rural locations have the necessary infrastructure such as schools, sporting facilities and shops to sustain a greater population than they currently have. Will the Minister confirm when each local authority will receive the exact population and growth patterns the NPF mentions? A lot of my colleagues are waiting on these figures, as are local authorities, because they will need to re-examine their county development plans and progress the development of towns and villages in their local authority areas. My colleague, Councillor Thomas Phelan, in Dungarvan contacted me. He is concerned about what the revised NPF will mean for towns such as Dungarvan that have not yet done their local area plans due to the NTA insisting on local transport plans. They need to know these figures in case they have to rezone land or reopen a county or town development plan. These towns and villages are losing businesses and essential services. Vacancy and dereliction in a lot of these areas is on the rise.

To go back to more urban areas, there is also concern about a lack of evidence-based planning. The concern is that this will lead to more land being speculated on and hoarded by a few developers and the lessons of the planning tribunals being forgotten. What we know for sure is that the revised NPF will lead to an increased supply of zoned development land but the Government itself does not know at the moment how much land is already zoned for residential development.

There is also a concern, as others have outlined, about the housing targets. Many county development plans were done relatively recently and there was an awful lot of back and forth with the OPR. The OPR came back to many local authorities, my own included, and told them that they were attempting to zone too much land. Those local authorities are now required to reopen their county development plans and re-examine them. Where does this leave the OPR in terms of its credibility and independence if councils reopen their development plans and zone more land?

While we welcome the fact that we finally have the revised document, the consultation process was far too slow over the summer. We believe that this is a weak document and that there are a number of key flaws in it. This should have come before the Oireachtas for scrutiny. It should have come before the committee and we should have had the opportunity to go through it in granular detail, which is what my colleagues in the Labour Party and I believe is necessary. That is why, at this stage, we cannot support this document.

Deputy Rory Hearne: This planning framework is important but, unfortunately, it is insufficient and inadequate in a number of areas, which I will talk about presently.

I wish to discuss the housing emergency because it is linked to this. It is linked to what is absent from the planning objectives. I refer to the absence of an objective to deliver affordable housing and any assessment of what scale of affordable housing is required or how it is going

to be delivered and where. We heard a claim yesterday by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, that the Social Democrats and the Opposition had not put forward ideas, alternatives or solutions around housing but we have put forward a number of evidence-based solutions and I want to put them on the record again. For example, I wrote to the Minister about the proposal we put forward for a homes for Ireland savings scheme that would offer a new source of finance for housing. Indeed, it would be private financing. It was very frustrating to hear the Taoiseach say that this would not build any homes but that what was needed was institutional investors and private equity funds to provide finance to build homes. That is actually a contradictory statement. He said the issue was that we did not have finance to build homes but the home for Ireland savings scheme is a solution that can access additional finance to build homes and potentially leverage the €160 billion that is in the banks. I ask that the Minister take this proposal on board and see how it can be implemented rapidly and start providing an additional financing stream for affordable housing that would actually help to deliver homes.

The reality is that we are in a catastrophic situation. The level of homelessness that we are seeing right now is unprecedented but, unfortunately, it is becoming normalised by this Government. It is not just the current Minister, who is relatively new, but also previous Ministers. We must restate that current levels of homelessness or, indeed, any level of homelessness or any child being left homeless is a national scandal. I cannot get over how we have allowed the situation to develop whereby it is not a case of stopping everything because we have thousands of children growing up in emergency accommodation. I just cannot get my head around it.

We have measures like the tenant in situ scheme, which was working well and the Department accepted was working but has now been restricted for some reason. It still exists but its ability to function for local authorities is being restricted. It has already been reported that Dublin City Council in my own area has issues with regard to the funding that is available to make it work. The same is true of Kildare County Council and Cork City Council. These councils are saying that, due to the changes, they cannot use the scheme to the same extent they did last year. Will the Minister reinstate in full the tenant in situ scheme?

On the planning framework itself, there are clearly issues with zoning, the servicing of land and infrastructure but these problems have been there for years. It is extremely frustrating that they have not been tackled. It is only now that this is being looked at and the Government is asking if there are new ways in which we can tackle these issues. Why have they not been tackled up to now? I am concerned that what we are going to see is more lip service and claims that these issues are going to be tackled rather than properly tackling them. There are some fundamental issues at play here.

The proposal we made to zone land for affordable housing is not in this plan. I do not understand why we are not zoning land for affordable housing as has been done in other countries. It is a way to ensure that, when we are zoning land, it will deliver affordable housing in perpetuity. There is a fundamental problem in the zoning of land currently. If local authorities zone land for residential development and there is no set allocation for affordable housing, what we will see, which is what we see currently, is land being speculated on. When the land is rezoned, the private owner of the land gains the uplift from that rezoning and can sit on it or sell it on to someone else who buys it and then sits on it. There is no mechanism through which that land can be developed. There are no proposals or measures put forward to ensure that zoned land is developed. There is a flaw in this framework because there is no use-it-or-lose-it mechanisms in terms of planning permission or zoning. While the tax measures on zoned land might go some way towards forcing development or ensuring zoned land is developed, what the frame-

work is not doing, ultimately, is addressing the issue outlined by the Kenny report in the 1970s of the speculative, windfall gain from land that is rezoned. It is home buyers who have to pay this. Countries like the Netherlands have a much more active land strategy whereby the state purchases the land, gets the planning permission and puts in the infrastructure. Essentially, what we are going to do is zone all of this extra land for residential development with no mechanisms by which to ensure that the infrastructure goes in and homes are actually built on it.

4 o'clock

We can put the infrastructure in there but it may not necessarily be built on. We have a fundamental problem in how we are doing that because, ultimately, we are still taking this market-led approach to housing delivery and it is still in this plan. The entire planning objectives contain no mechanisms by which affordable housing will be built on land. There are no mechanisms by which this will be implemented, apart from aspirational references to what the Land Development Agency might do with public land. However, there are no mechanisms by which that will happen for private land. That is a major flaw that must be addressed. We need mechanisms by which, for example, the Land Development Agency is given full compulsory purchase order powers to compulsorily purchase private land on a significant scale and start looking at ways in which it can prepare that land and ensure that affordable housing is built on it and getting builders to build on it. Local authorities could also play that role. We are limiting what the State can do with land by only focusing on public land. There is a real issue about the public land we are using.

There is a lack of clarity on this and on outcomes and strategies in the planning framework.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Whitmore. Ceithre nóiméad, le do thoil.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I looked through the document. When you read it, it all sounds very worthy as did the document before it and many other documents this Government and previous governments have produced. These are all nice, shiny, glossy documents that have very good sounding objectives and visions in place. Take, for example, national policy objective 12. It reads: “Ensure the creation of attractive, liveable, well designed, high quality urban places that are home to diverse and integrated communities that enjoy a high quality of life and well-being.” That is absolutely fantastic. How could we argue against that? However, the reality is we have seen many of these documents with many similar objectives. The issue for us as a country is not writing these documents but rather implementing them and seeing them delivered. To date, we have not seen the development of communities.

I only have a few minutes, so I will use this opportunity to talk about my constituency in Wicklow. Wicklow neighbours Dublin. We have seen considerable population growth over recent years and compared with other parts of the country we have seen quite a bit of housing go in. However, the housing is not affordable. We are talking €800,000 for a four-bed and €650,000 for a three-bed. That is a pretty standard price. For many who were born and raised in Wicklow, the reality is they will not be able to afford to remain in Wicklow. Many parents with adult children in Wicklow are really conscious of that and are incredibly worried about their children. Once you force children to a different county, or indeed country, you are breaking up that family network and the core fundamentals of community. You are taking away families’ opportunities to engage with their grandchildren and taking away childminders in many instances, and when there are elderly parents you are taking away adult children’s ability

to care for their parents as they age and that fundamental promise of community is gone.

The document talks about schools, public transport, healthcare facilities, primary care centres and Garda stations – all the things we need, should have and should be investing in but that we have not been investing in.

We talk about education and the need to have sufficient educational facilities and infrastructure but we just do not have it. It seems like the Department of Education is continually chasing its tail in providing sufficient educational spaces. Again, I am talking about Wicklow. At the moment, I am dealing with five children who have no place for secondary school this September. That could be seen as a blip, an unfortunate instance where the Department will hopefully step in and resolve that, but last year was the same and previous year and the year before that. Every year the exact same thing happens. We do not have enough primary school or secondary school places. You can see the problems moving from Greystones to Newtownmountkennedy to Wicklow town and in Blessington where we have infrastructure and where kids are in modular buildings. It takes years to get the proper permanent building in place. Not only does it take years but it takes hours, weeks and months of parents fighting for it to get it in place. That is not acceptable.

This week, public transport for Greystones and Kilcoole went up in price. That is a crazy decision.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Okay.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We do not have sufficient, affordable and proper public transport. We do not have investment in the infrastructure we need. Unfortunately, I do not have much faith that the Minister will be able to deliver the communities we need.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): I call Deputy Sinéad Gibney.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the revised national planning framework. It is such a crucial piece in the infrastructure of our planning in this country. Obviously, it flows down into regional plans and into local area plans and sets those parameters which we need to guide the development of our population and our communities over the coming years. In particular, I welcome that brownfield sites and infill development is a feature in this. In my constituency, although really across Ireland, we need to make sure we harness that as a way to make sure we reach our targets in terms of housing development but that we do it in a way that is sustainable and in a way that keeps communities together, which is so crucial.

I agree with my colleagues in terms of what we need to see match this. It is the infrastructural development that unfortunately we have been crying out and which has been under-delivered again and again by this Government. In my constituency of Dublin Rathdown transport is such a problem for people. The bus routes are not working for them. The Luas was such a great success but now capacity is such that people cannot even get on at certain stops. Even at my local stop in Sandyford or in Stillorgan, it is difficult to get a seat in the morning at rush hour. Healthcare, GP visits and secondary school places are a problem as well. With regard to amenities and sports facilities for young people, there are issues in Sandyford where conflict has arisen because young people have so little available to them in the local area-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Okay.

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Deputy Sinéad Gibney: -----and indeed sports facilities are crying out-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Just to finish-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): We are well over time.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: There is such a positive story here in terms of the population development we will see.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It will be 296,000 people by 2040-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: -----so we have to build the appropriate infrastructure-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: -----to meet those needs.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you very much. We will go back to the Sinn Féin Party and to Deputy Pa Daly. Cúig nóiméad, le do thoil.

Deputy Pa Daly: The national planning framework had the potential to unlock a brighter future in this country and to right the wrongs of the past, to develop a co-ordinated strategic and ambitious approach to the social, economic, environmental and cultural development of the island but what has been presented is certainly not that. It lacks ambition, is devoid of detail and is certainly not going to bring in the transformative change that the country deserves. Unsurprisingly, the Government has once again decided to rush through today another essential policy tool without allowing for proper Oireachtas scrutiny but that is par for the course for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - skipping the essential democratic processes so they can evade criticism and let the Minister off the hook.

This framework will not deliver our climate ambition nor will it deliver the interconnected transport system that will facilitate balanced regional development and ensure proper rural connectivity. There is also nothing in here - faic all - for the Gaeltacht area. There is a basic failure to marshal this plan to address the twin crises in climate and biodiversity and ensure that Ireland's future development is informed by these existential threats. These challenges are intertwined and should not be treated in isolation. Ireland is one single biogeographic unit. We know about the challenges of ecological collapse. They do not pay attention to borders, so we need an all-Ireland approach. What engagement, if any took place, between Ministers and officials with their counterparts in the Six Counties? I would love to know.

The integrated electricity market already demonstrates the benefit of an all-island approach and there is no reason we cannot build on this in terms of energy but also a united transport system. However, to achieve this we need more than the vague nods to deeper collaboration that we see in the NPF. The framework also fails to ensure that Ireland is operating within carbon budgets. We are already on track to exceed them by a large margin, which is getting wider and wider. Carbon emissions are cumulative and it is a flawed approach to simply focus on 51% by 2030, especially given that the NPF is a national policy document up to 2040. A destination

without a roadmap for how to get there is not a proper plan. We must think of our future and our children's future. We owe them that much.

The NPF additionally fails to take the necessary steps to seize control of Ireland's incredible renewables potential. This was a real opportunity to course correct and make up for decades of inaction, bad planning, mismanagement and the reasons we are so far behind on our targets. The Government, however, has declined to take up the mantle. Take, for example, the regional renewable capacity allocations. They are nowhere near ambitious enough. While I am glad the Government has finally recognised the need for a regionally balanced approach, which distributes the burden and benefit more equitably, the targets it has set almost guarantee we will miss them. That will cost us billions in fines and place energy independence out of reach, and will not deliver on the potential to reduce people's electricity bills every two months. That is not going to happen with these targets. With these allocations, we will continue to be dependent on international gas markets for our electricity prices.

The allocations fail to take account of our infrastructural deficits in the grid and water provision. What hope have towns in Kerry, which need increased infrastructure so they can increase development in towns and village centres, without a proper plan? It is not just about available land but is also about capacity. The Government is falling short in that regard. To make matters worse, the NPF fails to deal with the fact that data centre expansion has gobbled up all the renewable energy capacity. There are serious risks to our energy security and climate ambition. What obligations are there going to be on companies that are promoting data centre expansion to ensure renewables are available?

As the Government eyes up LNG in a move that it considers necessary, and we will see what happens with the reports that are pending, we must ask ourselves what is really happening here and what is the ultimate agenda. Similarly, the framework also fails to introduce a specific national policy objective that supports repowering. Everyone agrees this will be essential for the transition to net zero but the NPF says and does little in that regard. The same, unfortunately, can be said of our plan for long duration energy storage. I was disappointed, but not surprised, that the Government seems determined to stick with the model of private ownership. Corporate developers are at the helm of our transition and they ensure that any benefits of transition will be siphoned off into the pockets of their shareholders rather than translating into national wealth for all. We see a higher role for the State. At the heart of our vision is the expansion of community, public and domestic ownership of renewables to bring down energy costs-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you.

Deputy Pa Daly: -----and share the costs more equitably. I will finish on the following point.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Thank you. No, you are finished, Deputy. We must keep to the schedule.

Deputy Pa Daly: Language planning in the Gaeltacht has been totally ignored.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): I call Deputy Timmins. I apologise, but we must keep within the time limits. Thank you.

Deputy Pa Daly: We are way ahead of time.

Deputy Edward Timmins: It is important that these guidelines are rolled out to the county councils as soon as possible to allow them to amend their county development and local area plans. Because of the delay, I have seen a planning application for 335 houses in Blessington, County Wicklow, which was supported by the council and all the elected members, refused by An Bord Pleanála because the local area plan was not up to date with the new housing targets.

No guidance has been issued at this stage on headroom. From my experience of development plans, the previous direction from the Office of the Planning Regulator was 0% headroom, which was misguided. It is imperative that there is a considerable percentage of headroom because in practice, many sites will not be developed for various reasons. All landowners are not ready-to-go developers and real-world site development often has many obstacles, including cost, and may lead to planning refusals. I would suggest headroom of the order of 70%.

I welcome the reference to substantially better linkage between the zoning of land and the availability of infrastructure. Policy objective 103 states, “When considering zoning land for development purposes that cannot be serviced within the life of the relevant plan, such lands should not be zoned for development.” The problem with that is we do not know what Irish Water’s specific plans are for the lifetime of the development plans.

Tiered zoning refers to lower tiers with fewer services. Many current plans are tiered even when they both have access to services. There should be no tiered zoning in these cases. If, for example, tier 1 zoning is not developed, it stops tier 2 development, even though tier 2 could have access to infrastructure.

I will make a suggestion regarding expired local area plans. Currently, if someone appeals a grant of planning permission, An Bord Pleanála will refuse on the grounds that the local area plan is out of date. Would the Minister consider giving expired local area plans legal status or extending their lifetime to avoid such refusals until such time as they are updated? The challenge now is that the forward planning units of the county councils will have to choose between updating the local area plans and updating the county development plans. My suggestion could avoid that resource issue. In any case, the forward planning units need guidelines from the Minister. I know that in Wicklow, some local area plans have expired, such as the one in Blessington. I am aware of the same issue in other counties, including Kildare and Wexford. How long will this review of the local area plans and county development plans take? Normally, this process takes nine months but we do not have that time. Is there any way we can expedite this? The target figures for each town should not be caps, which is how the system currently operates. Can An Bord Pleanála be given deadlines for planning decisions? I know of a case where a decision was due from An Bord Pleanála last July and still, over nine months later, no decision has been made.

From a national point of view, councils must be closely involved in the delivery of housing. Delivery must be micromanaged. These county targets must be drilled down further, with monthly figures produced by all local authorities showing actual figures versus target figures, and explanations given. That is the only way to deliver large numbers of houses. The Minister must then meet the CEOs of the councils and the heads of planning on a quarterly basis. This method is exactly the way a business would aim to achieve its targets.

The residential zoned land tax is referred to a number of times in the document. As in many aspects of planning, there is a real gap between the planners’ view of the world and the economic realities on the ground. Many areas of the country that are zoned are uneconomic

to develop. That means the cost of developing and building a house would exceed the selling price of the house. It is, therefore, uneconomic and development will not happen. Under current market conditions, such a house would not be developed. That is not to say it could not become economically possible to develop in the future so the land should not be dezoned. The tax should not apply to such locations. Flexibility is required as market conditions change. In practice, the only housing that is viable in these areas is by the councils or housing bodies. This results in locations not having a balance between social and private housing, and results in private house buyers being shut out of the market. I know of several examples where housing bodies have bought up estates in small towns and local buyers cannot purchase them.

Affordable houses are mentioned several times but without figures or targets. Can we consider working with housing bodies to deliver full, affordable housing schemes? They currently do hundreds of social schemes but can they do affordable housing schemes? This is really badly needed. Could the council work directly with developers to deliver affordable housing estates?

The rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, is referred to in the plan. This has proved a good scheme but it needs to happen quickly.

On rural planning, the definition of areas under urban influence was far too stringent in the previous NDP. I hope that definition is narrowed in this plan because in County Wicklow, apart from one townland, the whole county is deemed to be under urban influence. This can result in the refusal of genuine rural planning grants, which I have witnessed.

The plan refers to maintaining the strategic capacity and safety of the national roads network, including planning for future capacity enhancements. This must include the new N81 and the upgrade of the N11-M11.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. It is good that there has been a review of the NPF. The previous planning framework was introduced too hastily. It is good that we slow down a little, take stock and review where all of this is going.

I know there is a different term used in government but I welcome the appointment of this “housing tsar”, as it is being dubbed in the media. It is important that someone in the Department gives a high-level briefing to the Minister of State and Minister so that decisions can be taken to really move this forward. The judgment will be how many houses have been delivered by the end of this Government’s term. It is really important that headway is made. It would be useful for each local authority to present an audit of refusal reasons across a defined period, maybe a two-month period, and that this be brought into the Department by way of analysis. Some refusals are applications that should never have been lodged in the first place, people who did not qualify to build in areas. However, like the last speaker, I can say that in the part of County Clare in which I live, the predominant amount of land is designated as being under urban-generated pressure. It means unless you are born or bred in, or have a social link to, the area, you will never get to build. If we are looking at population increases and urban growth, then what we define as an urban-generated pressure area also needs to change by virtue of that. There cannot be large swathes of a county where pretty much no one gets to build thereafter.

Another thing I have seen creep into our county - and I think it is replicated across the country - is the definition of what constitutes a farmer has changed. In County Clare and perhaps other counties, the majority of a household’s income must come from farming. In County Clare, 85% of farm families are suckler farm families. Each year, the cows calve, the calves

are sold after nine months when they are weaned and the cycle continues. That is how it has gone for generations. County Clare is not dairy country so it is hard to find a family where the majority of the household income comes from a farming enterprise. It is quite different when someone is dairying; the farm is generating enough income that the entire family can work at that enterprise. It may not always be like that because it fluctuates, but the trend in suckler in recent years has been that one or two adults in the household have to work during the day and do foddering and all the other jobs in the evening. The metric by which “farmer” is defined does not work anymore and can be rather punitive. Someone with 28, 30 or 35 suckler cows needs to be able to live on their farm. They have a social need to be there. To crudely assess their social need on the basis of their income filed with Revenue in the past year does not cut it.

The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, need to keep a close eye on the pilot sewerage schemes. A package of schemes to the tune of €50 million was announced about a year and a half ago. None of them have progressed so far.

I want to say on the record something that concerns me greatly. Irish Water at a high level has been briefing against the scheme. This is a wonderful scheme that needs to happen. There are many villages in our county and country unsewered. When you flush a toilet, it percolates somewhere into a drain and ends up in a local stream, river or lake. That has to stop. Broadford and Cooraclare are two villages in my county that were selected for this pilot scheme. I have overheard senior officials in my company say it does not make economic sense to do that. They use the example of Broadford, which has approximately 100 houses that would benefit from the sewerage scheme. The cost of the scheme is €5 million and they crudely said that works out at roughly €50,000 per house to connect to sewerage and is economically unviable. That does not factor in the environmental damage that non-action involves. We will have to deliver these schemes. They have waited 40-plus years for them. Government has funded and approved them. It is time someone in the Department drove on and overrode these illogical arguments being put forward by way of resistance from Irish Water.

Population targets cannot become caps. Also, in a county like Clare, where much of our road network is constituted of regional and national routes in the west of the county, we cannot prohibit people who have always lived there intergenerationally from building in those areas.

When we talk about planning, we do not talk so much about forward planning as about applications that go in for an eight-week period and result in a decision. We need to significantly beef up in all local authorities the number of people working in planning enforcement and pre-planning. There was a time when you would apply for a pre-planning meeting and a few weeks later would be called in and given a pretty good indication of whether it was a runner. That does not seem to happen anymore.

Planning guidelines on wind energy are grossly outdated. I think they date back to 2008. They are not purposeful for the industry and they are not fit for purpose in terms of protecting the communities these colossal pieces of infrastructure go into. We heard time and again through the lifetime of the last Government that the guidelines were coming. I heard at one point they made their way onto the desk of the then Minister, Eamon Ryan. He had concerns about the noise output of turbines. Fine, but where are they? When will we see the new guidelines? The industry is demanding them, as are the communities where planning applications have been lodged. We need detail. Will the Minister of State come to that in his response?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Today, the Minister of State is presenting the national plan-

ning framework and it is the blueprint for how the State will manage strategic planning and sustainable development out to 2040. It is essential that the framework deals strategically and systematically with the major issues of our time: housing, climate change, energy security and the prosperity of everyone living on the island. These issues can only be dealt with on an all-island basis. As we prepare for constitutional change and a referendum on Irish unity, there is a responsibility on Government and all agencies to ensure the plans they publish are future-proofed. There is probably no more important document than the national planning framework to ensure we prepare in a cohesive and planned way to create a better future for all living on the island and for future generations.

The section “Working with Our Neighbours” is not adequate in that context. As a west of Ireland representative, I believe the framework is skewed in favour of development in Dublin and the eastern region. This is not good for the west and north west - it is not good for Dublin and the east either. Unless we see regional development as an answer to national challenges, we are missing opportunities and ingraining inequality. CSO statistics show the eastern and midland region has grown by 55%, while the northern and western region has grown by only 15%. Residential unit commencement data from the Department of housing and collated by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly is even more stark. In 2024, 63% of commencements were in the eastern and midland region, while only 10% were in the north and western region. The assertion in the national planning framework that the population in the eastern and midlands region will grow at twice the rate of the northern and western region combined with the southern region sets a flawed narrative for everything else in the plan. How will a 50-50 growth strategy tackle the imbalance that currently exists and the stagnation of growth in the west and north west? The Northern and Western Regional Assembly has also reported that this part of the country is in the bottom 20 EU regions for transport infrastructure, with notable underinvestment also evident in the region’s higher education, research, water, rail, road network and grid.

