



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Bealtaine 2025

Wednesday, 14 May 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

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

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss wages of early childhood educators and staff shortages.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss multi-annual funding for residential placements for adults with disabilities.

Deputy Brian Brennan - To discuss discrepancies in the rate of housing assistance payment limits between local authorities.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss route finalisation on the Lucan Luas project.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss ongoing issues relating to water pressure and supply in Kildare North.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for a new taxi or hackney licence to service rural Ireland.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss water and wastewater infrastructure in Dublin.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss plans to reform the system for the appointment of coroners.

Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Pearse Doherty - To discuss amendments to the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022. To discuss the need to bring amendments to the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the need for security personnel on public transport services in north Dublin during evening hours.

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Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss the implication of the new GAEC 2 rules will have for farmers in many parts of County Kerry.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the need to make the increase in the cap for the defective block grant scheme available to all homeowners availing of the scheme.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the provision of the new Coast Guard building at Courtown Harbour, County Wexford.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the review of the basic income for the arts scheme.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the ambulance service in County Clare and planned changes to shifts.

Deputy Liam Quaide - To discuss plans for beneficiaries of temporary protection currently residing in County Cork.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman - To discuss extending access to the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up vaccination programme.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the closure of the tenant in situ scheme in Cork city.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss the need for a public inquiry into conduct in care facilities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss services available in Monaghan Hospital.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss a public inquiry for conduct in care facilities during Covid-19.

The matters raised by Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh, Padraig Mac Lochlainn and Pearse Doherty, Danny Healy-Rae, Shane Moynihan, Eoghan Kenny and Cathy Bennett have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Defective Building Materials

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: How much more do homeowners impacted by the defective blocks in Mayo and other counties have to endure, whether they have partially completed their rebuilds or whether they are trying to get into the scheme? At every age homeowners are given assurances that they would not be disadvantaged by the timing that they entered the schemes. Now homeowners, who are in the middle of rebuilding their homes and lives, have been told that they have to wait for legislation to be prepared and passed to enable them to avail of the higher rates. It is utterly disgraceful that these homeowners are being treated like this. It is clear that the scheme is not fit for purpose and in many cases only provides for 70% or less of the costs of remediation. Too many of the impacted homeowners are locked out of the scheme because of affordability. If there is to be any fairness in this whole scandal, the Government

must provide retrospective redress, must end the damaged threshold being used as a barrier to the scheme and must amend the scheme to allow impacted homeowners to access upfront payments to commence remediation works. The Government must allow the flexibility and timelines from start to completion. It must make the increase in the cap for the defective blocks scheme to be opened to all affected homeowners, not just the new entrants. It must ensure that those responsible for the manufacturing of defective blocks are held to account, that a full public inquiry is held into the defective material and how it was sold into the housing markets and that the industry must contribute to the overall cost of the remediating of defective properties. Where is the scheme for the council houses and approved housing bodies, AHBs? Many questions need to be urgently answered regarding this scheme.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Last year, the then Government finally announced an increase in the cap. It was in line with the recommendations of the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, who examined the real costings on the ground. The reality is that the Government did not apply that to people who are going through the scheme already; it was only for new entrants. That was cruel. The Government made it clear that it was going to amend the legislation to sort this out. I appealed to the Government to do that before election. I stood in front of the Taoiseach and Tánaiste separately and appealed to them to bring in the amendments. We would make time and it could be done. I feared that this would happen. Unfortunately, I have been proven right. We are now sitting in May and there is no sign of this amendment to the legislation. It is straightforward. I raised this directly with the Minister, Deputy James Browne, who was in County Donegal in recent days. I made it clbítear to not talk about ten Stages of legislation. We will do everything in the Opposition to get this through. No pre-legislative scrutiny will be required if the Government honours what it said it was going to do last year, which was to make this increase in the cap available to everybody who is currently going through scheme. This is really cruel. People are struggling with the €40,000, €50,000, €60,000, €70,000 or €80,000 plus that they must find themselves. They do not have the money to make the final payments to pay the builders. This is urgent. It has been urgent since late last year. I appeal to the Government now to bring this through as soon as possible. It should be brought through it through next week. It will be facilitated by the Opposition in every way. We will do everything we can to make it happen next week in the Dáil and Seanad; there is no excuse. This is a simple straightforward amendment to the legislation. It should have been done late last year. It needs to be done now.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I wish to thank the Deputies. There were three Deputies down. Is Deputy Pearse Doherty absent?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: He is absent.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: That is fine. I thank Deputies Conway-Walsh and Mac Lochlainn for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. As the Deputies will be aware, the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022, which commenced on 22 June 2023, contains the current grant scheme and the related regulations that were adopted on 29 June 2023. Following updated costs reports that the Department received from the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland and advice from the expert group, a 10% increase in the overall scheme cap, which Deputy Mac Lochlainn acknowledged, was brought forward in October 2024, raising the cap from €420,000 to €462,000 for all homeowners yet to receive a grant determination by that date. It should be noted the grant scheme grant rates were