Unfortunately, this plan in its current form fails to meet those needs. On that basis, we will not be able to support it in this form.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This is not a revision of the national planning framework; it is just a tweaking around the edges. It is very disappointing that no analysis has been provided on why the objectives of the original national planning framework have not yet been reached or on how this plan will operate differently. In the Dublin area, €19,000 is spent *per capita* on the NDP. This compares to just €10,000 in the Cork metropolitan area. All of the planning frameworks in the world are worth nothing if the money to implement them ignores the objectives. How is the regional counterbalance supposed to happen if it is not plan-led? Instead, the Government is demand-led, focusing on objectives and requests from developers and speculators.

The revised national planning framework does not properly emphasise the need for infill developments and brownfield developments in our towns and villages. We are seeing large estates being built on greenfield sites around towns. This can have a negative effect on local economies and force more people into cars. I will give one example. Twenty years ago the people of Grenagh in Cork were promised a bus service. They have virtually no bus service now. Loads of houses have been built, but there is no plan. It happened in Whitechurch, White’s Cross, upper Glanmire and many other areas. At the same time, many of our main streets are full of derelict and vacant buildings. One of the key ambitions of the national planning framework is the guidance on “meanwhile use”. Local authorities, landowners and prospective tenants are very cautious because there is no clarity on the legal standing when it comes to “meanwhile use”. This

should be rectified because it is one of the most powerful tools to help regenerate areas and deal with dereliction and vacancy.

There is so much more that could be done in this regard. It is a missed opportunity.

Deputy Joe Neville: I congratulate Deputy John Cummins on his role as Minister of State. He has been there for a few months but it is my first time speaking to him directly in the Chamber. Deputy Cummins was a great councillor friend of mine. Obviously, he is from Waterford and I am from Kildare but we were great friends for so many years that is a great honour to be able to speak to him in this way today.

I want to support the revised national planning framework but also to call for its full and fair implementation, particularly, as the Minister of State will know, in regions close to my heart like north Kildare, where the gap between population growth and infrastructure delivery has ever widened. The varied plan on page 27 clearly states that the mid-east region, which has Kildare at its heart, has experienced population growth at more than twice the national average in recent decades. However, when we look at the detail, the imbalance becomes stark. I did a word count and, in the entire framework, Dublin is mentioned 169 times, Cork is mentioned 94 times and Galway is mentioned 71 times. These are the three largest counties in the country. County Kildare, despite being the fourth largest county, is referenced just seven times. That disparity speaks volumes to me.

Towns like Leixlip, Celbridge, Maynooth, Naas, Clane and Kilcock have, to an extent, become commuter hubs and, as I have referenced before, are absorbing wave after wave of housing development without the commensurate delivery of roads, schools, transport links or community amenities. We are seeing the results of decades of, if not necessarily a planning failure, then definitely a lack of implementation of the required infrastructure. Houses were built first and everything else was left to play catch-up, and in many cases, the catch-up has still to be done.

Let us be very clear. The framework does acknowledge this issue. It states:

... local infrastructure needs, including in particular social and community infrastructure in areas such as education and amenity, and addressing the legacy of rapid growth, must be prioritised.

[...]

... housing development should be infrastructure led and primarily based on employment growth, accessibility by sustainable transport modes and quality of life ...

I fully support all of those principles but, at the same time, while we are seeing those principles on paper, so far, they have not been continued in north Kildare. Therefore, while I support the document and everything in it, I call for it to be delivered when this actually gets rolled out.

North Kildare is home to world-class employers, such as Intel in Leixlip, of which we have heard a lot in the news in the last two weeks in a way that we would not have liked, and the Kerry Group in Naas, as well as the rapidly growing research and education footprint of Maynooth University. We are pulling more than our weight economically in Kildare yet, on the ground, I feel we are being left behind when we talk about investment in infrastructure. The key deficits must be addressed.

Today, in the House, I will call out a few of those places. Celbridge, a town where the population might have been 1,000 people 30 or 40 years ago, is now home to 23,000 people yet it only has one bridge across the River Liffey. The need for the second bridge was there 30 years ago but it still has not been given. In Maynooth, LIHAF funding was put in place in 2010 but the relief road has not been delivered. There is talk of bringing DART+ out to Maynooth yet only a few miles down the road, there is a train station sitting in Kilcock that we are not planning to bring DART+ to. Clane is a town that is growing and growing and traffic congestion is a huge issue. At Castletown House, which was the major amenity in the north east of the county, public access was lost. Three years ago, it had 1 million visitors but that is now down to a trickle because we have lost access from the M4.

While we need these reports, we also need delivery. Strategic planning must result in shovel-ready projects that are properly funded and fast-tracked for areas that have borne the brunt of previous unbalanced growth. That is why I am in favour of the revised planning framework. I do not feel that north Kildare has benefited in the way it should have. We must redress the imbalance not by slowing growth in our county but by accelerating the delivery of infrastructure. We will then be able to take more.

North Kildare has played its part and is ready to continue to play its part. I, for one, will be at the forefront of that. I have done it as a councillor. I have worked on local area plans. I have delivered houses in Leixlip, where we have seen thousands more houses delivered in my time as a councillor. I have done the same for other local area plans in Celbridge. I have pushed for county development plans to have more houses. Yes, we have allowed them because, ultimately, we know that with housing, we need to find places for everyone to live. However, at the same time, in our area, we also need to get the infrastructure delivered behind that.

I wanted to give my message today because I am in favour of the plan and I know the plan needs to change. However, I also wanted to speak strongly about the need for the key items that were raised in that plan to be delivered in my area of north Kildare and to speak on behalf of my constituents.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, for taking the time to be here today. As I said, it is great to be able to speak to him in this way. I wish him the best of luck in the coming years of his term.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to the Independent and Parties technical group. I call Deputy Charles Ward, who is sharing time.

Deputy Charles Ward: The revised national planning framework includes many great suggestions, such as improving local connectivity to broadband, energy, transport and water networks, recognising Letterkenny as an important cross-border network for regional development and addressing the town and village rural population decline by encouraging new roles and functions for buildings, streets and sites. However, it is clear to me there is no intention of actually implementing many of these suggestions, including the revised planning network, given they are clearly not rooted in reality.

The suggestion, for example, to implement a proper, planned local authority-led approach to identifying, meeting and managing housing needs arising in the countryside areas is laughable. Anyone with experience of local politics knows this is just not possible, given how little power our county councils actually have. Shockingly, councillors currently have no power to identify,

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meet and manage housing needs. My party colleagues, the councillors of the 100% Redress party, had to walk out of a special plenary meeting on housing in Donegal County Council on Monday in protest at the lack of engagement on housing at council level.

The lack of action by the council and the Minister for housing on housing issues in Donegal, particularly the defective concrete crisis, is extremely frustrating. There is a complete disconnect between the Department of housing in Dublin and Donegal. We have asked the Minister, Deputy Browne, many times to visit Donegal so he can witness for himself the devastation caused by the defective concrete crisis. It is clear to me that the Government is far too removed from this issue. The crisis requires the experience of those who are impacted and councillors who know this crisis at first hand and who truly understand what is needed to tackle it. Decisions being made at local level regarding regional issues such as defective concrete should be made by elected representatives in the area, not by Government-appointed staff. County councillors should not have to serve as decision-makers or be forced to act as opposition in their own councils. We need to expand the remit of the local authorities and give more power to county councillors.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment. The revision of the national development plan is supposedly to accelerate the delivery of housing in particular. There are a couple of things needed to accelerate that. The first is the need to replicate existing plans so the same plan for social and affordable housing and other houses can be used in Waterford, Laois or Donegal. The private sector is doing this. If we look at what it is building, it is replicating the plans all over the country. However, what is happening with local government and Government-sponsored housing is that it is back to a blank canvas every time. It is costing between 10% and 15% more to build houses and it is slowing it down. The Department in the Custom House is micromanaging the local authorities and it needs to stop. I have told previous Ministers that and I am telling Deputy Cummins that as the new Minister of State. That is the first thing.

The second is that we need builders, in particular small builders. The Minister of State knows that in rural towns and villages, small builders need the low-cost finance that is available to the larger builders. We also need to accelerate the apprenticeship programmes.

We need to stop micromanaging the local authorities with regard to social, affordable and cost-rental housing. Infrastructural deficits need to be addressed, particularly the infrastructural deficits in water supply. I ask the Minister of State to think about this. His constituency counterpart, Phil Hogan, created Irish Water. I was Opposition spokesperson on that at the time. I argued with him about it over several days. The Minister of State knows the difficulties in trying to deal with Irish Water. Money needs to be given directly to local authorities to put in the infrastructure into small towns such as Mountmellick, Mountrath, Rathdowney, Graigueculen, Ballylynan, Portarlinton and Abbeyleix. Many of them are connected by rail so they are very easy to get around. We need the infrastructure to go into those towns. We need to get the foot off local authorities and stop micromanagement of them. We need to use the same plans throughout the Twenty-six Counties in trying to rapidly build up and speed up delivery. If you want to quickly produce something that is good quality, you mass produce. That is what we need to do.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I did my best to read through the report. I have two minutes so I cannot do it justice, but I have certainly read it. I would like to welcome it but I cannot. When you look at it, the words, such as “sustainability”, are good, but you then realise it is busi-

ness as usual. It is significant that in a few days' time we will - I will not say celebrate - recall that we declared a climate and biodiversity emergency on 10 May 2019 and there is absolutely no indication that the Government realises the transformational action that is required.

On housing, the Department's press release states that the Government will accelerate housing delivery. I welcome that. However, as other speakers said, the Government will accelerate housing delivery on the basis of a model that has proven to be completely wrong and has led to a housing crisis. This is in addition, and I do not want to personalise this at all, to using the man from NAMA, which in itself as an entity is a major part of the housing problem, and not realising that it has created, if not a monster, then something that is totally geared towards keeping house prices high. The Government is now going to take that person and put him in charge as the housing tsar. It could not be more bizarre. It is a whole jigsaw of pieces on housing without an overall picture.

I will mention transport in Galway city, which is one of the five cities destined to grow in a sustainable manner, with 50% of that growth to be within the footprint of the city. That is all very welcome. However, there is not a single commitment to a light rail for Galway to lift the traffic off the road. There is no analysis of the lack of regional development within the county and region, including no sewage treatment plant in Barna. The major siphon carrying the sewage under the River Corrib is in imminent danger of collapse, according to an engineer's report. There is no commitment to a sewage treatment plant on the east side of the city. There is no commitment to regional development, although there is an acknowledgement that the region has been demoted.

Three paragraphs are given over to the Irish language. This confirms the mindset of a Government that thinks the Irish language is for learners and is an addition, instead of realising there is a serious emergency in every single Gaeltacht because of the lack of housing.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: This is a highly important document and there is only a short time to speak to it. I will mention some of the positives. I am encouraged by the stronger focus on compact, low-carbon growth and the formal integration of environmental assessments. The new national planning objectives, NPOs, reinforcing a commitment to biodiversity are important. Likewise, I welcome the commitment to transport-oriented development, which I will speak about in a moment. In particular, I welcome the measures to support offshore renewables and the regional targets for onshore renewables because the tendency of some local authorities to designate large parts of their county as renewable energy free zones is very problematic.

I will also address the inadequate focus in this document on balanced regional development. Deputy Connolly mentioned the issue of there being no reference to light rail for Galway. There is no reference to commuter or metropolitan rail in Limerick to provide a link between Limerick and Shannon, or to the western corridor. We have a document that speaks to transport-led planning and transport-led housing, but the actual indicators and projects that will deliver that are not referenced.

I will take a step back to the previous Government, when the Green Party was regularly criticised for being Dublin and urban centric. I am a Dublin TD. I am very proud to represent a suburban Dublin constituency, but the new national planning framework does not address the imbalance in our country towards Dublin. As a Dublin TD, I want to see that imbalance addressed. It is important because, in the previous Government, our party was focused on as the driver of that imbalance, but I say to TDs in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, indeed, Independent

TDs, they are adopting a document that fundamentally maintains the imbalance towards Dublin. That is bad for our regions and for Dublin as well.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Any national planning framework will be a failure unless it is underpinned by real and serious consultation with communities and community representatives at local level in a bottom-up approach. Communities must have the opportunity to make representations to statutory, elected democratic bodies to ensure their voices are heard. The only way this will be achieved is by re-establishing local democracy in our towns, large and small, for instance, the re-establishment of borough corporations and town councils. Local democracy was abolished in 2014 by the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government at the stroke of a pen. It has seriously damaged our towns and their economic and social development.

The corporation for Clonmel borough, one of the five boroughs in the country, with a mayor and form of local democracy dating back to the early 1400s, was dismissed without a thought. It was replaced by a toothless committee with no powers or funding that is effectively a talking shop. The abolition of Clonmel Corporation has done serious damage to what was a thriving town but now needs serious regeneration and redevelopment. Not only do we need urgent access to urban regeneration funding for the renewal of our town centre, we also need the re-establishment of Clonmel Corporation, South Tipperary County Council and the town councils of Carrick-on-Suir, Cashel and Tipperary.

Local government is the beating heart of our democracy. The programme for Government references strengthening local government but in a generalised and non-specific way. One of its very few specific commitments is the promise to convene a local democracy task force. I call on the Minister of State to set up that task force immediately, with the specific objective - not the generalised woolly thinking and talk in the programme for Government - of re-establishing town and borough councils throughout this country. No planning framework can succeed without local democratic input from locally elected representatives, especially in our large towns, cities and urban centres throughout the country.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome the publication of the revised framework. It has been somewhat signposted as part of our response to the housing crisis. I hope it will have that impact as it goes on in the alignment between national, regional and local planning policy.

The revised framework reaffirms the commitment of the 2018 framework to balanced regional development, where 50% of the population's employment growth will be shared between the Dublin and eastern region and the rest of the country, essentially, through the north, western and southern regional assemblies. The great challenge for this Government and for subsequent Governments with this plan is whether we can realise that desire for regional balanced development with our Exchequer commitments. A certain number of submissions to the revised framework noted that this has not happened since the publication of the 2018 framework. The Planning Regulator, a State authority, noted that this document goes some way towards bringing the country to the point where we will have that type of regional balance, but it will be a matter for Government to hold to that objective from a number of frameworks. You would imagine that one of the frameworks could be from the Exchequer and the development of projects included in the national development plan. Similarly, the Irish Planning Institute stated that the framework had a laudable emphasis on limiting the dominance of Dublin and the midland region on other regions but, unfortunately, since 2018, we have seen a business as usual approach that has allowed for the Exchequer to prioritise projects in Dublin and the east as opposed to the rest of the country. That is the great challenge for us. It is to be hoped that subsequent to the publica-

tion of the framework, we will see the Exchequer imbalance also being addressed.

To be somewhat more parochial, the document states that Galway city has grown at a level somewhat below the national average since 2016 whereas the other regional cities have grown at a level slightly above it. That is concerning, particularly when one considers that in the previous two decades Galway grew at a somewhat greater level than other cities, particularly the regional cities. I wonder why this is happening. One of the challenges in Galway is the MASP framework. Galway has a particular challenge that the area covered by the MASP is divided between two local authorities, namely the city council and the county council. That is not the case in Waterford or in Cork. In Limerick, it exists to a different degree somewhat whereby the MASP area probably runs into some parts of County Clare.

The MASP is causing a problem in Galway, and this not gone unnoticed by the local authorities. Galway City Council, when it made a submission in respect of Galway County Council's development plan, noted that there is an overly generous residential zoning in the county MASP area that will greatly undermine the vision for success for the overall city and county MASP area, which, despite the ambitious targets, needs to be driven by compact development, regeneration and strengthening of the existing urban area. Galway County Council, in its submission to the planning framework, has sought greater clarity in respect of Galway County Council's role within the Galway MASP area. The regional social and economic strategy also notes that it will now be necessary for the Government to develop some mechanism that will link Galway City Council, Galway County Council, the regional assembly and the Departments of housing and Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. We need that. We need the Department to take a stand in that regard. We might need to legislate for that because there is uncertainty as to where responsibility for the development in the MASP area lies. The ambition we had regarding the framework put in place in 2018 has not been realised.

The other great issue, of course, is that there no form of financial backing. There is no funding for the MASP area, and that is causing concern as well. I ask the Minister to look at that. Subsequent to the publication of the framework, there might be a need to legislate in this regard. There is certainly need for the Department to take the lead or to issue a circular on it.

If I look at some of the key enablers for Galway in the revised framework, they are remarkably similar to those contained in the original framework. This might suggest that we have seen little progress on some of them. Those mentioned by previous speakers very much relate to transport. Deputy O'Gorman noted that a particular rail project in Limerick is not mentioned in the framework. However, the key enablers for Galway are the only ones devoid of any reference to rail. There is reference to rail in terms of Waterford, Cork and Limerick. However, despite the fact that Galway City Council's submission noted the great potential for transport-orientated development along the rail track between Galway and Athenry, there is no mention of it in the key enablers for Galway. That is very disappointing. I hope this will be rectified in the national development plan. Will the Minister of State see to it that an ambition to implement the outcome of the strategic rail review in relation to Galway and to double the rail track to Athenry and develop the track between it and Tuam is included in the national development plan?

I welcome the fact that the Minister ignored the NTA's submission in which it sought to exclude the reference to the Galway metropolitan area transport strategy. Deputy Catherine Connolly stated that there was no mention of light rail for Galway. However, the metropolitan area transport strategy should state, as was outlined in the study carried out before Christmas,

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that there is potential for light rail in Galway. I think that is covered there. I was disappointed that the NTA sought to eliminate reference to the Galway metropolitan area transport strategy, but, in fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, it has been left in. It is time for the NTA to complete its work, particularly in the context of the only area of the city in respect of which there has been no review of the transport strategy. Galway needs such a review now. Will the Minister of State make sure it happens?

I echo the sentiments expressed in respect of the Galway city ring road.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Connolly is eating into Deputy Moynihan's time.

Deputy John Connolly: The Minister of State cannot get involved with An Bord Pleanála. However, will he ask it to make its decision as quickly as possible?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak in support of the revised national planning framework. I welcome the revision. It also acknowledges the changed context of the need to accelerate housing construction. It is important to emphasise the equal importance of infrastructure and all the associated services that need to be delivered. The revised framework represents the step-change that we need. I hope that, in tandem with the full commencement of the Planning and Development Act 2024, we will see that step-change in terms of delivery.

I come to this debate with a dual perspective, namely as a Member of Dáil Éireann but also, like many colleagues in the House, as a former county councillor who was involved in the formation of a county development plan. Such plans, for anyone who is new to politics, are instructive in how the entire planning process and the planning framework are set up in terms of the hierarchy of regional and local needs. They are also quite instructive for those of us who are frustrated with the pace of the delivery of housing in the context of how comprehensive and significant is the overall volume of movement that is required.

Making this revision and extending it to local authorities demonstrates the agility that we need to see at all levels across the State in terms of coping with the need for the accelerated provision of housing but when it comes to thinking about how we future-proof the developments we need to put in place. It is important that the Department and the Minister extend that agility to the local and regional authorities in terms of how they take direction from the national planning framework and bring it to their elected members for translation into local county and city development plans. It is also important to ensure that there are no gaps and that it is treated with a housing first urgency by all authorities across the State.

Like many Members, I have been acquainted with decisions that have been made by local authorities, in and outside Dublin, which seem to fly in the face of housing first and the urgency relating to housing delivery that we hear about on the airwaves and in this House. It is almost a case that it is being made difficult for developers to proceed with minor or smaller schemes because they do not necessarily adhere to every letter of every objective. Rather than have a can-do attitude on the part of local authorities in engaging with those developers, it is important that we listen to those who are at the coalface of developments of all sizes, be they small builders or large developers, in order to ensure that we get on top of what is possibly one of the most defining social crises of our generation.

I agree with much of what my colleague Deputy Connolly said with regard to the importance of the NDP. In the documents relating to the national planning framework, there are many

references to it being aligned with the NDP. I would like to see the NDP being used, in the context of the national planning framework, as the instrument to enable what we need to happen. We are going to have a population of nearly 6.5 million people in five, ten or 15 years, so we need to ensure that the necessary transport infrastructure is put in place. Transport-oriented development needs to be a priority in the context of what we do. In terms of my constituency, the NDP must be seen as an instrument of delivery when it comes to adequate roads infrastructure for places such as Rathcoole, Saggart and Newcastle. Infrastructure projects listed in the South Dublin county development plan, such as that relating to the western Dublin orbital route, need to be advanced. Those projects need to be completed in order to enable the housing delivery which will happen in that part of Dublin over the next five or ten years and which has already happened. It must be remembered that we are playing catch-up in this regard.

There needs to be urgency in respect of projects such as the Luas for Lucan, which is listed in the greater Dublin transport strategy, in order to ensure that further development will happen in Lucan. These projects must be completed to ensure that adequate public transport infrastructure is provided in areas where demand for housing will remain high. It is not as if people will not want to live in these in 40, 50 or 60 years' time. Ultimately, the aim behind the national planning framework should be to build up large cities which are hubs for their economic regions and the populations of which will ultimately be replaced. These places should not just be home to ageing populations; they should remain attractive to families over time. The facilities necessary to underpin this should be provided.

I am particularly keen that the national planning framework would be taken on board by the Department of Education, particularly its school building section. I do not know if colleagues are of the same view, but sometimes I feel there is a frustration in terms of the speed with which the school building section acknowledges and looks at the demographic projections for a particular area or if the school planning areas are aligned with what is set out in the national planning framework or in county or city development plans. It is important for that to happen. This comes back to my point about the importance of a housing first culture in terms of how we implement the national planning framework and how we deal with issues such as childcare. During questions to the Minister for children last night, a number of Deputies discussed the need to ensure that where provision is being made in developments for the provision of childcare facilities, that these facilities are actually delivered. We know there is a patchy record in that regard across the country. This also applies in the context of matters such as Garda stations and Garda numbers.

I encourage the Department and the local authorities to engage with bodies at all levels of delivery, whether they be State agencies such as Uisce Éireann or ESB Networks or small developers, to ensure that the urgency required to deal with this crisis is reflected across the country. I also urge all involved to look abroad at some of the reforms that are being pursued in, for example, New Zealand with regard to easing zoning rules and consider whether these are things that we should look at in order to get the supply of houses up to the 50,000 a year that we will need, not only for the next three or four years but, ideally, for the next ten to 15.

5 o'clock

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will focus my comment on fisheries, the seafood sector and the wider marine space. Looking at the east coast of Ireland, we made serious mistakes as a country in developing offshore renewable energy in a way that took away the livelihoods of fishermen. That is how not to do it. However, there has been positive progress in recent years.

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I commend the work of the offshore renewable energy seafood task force. This has been looking to bring together both industries to work out a way forward that does not threaten the livelihoods of fishermen. As the Minister of State will know, it has been a tough number of years for our industry since Brexit. We need to realise the potential of offshore renewable energy but, in doing so, we must talk about co-creation.

I will also touch on marine protected areas. We need to develop such areas and embrace their potential but, again, there are a number of partner stakeholders. These include: the fishing industry, including fishermen; the environmental campaigners, who campaign on important issues; and the offshore renewable energy industry. All three have to be at the table. No area should be designated as a marine protected area unless the maps are co-created. We are not talking about drawing on a map and then consulting afterwards. It has to be done together. It has to be done in partnership. The fishing industry is up for this. It also has to be done with respect and it must look at the real threats to the industry. There is positive work we can do in the time ahead if it is done with respect. I commend the offshore renewable energy seafood task force for the way it has conducted its business. I get good feedback from everybody. These are not going to be easy issues to deal with.

The Government needs to strengthen the seafood section of the plan before us right now. We need to send a clear signal that there is a vision for seafood and fishing communities. We are surrounded by the richest waters in Europe. We have to do better as a country. The appointment of a Minister of State and a dedicated committee is welcome. Let us now strengthen the plan, too.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: One of the big issues of the day is the housing crisis. I am sure the Minister of State will agree with that. However, the last planning framework, from 2018, significantly underestimated the level of housing need in the State. As a consequence, two successive Government housing plans failed to address the volume of housing required, although the previous Governments did not meet their targets in any case. The new framework being proposed involves a housing needs demand assessment as one of its core features but it seems to have underestimated the level of demand. The published draft targets an annual average of 50,000 homes a year for the duration of the plan but that seems way off at this point. I do not need to point it out but the further you fall behind in a race, the faster you have to go to catch up. Like its predecessors, this Government's estimated targets will cause it to fall further behind, as it is using the same original estimates despite an increase in pent-up demand. It seems there has not been an independent assessment of unmet demand. This is maintaining high property prices. All of the solutions seem to start with the assumption that we cannot move away from rising prices.

In my constituency of Galway West, the housing crisis is not just an economic one, but a linguistic and cultural one as well. The Welsh Government's Welsh language communities housing plan commits to "taking immediate and radical action using the planning, property and taxation systems to address the negative impact that second homes and short-term holiday lets can have on the availability and affordability of housing for local people". Here, the revised national planning framework does not mention housing and the Gaeltacht together. Neither does the Government's 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 refer to housing. Both documents have failed to identify this core threat to the language's continued existence. That is literally failing to plan. Ní luann an plean seo ná an straitéis 20-bliain don Ghaeilge an Ghaeilge, an Ghaeltacht agus an tithíocht le chéile. Más rud é go bhfuilimid ag iarraidh dul i ngleic leis an nGaeilge agus an líon daoine a labhraíonn an Ghaeilge i ndáiríre,

caithimid breathnú ar thithíocht sa Ghaeltacht. Is rud é sin atá soiléir do chuile dhuine nuair a bhreathnaíonn siad air seo. Ar ndóigh, táimid fós ag fanacht ar na dréacht-treoirínte pleanála Gaeltachta. Teastaíonn siad sin.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I acknowledge Richie Herlihy and his friend Paul Lenihan who are in the Gallery. I welcome them to the Dáil.

We can do all the frameworks we like with all the best of intentions but unless you have the infrastructure, you can build nothing. I will provide the Minister of State with an example of an application that is with Uisce Éireann at the moment. There are 42 houses to be built in Pallaskeenry. I will ask for the Minister of State's help with this. All that is needed is an A4 page stating that there is capacity in the sewerage system. This is delaying the building of 42 houses in Pallaskeenry. I have been on to Uisce Éireann and our local county council. The executive met with Uisce Éireann, which said it would be looked into. It has taken a month for Uisce Éireann to look into an A4 page. I sent it the last one it issued. It has expired but Uisce Éireann just needs to change the date on it and send it back. This is holding up 42 houses. How are we going to build houses for people if we have this type of delay? It is the same thing in Croom. Infrastructure is key if you want to build houses. Some 60 houses in Croom were held up for six months due to Uisce Éireann. It was not all its fault. When the local authorities handed stuff over to Uisce Éireann, they delayed because they did not realise they had given commitments to people building houses before the handover. There was a lack of communication.

On people building one-off houses, everyone should have the right to live where they grew up. If there is adequate land, road frontage, visibility and percolation, people should be allowed to build. In a town, you can put 15 houses into half an acre. However, if somebody wants to build a house in the county, they are told they need half an acre. With the new guidelines, people can build a second house of up to 400 sq. ft or 40 sq. m on the same property if somebody wants to downsize, for example. If somebody in a family wants to downsize, 400 sq. ft means only 20 ft each side of a square. We should be allowed to build something a little bit bigger on a half-acre site, especially if we can build 15 or 16 houses in the same area in a town, city or village. In the county, the Government says we can only build one but that we might be able to put in another building of 400 sq. ft afterwards. We need to make sure we can invite our people to come home. If they want to build their own houses and put a roof over their own heads, that comes at no cost to the State.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are here today to discuss the final draft of the revised national planning framework, a crucial step towards Ireland's sustainable future. It is imperative that we address the acute infrastructure challenges in the areas of housing and transport. West Cork suffers from inadequate sewerage systems, particularly in areas like Dunmanway, Goleen, Shan-nonvale, Rosscarbery and Ballydehob. This makes even basic housing development impossible in some areas. The road conditions remain dire, with only €70.2 million allocated for maintenance in 2024. This is a slight decrease on the previous year and insufficient for the 12,000 km of road that need attention. Transportation is another critical issue. Despite the restoration of some bus routes in 2024, west Cork still lacks comprehensive public transport services. The absence of light rail, trains and frequent bus services exacerbates our isolation and limits economic opportunities. This lack of infrastructure and transportation services hinders growth and quality of life. We must advocate for strategic investment to foster sustainable developments in west Cork.

I am absolutely delighted Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan is here. As a newly appointed

Minister of State, I hope that he will take on board what I am going to raise regarding infrastructure in Dunmanway. The fact is that people are not allowed to develop a house in a town as big as Dunmanway. That can is kicked down the road at every meeting we have. It is to go on to 2030 or 2032. We really do not know because Irish Water cannot give a clear deadline. The people in Dunmanway cannot wait until 2030 or 2032. We need delivery. The Minister of State knows that and he has to deliver. He is the Minister of State now and I am putting my faith in him to deliver for these people but also for the people of Rosscarbery, Goleen, Ballydehob and Shannonvale. They have every right to have a proper wastewater treatment system in their communities and not have wastewater pouring into local community gardens where people have cordoned it off for the past 20 something years. It is outrageous.

It is the same with light rail. We do not have light rail going to west Cork. We do not even have a sign from west Cork showing where rail is in Cork city.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: I would like to acknowledge the presence in the Public Gallery of my good friends, Paul Lenihan and Richie Herlihy. I invite the Ceann Comhairle to Cork to dine at Richie’s restaurant, which is a food truck. He has the best battered sausage in Cork. I know for a fact that you too can have a body like this.

I welcome the report but I feel there are lots of holes in it. In fact the entire planning framework itself has difficulties from top to bottom. I heard Members from the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael benches saying that it is now up to the local authorities to implement these plans that are being put together, but it is not. The Government has restricted the powers of the local authorities continuously, year after year. Irish Water is now dictating what can be done. The National Transport Authority, NTA, is dictating what can be done. BusConnects is dictating what can be achieved in our cities. From Ballyvinter down to Carrignavar and over to Grenagh, we do not have orbital buses. You cannot get an orbital bus in Mallow at the moment. We have not built the Mallow distributor road. How can we talk about counterbalanced cities? Bear in mind that Cork was only mentioned 94 times in this report, which is meant to be the counterbalance to the capital city, Dublin. There is a counterbalance problem in Cork, full stop. The north side is deprived of a northern distributor road, of a northern ring road, of a Mallow distributor road, and a Cork to Limerick motorway. How can we really start developing the southern city as a capital until we have these in place?

I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy O’Sullivan, that Irish Water is dictating continuously. Only 200 houses can be built in my home parish in Blarney because Irish Water is refusing to put a water treatment plant there. We cannot build one house in Carrignavar for the next five to ten years because we have no water treatment plant. We have a ghost estate there that cannot be redeveloped because we cannot get water to the estate. We have people with land all over Cork who want to put individual houses there for their children. This would take them out of the housing market so they would not be competing against some couples who do not have that opportunity. Yet we are not doing anything on that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the national planning framework. I welcome any attempts to future-proof infrastructure in this country. I am very disappointed, however, in reading the report. It is high on vision but it is almost like the report is detached from reality. I do not have long but I will give just one example. The report references the value and importance of the serviced sites scheme. I put it to the Minister of State that there is no serviced sites scheme in Mayo. Despite several attempts by many councillors there are none. You would not think that from reading the report.

Another point I wish to raise relates to the housing targets. We saw in 2018 that the same report underestimated the demand in housing. We see this again in this report. The Housing Commission has said that we need to build 60,000 houses. I wonder if this is purposely done given that we are so far off our targets. Is it purposely done to reduce the targets? The Housing Commission does not agree with the targets contained in this report.

The apprenticeship situation is a major issue. In order to build more houses and more infrastructure, we need manpower. Apprenticeships are mentioned once in the report. The reference is in the context of more collaboration around cross-Border apprenticeships. I have friends who have been waiting for years to be called to the next phase. We have made the apprenticeship system a second class citizen to the universities and yet we wonder why we cannot attract more people into trades, which we so desperately need. This report is meant to set out the blueprint-----

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: It is a framework.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The framework rather. There is not even a mention, or hardly a mention, of it. That is hardly progress. We need real delivery. I do not have any longer but could go on to speak about a litany of things in relation to this. I ask the Minister of State to focus on the delivery.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It looks fantastic. It is a great plan with great graphics. If one reads it line by line and bit by bit, it has so much to offer but we all know it is aspirational without the investment. I give the example of water infrastructure. We need massive investment in water infrastructure to facilitate housing. The plan references offshore energy potential. We need massive investment in our ports. To work towards it or to progress towards it is not enough. We need tangible achievable objectives.

The housing targets have not been met before so I am still a bit sceptical about what is in this plan but I am more sceptical about the delivery of infrastructure alongside housing. In my constituency, I have seen two strategic development zones, Adamstown and Clonburris. Clonburris, for example, has one full size GAA-rugby pitch and five soccer pitches for an eventual population of 25,000 people. That is all that has been put into the framework plan. If that is what we are going by at the moment, then we need to deliver things a lot better.

Every type of housing needs to be a strategic development zone. Newcastle in my area has a local area plan but it is not worth the paper it is written on because, again, one cannot tie in the schools and the infrastructure alongside the housing. We need to look at that.

We also need to focus on our cities. I have said this previously in other contributions. Dublin should have twice the population within the canals. We must look at how to change the planning laws to make it easier to repurpose business units and commercial units. Similarly in regional distribution we are not looking enough at the midland towns and possibly even a new town to be planned from scratch. We have to do it piece by piece and in an integrated way.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for his presence today. I am keen to make a contribution on the national planning framework, which is essentially the creation of an environment for accelerated housing development in Ireland, and other issues it concerns itself with.

In no particular order I will just throw in a couple of ideas or issues close to my heart. I do

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not represent a Dublin city constituency: I represent a suburb constituency of Dublin South-West. I said recently that Dublin has suffered from neglect over the last number of years and a lack of love, generally speaking. It needs to be front and centre. For some people in this House prioritising Dublin - generally speaking - never seems to be met with a serious response but often with a jaundiced response. It is the capital city.

Consider the party that built this city, including Terminal 2, the red and green Luas lines, the various stadia around the city, the Dublin Port Tunnel. We see there has been very little done in the last decade in relation to landmarks and legacy buildings and infrastructure in Dublin. I think that needs to be front and centre. I ask the Minister of State to look at his own Department, for example. The north side of Dublin is particularly lacking in love. I have felt for a long time that the Custom House should not be a Government Department. The Department of housing should not be in an old building like that. The entire Custom House should be open to the public. It should be a performance centre. We do not have a major music performance centre in this country. I would move the Department out to a purpose built, A-rated, modern and dynamic building where civil servants can work properly in devising plans in an environment that promotes this. That building should be open to the public. The Minister of State should really consider that. It would begin the transformation of Dublin's northside.

The Minister of State is familiar with metro south, so I will not take up too much time on that. The Minister of State's colleague has spoken about downsizing and it got a kind of a mixed press on Monday night on the television. I am very much in favour of it, whatever term is used. I know loads of people - they do not have to be older people - who would move to different-sized accommodation if it were local, which would allow them to stay in their parish, their locality and with their friends, thus freeing up a three-bed or four-bed house for younger families. We have to get serious about that. Of course, the win for the State there is that one does not have to put in the utilities. The utilities, services, roads, schools, shops and everything else are there. It is about trying to maximise the use of the space that is available. Much of the national planning framework is all about that proper land use.

One thing we have to do is - I know the Minister of State would be in favour of it, as would I - incentivise the use of the high number of cycle tracks that have been built, because they are not being used. That is a function of the Government. I have had ideas about that in recent years. It is like pushing a boulder up a hill, but we keep pushing, as it was with the co-location of pre-schools with primary schools. It took me about eight years, and we finally got that concept over the line. We need to incentivise people to use all the cycle infrastructure that has been put in.

A number of active travel schemes in Dublin impede the movement of public transport. It is something I have spoken to the NTA about. I am positive with its response, even though it took a while. I will be positive where I need to be positive. Public transport is impeded because the active travel part of a local authority is not talking to the public transport part. That has to stop. If it means that the decision or the oversight of this goes up to a major decision-maker, that has to happen. I have so many examples of this. Where it is done well, it is exceptional. In the city, for example, from Busáras all the way out to Fairview, there are cycle tracks and dedicated, end-to-end bus corridors. It is really impressive. It cost a sackload of money, but it is as good as a tramline. There is no excuse when it is done badly and impedes public transport.

Deputy Moynihan's and my constituencies are contiguous, and we therefore share some things in common, such as Garda stations. They should be discussed with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. I do not believe the Garda stations in Dublin have been rationalised in about 50

years. They are like the old parishes. Five or six Garda stations cover my constituency where two could do it if they were rationalised properly. That does not help. We need a Garda station out in Citywest.

I support housing first; that is our absolute priority. My God, if the Government is successful, it will be remembered forever. If not, the Government will also be remembered forever. With housing must come amenities, though, and I often fear that the concept of amenities can be lost, so please keep it front and centre.

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the new planning framework recognising the need to reflect changes since 2018. Back then, it was an innovative plan. Today, we must double its ambition. Setting objectives is one thing, but delivering them is another. We speak of building 50,000 homes per year until 2040. That is achievable, but it demands radical change in efficiency and execution. People are asking about housing now, not just in the future. This morning, I met fifth year students from Mount Sackville school in Castleknock. Their biggest concern is where they will live in the next five to ten years. It is not an abstract worry; it is a real, pressing issue. More land must be zoned. Builders should not be forced to sit on stalled projects with no alternatives. If they can work on multiple sites simultaneously, their skills and resources will be fully utilised instead of being wasted by bureaucratic bottlenecks.

We must also take a serious look at planning permissions that are set to expire despite no substantial work having been done. Complex developments face unique challenges such as funding delays, rising interest rates and logistical hurdles. Banks will not release funding unless developers have sufficient time to complete their projects, for instance. If we do nothing, we risk losing between 50,000 to 100,000 approved homes, I am told, simply because time runs out on permissions. That would be an indefensible failure. Local authorities need clarity on enabling infrastructure beyond the serviced sites fund or urban regeneration and development fund. Without clear direction, they cannot move forward effectively.

I am sure the Minister of State is aware of Dunsink, the long-standing, 1,000-acre strategic land bank in Dublin West bordering Castleknock, Ashtown and Finglas. Approximately 10,000 homes could be built there. It is the last major undeveloped land inside the M50. It must not remain just another potential solution; it must become a reality now. The urban regeneration and development funding has already supported a feasibility study on transport showing the site's potential, yet Dunsink continues to be talked about like a distant prospect. That cannot continue. The Fingal Development Plan 2023-2029 suggests regeneration could take longer, maybe more than 20 years. That is simply not acceptable. We do not have two decades to wait while demand spirals out of control. Yes, the challenges are real. Land ownership there is diverse and there are existing institutions, such as Dunsink Observatory, the Teagasc food research centre, the National Orthopaedic Hospital in Cappagh, Elmgreen Golf Club and the former Dunsink landfill. These should not be reasons for any more delay. They should be factors that are actively addressed. If housing is truly a priority, then we must move forward with national funding access, strategic planning, infrastructure activation and ambition. This must be treated as urgent. Fingal County Council needs to bring all stakeholders, including Uisce Éireann and the ESB, to the table immediately and maintain consistent engagement until these lands are activated. We need to stop asking what can be done in ten to 15 years and start asking what can be done today.

While we are talking about density, we must also recognise the economic realities of housing development. High-density projects are necessary, especially near major transport hubs,

but we must acknowledge that funding for those large-scale apartment developments is complicated. Few developers can execute them at scale and there is an over-reliance now on State intervention. That is not sustainable. Even when homes are built, purchasing them remains out of reach for many. They are seeing development in their communities but they cannot access those homes. Planning must prioritise viability, not just density targets. We can still meet our compact urban guidelines while allowing greater variety in housing solutions and sustainable planning. That means supporting more builders, encouraging more accessible financing and reducing reliance on State support. These are practical solutions. We have land, plans and solutions. What we need now is ambition and urgent action.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This framework will have a significant influence on the development of major strategic projects in the State. It should show ambition for future balanced regional development. As a TD from the west of Ireland, however, I think this development plan fails to address the current regional imbalance between the greater Dublin area and the rest of the country. If anything, the population growth targets contained within the document further cement this imbalance against the western region. This is a missed opportunity for the west. It demonstrates the hollow commitments of this Government towards regional balance and development. Future development in the western region will depend on the delivery of major infrastructural projects, especially in the area of transport. We need serious transport infrastructure investment in the west. I am thinking of projects affecting my own constituency, such as the western rail corridor, the double tracking of Athenry to Galway and the Galway ring road. These projects have not been delivered. Plans are one thing, but delivery is where the west of Ireland has always been let down.

Going back to the plan, it is disappointing to see that there is no national policy objective that addresses regional connectivity and transport. This sentiment is shared by many stakeholders, such as TII. While the revised planning framework puts great focus on the growth and resilience of rural communities, this is wishful thinking without a policy commitment to rural connectivity. Similarly, there is limited reference to the role that the State's regional airports will play into the future. The development of this island's regional airports should be viewed as a clear, strategic priority, especially in the delivery of balanced regional growth. More than 84% of all flights in the State are processed through Dublin Airport. This imbalance reflects an underutilisation of regional and western airports, such as Shannon and Knock airports. Addressing this imbalance requires investment in both bus and rail links to regional airports, yet this document does not signal any intention to prioritise such strategic development.

This planning framework is vague in its language around the re-powering of existing renewable energy projects. Such re-powering projects can extend the lifespans of already existing renewable energy projects and reduce the need to develop these in new areas. Overall, the tone of the document reflects a missed opportunity to deliver the strategic needs of this island. I call on the Government to reconsider the policy objectives, especially from a rural connectivity and energy perspective, and to direct the development of the State in a way that is more regionally balanced.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: People in Kerry are looking forward to the new planning framework and hoping it will deliver from them in a way previous plans have not done. I am talking about people who own land, not farmers' sons or daughters because they are being looked after. There are others who own an acre beside their parents' house, four or five miles outside Killorglin or seven or eight miles east of Killarney, but are still not allowed to build. We talk so much about housing here every day. It is scandalous that people who want to build and are asking for

nothing but planning permission - no money or funding because they would build the houses themselves - are not being allowed to do so. It is all because of this significant urban-generated pressure that has been thrown at them.

For people who want to buy their own house, there have been no affordable houses in Kerry. The Government's plan did not provide for one affordable house in Kerry. As regards sewerage schemes and water schemes, we are totally ruined. Treatment plants in 38 settlements need upgrading. People in places like Scartaglen, Curragh, Castleisland and Moyvane cannot build another house. We then have group water schemes in places like Knight's Mountain, Gneeveguilla, Bawnard, Knocknaseed, Castleisland and the higher areas that are without water for a lot of the year. We need to do something.

People are blaming Irish Water and that is wrong because the company is not being funded. It cannot do this work without being funded. I ask the Government to show that if it is real about building houses, it has to build treatment plants and provide water sources. To do that, we need to fund Irish Water to provide those services.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Níl tagairt ar bith sa chreat seo do riachtanas phobal labhartha agus tíreolaíoch na Gaeltachta a chosaint agus deis a thabhairt don chéad ghlúin Ghaeltachta eile cónaí ann, in ainneoin aighneachtaí cuimsitheacha curtha isteach ag Conradh na Gaeilge. Níl aon rud faoin nasc idir an soláthar tithíochta agus pleanáil teanga sa Ghaeltacht, agus níl tagairt ar bith don fhadhb a chothaítear nuair atá breis is 1,000 teach ar fáil ar Airbnb i gceantar Gaeltachta i gcomparáid le níos lú ná deich dteach ar fáil ar cíós fadtéarmach ar daft.ie, mar a léirigh iniúchadh a rinne TG4. Ba chóir cur chuige Rialtas na Breataine Bige a ghoid, a deir ina phlean go ligeann dlús na dtithe saoire sa phobal teanga “detrimental effect on the vibrancy of the language in these areas. When young people in particular are unable to live and work in their Welsh-speaking communities this clearly has an effect on Welsh as a community language and the sustainability of these communities.” Ba chóir na pleananna daonra agus tithíochta do limistéir pleanála teanga na Gaeltachta, a gealladh sa chlár Rialtais, a thionscnú, agus na treoirlínte a gealladh dúinn ó 2021 a fhoilsiú gan mhoill.

Ó thaobh na healaíona de, of 1,000 people who answered a Sinn Féin arts survey last year, 74% said they were not satisfied with the local arts space. There is nothing in the national planning framework incorporating space for the arts, culture, nightlife, new developments or protecting existing spaces. The planning objectives 89 and 90 around protecting, conserving and enhancing built heritage, including streetscape vernacular dwellings and other historical buildings and monuments through appropriate, sensitive investment and conservation, are welcome. This should have been interpreted to rule out the disastrous Hammerson plan and envisage the vision outlined in the Moore Street Preservation Trust.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The NPF is a critical tool in how we shape our housing infrastructure, services and communities. I welcome the revision placed before the House following public consultation and a comprehensive review. However, we need a plan that reflects the major changes our country has seen in recent years. Planning is not just about numbers and maps; it is about the kind of people and communities we build.

Too often, especially in north Dublin, as I have seen time and again, including in the examples of Belmayne and Clongriffin, we have built thousands of new homes but we do not have public amenities to match them. I have gone to multiple residents' meetings since being elected to this House and while I was a councillor. There are more than 10,000 residential units in this

area but not one single community service where residents could leave their children and allow them to do anything other than hang around on the streets. It is no wonder we have antisocial behaviour in these areas.