also examined and increased to between 7.4% and 8.7% in November 2024.

The cap increase is in line with the provisions of the Act as set down by the Oireachtas, which allows for a maximum increase of 10% in the overall scheme cap. The Act also provides that any increase in the scheme cap or grant rates will apply to eligible relevant owners that are yet to receive a determination in respect of remediation option and grant amounts. The Department sought legal advice that confirmed that extending these increases to a wider group of relevant owners requires amending the Act. In the interest of equity and fairness, the Minister intends to extend the increase in the scheme cap and rates to apply to a wider group of relevant owners. This will be examined as part of the remediation of dwellings damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Bill, which has been included in the summer 2025 Government legislative programme for priority drafting.

A number of other matters have come to light during the first 18 months of the operation of the scheme and the Minister will also consider a number of technical amendments as part of this legislative change. These changes will assist in the efficient administration of the scheme and will enable the smoother operation of the grant scheme for applicants. As Deputy Mac Lochlainn referenced, the Minister met with various stakeholders in Donegal on Monday, 12 May, including representatives from the Mica Action Group, along with a large group of Donegal county councillors and senior management of the council. The Deputy acknowledged that he met with the Minister. Each group raised important matters, including the need to extend the eligibility of the cap and rate increase to a larger group of homeowners. The visit demonstrated to the Minister first-hand the real difficulties homeowners are facing. It was further impressed upon the Minister the continued importance and contribution of the defective concrete blocks scheme in helping them to fix their homes and move on with their lives.

The Government is committed to assisting homeowners to remediate damage caused by defective concrete blocks. The grant scheme was put in place to help people to fix their homes and move on with their lives. The scheme is working and real progress is being made. At the end of April 2025, there were 2,697 applications to the grant scheme, with 162 homes where remediation works had been completed and a further 824 where work has commenced. The Government understands that this can be a difficult and challenging time for homeowners. On a human level, I expect that it is very difficult for people. The Department continues to work with key stakeholders on the operation of the scheme, including the relevant local authorities, the Housing Agency and the homeowner's liaison officer where the concerns of the homeowners came to the Department.

To deal with a point that Deputy Conway-Walsh referenced, a draft of the defective concrete blocks social homes scheme for local authorities and AHBs affected by defective blocks is being finalised. The scheme will include grant rates and caps as outlined in the private scheme for homeowners. The scheme will apply to local authorities and AHB homes located within designated local authorities. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will apply approach to focus on efficiencies and the best use of limiters available to undertake the mediation works.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister of State said that the Government understands that this can be a difficult and challenging time for homeowners. I am sorry but he does not and the Government does not. I am glad the Minister went to Donegal but my god you would have to be hiding under a rock for the past 15 years to not know that this was one of the biggest scandals that has ever faced this country. The Minister of State has not answered the question.

When is the legislation going to be amended? I am dealing with families who are really suffering. They are at a loss of tens of thousands of euros. I know a couple who are getting married later in the summer and they want answers. We have said in opposition that we will facilitate - day or night - the legislation to go through. I do not care, and I know the same goes for Deputies Mac Lochlainn, Doherty and others, whether it is the middle of the night, the weekend, whenever we have to get this legislation through, we have to get it through in days. We cannot continue to wait for weeks and months.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I am really concerned with this response written by the Department officials. The people who wrote this were present in Donegal in recent days. They know the urgency of this. Now they are talking about adding other issues to the amendments. This could go on forever.

This is straightforward. It is a simple amendment to the legislation to make sure that the increase in the cap is available to everybody currently participating in the scheme, not just the new entrants. It is a really straightforward matter. It should be urgently done as a stand-alone amendment. It was made clear to the Minister. I do not know why he would have any doubt about this. There are not ten Stages of pre-legislative scrutiny. This is something that everybody, both Opposition and Government, agrees on. If the Government honours what it said it was going to do last year, which is make the increase available to everybody currently going through the scheme, it will fly through the Dáil and the Seanad next week without a problem. It needs to be done urgently. Please, do not now add on other issues that will drag it on for God-knows how long. What is happening to families is cruel. It needs to be sorted out.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank both Deputies. I understand the frustration for people in these areas. As I already stated, the Minister and the Department sought legal advice that confirmed extending the increases the Deputies are talking about to a wider group of relevant owners requires amending the Act. I think everyone is agreeable on that. In the interest of equity and fairness, the Minister intends to extend the increase in the scheme cap and rates to apply to a wider group of relevant owners and this will be examined as part of the remediation of dwellings damaged by the use of defective concrete blocks (amendment) Bill. As Deputy Mac Lochlainn will know as Whip, that is in the summer 2025 Government legislative programme for priority drafting.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It was in the spring one, too.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I can only deal with what is the position now. It is down for priority drafting. The Minister is taking this matter very seriously. As indicated, a number of other matters have come to light during the first 18 months of the operation of the scheme and the Minister will consider a number of technical amendments also as part of this legislative change. These changes will assist in the efficient administration of the scheme and will enable the smoother operation of the grant scheme for applicants. I have no doubt Deputies Conway-Walsh and Mac Lochlainn have brought these matters to the direct attention of the Minister. I will do likewise and the officials will be watching the debate. I note, on a human level, the concerns of the constituents the Deputies represent. These are matters I will bring directly back to the Minister.

Agriculture Schemes

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I want to discuss the implication of the new good agricultural and environmental condition of land rules, GAEC 2. Farmers in many parts of County Kerry will be affected. Farmers have been advised that they must recognise these new rules and regulations as part of applying for their basic income support scheme, BISS, payments and other CAP payments on 15 May, which is tomorrow. That is the first issue I want to raise concern about. There has been so little time. The letters only came out last week. There are concerns about implications for opening new drains and shallow ploughing. What implications will it have for planning permission in the future? I want to ask this clearly and I want an answer: can people still cut turf on the boglands that they have to keep for themselves as they traditionally done? For more than 200 years we have been cutting turf on our farm to keep ourselves warm. Why is it that farmers are the only ones always being targeted or challenged about emissions? Why is it that the farmers in the poorest land areas of the country, such as much of Kerry, are under scrutiny? Why was this action not carried out in a more transparent way? There were no proper discussions in this Chamber.

Members and farmers were not made aware until about two months ago. This was agreed more than three years ago by the then-Minister, Department officials, IFA and other farming organisations. Maps have been issued to farmers. Many are raising concerns in respect of the correctness of what appeared to be on the very old maps. However, farmers have been advised that an appeal system will become available in due course. In the meantime, farmers will have to wait to be paid. Many have not received their 2024 ACRES payments. It has to be remembered up here in Dublin and in Dáil Éireann that farmers in rural Ireland and indeed, in Kerry, are the backbone of rural communities and the backbone of the country. They have been and are still capable of producing top class beef and lamb from poor, fragmented farm holdings across all of south and east Kerry from Gneeveguilla, Rathmore through Kilgarvan back into Kenmare and down both sides of the Kenmare river, through Tuosist and back to Lauragh, through Blackwater, Glencar, Sneem, Caherdaniel and Cahersiveen. Indeed, the marts of Cahersiveen, Kenmare, Gortalea and Castleisland town are testament to the number of weanlings and lamb that have been reared off the very small pockets of marginal, arable land in between rocks and bogs. Dairy farmers in east Kerry from Kilcummin to Barraduff, Rathmore, Gneeveguilla, Scartaglin, Cordal, Brosna and Knocknagashel supply great quantities of milk from heavy and marginal-type land. These are great farmers who improve their lands, actions and methods to make the most out of what they have. Why do they not leave these farmers alone? Why hassle these grand people? What about the millions of jets flying overhead? What about the space-ships going into space? What about the bombs in Ukraine and Gaza over the past number of years? The letters have gone out to the owners of the poorest type of land in Ireland. Ireland is one of the smallest agricultural countries in the world. If we all walked off this island, it would only mean a reduction of 0.13% in the worldwide context of emissions. It will not change the climate or the weather either.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to provide an update on an important issue. The Deputy is right; there is a lot of concern among farmers around GAEC 2. I am happy to have the opportunity to reassure people that the concerns that are there are misplaced for a variety of reasons. I can give the background to GAEC 2. It is a mandatory condition for the payment of BISS. That is a single farm payment where the application deadline is this week, as the Deputy outlined.