A stitch in time saves nine. We should put a community centre, library and other facilities for children in north Dublin on the L-shaped land in Belmayne. We all know what happens to young adults who not have an option. I hope the Department will look at this because it is really important. We need an idea that would allow people to access key services within a short walk or short cycle of their homes. That is not an aspiration but a requirement. Planning is the most powerful tool we have. It is proactive rather than reactive. It looks ahead and is a framework that delivers, not just for housing but for better communities.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish the Minister of State well in his new position. I welcome some of the proposed changes in the NPF review. Ultimately, the document must restore power to councils to form their own plans and address the overriding powers of Uisce Éireann, the Office of the Planning Regulator and Transport Infrastructure Ireland in dictating the development of rural constituencies. When I was a comhairleoir on my council, we had none of this. We had the National Roads Authority, NRA. As I often said, I thought we had decommissioned it but apparently it is still there. This is the problem with this document.

The Cahir local area plan is a prime example of the failings of the NPF and the heavy-handed nature of the Office of the Planning Regulator. The plan that was reviewed in 2021 - my daughter, Máirín, is on the council in that area - sought to reduce the quantum of residential zoned land from 50 acres to just 10 ha. It ignored concerns from the councillors and anybody else at the time. It was the height of stupidity. Now they want the council to rezone the land again, having admitted their mistake. Anybody would know that reducing the zoned land from 50 acres to 10 ha was way too much but they just would not listen. They were obstinate.

I have cases involving planning for rural farmers. One is on the N24, between Cahir and Tipperary, and one on the N74 on the way to Kilkenny. These farmers are living with their families and even though they have land and are farming it, they are not allowed to build a house on it because of more turning in circles. In actual fact, the opposite is the case. If they have to build elsewhere, such as a town or some place else, they have to go to and from the farm to do their work. It is patent nonsense and these bodies will not listen. We have more of these agencies that have CEOs and directors and brass plates on the walls. They are doing nothing only confusing. They cannot go on the way they are going because they have stalled progress on housing and infrastructure with Uisce Éireann. How many villages and towns in Tipperary that are full up have no access to this? There is no funding and they have no power. We must go back and look at what happened in 2014 with the set-up of Irish Water.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith anseo um thráth-nóna.

I welcome the updated draft of the NPF. There are several opportunities here to correct the mistakes of the tiger times. I speak as somebody from east Meath, a commuter county which has been seriously impacted. I sincerely hope the concerns of residents will be listened to and opportunities that present will be enacted.

The focus on compact growth and community infrastructure is highly commendable. It is essential that age-friendly housing is the priority there in terms of brownfield and whatever

incentivisation is used for the development of brownfield and town centre sites.

Infrastructure, including transport infrastructure, from a climate perspective and from the point of view of connectivity of communities with their places of work, leisure, health needs, etc., must be a priority. All this, however, is entirely dependent on interdepartmental and inter-agency co-operation and collaboration. Without that, this will be doomed.

I will highlight two key areas: the high-quality international connectivity and Dublin Airport. There is a serious issue with a breach of planning permission there from the north runway which is seriously impacting residents in Meath East, but there is a solution that will allow the growth in connectivity and mitigate the current situation.

As regards the transition to a climate-resilient society, when will phase 2 of the land use review be published? Again, Meath East is seriously impacted, with a proliferation of solar farms, gas generation and battery storage facilities. There is no balance there.

Finally, will there be financial penalties for local authorities that do not adhere to the NPF or the regional spatial and economic strategies? Otherwise, we have learned nothing from the mistakes of the past.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan): I thank everybody for their contributions. I listened with interest. Many valid points were made by Deputies who are clearly in touch with their constituencies. They know the reality on the ground in their constituencies. I might come back to a lot of those comments at the end of my closing remarks.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to outline the importance of the first revision of the national planning framework. I welcome the valuable discussion that has taken place, which reflects the importance of ensuring there is an up-to-date national strategic plan in place to guide the decisions that will shape Ireland for the next 20 years and provide the policy clarity that is needed to give certainty in these challenging times.

The national planning framework is the Government’s high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of our country out to the year 2040. As outlined earlier by the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, this framework has been revised and updated to take account of changes that have occurred since its initial publication in 2018. It is a framework to guide public and private investment, to create and promote opportunities for our people and to protect and enhance our environment, from our villages to our cities and our unique rural areas.

As set out in the opening statements of my Government colleagues, the spatial planning system plays a key role in managing the impact of growth and development on our natural environment and mitigating climate change. In particular, I welcome the emphasis on biodiversity and the need to promote nature restoration in the revised NPF, which will provide the opportunity to align our future national restoration plan with the statutory planning system.

Countering the trend of urban sprawl, supporting the targeted delivery of infrastructure services and increasing the availability of new homes is a key focus of the revised NPF.

In the period between 2022 and 2040, it is expected that there will be roughly an extra 1 million people living in our country. This population growth will require new jobs and new homes

which we need to plan for in a sustainable manner. This will require more land to be zoned, as well as more housing from other sources, such as through tackling vacancy and dereliction to utilise our existing building stock and to assist with meeting our climate obligations.

The NPF does not itself zone land and there must therefore be a further step to formalise the translation of updated NPF population and housing figures to the local level. The allocation of updated planning housing growth requirements on a local authority by local authority basis will involve a balanced methodology that factors in the level of housing demand arising from performance in terms of recent housing delivery and capacity while ensuring adherence to the policy parameters of the NPF strategy. Work on this stage is under way based on the revised NPF housing figures, and it is intended that this will inform the updating of development plans across the country over the coming months. The strategic plan-led approach to future housing development will inform the making of decisions in relation to planning applications in a robust and efficient manner, assisted by the statutory decision-making timelines contained within the Planning and Development Act 2024.

The impact of this will be significant and will require co-ordination and prioritisation to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to support and enable housing delivery and to ensure that housing delivery is aligned with the provision of services and facilities, including education, childcare, healthcare and recreational facilities, to support the expansion of existing settlements and the creation of new sustainable communities. Therefore, it will be critical to deliver compact and sustainable growth patterns, and any allocation of land in relation to updated targets will need to reflect the potential of brownfield land, including infill sites, the conversion of existing buildings and the reuse of vacant and derelict buildings, in addition to greenfield land, to deliver housing.

Addressing vacancy and making efficient use of efficient housing stock is a key Government priority. To address this, a number of structures have now been established, including a dedicated vacant homes unit in my Department, a full-time vacant homes officer in each local authority and the publication of a vacant homes action plan to draw together a number of vacancy-related measures across relevant Government Departments. The latest vacant homes action plan progress report, published in March 2025, shows that real progress has been made in tackling vacancy and dereliction, with significant investment through schemes such as the urban regeneration and development fund, the vacant property refurbishment grant and the repair and lease scheme, which help both local authorities and property owners to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use and revitalise towns across the country.

The NPF also highlights the benefits of protecting and enhancing our built heritage. The town centre first heritage revival scheme is utilising Ireland's ERDF EU-regional programmes to rehabilitate publicly owned vacant or derelict heritage buildings through renovation, renewal and adaptive reuse. This scheme is allocating over €117 million to transformative capital works to such buildings in Cork, Galway, Waterford, Donegal and elsewhere around the country.

The cornerstone policy of both the existing and draft revised national planning framework is the achievement of a greater regional balance in future population and employment growth. Critical to the achievement of greater regional balance is the overall development of both urban and rural areas in Ireland, with a particular policy focus on delivering strengthened and diversified rural communities, consistent with Government policy. This extends to the Gaeltacht areas across the country, where promotion and protection of the Irish language through the implementation of language plans are supported in this revision.

The opportunities provided by the green energy transition to effect regional development are promoted by the strategy, in addition to the need to deliver essential infrastructure such as transport, water, wastewater and electricity projects that are needed to support additional population and employment growth in all our regions. The funding of infrastructure projects, with specific public investment projects to support and promote a greater balance in regional development aligned with the NPF, is facilitated by the national development plan. Accordingly, the important interaction between the NPF and the NDP is essential to realising our objectives. The Government is committed to providing increased support for infrastructure through the creation of a dedicated infrastructure division in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and through the new housing activation office in my Department, and it is essential that we continue to address barriers to delivery in order to meet the needs of current and future generations. The NPF revision builds on existing policies to ensure we develop resilient, vibrant and inclusive places and communities to live.

This is a framework to allow Ireland to grow sustainably. The demographic of Ireland is changing; our population is increasing. Therefore, our housing targets are increasing. This framework recognises that and puts in place a framework that will tie in with our national development plan in order to achieve those housing targets, along with the revision of county development plans on a local authority basis. Climate action and nature restoration are at the key of the framework as well, which is very important, especially from my point of view and the remit I have within the Department. We must remember also - because I have heard a lot of criticism about the lack of targets in terms of regional development - that prior to the 2018 framework there was no 50:50 split. In other words, the split between 50% growth in Dublin and the east compared with the north west, west and south was not there. Now it is there and that will allow investment in the regional areas but also protect a very important capital city we also need to invest in. There is a need for compact growth but this framework also allows and acknowledges the need, the requirement and the right of people living in rural areas to get planning permission within their communities. I take the point there is a need to empower local authorities to zone land where they deem it necessary and for them to have more say, as well as the reserved function in terms of how their development plans come together. I guess the criticism of the Office of the Planning Regulator is coming from that point, but this framework allows autonomy within the local authorities in order to do that.

The issue of one-off housing was a constant theme, especially from Deputies living in rural parts of Ireland. That is where I live and it is an issue I see cropping up daily. I have never heard of planning permission being refused because of the national planning framework. However, I absolutely accept young people, young couples, individuals and older people as well are experiencing many difficulties with getting planning permission in their communities, neighbourhoods and sometimes on their own land. When the development plans are reopened after this national planning framework is adopted there is an opportunity for local authorities and councillors to make decisions and write county development plans that support young people living in rural areas to get planning permission in rural areas. I accept it is a difficulty and that many young people are having to jump through too many hoops and go through two, three or four applications before they finally get permission on their land, in their community or neighbouring areas. These are people who want to contribute to their community, to their local sporting organisations and to live and work in their community.

Many Deputies made reference to infrastructure and wastewater in particular. This framework underlines the importance of this infrastructure. It is now down to the NDP and invest-

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ment in Uisce Éireann, as well as the organisation itself, to ensure that infrastructure is delivered. I thank Deputies sincerely for their contributions.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 30 April 2025.

Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024: Committee Stage

An Ceann Comhairle: If Deputy Carthy is here to take the Defamation Bill, we will proceed.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Did I nearly get a break there?

An Ceann Comhairle: You nearly did.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have just got indigestion. I am blaming the Minister.

Sections 1 to 3, inclusive, agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Section 4 is opposed. Does Deputy Carthy wish to speak on it?

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Ceann Comhairle is far too efficient for my liking.

I will propose the deletion of the entire section. Section 4 relates to the role of the jury in High Court defamation actions. It would be important if the Minister could give us clarity on whether he is planning to proceed with this section in its entirety. I put on the record very strongly that Sinn Féin is opposed to the removal of juries from High Court defamation cases as a matter of principle and we will not be able to support the Bill if this remains the Minister's position. It is important to put on the record that our opinion is shared by many in the legal profession. It would leave Ireland as a complete outlier in common law jurisdictions globally.

I was not part of the pre-legislative scrutiny deliberations, but having read the transcripts of the Oireachtas committee and the final pre-legislative scrutiny report, the importance of members of the public determining in issues relating to damage to reputation and freedom of expression was very clearly highlighted by both the Bar Council and the Law Society. This holds weight and seems like eminent common sense. In adjudicating whether a person's reputation is damaged, who better to pass that judgment than a jury of one's peers?

6 o'clock

Of course, nobody is suggesting the current system works perfectly. It is fair to say it does not always, particularly when it comes to the provision of damages. That seems to be the Government's argument, namely, that juries award damages inconsistently and sometimes excessively. Going back to the committee deliberations, everyone is open to having a discussion on how we deal with that issue without removing juries entirely. Perhaps juries could make determinations but we could restrict adjudication on the quantum of rewards to the Judiciary. There is space to address what Government says is the primary issue without throwing the baby out with the bath water or, as somebody said, taking a sledgehammer to a screw.

Unfortunately, I have noticed a tendency across a number of governments that, as opposed to fixing an issue, they ban it, get rid of it or overcorrect it. I have seen this time and again when Government Departments delay EU directives, for example, and then the simple solution is to just ban a practice when a number of member states might simply adjust.

Is the Minister open to reconsidering his approach to the outright gutting of the role of ordinary people serving on juries and making determinations as to whether defamation has occurred? Is he willing to have discussions on later Stages of the Bill? Like his predecessor, is he intent on going ahead with this, knowing that if we resolve this issue alone, we could easily come to a consensus and have a Bill that has the full support of this House? I urge the Minister to consider his approach carefully.

NEW SECTION

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 6, between lines 19 and 20, to insert the following:

“Role of jury in High Court defamation actions

4. (1) Subject to *subsection (2)* and notwithstanding section 94 of The Courts of Justice Act 1924, or any other provision made by or under any enactment or rule of law, where a

defamation action is tried by the High Court sitting with a jury—

(a) all questions of fact shall be tried by the jury, and

(b) damages (if any) shall be assessed and awarded by the trial judge.

(2) This section applies only to defamation actions that are instituted on or after the date of its coming into operation.”

I speak as a former media spokesperson for the Labour Party. I listened for a long time to the concerns of newspaper editors about the crippling cost of insurance in the operational costs of newspapers. We all need to support our regional and national newspapers in this country. There was a campaign for an overhaul of the defamation laws, understandably, as newspaper editors saw at the time that the risks associated with defamation were having a disproportionate impact on their insurance premiums. However, we have serious concerns about key elements of this Bill. This Bill is based on the recommendations of the in-house review of the defamation Act 2009, published by the Department in March 2020. This took place two years before the Supreme Court judgment in March 2022 in the case of *Higgins v. The Irish Aviation Authority* where Mr. Justice John MacMenamin delivered the lead judgment. Our view in the Labour Party is the in-house review and the Bill are out of date. Some of us are familiar with conversations regarding personal injuries. Judicial guidelines had to be introduced to put some control on damages arising from personal injuries. The courts Act 1988 abolished juries for personal injuries. We were promised then that it would reduce excessive or disproportionate awards, significantly reduce delays and legal costs, reduce the length of hearings, provide greater clarity and certainty and would facilitate earlier settlement of cases. As we all know, it did nothing of the sort. Insurance premiums continued to soar for decades. Even with the introduction of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, we still did not see the necessary reforms. It was only when judicial guidelines were introduced that we began to see some changes in what was paid out.

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That is why the Supreme Court judgment in the Higgins case is groundbreaking and so important. For the first time, the ruling in that case categorised general damage awards in defamation cases in four categories. The first and lowest applies to moderate defamation for awards of zero to €50,000. There is a second band for what could be termed medium damages, awarding €50,000 to €125,000, and a third category for serious defamatory material, from €125,000 to €199,000. At the top of the scale of awards in the case of the most egregious defamation are awards in excess of €200,000 made before the courts. The Supreme Court recognised that these awards must be seen as truly exceptional and there was very real damage to the individual's reputation, where the judgment was clearly tilted in favour of the vindication of a good name.

We argue that the judgment in the Higgins case should be given more time to bed down. It is only three years old. It needs to be applied and its application assessed. It is important to note that the law as set out in the Higgins case is still the law. Nothing in this Bill attempts to change that law. It does not matter whether future cases are heard by a jury or a judge sitting alone - either way, there will still be four bands of awards set out by the Supreme Court. Those bands will continue to be applied. I do not see how the abolition of a jury will affect the level of damages awarded in future cases since they will continue to be awarded in a way set down by the binding decision of the Supreme Court.

I wish to refer to another case in 2017, *McDonagh v. Sunday Newspapers Ltd.* Mr. Justice MacMenamin noted:

The right to a good name, freedom of expression and public opinion are closely connected concepts, in which the concept of 'the views of right thinking people' are inherently part of the test. Juries are intended to reflect the views of the public. They [reflect] the public mind and public opinion in balancing the constitutional values embodied in statutory form. This 'public dimension' is of great relevance in measuring whether a publication is actually defamatory at all; if it is, whether there is a defence to it; and if a publication is found to be defamatory, the measure of damages.

If defamation is about damage to the standing of a person in the community, who is better to decide? That is the question in front of us - is it a judge or a cross-section of the Irish people? We express some surprise that we have not seen an amendment from the Minister to this Bill. On Second Stage, he told the Dáil, "I share many of the concerns being expressed by other Deputies. The decision to abolish juries in the High Court would be short-sighted." He went on to say, "I am concerned that the reason to remove juries for the purpose of defamation actions has not been thought out." The obvious question is: has the Minister changed his mind? Why? Some may argue there is an element of departmental capture in what we have before us on Committee Stage.

If the main reason to abolish juries in defamation cases is to make litigation less expensive, we must consider that one reason for the cost of defamation cases is that the law does not permit these cases to be brought in the cheapest available court. Since 1924, our courts Act has excluded defamation from the jurisdiction of the District Court. That means the simplest defamation action starts out with a value of at least €15,000. We ask the Minister to consider moving minor defamation cases to the lower court where lower damages will be awarded. If that does not prove to be the case, we will table an amendment to that effect on Report Stage.

ISME and retailers have also raised concerns that defamation cases can be used to inflict costs on a defendant. Will the Minister address them in his comments? On Second Stage, my

former party colleague, Brendan Howlin, the justice spokesperson for our party at the time, quoted a former president of the High Court, who said that in this country you have to be “a pauper or a millionaire” to pursue legal proceedings. The current Minister, who was then a backbench TD, disagreed with his contention, arguing ordinary citizens can and do get access because of a no foal, no fee that operates to fund litigation. As the Minister knows, no foal, no fee is between a litigant and his or her lawyers. If the plaintiff does not win the case, the lawyers will not be paid. If a no foal, no fee agreement does not protect a litigant against the claims of the other side’s lawyers, an enormous liability arises. That is why, as the Minister well knows, when a lay person goes into a solicitor’s office and seeks advice about taking a defamation case or indeed many other types of cases, almost the first question that will be asked by a lawyer is “Do you own your own house?”. A homeowner or a person who has assets of any type faces the very real prospect of an award of costs being followed up by adjudged mortgage or an order of sale. That is why the distinguished former president of the High Court pointed out that only millionaires and paupers can be found in our superior courts.

I want to make two final and related comments about defamation and its cost. First, it is my understanding that it is still the case as a general rule, and without considering the complexity of any particular case, that legal fees in defamation actions are higher than the rate applicable to any other civil action. We should be using this opportunity to abolish any informal practice or standard within the practise of law that permits legal costs adjudicators to treat defamation as special and therefore permitting higher fees. Second, the Civil Legal Aid Act of 1995 still lists designated matters in respect of which legal aid may not be granted by the Legal Aid Board. The refusal to cover defamation seems to be based on a notion that suing for defamation is not only, but out to remain, the preserve of the well-to-do. Obviously, that is clearly a very outdated notion at this point. This attitude is completely at variance with the constitutional obligation of the State to vindicate the good name of the citizen. Given the constitutional status of the right of people to their good name, this exclusion is simply unjustifiable and we believe this restriction needs to be deleted. There are more than enough safeguards in the law to ensure that the Legal Aid Board does not fund frivolous or spurious actions.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There is much to welcome in the legislation as proposed. While we support many of the anti-SLAPP measures that are included, like others, we in the Social Democrats recoil at the absence of juries within the courts system. Juries provide the judgment of a person’s peers. Juries have a sense of public confidence and democratic principles built into them by their very nature. Juries reflect public values and real-world experience. They enhance trust in the justice system and represent a core element of democratic justice - the people’s justice. We do not agree with removing juries and simply having the judgment of members of the Judiciary. While judges play an absolutely vital role, in many instances they are not reflective of society as a whole when it comes to their demographic profile. That is certainly some thing we would like to see changed and enhanced but it is not the case at the moment. Juries provide protection against judicial overreach and ensure fair and balanced decisions, especially in high-stakes cases. Consideration should be given to alternatives to abolishing juries. We could address court delays by hiring more judges. Ireland has the lowest number of judges *per capita* in Europe. We could also consider hybrid models such as those that exist in New Zealand and British Columbia, where jury trials can be requested and approved by a judge.

The Bill removes the long-standing right to a jury trial in defamation cases. This right dates back to the Magna Carta, which is more than 800 years old. It cuts ordinary citizens out of the judicial process and undermines democratic participation in legal decision-making. This is

of major importance and should be protected when it comes to jury trials. Juries ensure fairness and reduce bias. The fact that a cross-section of society is making a determination on the standing of a person is important, especially in cases involving powerful entities. Juries offer a check on the erosion of civil rights and support citizens' involvement in justice, just like their involvement in politics when they go out and vote.

Jury trials apply in other civil rights cases involving questions of liberty, free speech, reputation and property and singling out defamation creates inconsistency and unfairness within legal practice. Jury trials for defamation are still allowed in the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand and much of Australia. Abolishing them would make Ireland an outlier. One of the Government's justifications is the unpredictability of awards. On the surface, this might seem like a fair enough argument but it does not stand up to scrutiny. For example, very few jury awards have been overturned on appeal. We also have the Supreme Court case which has offered very clear guidelines in this area. Speeding up trials is another justification but there are no examples of this. In Britain, when similar legislation was introduced in 1998 in personal injuries cases, the opposite was true. There is no evidence that jury trials are more costly. Judge-only trials have also been lengthy and jury verdicts are harder to appeal, often resulting in faster resolutions.

Jury trials have long protected civil rights. The recent Supreme Court changes have addressed many of the Government's concerns. No compelling reasons to eliminate jury trials in defamation cases have been presented and backed up by evidence. It is better to let recent reforms take effect and monitor outcomes before removing that fundamental right. Preserving jury trials safeguards the democratic process. It is important in any democracy to build public trust in the judicial system.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not have the cluster of amendments in front of me but we are speaking about taking away the right to jury trials. I wished the Minister the very best in his new career but I cannot but go back and read out his speech. I do not know how he is going to get around that, other than by the fact that he now has power or, as has been alluded to already, has been captured by the Department. I do not wish to embarrass him. In fact, I respect him. I may have been in the Chair on the day on which he made the speech in question. He agreed with us in opposition and shared our concerns. I presume he still shares our concerns because nothing has changed except that the Government is now intent on ramming this through.

The Minister is in a difficult position and that is where moral courage and leadership comes in. In a world where we really need it, this is the time to shine, to show moral fibre and stand up. I say that with the greatest of respect. I would not like to be in the position the Minister is in now and having to eat my words. I do not think he should eat his words. He should be proud of them. Let us see what he said. It was very succinct and clear. He stated:

I wish to consider the abolition of juries. I share many of the concerns being expressed by other Deputies. The decision to abolish juries in the High Court would be short-sighted.

Presumably it is still short-sighted. He went on:

The reason for it is that there is a belief among media defendants, in particular, who are subject to defamation claims that if they get rid of juries, awards will go down and defamation cases will not go on for as long. My assessment is that is not correct.

Presumably, that is still his assessment. The Minister addressed Deputy Howlin and then went on to state:

If we abolished juries, I can guarantee the House that we will develop a whole body of jurisprudence that will result in cases being repeatedly appealed to the Court of Appeal and probably the Supreme Court. It is seldom the case that people appeal awards or decisions of juries because they know the appellate courts will be very respectful [and rightly so] of any decision reached by a jury. Obviously, if a jury gives an excessive award, as happened a long time ago, that will be dealt with by the appeal court, but, as has been indicated by others in this House, the Higgins case clearly set out guidelines ...