EU regulations require all member states to have a standard in place from the start of this year. Up to this point, Ireland took the maximum flexibility allowed to delay the introduction of the standard until 2025. Many other member states introduced it in 2023, when we as a country signed up to this and said we would do it.

A further deferral for 2025 was sought by Ireland, asking the European Commission for additional time. We received a very clear response from the Commission that no further deferral would be approved. If I did not introduce this standard in 2025, Ireland would be in serious breach of the EU regulations governing CAP strategic plans. This would have led to significant fines that would have directly impacted the budget I have to support the very farmers the Deputy talked about all over Kerry. I could not let that happen. I could not let a fine come in that would have taken away money that I want to spend on supporting our farmers instead.

The standard that has been introduced for 2025 provides a baseline protection for carbon-rich soils, while allowing agricultural activity to continue. That is an important point. Farmers' day-to-day activity in Kerry will not change even if their land parcel is in GAEC 2. They can continue to farm as they have always done in the past.

In Ireland, our grass-based system already provides considerable protection for such soils and they are also protected by existing national planning provisions, for example on drainage. As I said, agricultural activity can continue. For example, ploughing, reseeding and maintenance of existing drains is all still allowed. New drainage is also possible in line with the existing national provisions, which have been in place for many years. Therefore, the introduction of this standard is expected to have minimal impact on farmers' day-to-day operations.

Around a quarter of farmers - 35,000 of them, who account for approximately 540,000 ha of peat soils - will have some land that is subject to the GAEC 2 element. In the main, these farmers will not need to take any new actions to comply with the standard. GAEC 2 was subject to final approval by the European Commission and was adopted on 30 April 2025. I could not write to farmers with the maps and exact detail until our proposal was approved by the European Commission. The Commission accepted what was a very significant change from our perspective in what we wanted so we got measures put in place to allow farmers to continue to farm as they do.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has consulted relevant stakeholders, including farm bodies and environmental NGOs, on a proposed standard. We have chosen to use a clear, parcel-based approach based on well understood maps as a fair way to ensure we get the required protection in place and farmers have no uncertainty as to the requirements or where they apply. It is in all of our interests that farmers have certainty.

Once approval of the standard was received from the Commission, my Department published a technical note with detailed information on the standard. It was released to the media in order that the information could be provided in the *Irish Farmers' Journal*, *Agriland* and everywhere else. The Department has also provided direct information to farm advisory services and held meetings with the public and private advisory services to ensure the requirements are fully understood.

A detailed map layer has been available on the application system for all farmers to review since before BISS applications opened. My Department has written to every farmer who has at least one parcel identified as GAEC 2, with a map and further information on the requirements.

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Farmers have been receiving these letters since last week, but I still encourage all farmers to check the map on the system and engage with their farm advisory service advisers. Department officials continue to attend local meetings on this issue to help explain the conditionality requirements to farmers and to reassure them there is no need for the concerns raised by the Deputy. The key point that I wish to reiterate is that for the vast majority of farmers, this will have no impact on their day-to-day operations.

I understand the concerns raised around the timing but my Department is engaging directly with farmers and advisory services. There was no opportunity to further delay the introduction of GAEC 2. It was not legally possible to delay its introduction and failure to implement the standard would result in significant financial penalties, which I as Minister could not stand over.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister for his response. I ask him to give me a clear understanding as to whether farmers who have lands in Lyracrumpane, Glencar, Cahirsiveen, Kilcummin, Gneevgullia, Scartaglin and all those places can cut turf where they have parcels of peat? That is a straight question and I want a straight answer to it.

Farmers are very concerned about the time it will take to get their payments and have this sorted out and gone through properly because they doubt the correctness of some of the maps that some of them have received. They need time for that. If farmers need an extension of time until the end of the month to get their applications in, so be it. I ask the Minister to ensure no one is left out or has an application deemed incomplete because there is so little time. The Minister must recognise that.

This will be another regulation placed on farmers. While this is the thin edge of the wedge, the wedge widens as it goes down and this is what farmers are afraid of. Will it affect their ability to get planning permission for sheds and different things on their lands down the line? We need answers to that. Farmers are worried about things like that.

The Department already has 27,000 acres of national park in Kerry that it cannot properly manage. Rhododendron is out of control and deer are roaming the roads causing havoc. In buying up more land in Kilgarvan, Beaufort and other places over the past 12 months, the Department is competing against active farmers.

This action, or new standard, will take more time than is available. Applications have to be in by tomorrow, 15 May. I ask the Minister to give some leeway so that farmers can put correct applications in. Again, I ask the Minister to make clear whether farmers cut turf, as they have traditionally done, and as we have done in Reacaslach for the past 200 years.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising these points. On providing more time, the deadline for BISS applications is clearly 15 May. If I were to push that deadline back or try to extend it in any way, it would have a knock-on impact on the whole system of getting payments in place. We had delays in payments previously and are back on track in terms of making sure we can get the areas of natural constraint, ANC, scheme, BISS and single farm payments out on time and early, as we traditionally did. I do not want to interfere with that and there is no need to interfere with GAEC 2. The most important point is that farmers, whose land parcels come in under GAEC 2, are aware of that. They have the maps now to tell them that. It has always been the case that farmers seeking to lay new drainage in land with peat in it were subject to a planning permission requirement. That is the only planning requirement.

In regard to the Deputy's concerns around planning permission, the only people who know

their land parcel is in GAEC 2 are the farmer and the Department of agriculture. The map is not published anywhere. The local authority does not know what land is subject to GAEC 2. The normal rules will apply in the case of any farmer seeking to apply for planning permission for a shed or house. The farmer will do a T-test on the ground to see if there is peat in it and the result will determine whether the farmer receives approval for having a septic tank in that ground. That will not change. The local authority to which the farmer is applying will not know whether it is GAEC 2 land or not. I do not know about Kerry but in Kildare if there is peat in the soil, a farmer will not get planning permission. However, a farmer will get it in the case of mineral soils or at least that will not be a reason for not getting permission.

The Deputy asked a direct question about areas of turf cutting. These areas are ineligible for BISS payments, so there is no change. GAEC 2 is only a baseline requirement for BISS, the single farm payment. If farmers are not applying for the single farm payment, which they cannot do for areas on which they are cutting turf, GAEC 2 does not apply. I am not saying the Deputy is scaremongering but others are. All of the scaremongering, concerns and misinformation out there on nature restoration, designation and planning permission in no way apply to GAEC 2. I give the Deputy an assurance that this time next year farmers in Kerry will not be coming to me because they have fallen foul of this or have received penalties. The reason is that their day-to-day activity will not change and the requirements they have to comply with have existed in legislation long before today.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Do farmers have to leave out the patch where they are cutting turf?

Deputy Martin Heydon: No, the patch where they are cutting turf would never qualify for BISS anyway. The farmers will not be applying-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Discussion on this Topical Issue matter has concluded. The Minister might respond to the Deputy privately on that.

Deputy Martin Heydon: That is no problem.

Public Transport

Deputy Shane Moynihan: One of the most consistent issues raised with me during the general election campaign was the lack of delivery on the long-promised Lucan Luas line. At doorway after doorway, people spoke with frustration, not just about the delay but with a sense that our area, Lucan, is often overlooked when it comes to major transport infrastructure. This is a wider issue across the constituency of Dublin Mid-West. What strikes me is that I can count on one hand the number of times the Lucan Luas line was raised in this Chamber during the lifetime of the previous Dáil. Despite it being contained in transport strategies and policy documents for many years, there has not been any level of political urgency about it. I would like to think that will change now.

As a Government TD, I am determined to bring a renewed focus to this project, not just because it is politically convenient but because it is strategically necessary for people in Dublin Mid-West. Communities such as Lucan are expected to shoulder significant housing expansion but we cannot keep on asking people to wait for transport infrastructure that is always promised but never prioritised or delivered. Last week, the national planning framework was discussed

and adopted by the House. At its core is an objective to prioritise transport-orientated development and strengthen commitments to align transport investment with housing and population growth in metropolitan areas.