I do not wish to labour the point. It is there in black and white. I appeal to the Minister to show moral courage. What is happening here is nothing less than bowing to vested interests. I attended an event in the audiovisual room lately. It was packed. I say this at the risk of losing votes, but that is immaterial to me. The only time that I ever see the audiovisual room packed is when the media turn up. I have the greatest respect for the media up to a point. On two occasions that I have been in the audiovisual room recently, we have been hanging from the rafters waiting for our little line from the media. The media appealed to our good nature and argued that we must respect them. Obviously, the media is absolutely vital in a democracy. We need the media and we need it to do a good job. On both occasions that I was there they went on to talk about abolishing juries and on both occasions they produced nothing except rhetoric and repetition. Indeed, I took the opportunity to point out to those present that they were simply using rhetoric, repetition and God knows what words without substance to describe the benefits of abolishing juries.

Now the Minister finds himself in the position of supporting that empty rhetoric even though he was totally against it.

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties is telling us absolutely not to do this, as are other organisations. I am not inclined to pick out one over another, I am always impressed with the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and all the other groups, but I do wish to quote a former judge. The Minister might have used this line when he made the speech to which I refer, but I am not 100% sure. Mr. Justice Bernard Barton, now retired, went to a lot of trouble. He is former head of the civil juries division of the High Court. He, along with senior counsels - I think junior counsels were also present on the day - made a presentation in the audiovisual room and set out the facts for us. The Minister knows that Science Foundation Ireland – as it was – always told us about the importance of evidence and that our policies and decisions should be based on evidence. Remember that? There was a lecture from on high from Science Foundation Ireland to always have facts. Here we have the facts from a former judge who told us precisely the danger of what we are doing if we pass this legislation as drafted. He stated:

If enacted, the proposal would not only strip the citizen of the right to choose the mode of trial by which the facts of a case are to be decided – whether by judge and jury or by a judge alone – but would also [and this is equally important for me given the 25 years I have spent in local politics and the Dáil, where I have been watching the constant diminution of local democracy and the removal of powers, and now we are doing the same thing in the one area where people can participate in the courts] remove the public from participation in the administration of justice ...

He went on to state:

While the proposal is presented as a mere procedural change through the simple expedient of dispensing in the future with jury trial in High Court defamation proceedings, the

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means by which this objective is to be achieved is through the total abolition of an ancient legal right [as Deputy Gannon outlined, dating back to the Magna Carta]

I do not know many judges would take the time to come to the audiovisual room with their colleagues and write a detailed paper to ask us to please not do this because, at every level, it is dangerous. The simple thing is that it is not based on fact. Whatever problems were there with the questionable validity of the decisions of juries or the fact that they gave disproportionate awards were all dealt with in the Higgins case.

There was a cross-party committee. Was the Minister its chair or a member? He was neither. I am sure he is very familiar with the committee anyway. Nobody dissented from its report. The Minister has been left on his own tonight. I wish the members of that committee were here to give their opinions. The committee offered many recommendations. Backbenchers cry out for time to speak. We have had a major delay in getting on with the business of the Dáil because Members have said they do not have time. They should take a look at what is happening. There is no time limit on this debate and there is not a member of the former justice committee in the House that I can see. The committee made 18 recommendations, to which previous speakers have already alluded. I am not sure if they were made in order of priority, but recommendation 1 states, "The Committee recommends that the proposal under Head 3 to abolish juries in High Court defamation actions should be removed." Recommendation 2 states, "The Committee recommends that juries should be maintained in High Court defamation actions in order to make findings of fact" and continues in relation to the quantum of damages. I really do not know what has changed since September 2023. I am not sure why none of the former members of the committee is here to stand over what they agreed to. I know we are all busy. I was taken by surprise that this debate began early. I am delighted that it did. I am not one to point the finger but it is certainly significant that there is nobody here from that committee to state that this was a cross-party view.

The Ceann Comhairle will be glad to know that I will finish in a minute or two. I appeal to the Minister on a broader level about the fact that at a time when the Government talks about misinformation and disinformation and restoring trust, the biggest problem I experience as a politician is the lack of trust and belief in what we say. I have no difficulty in people having a different view as long as they can trust me. That is what I stand for - not rigidly, but I stand for something. I am not talking about myself in particular but any TD. Here we have someone of the Minister's calibre and people of the calibre of those who served on the committee saying that we should not to abolish juries. We are going to abolish juries, however. Something somewhere is wrong.

We need leadership today more than ever. Democracy is being diminished daily at every level. It has been diminished in the context of our planning laws - a process which started when we stopped people from appealing to An Bord Pleanála if they had not gone in at first at local authority level - the removal of powers to deal with waste management and the removal of powers from councillors. In addition, we go rid of town councils and so on. As a society, we have very few avenues by means of which we can participate. The Minister knows better than I, because he has been in the House longer, that the consensus mentality is dangerous. I read something recently that I will paraphrase: doubt is difficult; certainty is dangerous. The certainty with which the Government tells us that juries need to be abolished on the basis of non-facts and as a result of pressure exerted by particular groups is especially worrying. It tells us that we have learned nothing. Go back to the banking inquiry and the Nyberg report. The big thing that man highlighted was the consensus mentality and how nobody spoke out and everyone went

with the flow. We are back at that stage with everything – with neutrality and with Gaza and Palestine, whereby if any of us speaks out, we are told we are anti-Israel or antisemitic.

The Minister might ask why I am bringing all this up. It is because it is the same theme of the consensus mentality at all costs. I am asking the Minister to break that, not only for the sake of breaking doing so but also because of the words he spoke very honestly and openly here when he shared his concerns and thought it was the wrong decision. It is time to make the right decision.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan): I thank colleagues for their contributions, to which I will respond to presently. This is the first opportunity I have had since I was appointed as Minister for Justice to speak on the Defamation (Amendment) Bill. I was not, as is apparent, Minister for Justice when the House debated Second Stage.

It is important that I, as Minister, acknowledge the difficult role the Oireachtas is trying to perform when it comes to enacting defamation legislation. We are trying to balance two competing constitutional rights. On one hand, there is the right to one’s good name, which is expressed in the Constitution and which must be given statutory effect. That is the purpose of the Defamation Acts that have existed since the foundation of the State. Separately, we must recognise and respect the right to freedom of expression which is also contained in the Constitution. That is similarly given effect not just in terms of the defamation legislation but also in other legislation. It is a difficult balancing act for any Oireachtas to try to achieve when there are two conflicting constitutional rights.

My assessment during my membership of Dáil Éireann since 2016 is that there is probably greater advocacy on behalf of the right to freedom of expression than the right to the protection of one’s good name. That is probably because the former is more organised than the protection of the latter. However, as I have emphasised previously, we need to recognise that sometimes when it comes to the protection of one’s good name, the only remedy that people have is through the defamation legislation. We in this House are all aware of situations that arose when a prominent member of An Garda Síochána had scurrilous and calumnious allegations made against him. The only remedy that person had was through the defamation laws. It is sometimes forgotten in the debate about defamation that the reason the laws are there is for the purpose, first, to ensure that a person has a statutory mechanism to vindicate the right to their good name. Second, however, there must also be similar respect for the right of journalism and the media or any publisher to publish information which is true or information which is protected not because it is true but because of the other many statutory defences that are set out in the Defamation Act.

Before I deal with the two issues that have been raised in these amendments, I will speak in general about the role of juries in civil actions. Section 4 of the Bill includes a reference to the Courts of Justice Act 1924. After independence, it was generally the case that most civil actions were to be determined by juries. As has been mentioned by Deputy Sherlock, there was recognition in 1988 that it was simply no longer plausible to have juries determining personal injury actions. It worked fine when there were three or four personal injury actions per day in the Round Hall of the Four Courts but it is no longer tenable. Many personal injury actions take place, not only in Dublin but around the country. To have juries hearing personal injury actions would require a considerable number of jurors to be available. It would also delay the determination of those cases. In practical terms, there is a difference between a civil action that has a jury and a civil action that does not. Time is spent swearing in the jury at the outset. That

can take approximately two hours. Time is spent at the end of the case with closing speeches to the jury. Time is also spent on the deliberation of the jury before it reaches its verdict. All those factors convinced a former Oireachtas in 1988 that for personal injury claims, we should get rid of juries. I do not think many people would suggest that was a wrong decision.

Deputy Sherlock mentioned that the removal of juries had not resulted in a reduction in the cost of insurance premiums. However, we do not know what would have happened had juries remained in personal injury actions. I do not think it would have been feasible for juries to remain in personal injury actions for a lengthy period.

There are two issues to which I am being asked to respond. The first is the amendment in the name of Deputy Kelly, which was spoken to by Deputy Sherlock. It seeks to do something different than what is sought by other Deputies. The amendment seeks to state that juries would have a role in the determination of questions of fact that arise in the course of a defamation action but would have no role in respect of the assessment of damages. That is what is contained in the amendment tabled by the Labour Party. I will respond to that briefly. My assessment is that it would be inappropriate and would divide functions between a jury and a judge. There should be a link between who determines that a publication is defamatory and the entity that decides what should be the remedy for that through the award of damages. I oppose the amendment submitted in the name of Deputy Kelly.

Deputy Sherlock mentioned that the Higgins case provided direction for a court in respect of the assessment of damages. If a jury is not going to assess damages, which is the position of the Labour Party, the Higgins case would not be relevant to a jury. That does become an argument on the general question of the retention of juries because, although juries will be advised about the findings and dicta in the Higgins decision, they are not as bound as a High Court judge is by the determination of the case. I regret to say I will have to oppose the amendment submitted by the Labour Party.

There is a broader principle and objection put forward by the Social Democrats, the Labour Party, Sinn Féin and Deputy Connolly. The contention there is that the section itself should be opposed.

Deputies Sherlock and Connolly have effectively referred to what I said on Second Stage. I will tell the House what has changed since the Second Stage debate. In many respects, Deputy Connolly and I are in different positions. There are great advantages to being an Independent Member of Dáil Éireann. There are also disadvantages.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Minister also has a choice.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Similarly, there are many great advantages to being a member of a political party but there are also disadvantages, as I am sure the other Deputies here will acknowledge. One of the consequences of membership of a political party is the need for compromise. There has been a general election since the Second Stage debate. Fianna Fáil put forward a manifesto, which I supported. It included a requirement that the defamation Bill that was going through the Houses of the Oireachtas be enacted. There was then a debate between different parties about the formation of Government. A programme for Government was agreed between the two parties. I am a Minister in that Government. I am bound, because of the principles of compromise and collective responsibility, to give effect to what was agreed in the programme for Government. It was agreed in the programme for Government that there

was to be enactment of the defamation Bill as it went through Second Stage. Deputy Connolly can say that lacks moral courage, but that is the difference between being an Independent and being a member of a political party. Whether or not juries remain in High Court defamation actions is not a question of morality. It may, however, be a question of morality when we consider what I said in the Oireachtas previously. Others will, no doubt, present it as me changing my mind. I do not agree with that. What can be seen here is a recognition of the compromise that is required if one becomes a Minister in a Government and if one signs up to a programme for Government that contains a principle that conflicts with what one said earlier. Deputy Connolly and other Deputies are perfectly entitled to criticise me in light of what I have said previously. However, I must recognise, as Minister for Justice in a Government that has a programme for Government in place, that I am bound by the terms of the programme for Government.

I will advance the basis on which that has been put into the programme for Government and the basis on which it is provided that the Government wishes to remove juries from defamation actions. There are very few civil actions remaining where juries determine the cases. The only civil actions remaining in the High Court where a jury determines the outcome are defamation, false imprisonment and trespass to the person, sometimes known as assault. Those are the only cases in which one has an entitlement to get a jury in a civil case in the High Court. If one takes a defamation case to the Circuit Court, there is no issue because one is not entitled to a jury in a Circuit Court defamation action. I ask rhetorically that if people genuinely believe juries are so necessary for the purpose of vindicating one's good name, why then is there no amendment that states there should be a jury in a Circuit Court hearing of a defamation action.

The principal reason the programme for Government contains this provision, which requires that the defamation Bill be enacted as it stands, is the belief that the removal of juries will speed up trials. That is one of the reasons. It is probably hard to dispute that the removal of juries would speed up a trial. As I indicated at the outset, and as a judge who presides over civil jury actions in the High Court noted recently, it takes time to put in place a jury. Individuals are selected. They are told to come to court at 10.30 a.m. There is then a process to select a jury, which invariably goes on until 1 p.m. Jurors can be challenged. At that stage, you have lost half a day. The jury is then empanelled and sworn in. There follows an opening speech to the jury. Counsel for the plaintiff gives an opening speech. The case then goes on in the orthodox way with witnesses giving testimony. At the end of the evidence from both sides, there are closing speeches to the jury. There is then the judge's charge to the jury. There is then the deliberation and determination of the jury. Notwithstanding what anyone may think, it is empirically clear that the length of time it takes to determine a defamation action will be reduced if juries are removed. I do not think that can be disputed and it was not something I suggested on Second Stage. Time is expended in that way. Time in the civil courts means money and expense. It is inevitably true that the longer a case goes on, the more costly it will be.

Deputy Sherlock mentioned earlier that defamation actions are the most expensive. That is not my understanding. If she looked at the fee notes from a commercial case, she would notice they are considerably higher. Even taking her point, it reveals that the longer a case goes on, the more it will cost. I would have thought that was the principal reason Government included this in the programme for Government.

Then there are issues of certainty as to what will be awarded. If somebody asks a senior counsel what the likely outcome is of succeeding in a case for personal injuries, for example, a broken leg, that senior counsel will be able to assess fairly accurately the likely award from the judge. It will be within a range of figures. We now have the personal injuries guidelines.

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They will be able to accurately advise a client as to the likely outcome. That is an advantage for a plaintiff. Similarly, it is important for a person being sued, who can be told what the likely award against him or her will be if it goes wrong.

One of the downsides of assessments of damages being determined by a jury is that it is extremely difficult to tell a client, whether a plaintiff or a defendant, what the likely outcome of a jury is. I have great respect for juries and they generally, in my assessment, get it right, but jurors' predictions and outcomes are very hard to advise on. That has an impact on people being sued and on insurance companies covering people being sued. They do not reliably know what range of figures could be involved. That is the reason, notwithstanding the eloquent contributions of all four Members here this evening, that I - and it is a roundabout way of going to it - cannot agree to the amendment tabled in the name of the Labour Party Deputy and I must insist that the section continue as it is. I hope that has not put the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to sleep or anything like that. That is the end of my contribution.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is very interesting, Minister. I call Deputy Carthy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I ask his indulgence because we were rushing at the start and skipped over sections. I want not to oppose section 3 but to ask the Minister for clarification on a point. One of the other recommendations in the report of the pre-legislative scrutiny from the justice committee of the previous Dáil was that the definition of "periodical" should be made clearer, specifically regarding whether publications from broadcasters - say, the RTÉ website - would come under the remit of the Press Council or Coimisiún na Meán. The Oireachtas Library and Research Service produced a comprehensive review of the Bill versus the pre-legislative scrutiny report. In the review, it pointed to it not having been possible to include such a provision due to a lack of stakeholder agreement at the time. Will the Minister speak to this? Is it something he has considered since his appointment as Minister? Would he be in favour of it? If time allowed, would he be willing to look at a definition on later Stages? Essentially, does he plan to return to it?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Is that the definition of "periodical"?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Yes, the definition of a "periodical". It is a small point but I omitted to talk about it when we were skipping through section 3 and I want to put it on the record in case we table an amendment at a later stage.

I do not know if the Minister intended them this way but I interpreted his words to mean he did not agree with this but was bound by collective government, the programme for Government and decisions previously made to pursue it. That is astonishing. Of course, a Minister can bring a recommendation to Government that, on balance, a recommendation made by a previous Minister is not only contrary to the current Minister's belief but also that being dogged in the pursuit of that particular provision prevents the Dáil collectively from moving forward with reformed defamation laws. That is very disappointing.

On a number of aspects, the Minister misses the point the Opposition made and I find that disappointing considering, as has already been said, the Minister himself made virtually the same points we are making now. He understands as well as anyone, you would imagine, what it is that we are saying.

Sometimes the public has the view that the media, including newspapers and broadcasters, cannot publish lies. That is not what the law says. Media can, and on occasion do, publish lies.

The law sets a high bar for somebody to take a case that he or she was defamed. The definition of “defamation”, though not a legal definition, is essentially that it is the publication of an untrue statement that reasonable members of the public would think damages one’s reputation. That is very different from publishing lies.

I reflect on a very delicate time in the peace process when a number of lazy journalists figured out that a good way of writing headlines was to say senior members of my party were accused of being informers. Those were downright lies, and at a time when it put people’s lives at risk. They could not actually take a case for defamation because, in the eyes of the law, there is no distinction between British agents in a time of conflict or legal authorities in this State or elsewhere. It is not considered to be demeaning to your character if you are accused of assisting state authorities. Lies were able to be published *ad nauseam* and Sunday newspapers were competing against one another to see who could accuse the highest profile Sinn Féin representative or republican of being an informer, and they could get away with it.

That is moving off point a little bit but it is not being flippant about it. It is to say that media have a big responsibility and they are not always held legally accountable. I have seen articles written that were untrue but to prove they were defamatory would be difficult. That gets to the crux of why this is different from other civil cases the Minister has spoken about. Nobody can make an adjudication as to whether in the eyes of reasonable people somebody has been defamed better than a jury of one’s peers. Judges have a very important role and do a very important job but they are removed from lived realities. Due to the circumstances in which they operate and the incomes they have, they cannot be described as reflective of society as a whole. That is with no disrespect to our esteemed Judiciary. The principle of juries was established in the first place throughout the common law system. In that system today, the role of juries in many civil matters has been diminished or, in some cases, virtually abolished. However, if we are to move as the Government proposes in this area, we will be a complete outlier in respect of defamation cases and juries.

I am trying to break down the Minister’s arguments against the amendment to delete this section. The first issue he mentioned was delays. Of course we want to reduce delays. Appointing and swearing in a jury takes time. There have to be opening statements and the jury then has to deliberate. However, it is disingenuous in the extreme, and I think the Minister knows it, to suggest juries are the reason for the delays in our Courts Service. I do not believe they are at all, to be quite frank. If we were to take it to the nth degree that every component of court cases that causes a delay should be taken apart, then let us just get rid of trials altogether and arbitrarily make decisions. Presenting a defence causes a delay in the Courts Service but nobody argues we should get rid of that provision in order to speed things up.

The Minister also said he had a problem with the concept of a jury making a deliberation as to whether defamation had occurred and then a judge separately making a determination in our courts, but that is precisely what happens in the criminal justice system. Juries make a finding in relation to the guilt or innocence of an accused and then judges impose a sentence based on the sentencing guidelines. It is not something I am wedded to at this point regarding whether there would be a distinction. However, it would be a good compromise to suggest there are juries and then there is the issue of costs, given the difficulty people within the legal profession might have in terms of advising clients as to the likely outcome. This would address that difficulty.

I am not sure if there is another argument for abolishing juries other than delays and costs.

I do not understand why the Government would be so determined to move in such a way. I am looking through the document that was produced by Oireachtas Library and Research Service, which I commend because it is a very good document that goes through all aspects of the pre-legislative scrutiny. I am not sure if there is a legal expert or practitioner in the legal services who supports this provision at all. Certainly, the Bar Council and the Law Library seem to have particularly strong views, and I have noted the comments of former members of the Judiciary who are very vocal. We know that during the pre-legislative scrutiny, as was said by a number of other Deputies, there was unanimous support for juries.

This Bill was a long time in the making. Clearly, it was not something on which there was immediate agreement from the Government because previous Governments had ignored it for so long. To come to a point where there was unanimity within the Oireachtas justice committee on an issue as profound as this, including from members of the Government and the Opposition, seems a fairly big statement. To revert to Minister's original statement, he said he was bound by the programme for Government, collective government and the agreements of his predecessors. In that case, I am sure most people would have to ask what the point of this House and of having debates is. What is the point of having Committee Stage if not only is it the case that the Minister is not going to be convinced, but even if the Minister is convinced, he tells the House he will not do anything about it because his hands are tied behind his back?

I ask the Minister to reflect very strongly on this. I genuinely believe he thinks this is daft. I think it is daft. I also happen to think it is potentially dangerous to remove the voice of juries in significant defamation cases where it is, ultimately, a jury of peers who should be making the decision as to whether the very high threshold of defamation has actually been met. I want to make that case as formally as possible.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister for being forthright in his explanation of how his views have not so much evolved but probably remained the exact same. I took from his contribution that this is not something he believes in good conscience. He said he was bound by the principles of compromise. If I am to understand this, Fine Gael got 20.8% of the first preference vote in the last general election. I do not see the Lowry group here to defend the Minister or his Fine Gael colleagues. If we are to believe that this House is in any way the result of the will of the people, does it not worry us that one in five of the elected Members of this House are determining a very significant change in our court system to remove juries? We are removing the majority of a jury and justifying that by the principle of compromise. In and of itself, that is outlandish. Do we not have within this Chamber the principle of conscience, which should come before the principle of compromise? Otherwise, what are we doing here?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I also commend the Minister for his honesty and openness but that raises all the more questions. He is a member of a party and he has the views that he formed, based on his research and experience, that this was a bad decision, but he is now asked to leave that aside and go with what the party is telling him. That is extremely worrying, not just for this debate but for many other debates and issues, in particular regarding war, neutrality and Gaza.

Let me stick with the issue of costs because that is the one thing the Minister raised when he said the cost would be higher if we kept the juries, which are costly, lose time and so on. The Minister said: "If we abolished juries, I can guarantee the House that we will develop a whole body of jurisprudence that will result in cases being repeatedly appealed to the Court of Appeal and probably the Supreme Court." Is that not extremely costly? Where are the costs being

saved there?

I understand that every single expert who came before the justice committee said not to abolish the jurors. Different people might have made different arguments to let the juries decide on issues of fact and let the judge decide on the money, or to let the juries decide on issues of fact plus a recommendation that the judge would not have to follow that, and so on. How can we stand here as elected Members? We should look at that committee. I know Ministers will stand up and say they do not have to follow committees but it is significant that this is cross-party. There is no dissenting judgment. There is nobody saying that we should abolish the juries.

I will go back and pick up on several points. I have left the law, and defamation was not my area, so I do not speak in any legal capacity but as an elected representative who has the greatest respect for democracy. The more time I spend in the Dáil, the more respect I have for the Judiciary and the independent law profession. I was extremely critical in my time, I can tell you. There are many problems with people being excluded from the Courts Service and legal aid, on which we are awaiting a review. There are many problems with the courts and access to the courts. However, the longer I spend here, the more respect I have for the independent Bar and the solicitors, who do tremendous work, as do the judges.

That is particularly the case having spent this time and having read the reports of the Grace case, which we will get time to look at tomorrow. I see institution after institution defending itself over and over again in the many reports. We will be going into this with little time tomorrow but there have been reports such as the Dignam report and the Devine report. I mention this because at every stage, it was an acute example of the institution defending itself. That is why we need an independent Courts Service and we need the role of the juries. I see the Minister nodding and I know he agrees with this. If he is not nodding, I do not mind, but he certainly seems to be.

Let us look at what the retired judge said in this regard. This decision to change the defamation law was necessary but the decision to abolish the juries came from a report done by the Department of Justice. That Department of Justice report completely ignored the Higgins judgment, which came afterwards, but those in the Department did not go back to look at that judgment even though it came within a month of the report being published. They never had the sense to say that the problems they were looking at - the volatility of the juries and their unpredictability - had now been captured by the Supreme Court judgment, which laid down guidelines and principles. They did not go back to look at that.