It follows then that in considering transport options for a growing suburb such as Lucan, it is essential we make the correct long-term infrastructure decisions. Time and again, international and domestic research points to light rail as the most sustainable and scalable solution for suburbs of Lucan's profile. It combines the capacity needed for our growing population with the environmental performance and accessibility our communities deserve. A Luas to Lucan will ensure we deliver compact connected communities and not isolated housing estates.

Lucan's population, transport demand and existing congestion make it an ideal challenge for light rail. Rapidly growing areas like Adamstown and Clonburris make the case undeniable. Unlike lower capacity solutions such as bus rapid transit, light rail offers permanence, capacity and faster journey times. It can be delivered quicker than metro. In communities like Dundrum, Inchicore and Sandyford, Luas has been highly successful in encouraging people to switch from their cars. Put simply, light rail delivers a level of service that transforms how people travel and how they plan their lives around transport.

Luas has been one of the most cost-effective infrastructure projects in Irish history. It removes the need for millions of car journeys and has the lowest CO2 emissions per passenger kilometre among motorised modes of transport. It is time-effective. People vote with their feet, as evidenced by the sustained demand on Luas lines every day of the week.

It is time for us in this House and agencies like the NTA to get real about transport policy. There is a clear need to refocus and review how we approach transport projects, not just through the lens of aspiration but through the lens of delivery. It is not enough to plan; we must build and deliver, and I know the new Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, understands this.

We must prioritise the route finalisation for the Lucan Luas line as soon as possible and drive this project to the planning stages as soon as we can. The adoption of the revised national planning framework should give us the impetus to do this. We must push past inertia, especially bureaucratic and legal hurdles, ensuring that areas like Lucan, with growing populations and public transport deficits, are not permanently left behind.

Let me be clear. This is not about pitting one project against another, but the case for the Lucan Luas line is as strong as any other light rail extension in the country. The demand, population and need are there. That is why I continue to argue that a Luas line for Lucan is not a luxury but a necessity.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):
On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to address this issue in the House today.

As the Deputy said, improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving citizens' quality of life and achieving our decarbonisation goals. Achieving these goals has been set out in the programme for Government. Progress is being made on a number of proposed light rail projects.

There are four proposed expansions to the Luas network outlined in the current greater Dublin area transport strategy. The most advanced of these schemes is the Luas Finglas project.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, submitted a planning application to An Bord Pleanála in November 2024 for this project and we await a decision on this matter. In addition, a public consultation on the emerging preferred route for a Luas line in Cork is also currently open.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for transport planning in the greater Dublin area. The development of a Luas line to serve Lucan is currently one of the medium-term projects in the NTA Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022-2042, as approved by the Minister for Transport, for development and delivery within the 2031-36 timeframe. The measure outlined in the greater Dublin area transport strategy is “to develop a light rail line from Lucan to the City Centre, [as the Deputy spoke about], supplementing and complementing the planned bus system, to serve the overall public transport needs in this area”.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland is the sponsoring agency for the proposed Luas to Lucan project and the NTA is the day-to-day approving authority. I understand that the NTA recently submitted a project outline document, POD, to the Department of Transport, as is required under the Department of Transport’s appraisal framework. The POD noted that Luas Lucan has the potential to reduce transport emissions and encourage the use of public transport along the study corridor while catering for growth and improved customer experience.

The Luas Lucan is an east-west light rail line proposed to enhance connectivity across key areas of Dublin, supporting our economy and population growth and improving the quality of public realm for its residents. The scheme will complement the planned BusConnects Dublin and the DART+ programme to provide a high-quality network of multimodal options in the area out to Lucan. BusConnects core bus corridors to Lucan and Liffey Valley have both received planning permission from An Bord Pleanála.

The Government understands the merits of the proposed Luas to Lucan project. It is one of a number of projects that have been highlighted to the Minister for Transport for acceleration as part of the review of the national development plan, which is planned to take place soon.

Regarding route finalisation for the Luas Lucan project, the route selection and concept development phase of the project continues. A number of end-to-end options have now been selected, with further review of these options through a more detailed multicriteria analysis currently taking place. TII, as the sponsoring agency, plans to finalise the emerging preferred route next year. It will be after this point that TII, with the support of the NTA, will publish the emerging preferred route and options selection report. TII will then hold a non-statutory public consultation.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for that response. I note that Lucan is the largest town in Dublin without access to light rail, so when I talk about this extension, it is not just about transport but about fairness and inclusion.