The former judge also points out that the Department of Justice report looked at case law that had nothing to do with the 2009 Act but went back further to legislation from the 1960s.

7 o'clock

While I have the time I will read from this article:

... the decision of the Supreme Court in *Higgins v Irish Aviation Authority*, [was] delivered one month after the publication of the report.

The judgment of the court in *Higgins* marks a historic watershed in defamation law, the implications of which are directly relevant to the grounds advanced in support of [the] abolition [of juries].

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The [Supreme] court not only reversed the previous practice whereby it was not permissible to give guidance to a jury on damages by reference to monetary values or previous awards ... [and so on] but has also set out categories and ranges of damages to be applied in future cases for defamation ...

The express purpose of the guidance is to ensure an award of damages that will be proportionate [This is the very thing the Minister is accusing juries of not being capable of. A former judge is outlining that the guidelines from the Supreme Court said that the guidance will ensure the award will be proportionate] to the wrong/injury suffered in the circumstances of the particular case, the first objective for which abolition is advanced as necessary ... has already [been] addressed.

The Department of Justice did not see the need to go back after the Supreme Court judgment came out. The judge goes on to state, "It is particularly significant in the context of this debate that, in reaching its decision, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned the judgment of the Court of Appeal ...", and that it was the Court of Appeal decision that the Department of Justice report looked at. It did not come back to look at the Supreme Court unanimously overturning it. He goes on to deal with the legal process and the reduction in the duration of hearings and so on, which is the other argument being advanced:

Insofar as there were delays in having jury trials in defamation cases heard, this had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that the cases were jury actions, but rather was totally due to the lack of resources and failure to appoint a sufficient number of judges to deal with the enormous increase in court business, particularly over the last two decades.

This former judge goes on to point out that judges were appointed. He acknowledges that, but he is undermining the arguments of the Department of Justice and the Government. He further states:

With regard to the claim that the length of the litigation process [and this goes directly to the Minister] and legal costs will be reduced by abolition of jury trial, it should not be overlooked that one of the longest defamation trials in recent times was a case tried by judge alone: the trial lasted 29 days.

It is in the nature of defamation law that, in serious cases, trial duration can be protracted ... [rather] than because ... [it is] a jury [trial].

I will probably not be speaking on this again. That is why I am taking the time that I have to look at this. The grounds advanced, including cost, the volatility of juries and the lack of proportionality are groundless. They are without basis. We have a Government that is now abolishing juries on the basis of pressure. I disagree with the Minister regarding 1988 when we abolished juries in other matters. I do not agree that the same absolute pressure was brought to bear then to get rid of juries without an analysis of what improvements would follow. It is pointed out in this very succinct document that "Ireland would become an outlier among other common-law countries, where there is either an entitlement, as of right, to jury trial in defamation cases or where such trial may be ordered by a court on application, in the interests of justice."

The Minister outlined that this is the last staging post, that we do not need juries any more, and if we do not need them in other cases why would we need them in defamation cases. The former judge has also addressed that. I keep referring to that. All of his arguments have been

agreed by the other entities and organisations on the ground. I am simply choosing his words because they are clear and succinct. He states:

It is repeatedly claimed by those advocating abolition that the retention of the right to trial by jury in defamation cases represents an illogical anachronism that should be swept away in circumstances [as the Minister outlined] where the right to trial by jury has already been abolished for most, if not all, other civil wrongs ... [this] claim ... is as factually incorrect as it is legally wrong.

The fundamental rights of the citizen particular to the individual guaranteed by the Constitution – specifically, the rights to liberty ... [the right] of expression, good name, bodily integrity, an ownership of property, including the inviolability of the home – are among a ... [range] of other civil rights recognised by law that may be vindicated through trial by jury.

These are all of the arguments that have been outlined to us. Having read them all, having looked at the cross-party recommendations and having listened to the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, I cannot vote for a Bill that abolishes juries based solely on pressure, without evidence, when the evidence is quite to the contrary, at a time when we need language to mean something.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank Deputies for their contributions. I will try to deal with the issues they raised.

Deputy Carthy spoke about the definition of “periodical” in section 3. I am happy to give consideration to an amendment, if the Deputy tables it on Report Stage, which he has indicated he will do. At present, however, I am not fully aware of the detail of what he proposed but, as I said, I will give consideration to any amendment he puts down.

Deputy Carthy also spoke about how the media can publish lies. Generally, when it comes to defamation, people do not deliberately defame somebody. What generally occurs is a mistake is made or somebody uses incorrect language that has a meaning that goes beyond what was his or her intention, and it is a matter for the court to determine what the meaning is. Even though somebody may not have intended the language used to be defamatory, that is not sufficient. If the court believes the meaning of it is defamatory, that is sufficient. As I said previously, judges determine defamation actions every day of the week in the Circuit Court, which is where more people take cases than in the High Court.

Deputy Carthy also suggested that I said - in fairness to him this was not intentional - that juries were the reason for delay. I am not saying that juries are the reason for delay, but the presence of a jury in a case will inevitably mean that the case will take longer than if there is not a jury. That is a very clear situation.

There were many references to what was said by the Bar Council, former members of the Judiciary and the Law Society. Like Deputy Connolly, I have great respect for all three of those entities, but it is our function to legislate. I have great respect for judges, barristers and solicitors, but they are not elected. Who elected them? Nobody did. We are elected by the people. We should make our decision in the confidence that we are the people who have been elected. We should not defer all the time to people who we believe are better-informed than us.

Deputy Carthy also asked what the point was in having Committee Stage, if I am bound by the programme for Government. The point I was making is it is a central premise of the legisla-

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tion we are discussing, and a significant change, that juries will be removed from High Court defamation actions. That is the point I was making in respect of the issue.

Deputy Gannon referred to what is being put forth as solely a Fine Gael proposal, but it was also in the Fianna Fáil manifesto, which I supported. It is supported by the Government. It is unfair to categorise it as coming from just one entity.

Deputy Connolly talked about conscience. Maybe my level of conscience is not as heightened as Deputy Connolly's, but I do not view the abolition of juries in the High Court in the same way as issues such as Gaza, neutrality or war should be considered. I appreciate that this is a significant change, but it is not a principle of such conscience for me that I am required to genuflect before it.

There was also reference to cost and the jurisprudence that will arise. It probably is the case, as I said previously, that there will be more reserved judgments of the High Court when it comes to defamation than was the case when there were just juries. When you get a jury award, you do not get a written decision; the jury just give an outcome. That is why the outcomes are immediate. In most other civil actions, a High Court judge will reserve judgment and you get a written judgment subsequently. That takes a period of time. There obviously is as well a benefit in being able to see a written reserved judgement because it gives an indication of the reasons for the decision that is being made.

There was a lot reference to what I said on Second Stage. The primary point I made on Second Stage was that where most defamation happens in Ireland at present is online. People are defamed in many instances by anonymous people online on social media where heinous incorrect allegations are made about them. I identified on Second Stage that we needed to put on a statutory basis what is in effect now known as a Norwich Pharmacal order. That applies when a person who is being defamed online now has to go to the High Court to get an order for the High Court requiring the social media company to provide information to them of the account and the identity of the account holder who has defamed him or her. Fortunately, that has been included, and is one of the amendments within the Bill that we will be discussing presently. The contribution I made on Second Stage was not as limited as is put out there.

Deputy Connolly spoke about the Higgins judgment. The Higgins judgment is a clear judgment. It sets out what the rules are in respect of awards. If it is so clear, one wonders what is the necessity to have a jury if it is the case that the awards are so accurately prescribed by the Supreme Court in the Higgins judgment.

People talk about the common law world. In America, they have juries for most things. Any of the big cases in America you hear of - civil actions - go to a jury and it is a very different type of business than that which operates in the administration of justice in Ireland. Fortunately, jury trials in Ireland never became like jury trials in the United States of America, but I think it is the case, and I am open to correction on this, that juries do not determine defamation actions in the High Court in England and Wales.

I thank people for their contribution. I cannot agree to the amendment put forward by the Labour Party and I will have to seek to push section 4, which is an important part of the legislation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will make a brief point in response to one of the assertions of the Minister where he quite rightly says this House should not be bound to the views of any given

set of experts, whether it be the Bar Council, the Law Library, former members of the Judiciary even or the pre-legislative scrutiny of a committee of these Houses. It is ultimately, of course, for the Dáil to make a determination in respect of laws, but there has to be logic to it. The question I was asking the Minister was that all of these bodies are on one side saying this is a very bad idea, the Minister is on the other side saying he is moving ahead on this basis in line with his predecessor's intention, but he has not said on what basis he is doing that. The Minister has given some arguments but, frankly, I do not think any of them stack up. Generally speaking, a Minister will find someone, some entity or stakeholder, to say they think this is a good idea. Where did this come from? Does the Minister know what the origins of this was? Perhaps that would give us a little more clarity to understand. From my perspective, this is the pivotal part of the debate. If the Minister proceeds as he indicates, we will be opposing the Bill. It is as fundamental as that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am not looking around for entities that are supportive of this but there clearly are. Deputy Sherlock previously mentioned ISME. I suspect ISME is important but they are not the guiding people. I do not look for outside bodies to dictate to me as to what I should or should not do in the Houses of the Oireachtas. Ultimately, it was in the Fianna Fáil manifesto, it is part of the programme for Government and Members of the Oireachtas will determine it.

Amendment put:

| <i>The Committee divided: Tá, 64; Níl, 86; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
|--|------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Stاون</i> |
| <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | <i>Aird, William.</i> | |
| <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Brady, John.</i> | <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | |
| <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | |
| <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | |
| <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | <i>Browne, James.</i> | |
| <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | |
| <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | |
| <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | |
| <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | |
| <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | |
| <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | |
| <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | <i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i> | |
| <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | |

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| <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | |
| <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | <i>Connolly, John.</i> | |
| <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | |
| <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | |
| <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | <i>Cummins, John.</i> | |
| <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | |
| <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | <i>Daly, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | |
| <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | |
| <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | |
| <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | |
| <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | |
| <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | |
| <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | |
| <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | |
| <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i> | <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | |
| <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | |
| <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | <i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i> | |
| <i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i> | <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | |
| <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | |
| <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | <i>Lahart, John.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | <i>Lawless, James.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | <i>Lowry, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | |
| <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | |
| <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | |
| <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | |
| <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | |
| <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | |
| <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | |
| <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | |
| <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | |
| <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | |

Dáil Éireann

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|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i> | |
| | <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | |
| | <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | |
| | <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Dea, Willie.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | |
| | <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | |
| | <i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i> | |
| | <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | |
| | <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | |
| | <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | |
| | <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | |
| | <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | |
| | <i>Timmins, Edward.</i> | |
| | <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | |
| | <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Marie Sherlock and Duncan Smith; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

SECTION 4

Question put: "That section 4 stand part of the Bill."

| <i>The Committee divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
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| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Staon</i> |
| <i>Aird, William.</i> | <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | |
| <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | |
| <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | <i>Brady, John.</i> | |
| <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | |
| <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Browne, James.</i> | <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | |

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| <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | |
| <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | |
| <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | |
| <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | |
| <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | |
| <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | |
| <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | |
| <i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | |
| <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | |
| <i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i> | <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | |
| <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | |
| <i>Connolly, John.</i> | <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, John.</i> | <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | |
| <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Daly, Martin.</i> | <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | |
| <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | |
| <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | |
| <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | |
| <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | |
| <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | |
| <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i> | |
| <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | |
| <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | |
| <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | <i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i> | |
| <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | |
| <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | |
| <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | |
| <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | |
| <i>Lahart, John.</i> | <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Lawless, James.</i> | <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | |
| <i>Lowry, Michael.</i> | <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | |
| <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | |

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| <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | |
| <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | |
| <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | |
| <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | |
| <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | |
| <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | |
| <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | |
| <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | | |
| <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | | |
| <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Dea, Willie.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Feargháil, Seán.</i> | | |
| <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | | |
| <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | | |
| <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | | |
| <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | | |
| <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | | |
| <i>Timmins, Edward.</i> | | |
| <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | | |
| <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Matt Carthy and Gary Gannon.

Question declared carried.

SECTION 5

Question proposed: "That section 5 stand part of the Bill."

30 April 2025

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputies leaving the House to do so quietly and promptly. We now move to section 5, which is being opposed by Deputies Kelly, Gannon and Carthy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The fundamental concerns with section 5 are the same as those we had with section 4. I want to record my deep disappointment that the Minister could not be moved. When Committee Stage concludes and we proceed to Report Stage, the big question will be whether we have a Bill that has cross-party support and the full endorsement of the Oireachtas or a Bill that is contentious and divisive. Sinn Féin will be opposing this section.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Similarly, the Social Democrats will oppose this section. Again, this is about the principle of having trials by jury and the word “defending”. I have listened for the past hour and a half. We have read the research in the Oireachtas reports and by the various experts. Nobody has yet laid out any evidence to show why this would make the system better. I heard how it would make it cheaper, but that certainly does not mean it would be a better system. I would like to register my opposition.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I will be brief. Section 5 is consequential upon what happened to section 4. We voted to retain section 4. I note the opposition of Deputies Gannon and Carthy to section 5, but the fact that section 4 has been approved by the House means that section 5 should stay. I am retaining this section.

Question put and declared carried.

SECTION 6

Question proposed: “That section 6 stand part of the Bill.”

Deputy Matt Carthy: Section 6 refers to the “harm to the reputation of the body corporate” in the context of a not-for-profit organisation. This section proposes limiting this to instances whereby publication “has caused, or is likely to cause, serious harm to the reputation of the body corporate.” As I indicated earlier, there is a high standard and barrier in terms of defamation of an individual. This presents it at a much higher level for a body corporate. I refer to not-for-profit corporate bodies. The Minister will be aware that a lot of these groups do incredible and crucial work in our communities. Sports clubs, for example, can be reliant on the goodwill of their local communities for all manner of supports on a local level, in such instances where goodwill is at risk. I am concerned as to the scope of the definition of “serious harm”.

I am equally concerned that an incident whereby a single defamatory statement is not adjudicated to have caused serious harm, but forms part of a series of such statements over a period by different parties. Are we to say that comparable statements only become actionable if or when they are individually the straws that break the camel’s back, despite the fact that serious harm may have been caused by successive compounded statements, even by different individuals?

I have concerns about this. It seems to be an unjust approach and is potentially ripe for a lack of clarity as to what may or may not be defamatory. We have a different standard, essentially, for entities versus individuals. In terms of not-for-profit organisations at least, the current definition seems to be clearer and more practical. Will the Minister speak to the justification for the new section 12(2) inserted by section 6 and what he envisages will be the outworkings of this? I ask that in particular as I am not aware of any slew of cases from non-profits in terms of the definition. What problem are we seeking to actually solve by this? Is the Minister consider-

ing bringing forward amendments to this section on Report Stage?

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: One of the issues that was considered by the Department was whether we would include in the legislation a serious harm test as at present applies in England and Wales. It was decided that it would not be introduced or proposed in respect of personal plaintiffs, people who claim that they were defamed. The reason it was not proposed to look for a serious harm test is that the experience in the United Kingdom has been that it does not really achieve much. All it does is it sets in another interlocutory hearing for the purpose of determining whether or not a serious harm test has been met. The important thing from the point of view of the efficiency of the system and, more importantly, from the point of view of individuals who claim that their good name has been damaged is that we decided not to propose a serious harm test for individuals.

However, corporate entities are in a different position. If a company claims it has been defamed, it must, by necessity, mean that the company’s reputation has been damaged in the eyes of right-thinking people. It is a reasonable proposal to say that a company cannot claim that its reputation has been damaged unless it can identify financial loss. The whole purpose of a corporate company is to generate profit. If it is the case that it is not proven that there is any financial loss, that is a situation that should be reflected in legislation. The Deputy will no doubt say that there are many corporate entities that are not for profit. Notwithstanding that, if there is damage to the reputation of a corporate entity, it must be reflected in some diminution or some actual financial loss that it has sustained. It does not necessarily have to be a reduction or diminution in its profits, but it has to be a financial loss. That is something that could apply in the situation of a corporate entity that is not for profit.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Again, there are potential concerns here that are perhaps not envisaged in the Bill. We need to be incredibly careful. In terms of corporate profit-making entities, on the face of it, one would think that if a company has been defamed, one would automatically see an impact on profit margins or turnover. I am sure it would not take too much imagination to consider where there could be anomalies in that. Sometimes when talking about corporate entities, we think about big corporations but a corporate entity could be a local shop. We know in these cases that reputational damage can happen over a long period. One scenario might be that someone could defame a shop in a local town by spreading malicious rumours or printing something and while the shop would lose current customers, other customers would come in because of growth in the local population and the bottom line would not necessarily be affected. It is important to be mindful of that. As I say, I am much more concerned about the definition that is in place for not-for-profits because it is much harder then to define serious harm. For example, the Minister and I are members of political parties. Our parties of which we are members could fall under this criteria. If our parties were to be defamed, how would you prove serious harm? Would you come back after the next election and show a certain percentage drop in the vote or a lower percentage? How would you do that? That is why there is a need for a little bit of thought on this section.

The Minister will appreciate that I am new to this Bill and following it so I was not through all the permutations in the pre-legislative scrutiny but it just struck me when I read this section for the first time that there are potential issues here. I would like the Minister to give his assurance that he has considered all of those potential issues and perhaps agree to have a look at this to ensure they do not become more contentious once the Bill is enacted, if it is to be the case we move forward on that basis.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I certainly will give more detailed consideration to it in light of what the Deputy said. Dealing with the two examples the Deputy gave, the local shop in most situations, I would have thought, is not a corporate entity but is just owned by the local people. Let us assume that it is a corporate entity and they decided to run the shop under the auspices of a company. Let us say somebody suggests the shop is selling produce which is out of date. That is clearly defamatory and damaging to the reputation of that company. If it was the case, however, that that did not result in any reduction in profits or any financial loss to the corporate entity, it is hard to see what is the effect of the allegedly defamatory comment. If a company is defamed, it is reflected in the diminution of the financial strength of that company and you will be able to evidence financial loss. It is a sensible decision to make that if a company or corporate body is instituting defamation proceedings, that company should be able to establish there is financial loss sustained. In many respects, this replicates the tort of malicious falsehood, which will also continue to exist after this legislation is enacted.

The Deputy also mentioned the defaming of political parties. Although I am not absolutely sure, I suspect that political parties are not corporate entities but are registered with the Standards in Public Office Commission. Maybe things are different in Sinn Féin but I do not think Fianna Fáil is a corporate entity. I could be wrong about that. Let us think of a charitable entity that is a corporation. If someone defames that charitable entity that is a corporation, we will have to see some consequence to that. The company does not have feelings in the same way as an individual does so the company will have to be able to show some financial loss or financial consequence as a result of that allegedly defamatory publication.

As I say, I will look at it again and will give it further consideration. Obviously, if the Deputy wants to bring anything forward on Report Stage, he should feel free to do so and I will as well.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am generally supportive of this Bill and, unlike some of my colleagues, I see the rationale in not having juries for certain types of defamation cases. However, I have a query about the corporate entity issue, which is a follow up on what other Deputies said. Let us say there is a chain of hardware stores - let us call them Fianna Fáil hardware - and it is owned by Joe Bloggs. Let us also say Fianna Fáil hardware had a couple of defective pots of paints or whatever, but because it is the only hardware store in the town where it sells, the sales do not decrease. Right-thinking members of society, however, are starting to shun and avoid Joe Bloggs who owns the hardware stores. Is it the case the owner of a hardware store has to take a personal defamation claim, even though the complaints are made against the corporate entity, which is the hardware store? Where is the dividing line?

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for the contribution. In a situation like that, if an individual was very associated with a company, the individual could take an action in their own name on the basis that they have been defamed because an entity with which they are very clearly associated, and it is known to the public that they are associated, has been defamed. In that instance, an individual could take a defamation action in respect of it. It is difficult to give categorical assurances in respect of the type of example the Deputy gives, but what will remain throughout is the entitlement of an individual to take a defamation action.

If I am somebody who owns a series of companies and false statements are made about those companies which are very damaging, not just to the companies but to me, I then have an entitlement to take a defamation action because the companies, which are alleged to be involved in wrongdoing, reflect very much on me. There is not an absolute cut off point where, if

it is a company being defamed, only the company can take the action. If an individual is very much associated with the company in the eyes of the public or even referred to in the publication, there are instances where that individual could take an action as well.

Deputy Matt Carthy: One of the objectives of defamation law - it might not be stated in law - is that, at a time when there is so much mistrust about misinformation and disinformation, it should be a case that anybody who is publishing anything, particularly a professional media outlet, should not want to tell lies. The difficulty with this definition is that, for a for-profit entity, you can publish lies about it as long as it does not actually have a financial loss. There might be reasons for publishing lies or making defamatory remarks, even beyond media outlets, in the sense that while one company might not suffer a financial loss because of lies being told about it, another company might get a financial benefit from it, if the context in which that would happen can be understood.

We know that a lot of media organisations in particular, let us call a spade a spade, have been very eager to ensure it is as difficult as possible for defamation cases to be taken. Of course, they are concerned about their own corporate future and their ability to be financially viable. It is not to dismiss those concerns at all. The right to a good name can be as equally valid for an entity as it is for an individual.

We are moving to a point where, essentially, we now have three standards. We have the standard for what counts as defamation of individuals, which is a fairly high standard, in fairness. We have a standard for not-for-profit corporate entities and the definition of serious harm. I am not sure how that would be proven in that case. I could certainly see an area where that would be very contested, and I know members of the legal profession will probably be licking their lips at that prospect. We then have the third standard, which concerns for-profit entities, which is at least clear in what can be constituted in that there has to be a financial impact, but again, once there is no provable financial impact, you can essentially say what you like.

I am not opposing this section of the Bill at this stage but I am raising serious concerns. This is one of the reasons Committee Stage is better in a committee room where we are able to thrash these things back and forward. There are particular concerns about this section but the Minister has given an assurance that he will look at this as we move on with the Bill.

8 o'clock

I encourage him to ensure that that happen and that there is a proper examination of the potential implications here.

Question put and agreed to.

SECTION 7

Question proposed: "That section 7 stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Matt Carthy: The section relates to it being a defence to defamation to give a fair report of proceedings or judgments of courts in this State or in the North of our country. It extends this protection to the courts of any state, essentially. There is a certain practicality to this, particularly in the context of media essentially having become internationalised. I would appreciate it, however, if the Minister could speak to whether he believes that extending this to any state is practical or perhaps even fair and whether he has a fear that there is a risk that

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this would effectively lower the bar. Say, for example, a person fails in a defamation case that might be rightly taken in the United States. The United States has a much higher bar to get over in terms of defamation. Are we then to say that repeating those defamatory statements, which would have been considered to have been defamatory in the first place, in Ireland is to be facilitated because of that previous decision, if I am making the question clear? I appreciate what the Minister is trying to do in terms of being practical in a modern context but has he given consideration as to whether the appropriate response would effectively facilitate what may in fact be defamatory statements under Irish law because they were not found to be defamatory in another law? I would appreciate the Minister's thoughts on that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: This section proposes an amendment to section 17 of the Defamation Act. That section sets out what is protected by the defence of absolute privilege. For instance, any statement made in this House is absolutely privileged. No matter what Deputy Carthy were to say about me, even if it were grossly defamatory, if I issued proceedings against him he would get the proceedings struck out on the basis that that was said in Dáil Éireann, where absolute privilege applies. Also, the list in section 17 includes statements made in open court by a witness or on affidavit. The purpose of the amendment is to extend that in order that it applies not only to courts established by law in the State or established under the law of Northern Ireland but also to those established under the law of any other state or place. The reason for section 17 is to give protection to people who report on what happens in areas of absolute privilege. If anybody writes about what happened here tonight, they are fully protected. Similarly, however, if they were to write about what happened in a court in the United States or produce an accurate report of a court in Afghanistan, or any country around the world, the journalist would be protected because that is a statement that was made in a court of whatever the country is. It is a fair protection for somebody who reports accurately what was said in a court established in another country. We generally have respect for court systems that operate in other countries. Even if we do not respect those courts, however, we still should be entitled to report what findings that court reached in respect of a decision that was before it, even though we do not support the state itself.

I therefore do not share Deputy Carthy's concerns. This is a reasonable protection. It is a reasonable extension of the defence of absolute privilege, and individuals should be entitled to report on and repeat what was stated in a court established under the law of any other state or place.

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 8 to 16, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 17

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gannon has tabled an amendment to section 17. He is not here to move it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: May I speak-----

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Maybe he is on his way.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and perhaps Deputy Gannon will-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Reappear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----be here later?

SLAPP suits, which is I think what this section deals with, are of course an abhorrent attempt to place fear of financial ruin particularly on ordinary people or to scare off media outlets that might have a limited budget from taking part in either public life or public discourse. They have no place in a democracy. There cannot be selective prohibition of freedom of expression simply because there is a fear of a malign actor using defamation proceedings for that purpose where defamation has not taken place but there are deep pockets or sometimes strength. It is right and entirely appropriate that we should seek to address this and prohibit that.

I do have a couple of slight concerns. I have seen definitions of SLAPPs being thrown around that are not definitions of SLAPPs. Some commentators suggest that, for example, any political representative who tries to clear his or her name through the court is engaged in a SLAPP. To suggest, for example, that a county councillor representing a south inner city area in the Minister's constituency who feels that their good name has been impinged and who goes to court is equivalent to a multibillionaire who can have any number of senior counsel bringing an organisation to court is just ludicrous. It actually undervalues just how important it is that we tackle the issue of SLAPPs. It goes back to the point I have made repeatedly. No media organisation - in fact, nobody - should tell lies, things that are not true, about others. In many respects, it is very different from everything else because the victim has to essentially prove his or her case in all these instances, and then there are others who will use the system that is there, and we know this. There have been some very high-profile cases where media outlets in this State have been afraid to publish what are facts, essentially, because they are afraid of the financial outworking of that due to powerful interventions. All these things have to be done. We have to get it right. On balance, for the most part, I think this section of the legislation does that, but I just make those points.

I see Deputy Gannon coming in now. That will allow me to finish by saying that while the Bill seeks to address the issue of defamation laws being abused to make people fearful of public participation, abuse, even in terminology or through sloganeering, will not result in balanced defamation laws. In fact, it could tip the scales too far in the other direction and perhaps make people fearful of vindicating their own name, which would be the exact opposite of what we do.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 12, to delete all words from and including "but" in lines 13 down to and including "participation" in 14 and substitute the following:

"have the effect of preventing, restricting or penalising public participation".

I thank Deputy Carthy and others. The Bill says lawsuits must have the main purpose of stopping public participation to be considered abusive. My proposed change is that if the lawsuit "has the effect" of stopping or punishing public participation, even if that was not the original intent, it is considered abusive.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I commend Deputy Carthy on managing to talk on to allow Deputy Gannon to get time to come here. I share his objective that we ensure that better protections are provided for those who are targeted by SLAPPs. Fortunately, however, in Ireland we do not experience SLAPPs in the same way as I think other, more populous jurisdictions have experienced them in recent years. Notwithstanding that, it is important we have in place legislation to respond to them and also it is part of our obligation to transpose the EU directive.

Deputy Gannon's first amendment seeks to substitute the term that the main purpose of the proceedings will "have the effect". He is trying to change intention to "effect". My concern is the amendment proposed would cast a net too widely and risks including claims that are brought genuinely by people in good faith to vindicate their right to a good name but may have the effect of restricting public participation. Sometimes that can happen. Simply because litigation may result in reducing public participation or engagement by the media does not necessarily mean the individual taking the claim does not have a legitimate claim. Again, it comes back to the balancing act. On the one hand we must balance the right of an individual to vindicate their good name and on the other we have to reflect the freedom of expression that exists.

The EU directive very specifically defines "... abusive court proceedings against public participation" as proceedings that "... have as their main purpose the prevention, restriction or penalisation of public participation ...". That is the reason that language has been used in the section the Deputy is seeking to amend. The Bill's definition uses almost exactly that wording. Adopting a different definition that focuses on the effect rather than the purpose risks causing legal confusion and uncertainty and may not correctly transpose the directive. Regrettably, I cannot therefore accept that amendment. The section as drafted achieves the purpose of what is within the directive. It also achieves the legislative purpose of trying to ensure there is a balance between the right of the individual to vindicate their good name and the right of an entity to publish and to publicly participate in a debate.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment Nos. 3 to 5, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 14, to delete lines 6 to 14 and substitute the following:

"34E. (1)Where a defendant in defamation proceedings relating to his or her engagement in public participation makes an application to the court, in accordance with law, to strike out the claim as being an abusive lawsuit against public participation."

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gannon does not wish to discuss the amendments.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I might respond formally to Deputy Gannon's amendments.

I understand the purpose of amendment No. 3 would be to delete the reference to "manifestly unfounded" contained in section 34E of the proposed Part 4A. Section 34E transposes Article 11 of the directive under which a court may strike out proceedings that have been initiated against a person on account of their engagement in public participation without proceeding to a full hearing if satisfied they are manifestly unfounded. I understand the Deputy's desire to provide protection for those targeted by abusive proceedings against public participation. However, this aim must also be balanced with the constitutional right of access to the courts. Section 34E(2) outlines an indicative list of circumstances where proceedings might be considered manifestly unfounded. For example, it includes where the endorsement or pleading or claim is "an abuse of the process of the court", which would seem to reflect the Deputy's point on abusive proceedings. The list is expressed to be non-exhaustive and is broader than that contained in the general scheme, taking account of recommendations made by the committee in its pre-legislative scrutiny report. The wide definition aims to allow the court enough flexibility

to balance those rights as fairly as possible in the circumstances of each case. Deputy Gannon's amendment would substitute the current requirement for a court to be satisfied proceedings were "manifestly unfounded" with a requirement merely to be satisfied the proceedings came within the definition of abusive proceedings against public participation. I am satisfied the list provided in section 34E is sufficiently broad and appropriately reflects the requirements of the directive. I do not consider Deputy Gannon's amendment would provide any additional protections and therefore cannot accept it.

Deputy Gannon's amendment No. 4 would essentially freeze proceedings while an application for strike-out or any appeal arising from such an application is being heard or considered. That would include a prohibition on amendments to pleadings. However, in accordance with section 34E, the court, in determining such an application, is under an obligation to act as expeditiously as possible. In practical terms it is difficult to envisage what further steps in the proceedings would arise in advance of the determination of that application by the court. Further, amendment to pleadings is already a matter for the court provided for by the rules in court. I do not consider it necessary to introduce any such additional provisions specifically in relation to applications under section 34E and accordingly do not propose to accept this amendment.

There are a number of issues with Deputy Gannon's amendment No. 5. As I understand it the amendment is linked to amendment No. 3 and proposes that rather than using the "manifestly unfounded" test to strike out proceedings it should be open to a court to strike out proceedings that fit the definition of abusive proceedings against public participation, but the claimant should be allowed to defeat such a strike-out application if they satisfy the court that the claim is likely to prevail at trial and that the public interest in allowing the claim to continue outweighs the public interest in dismissing the claim. The striking out of proceedings represents a limitation on the right of access to the courts. Section 34E seeks to transpose the directive and carefully balances the rights of access to the courts and freedom of expression. Likelihood of success at trial is a matter that would be considered in any such strike-out application and it would be difficult to foresee how the circumstances envisaged by Deputy Gannon's amendment could arise in practice. I consider section 34E to provide sufficient flexibility to the court to ensure the cases that could go to full hearing are permitted to do so.

While I appreciate and recognise the intention to strengthen the protections provided in relation to section 34E by Deputy Gannon, the amendments as proposed would not achieve that objective and are inconsistent with the purpose of that section. For that reason I cannot agree to them.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 14, between lines 30 and 31, to insert the following:

"Stay of proceedings

34EA. (1) Upon an application made under section 34E by a defendant to a proceeding, no further step may be taken in the proceeding by any party until the application, including any appeal against the application, has been finally disposed of.

(2) Unless a judge orders otherwise, the claimant is not permitted to amend his or her pleadings in the proceeding—

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(a) in order to prevent an order under this Act dismissing the proceeding, or

(b) if the proceeding is dismissed under the Act, in order to continue the proceeding.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 15, between lines 4 and 5, to insert the following:

“**34FA.** Where an application for declaration has been made before or during a trial of action and costs, a judge must not strike out a claim and appeal under section 34E if the claimant satisfies the judge that—

(a) the claim is likely to prevail at trial, and

(b) the harm suffered or likely to be suffered by the claimant as a result of the defendant’s expression is sufficiently serious that the public interest in permitting the proceeding to continue outweighs the public interest in dismissing the case before trial.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 17 agreed to.

SECTION 18

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 6 to 9, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 16, lines 10 to 12, to delete all words from and including “under” in line 10 down to and including line 12 and substitute “to which Schedule 2 refers, or”.

This group of amendments makes changes to section 18 of the Bill, which concerns alternatives to legal proceedings. Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 make minor drafting changes to sections 34I and 34J. Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 concern the insertion of a new subsection into section 34J that provides that the court may adjourn proceedings to enable compliance with certain requirements of subsection (1) relating to provision by a solicitor of an accompanying statutory declaration.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 16, lines 35 to 38, to delete all words from and including “(if” in line 35 down to and including line 38 and substitute “his or her compliance with subsection (1).”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 8:

In page 16, between lines 38 and 39, to insert the following:

“(3) If the originating document referred to in subsection (2) is not accompanied by a statutory declaration made in accordance with that subsection, the court concerned shall adjourn the proceedings for such period as it considers reasonable in the circumstances to enable the practising solicitor concerned to comply with paragraphs (a) to (d) of subsection (1) and provide the court with such declaration or, if the solicitor has already complied with subsection (1), to provide the court with such declaration.”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 9:

In page 16, line 39, to delete “(3)” and substitute “(4)”.

Amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 10 to 13, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together by agreement.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 10:

In page 16, after line 40, to insert the following:

“Effect of specified ADR procedures on limitation periods

34K. In reckoning a period of time for the purposes of any limitation period under section 11 of the Act of 1957 applicable to the bringing of a defamation action, the following periods of time shall be disregarded:

(a) where a complaint is made to the Press Council to which Schedule 2 refers, the period beginning on the date of the making of the complaint and ending on the date of the determination of the complaint (including, where applicable, its determination by the Press Council on appeal) in accordance with the procedures of the Press Council for the time being in force;

(b) where a person exercises a right of reply under section 49 of the Broadcasting Act 2009, the period beginning on the date of the making of a request for the right of reply under that section and ending on—

(i) the expiration of a period of 21 days after the date of receipt by the requester of a decision to refuse under subsection (8) or (9) of that section, or

(ii) where an application to the Compliance Committee is made under that section, the date of receipt by the person who made the application of a statement in writing of the decision of the Compliance Committee under subsection (20) of that section.”.

Amendment No. 10 seeks to ensure that applicants are not dissuaded from using alternative dispute resolution mechanisms because of concerns about the limitation period for bringing defamation actions under the Statute of Limitations. It clarifies that periods of time under which alternative dispute resolutions procedures are ongoing shall be disregarded for the purposes of the limitation period.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 11:

In page 17, line 2, to delete “**34K.**” and substitute “**34L.**”.

Amendments Nos. 11 to 13, inclusive, adjust references to reflect the inclusion of the new section 34K.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 12:

In page 17, line 29, to delete “**34L.**” and substitute “**34M.**”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 13:

In page 17, line 30, to delete “section 34K(1)(a)” and substitute “section 34L(1)(a)”.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 18, as amended, agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move amendment No. 14:

In page 18, between lines 2 and 3, to insert the following:

“Circuit Court identification order

The Principal Act is amended by the insertion of the following section after section 44:

“45. (1) The Circuit Court (in this section referred to as the ‘court’) shall have jurisdiction to hear and determine an application in accordance with this section.

(2) An application shall be made by an applicant—

(a) in good faith, and

(b) on notice to the relevant intermediary service provider concerned.

(3) Upon an application, the court may, subject to subsection (4), make an order (in this section referred to as an ‘identification order’) requiring a relevant intermediary service provider to provide to the applicant such relevant information as the court may specify in the identification order where the court is satisfied that—

(a) a statement was published, or caused to be published, on an information society service by means of an intermediary service provider by a person or entity (in this section referred to as an ‘anonymous

publisher') whose identity is unknown to the applicant and whose identity is not readily ascertainable on the face of the statement or from other information available to the applicant on the information society service,

(b) a claim by the applicant in any defamation proceedings against the anonymous publisher that the statement is defamatory is likely to succeed at trial,

(c) the relevant information is necessary to enable the applicant to bring defamation proceedings against the anonymous publisher to whom the relevant information relates,

(d) the relevant information is likely to be in the possession of the relevant intermediary service provider, and

(e) the applicant has no other practicable means of obtaining the relevant information.

(4) A court may—

(a) make an identification order only where it considers that—

(i) it is in the interests of justice to do so, and

(ii) the interests favouring disclosure of relevant information outweigh those against,

having regard to the rights and obligations of the applicant and those of the anonymous publisher and any third parties who are reasonably likely to be affected by the order, and

(b) make the order subject to such conditions as it considers appropriate, which may include, in relation to the relevant information disclosed to the applicant by the relevant intermediary service provider in accordance with that order—

(i) terms restricting the use of the relevant information so disclosed to the bringing of defamation proceedings against the anonymous publisher, and

(ii) an undertaking by the applicant not to use the relevant information so disclosed other than to bring defamation proceedings against the anonymous publisher.

(5) The court may, whether or not it has made an identification order and where it considers it appropriate to do so, order that an applicant pay any or all of the costs of the relevant intermediate service provider in relation to an application and the costs resulting from the making of any identification order.

(6) In this section—

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‘application’ means an application under this section for an identification order;

‘defamation proceedings’ means—

- (a) an application under section 33 for an order to prevent the publication of an alleged defamatory statement,
- (b) a defamation action, or
- (c) a claim for other relief under this Act in respect of an alleged defamatory statement;

‘information society service’ means a service normally provided—

- (a) for remuneration,
- (b) at a distance, that is to say, that the service is provided without the parties being simultaneously present,
- (c) by electronic means, that is to say, that the service is sent initially and received at its destination by means of electronic equipment for the processing (including digital compression) and storage of data, and entirely transmitted, conveyed and received by wire, by radio, by optical means or by other electromagnetic means, and
- (d) at the individual request of a recipient of services, that is to say, that the service is provided through the transmission of data on individual request;

‘intermediary service’ means one of the following information society services:

- (a) a ‘mere conduit’ service, consisting of the transmission in a communication network of information provided by a recipient of the service, or the provision of access to a communication network;
- (b) a ‘caching’ service, consisting of the transmission in a communication network of information provided by a recipient of the service, involving the automatic, intermediate and temporary storage of that information, performed for the sole purpose of making more efficient the information’s onward transmission to other recipients upon their request;
- (c) a ‘hosting’ service, consisting of the storage of information provided by, and at the request of, a recipient of the service;

‘intermediary service provider’ means a provider of an intermediary service;

‘relevant information’, in relation to an anonymous publisher, means information as to the identity, address or other contact information of the anonymous publisher;

‘relevant intermediary service provider’ means an intermediary service provider that provides the intermediary service by means of which a statement referred to in subsection (3)(a) is published, or caused to be published, by the anonymous publisher.”.”.

I outlined on Second Stage a section I thought was missing from the Bill, which was that it contained no statutory mechanism to provide for a person to seek what is known as a Norwich Pharmacal order. Those orders are necessary in circumstances where a person has been defamed online but is not able to identify the publisher of the defamatory material. In such circumstances, at present, it is necessary for the defamed individual to go the High Court to seek a Norwich Pharmacal order that can then be served on the social media provider. After that, it can be possible for the individual who has been defamed to identify the person responsible for the publication. Amendment No. 14 seeks to address an issue many people raised. It provides that the Circuit Court will have a statutory jurisdiction to make identification orders in relation to defamation matters. Such orders, known as Norwich Pharmacal orders, are currently available through the High Court. However, obtaining them can be costly. Defamation actions can be heard in the Circuit Court but until now it lacked power to grant identification orders. This amendment has no impact on the existing powers of the High Court to grant identification orders. This amendment inserts a new section 19 into the Bill, which will insert a new section 45 into the Defamation Act 2009. The new section empowers the Circuit Court to hear and determine an application for an identification order. The applicant must make the application in good faith and note it to the relevant intermediary service provider, a term defined in the section, and is based on existing definitions in the digital services regulation. It requires an intermediary service provider to provide an applicant with information in its possession relating to the identity of an individual or entity who had posted defamatory material about the applicant online anonymously or under a pseudonym. Section 45(3) identifies requirements which the court must be satisfied have been met in order to grant the application. They include that the claim by the applicant in any defamation proceeding against the anonymous publisher is likely to succeed at trial, the relevant information necessary to bring defamation is likely in the possession of the ISP and the applicant has no other practical means of obtaining it. In addition, section 44(4) outlines the need to consider interests of justice and right and obligations of the applicant, anonymous publisher and any third parties reasonably likely to be affected by the order.

Deputy Matt Carthy: May I speak about the amendment?

An Ceann Comhairle: You may.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I fully support this amendment. It is restrictive in terms of allowing people to go through the Circuit Court to seek the identity of those behind online anonymous publications or posts. Social media in particular is one of the great advances of our time. The right to anonymity on social media can in many ways be positive and allows people to express themselves and engage in public participation and debate in a manner they may not be in a position to do otherwise. There are those, however, who use platforms such as social media under pseudonyms or anonymous accounts, sometimes claiming to represent an entire people or entire town or place and making scurrilous untrue claims and sometimes defamatory claims. If a post makes an aggressive or untrue statement about somebody else, that person should be entitled, through the courts, to find out who it is who made that statement. My only concern is the bar set for a judge to make a determination that there needs to be a belief that the case will be won. It is almost like hearing the case beforehand. Other than that, this is a step in the right

direction. Perhaps the Minister will look at the criteria. It should be easier if somebody has been abused, lied about or defamed by an anonymous account to get the identity of the person or persons behind that account.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank Deputy Carthy for his contribution. This is probably the most consequential amendment we have discussed this evening. It will probably be of the most assistance to people in Ireland who are concerned and affected by defamation. As I said, the most common form of defamation in Ireland is not carried out by the media. In fact, the media are much more careful and responsible than in the vast amount of other countries. That is why the media in Ireland have such a good reputation. Perhaps it is not acknowledged that part of the reason we have such high-quality media in Ireland is because of the strict defamation laws. Where there appears to be insufficient regulation is social media use by anonymous individuals online. In fairness to the courts, they have showed themselves to perhaps be ahead of the Oireachtas. They developed a mechanism under the common law whereby individuals can apply to the High Court for the purpose of securing a Norwich Pharmacal order. It is much better that we as legislators put in place a statutory scheme, referred to as an identification order, that will enable people to get this information to bring a halt to or seek a remedy for defamatory statements made about them by anonymous individuals online.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 19 agreed to.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: As that is the last section, may I identify some provisions I may bring forward on Report Stage?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, Minister.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I wish to indicate to the House that I intend to bring forward some further amendments, about some of which we are not yet clear as to the exact placing within the Bill. Those amendments will include an amendment to provide for clearer and simpler defence of fair and reasonable publication in the public interest, which is particularly important to protect responsible public interest journalism, a small number of additional amendments to Part 8 of the Bill in relation to alternative dispute resolution and an amendment in relation to the transposition of the remaining provisions of the anti-SLAPP directive. In parallel to the progression of the Bill, my officials are working on the transposition of the remaining requirements of the anti-SLAPP directive. If it transpires that any of those remaining elements of the directive require transposition by way of primary legislation, that may be done by way of amendment to this Bill, given that there are already extensive transposition provisions included in Part 7. There may also be an amendment in respect of the granting of damages for harm suffered by a person targeted by SLAPP if it is believed that is necessary or appropriate. In consultation with the Courts Service we are looking at the wording of provisions relating to the publication of judgments to ensure they are operable in practice. Finally, we will seek to include transitional provisions and minor language revisions. These are the potential amendments that will be brought forward on Report Stage.

Title agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: When is it proposed to take Report Stage?

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: That has not been set yet.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Which part, Deputy?

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Report Stage or the Bill?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Committee Stage is not agreed. Is that in order?

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no question on that. We are both learning, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I just wanted to let the Minister know the strength of my feelings.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before moving to the voting block, we must await the Chief Whip who will be proposing an alteration to the Order of Business for tomorrow due to a bereavement in a Minister's family.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 8.33 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 8.35 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 8.33 p.m. and resumed at 8.35 p.m.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach(Deputy Mary Butler): The following is a proposal to revise the schedule for 1 May, 2025. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or in the arrangements agreed on the Order of Business, that (a) the statements on the Farrelly commission report shall be taken at 10.23 a.m. tomorrow and shall be interrupted after 96.5 minutes and (b) oral parliamentary questions to the Minister for Social Protection shall be taken in place of statements on the Farrelly commission report on the resumption of the sitting following the sos.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Unnecessary Hip Surgeries at Children's Health Ireland: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy David Cullinane on Tuesday, 29 April:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes with alarm the results of a clinical audit conducted on children's hip surgeries performed on children under the care of Children's Health Ireland (CHI), which:

— audited 147 cases across 14 surgeons across 3 institutions for the period 2021 to 2023, namely CHI at Temple Street, CHI at Crumlin, and National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh; and

— found that, of those audited, 60 per cent of the surgeries at Temple Street were not indicated, 79 per cent at Cappagh were not indicated, and 2 per cent at Crumlin were not indicated;

further notes that:

— not all of these surgeries were conducted through the public system, but that many were conducted privately with even less oversight of care;

— many parents sought second opinions and that there are cases where the second opinion considered that not only did the child not require surgery, but that the diagnosis was incorrect;

— this malpractice has occurred under the watch of several Ministers for Health, who have failed to properly oversee the effective delivery of children’s healthcare in this State and have instead operated at arm’s length; and

— a final report into this matter has yet to be completed nor published;

furthermore:

— considers that a surgery conducted in circumstances where it is not clinically indicated according to best practice standards is an unnecessary surgery; and

— acknowledges that any surgery can be a traumatic experience for a child and their parents;

recognises that:

— potentially tens of thousands of hip surgeries have been conducted at these institutions over the last decade, and that parents of children who had these surgeries are left in the dark and wondering whether their child suffered an unnecessary surgery; and

— condemns the fact that there was no disclosure of these concerns and incidents despite the Minister for Health being made aware as far back as May 2024 and until the publication of the clinical audit by the Ditch media outlet, and that these concerns were kept hidden from parents and Dáil Éireann;

further recognises:

— that these revelations come at the same time as the completion of the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) investigation into the use of non-medical grade implants in several children, which found severe governance and institutional failures at CHI; and

calls on the Government to:

— conduct an extensive review of orthopaedic surgical practice at CHI to uncover the extent of unnecessary surgeries on children, and to determine why these surgeries were conducted and whether a profit motive was involved in any of these cases;

— provide certainty to all parents of children who have had orthopaedic surgical practice at CHI;

— hold those responsible for these failures to account, at an individual, organisa-

tional, and political level; and

— ensure that as we transition into the new Children’s Hospital that it provides the best quality care with the highest standards of governance, management, ethics, open disclosure and communication between families and medics.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“recognises that:

— Children’s Health Ireland (CHI) was made aware through the protected disclosure process of a concern relating to the threshold criteria being used for surgical intervention in relation to development dysplasia of the hip (DDH) September 2023;

— the concern related to different indications for DDH surgery between CHI Temple Street, the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh (NOHC) and CHI Crumlin, with a lower threshold for surgery at Temple Street and NOHC for children, this resulted in different practices across the sites in CHI and NOHC;

— the Department of Health was notified by the Health Services Executive on 9th May, 2024 that a clinical audit was to be conducted in CHI and the NOHC;

— the clinical audit is being conducted by an external international expert on surgery for children with developmental dysplasia of the hip performed during the 2021-2023 period across CHI and the NOHC;

— the Minister for Health is awaiting the final report of the audit, which is expected in the coming weeks, before any conclusions can be drawn on this matter, further details will be shared once the process concludes, respecting confidentiality and due process;

— patients and their families will have understandable concerns, and CHI and NOHC have issued letters to families to provide reassurance and information about the audit pending its completion;

— as a patient safety precaution, a single cross-site pre-operative decision-making process for any planned DDH surgery in CHI and NOHC has been implemented, all cases are being reviewed before any decision for surgery is made by clinicians from CHI Crumlin, Temple Street and NOHC;

— an action plan is currently being drafted, this plan includes identification of groups of patients not included in the audit sample but who may be affected by any findings of the audit.

— plans are also being put in place for patient follow-up as required in line with good practice and will consider any recommendations with regard to clinical follow up from the final report; and

— a communications plan is also being developed to support the publication of the final report and further communications to patients and families.”.

- (Minister for Health)

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An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding unnecessary hip surgeries at Children’s Health Ireland. On Tuesday, 29 April, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| <i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Staon</i> |
| <i>Aird, William.</i> | <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | |
| <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | |
| <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | <i>Brady, John.</i> | |
| <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | <i>Byrne, Joanna.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | |
| <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | |
| <i>Browne, James.</i> | <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | |
| <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | |
| <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | |
| <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | |
| <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | |
| <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | |
| <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | <i>Doherty, Pearse.</i> | |
| <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | |
| <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | |
| <i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i> | <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | |
| <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | |
| <i>Connolly, John.</i> | <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | |
| <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, John.</i> | <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Daly, Martin.</i> | <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | |
| <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | |
| <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | |
| <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | |

Dáil Éireann

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| <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | |
| <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | |
| <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | |
| <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | <i>Murphy, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i> | <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i> | |
| <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | |
| <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | |
| <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | |
| <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | <i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i> | |
| <i>Lahart, John.</i> | <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | |
| <i>Lawless, James.</i> | <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | |
| <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | |
| <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | |
| <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | |
| <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | |
| <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | |
| <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | |
| <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | |
| <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | |
| <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | |
| <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jen- nifer.</i> | <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | |
| <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | |
| <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Feargháil, Seán.</i> | | |

30 April 2025

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| <i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | | |
| <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | | |
| <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | | |
| <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | | |
| <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | | |
| <i>Timmins, Edward.</i> | | |
| <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | | |
| <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and David Cullinane.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, put and declared carried.

Special Education: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Eoghan Kenny on Wednesday, 30 April:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— there is an ongoing failure by the State to adequately plan for school places for children with special or additional educational needs;

— parents have resorted to sleeping outside the Department of Education to raise awareness of the lack of appropriate places;

— significant sections of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 remain un-commenced, and a review of the EPSEN Act was begun in 2021 with a public consultation in 2023 but to date no report or recommendations have been published;

— schools that have been assessed as requiring additional Special Needs Assistant (SNA) positions are being blocked from recruiting for these essential roles;

— there is no timeframe or sufficient budgetary provision in place for ensuring the national provision of in-school therapies through the Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS), building on the work of the School Inclusion Model pilot; and

— the training and supports provided to teachers, SNAs, and other educational staff have not kept pace with developments in the field of additional needs education;

recalls that:

— 126 children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) had no school place at the start of this school year in September, and the number of children accessing the Home

Tuition Grant scheme due to the lack of an SEN placement has increased;

— there is no national centralised system operated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to determine sufficiently in advance the number of additional special educational school places required;

— there are no protocols in place for the sharing of information on SEN between pre-schools, primary schools, post primary schools and special schools to support children as they advance through the educational system; and

— 14,221 children were overdue an assessment of needs in December 2024, nearly 13,000 children are waiting for initial contact with a Children’s Disability Network Team, and tens of thousands of children are on primary care wait lists for treatment, adding further pressure on schools and educators to support children with additional unmet needs;

recognises that:

— parents and educators continue to have significant concerns about the current system of planning for SEN provision where schools are put under pressure at short notice to open classes without adequate resourcing, appropriate accommodation or training for staff, and with minimal specialised support; and

— 399 new special classes were announced for the 2025/26 school year earlier this month, but many children will struggle to secure places appropriate to their needs in their local community; and

calls on the Government to:

— ensure the right of every child to an appropriate school place in their general locality is fulfilled in September 2025;

— introduce a central application system for special educational places to commence for the 2026/27 school year, and develop protocols on the sharing of information at every step of the educational system;

— provide appropriate means of transport for children with additional educational needs to access their school place;

— guarantee that every school will receive sufficient funding for the full equipping of classrooms including modular builds, sensory and play spaces, and assistive technology when new special classes are opened;

— publish the finalised review of the EPSEN Act and commit to bringing forward amending proposals as necessary and to commencing the long delayed measures;

— provide a timeline for the national rollout of in-school therapists through the ETSS to provide certainty for schools and parents, and introduce play, art, music and other relevant therapies and in-school counselling where appropriate;

— lift the arbitrary cap on SNAs, and ensure that positions are funded when the NCSE has recommended a post is required, remove the 72 hour obligation on SNAs, and continue to support the professionalisation of the SNA role;

30 April 2025

— introduce an initial teacher education programme for student teachers allowing them to complete at least one school placement in an additional needs setting, and introduce free upskilling in SEN for existing teachers; and

— ensure every teacher is fully trained in seizure first aid, amend the assault leave scheme, and develop a new position in schools of a Special Education Needs Officer.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

— a child’s right to education is enshrined in the Constitution and, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, must be accessible on an equal basis with others in the community in which they live; and

— the Government is committed to ensuring that each child with a Special Educational Need (SEN) has an appropriate school place, in line with their constitutional right and Programme for Government commitments;

further notes:

— the continued significant State investment of €2.9 billion in supporting the provision of special education, a 48 per cent increase since 2020;

— the significant increases in the allocation of special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to support children with SEN in our schools which facilitates the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in prioritising the allocation of all of these resources to children with the greatest level of need;

— the strategic initiatives introduced to provide for the continued accelerated delivery of special class places in mainstream schools and special school places with the number of special classes having doubled over the last five years, and 16 new special schools being established;

— Budget 2025 provided for up to 2,700 additional special education placements to include, 400 new special classes in mainstream schools and 300 additional special school places;

— the fact that 399 of these new special classes are now sanctioned for the coming school year, three months earlier than previously thought, and that significant progress is being made in relation to the establishment of five new special schools and the expansion of provision in other special schools;

— the intention to use Section 37A to compel a school who has available accommodation and has been engaged with over an extended period to open special classes;

— the fact that over 3,700 new special classes will be available across the country for the coming school year which should ensure that children can access a special class in their local area;

— the significant investment in the expansion of staffing at the NCSE to assist fami-

lies of children with SENs in all aspects of their educational journey, including accessing a placement appropriate to their needs;

— the establishment of the D15 Taskforce to support forward planning for special education provision in the area, and similar initiatives in other areas;

— the commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce a common application system;

— the recent publication of a circular letter by the Department of Education setting out new guidelines for schools in relation to the review of special education placements and the removal of the need for parents to seek updated professional reports where a student is transitioning from a primary special class to a post-primary special class of the same designation;

— the intention to introduce a National Therapy Service (NTS) in education to be delivered by the NCSE, the NTS will commence in special schools and subsequently extend to schools with special classes and mainstream provision, and it is intended that the service will be rolled out on a phased basis in some special schools at a later stage in the 2025/2026 school year, with a wider roll-out for the 2026/2027 school year;

— the establishment of the Educational Therapy Support Service in the NCSE, Regional therapy supports which includes Teacher Professional Learning, and follow up in school support will be available nationally from September 2026;

— sustained in-school support delivered by Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists, based on the therapy element of the School Inclusion Model is currently being delivered to 22 schools in the Eastern Region, further schools will have access to this support in the Western Region in September 2025;

— the introduction of an integrated model of enhanced in-school therapy supports pilot, in conjunction with the Health Service Executive, this pilot ensures the educational, health and social needs of children and young people are met through the reinstatement of therapy services onsite in special schools;

— the funding provided for the training and upskilling of teachers and SNAs who support children with special education needs;

— the request by the Minister for Education to the Teaching Council to include a mandatory assessed placement period in a special class or a special school setting in all initial teaching education programmes;

— the extensive review by the Department of Education of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 will be published in the coming weeks;

— the establishment of a new SNA Workforce Development Unit by the Department of Education which is engaging with SNAs, schools, unions and stakeholders, which recognises the essential role played by SNAs in our school and which is underpinned by a new national training programme for SNAs costing €1.9 million recently announced in conjunction with Atlantic Technological University;

— the work underway on a redeployment scheme for SNAs which for the first time,

30 April 2025

will allow SNAs in posts which may no longer be required for reasons such as falling enrolments, reduced care needs or changing demographics, to be redeployed to a school which has a vacant post;

— the provision of circa €264 million in 2024, to support over 21,700 children with SEN access school transport to attend school each day which is a 68 per cent increase since 2021;

— the significant level of funding and supports being provided to schools to deliver accommodation for special classes, including school building projects, the repurposing of available rooms, and the provision of modular accommodation;

— the review of the assistive technology scheme to ensure all children who need technology to access the curriculum receive it through a streamlined process which is underpinned by funding of €5 million, an increase of €2 million since 2020;

— the introduction of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot 2023-2025 to support children's wellbeing and mental health in primary schools and the recent introduction of the new national programme (Neart) of mental health and wellbeing resources and training for post-primary schools that is delivered by Jigsaw in collaboration with the National Educational Psychological Service;

— the Department of Education has commenced a review of the Leave of Absence following Assault scheme, and is also finalising the terms and conditions of a new Occupational Injury Scheme for teachers;

— the range of resources that has been or will soon be made available to schools to enable them to support students' behaviour, including the publications by NCSE Relate Behaviour framework, Tusla Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools and the Department of Education Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations Guidelines;

— the extensive programme of training in place, or planned, to support schools in managing student behaviour;

— the restoration of posts of responsibility in schools and the availability of additional hours from September 2025 to assist schools in coordinating their special education teaching provision; and

— the renewed focus of the Government on the area of disability services with a particular focus on improving the delivery of services for children with disabilities; and calls on the Government to:

— take any necessary steps to ensure that every child with SEN who needs an appropriate school place has access to one in a timely manner;

— progress work on the development of a more inclusive education system for children with SENs by supporting them to attend their local school;

— continue to expand the number of special school places, special classes and special education teaching hours as required across the State;

— improve communication and outreach to parents of children with SEN to streamline the process by which parents apply for specialist school places, reducing the burden on them and improving the timelines, including the introduction of a common application procedure;

— continue to increase investment into the area of special education to ensure that every child can reach their full potential;

— support additional schools and students to benefit from the Summer Programme; and

— ensure that the NCSE will continue to engage intensively with parents and all educational partners to continue to increase capacity.”.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding special education. On Wednesday, 30 April, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| <i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Staon</i> |
| <i>Aird, William.</i> | <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | |
| <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | |
| <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | <i>Brady, John.</i> | |
| <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | <i>Byrne, Joanna.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | |
| <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | |
| <i>Browne, James.</i> | <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | |
| <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | |
| <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | |
| <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | |
| <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | |
| <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | |
| <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | <i>Doherty, Pearse.</i> | |
| <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | |
| <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | |
| <i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i> | <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | |
| <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | |

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| <i>Connolly, John.</i> | <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | |
| <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, John.</i> | <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Daly, Martin.</i> | <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | |
| <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | |
| <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | |
| <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | |
| <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | |
| <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | |
| <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | |
| <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | <i>Murphy, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i> | <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i> | |
| <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | |
| <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | |
| <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | |
| <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | <i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i> | |
| <i>Lahart, John.</i> | <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | |
| <i>Lawless, James.</i> | <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | |
| <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | |
| <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | |
| <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | |
| <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | |
| <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | |
| <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | |
| <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | |
| <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | |
| <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | |
| <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jen- nifer.</i> | <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | |
| <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | |

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| <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | |
| <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Feargháil, Seán.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | | |
| <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | | |
| <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | | |
| <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | | |
| <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | | |
| <i>Timmins, Edward.</i> | | |
| <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | | |
| <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Duncan Smith and Ivana Bacik.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, put and declared carried.

Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on Orders of Reference and Establishment of Committees: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Deputy Mary Butler, on Wednesday, 30 April 2025:

That-

(1) the Select Committees as contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled “Orders of Reference and Establishment of Committees”, laid before Dáil Éireann on 30th April, 2025, are hereby appointed pursuant to Standing Order 102, with the Orders of Reference as contained in the report, including the remit, powers, number of members and quorum of each Committee; and

(2) each Select Committee listed in the report shall be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to form a Joint Committee, to carry out the functions set out in Standing Order 103, other than at paragraph (5) thereof: provided that, pending the appointment of Select Committees by Seanad Éireann, Select Committees may consider all matters set out in Standing Order 103 and otherwise in their Orders of

30 April 2025

Establishment and shall have the relevant powers as defined in Standing Order 104 for those purposes.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

In paragraph (1), to insert the following after “quorum of each Committee”:

“, save that the footnote ‘ 3 National Security encompasses cyber-defence, sub-sea critical infrastructure and related hybrid threats’ on page 5 be deleted.”.

- (Deputy Padraic Mac Lochlainn)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division on the report of the committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on orders of reference and establishment of committees. On Wednesday 30 April, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| <i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 67; Níl, 86; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Stاون</i> |
| <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | <i>Aird, William.</i> | |
| <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Brady, John.</i> | <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | |
| <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Joanna.</i> | <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | |
| <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | <i>Browne, James.</i> | |
| <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | |
| <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | |
| <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | |
| <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | |
| <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | |
| <i>Doherty, Pearse.</i> | <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | |
| <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | <i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i> | |
| <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | |
| <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | <i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i> | |
| <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | |
| <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | |
| <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | <i>Connolly, John.</i> | |

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| <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | |
| <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | |
| <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | <i>Cummins, John.</i> | |
| <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | |
| <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | <i>Daly, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | |
| <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | |
| <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | |
| <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | |
| <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | |
| <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | |
| <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | |
| <i>Murphy, Paul.</i> | <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | |
| <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | |
| <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | |
| <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i> | <i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i> | |
| <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | |
| <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i> | <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | |
| <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | |
| <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | <i>Lahart, John.</i> | |
| <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | <i>Lawless, James.</i> | |
| <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | |
| <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | |
| <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | |
| <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | |
| <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | |
| <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | |
| <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | |
| <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | |
| <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | |
| <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jen- nifer.</i> | |
| <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | |

30 April 2025

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| <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | |
| | <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | |
| | <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | |
| | <i>Ó Feargháil, Seán.</i> | |
| | <i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i> | |
| | <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | |
| | <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | |
| | <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | |
| | <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | |
| | <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | |
| | <i>Timmings, Edward.</i> | |
| | <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | |
| | <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Aengus Ó Snodaigh; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Question put: "That the motion be agreed to."

| <i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 103; Níl, 49; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Staon</i> |
| <i>Aird, William.</i> | <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | |
| <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | <i>Brady, John.</i> | |
| <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | |
| <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | <i>Byrne, Joanna.</i> | |
| <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Browne, James.</i> | <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | |
| <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | |

Dáil Éireann

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| <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | <i>Doherty, Pearse.</i> | |
| <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | |
| <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | |
| <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | |
| <i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | |
| <i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i> | <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Connolly, John.</i> | <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | |
| <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, John.</i> | <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | |
| <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | <i>Murphy, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i> | |
| <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | |
| <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | |
| <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | <i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i> | |
| <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | |
| <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | |
| <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | |
| <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | |
| <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | |
| <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | |
| <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | |
| <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | |
| <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i> | <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | |
| <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | | |
| <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | | |
| <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | | |
| <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | | |
| <i>Lahart, John.</i> | | |
| <i>Lawless, James.</i> | | |
| <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | | |
| <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | | |

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| <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | | |
| <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | | |
| <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | | |
| <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | | |
| <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | | |
| <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | | |
| <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | | |
| <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | | |
| <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | | |
| <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | | |
| <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | | |
| <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | | |
| <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | | |
| <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i> | | |
| <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | | |
| <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | | |
| <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | | |
| <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | | |
| <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | | |
| <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | | |
| <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | | |
| <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | | |
| <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | | |
| <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | | |
| <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | | |
| <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | | |
| <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | | |
| <i>Timmins, Edward.</i> | | |

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| <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | | |
| <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | | |
| <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | | |
| <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

Question declared carried.

Final Draft Revised National Planning Framework: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on Wednesday, 30 April 2025:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Final Draft Revised National Planning Framework, as approved by the Government on 8th April, 2025; a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd April, 2025 together with the Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report, the Post-Consultation Natura Impact Statement, the Post-Consultation Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Report, and the Appropriate Assessment Determination.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the final draft of the revised national planning framework. On Wednesday, 30 April, on the question, “That the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

| <i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i> | | |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Tá</i> | <i>Níl</i> | <i>Stاون</i> |
| <i>Aird, William.</i> | <i>Bacik, Ivana.</i> | |
| <i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i> | <i>Bennett, Cathy.</i> | |
| <i>Boland, Grace.</i> | <i>Brady, John.</i> | |
| <i>Brabazon, Tom.</i> | <i>Buckley, Pat.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Brian.</i> | <i>Byrne, Joanna.</i> | |
| <i>Brennan, Shay.</i> | <i>Carthy, Matt.</i> | |
| <i>Brophy, Colm.</i> | <i>Clarke, Sorca.</i> | |
| <i>Browne, James.</i> | <i>Collins, Michael.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Colm.</i> | <i>Connolly, Catherine.</i> | |
| <i>Burke, Peter.</i> | <i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i> | |
| <i>Butler, Mary.</i> | <i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i> | |
| <i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i> | <i>Cronin, Réada.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i> | <i>Crowe, Seán.</i> | |
| <i>Byrne, Thomas.</i> | <i>Cullinane, David.</i> | |
| <i>Cahill, Michael.</i> | <i>Cummins, Jen.</i> | |
| <i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i> | <i>Daly, Pa.</i> | |

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| <i>Calleary, Dara.</i> | <i>Devine, Máire.</i> | |
| <i>Canney, Seán.</i> | <i>Doherty, Pearse.</i> | |
| <i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i> | <i>Donnelly, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Ellis, Dessie.</i> | |
| <i>Chambers, Jack.</i> | <i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i> | |
| <i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i> | <i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i> | |
| <i>Clendennen, John.</i> | <i>Gannon, Gary.</i> | |
| <i>Collins, Niall.</i> | <i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i> | |
| <i>Connolly, John.</i> | <i>Gould, Thomas.</i> | |
| <i>Cooney, Joe.</i> | <i>Graves, Ann.</i> | |
| <i>Crowe, Cathal.</i> | <i>Guirke, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Cummins, John.</i> | <i>Hayes, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Currie, Emer.</i> | <i>Healy, Seamus.</i> | |
| <i>Daly, Martin.</i> | <i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i> | |
| <i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i> | <i>Kenny, Martin.</i> | |
| <i>Devlin, Cormac.</i> | <i>Kerrane, Claire.</i> | |
| <i>Dillon, Alan.</i> | <i>Lawless, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Dolan, Albert.</i> | <i>Lawlor, George.</i> | |
| <i>Feighan, Frankie.</i> | <i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>Fleming, Seán.</i> | <i>McGettigan, Donna.</i> | |
| <i>Foley, Norma.</i> | <i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i> | |
| <i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i> | <i>Murphy, Paul.</i> | |
| <i>Geoghegan, James.</i> | <i>Mythen, Johnny.</i> | |
| <i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i> | <i>Nash, Ged.</i> | |
| <i>Grealish, Noel.</i> | <i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i> | |
| <i>Harkin, Marian.</i> | <i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i> | <i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i> | |
| <i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i> | <i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i> | |
| <i>Heneghan, Barry.</i> | <i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i> | |
| <i>Heydon, Martin.</i> | <i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i> | |
| <i>Higgins, Emer.</i> | <i>O'Hara, Louis.</i> | |
| <i>Keogh, Keira.</i> | <i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i> | |
| <i>Lahart, John.</i> | <i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i> | |
| <i>Lawless, James.</i> | <i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i> | |
| <i>Martin, Micheál.</i> | <i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i> | |
| <i>Maxwell, David.</i> | <i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i> | |
| <i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i> | <i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i> | |
| <i>McCarthy, Noel.</i> | <i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i> | |
| <i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i> | <i>Quaide, Liam.</i> | |
| <i>McCormack, Tony.</i> | <i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i> | |
| <i>McEntee, Helen.</i> | <i>Rice, Pádraig.</i> | |
| <i>McGrath, Mattie.</i> | <i>Sheehan, Conor.</i> | |

Dáil Éireann

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| <i>McGrath, Séamus.</i> | <i>Sherlock, Marie.</i> | |
| <i>McGreehan, Erin.</i> | <i>Smith, Duncan.</i> | |
| <i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i> | <i>Stanley, Brian.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i> | <i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Michael.</i> | <i>Wall, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>Moynihan, Shane.</i> | <i>Ward, Charles.</i> | |
| <i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i> | <i>Ward, Mark.</i> | |
| <i>Murphy, Michael.</i> | <i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i> | |
| <i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i> | | |
| <i>Neville, Joe.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Connor, James.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i> | | |
| <i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i> | | |
| <i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i> | | |
| <i>Richmond, Neale.</i> | | |
| <i>Roche, Peter.</i> | | |
| <i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i> | | |
| <i>Smith, Brendan.</i> | | |
| <i>Smyth, Niamh.</i> | | |
| <i>Timmings, Edward.</i> | | |
| <i>Toole, Gillian.</i> | | |
| <i>Troy, Robert.</i> | | |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.18 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 1 Bealtaine 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.18 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 1 May 2025.