The Minister of State referenced the public transport connectedness that exists across parts of the infrastructure currently. There is a very large public transport deficit in Lucan as well. BusConnects has taken some steps towards the catch-up that we need to play, but there is a huge opportunity for us here to get this right with the extension of the Luas infrastructure to Lucan. I am thinking especially of the working mother in Lucan who spends over an hour commuting by bus into the city centre. Her journey time could be halved, enabling her to have a better quality of life. I think of the older person living in the area who finds current transport options very limiting in terms of accessibility and cost. A Luas stop would provide that person with greater

independence and access to essential services.

I welcome the fact that the Luas Lucan project has been highlighted for possible accelerated delivery under the NDP. I will be working with the Minister for Transport to advocate for that. It is a no-brainer to ensure that we accelerate the delivery of this project. I am of the view that we complete the process of designing the emerging preferred route as fast as we can. As soon as the detailed multicriteria analysis that the Minister of State referenced is done, we should move immediately to the emerging preferred route. We need to get that out into the ether as soon as we can.

We need to show an urgency with this in respect of the length of time we are going to spend on the public consultation. People should have their say but they should also see there is an urgency and an impetus behind this, especially in light of our discussion in this House last week on the need for the additional zoning of land, in Dublin in particular. This is the sort of project that enables that additional zoning.

I will keep fighting for this during my time in this House. I hope we can push it to planning as soon as we can.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Again, on behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank the Deputy for his commitment, comments and interest in this important issue.

Regarding current developments, as mentioned, I understand that the route selection and concept development phase of the project is now taking place, with a number of end-to-end options going through a detailed multicriteria analysis. As stated in the National Development Plan 2021-2030, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, as the project's sponsoring agency, and the NTA, as the day-to-day approving authority, will continue with the appraisal and planning of the Luas to Lucan project. As the sponsoring agency, TII plans to finalise the emerging preferred route in the first quarter of 2026. After this point, TII, with the support of the National Transport Authority, will publish the emerging preferred route and will hold a non-statutory public consultation.

I reiterate that the proposed extension of the Luas to Lucan is only one of a number of a projects identified in the greater Dublin area transport strategy to significantly improve the combined light rail and heavy rail network by 2042. I assure the Deputy that projects will be progressed in line with the requirements of infrastructure guidelines and that public consultation processes will be undertaken at appropriate stages as projects are progressed.

I understand the merits of the proposed Luas line to Lucan, as does the Government, and we look forward to seeing it progress through infrastructure guidelines.

Disability Services

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: As regards the Minister of State who has just left the House, Kieran O'Donnell, it would be remiss of me when speaking on an issue like this not to commend his father, Martin, one of the founding members of St. Joseph's Foundation, and his commitment to disability services in north Cork.

This morning I raise a serious issue regarding residential placements for adults with disabilities. I want to speak specifically about the Cork and Kerry region. The programme for

Government states:

After reviewing the recent two-year healthcare funding agreement, we will consider the development of a multi-annual approach for disability services, which will be linked to productivity, staff levels and the delivery of services.

While I appreciate that it might not be in her script, may I ask the Minister of State about the approach being considered? Why is the word “consider” used in this part of the programme for Government, considering, ironically, the level of need within both our service and our system? Will she clarify if the Government is still considering the development of the multi-annual funding approach or can she provide a guarantee to me and families right across the country right now that this Government will commit to an multi-annual funding approach? In Cork and Kerry, there are 600 people waiting for residential placements. The answer to a parliamentary question that I received from the HSE stated that many of those 600 will benefit should the Government allocate multi-annual funding to HSE south west to address the deficit in the quantum of residential places. To me, that basically means the HSE is waiting for the money. As a result, it once again falls to the Minister of State’s Department and the Government to decide whether these services for these families and adults will be provided.

In budget 2025, €106.6 million was allocated towards residential places. However, only €27.9 million of that remains because of the €78 million needed to meet the incremental costs from 2024. I accept that increases in age and life expectancy and the changing needs of people with a disability have led to the need for increased residential facilities. Does the Minister of State agree, however, that we are not doing enough at a quick enough pace to meet the demand? It comes back to political will. There is no will to commit to funding residential placements at a far higher figure than the current ones. I welcome the fact that in four years there has been an increase in 559 residential placements. However, as I said, this is simply not good enough or quick enough. Residential capacity will decrease during the year as a result of the loss of places in congregated settings due to debts which cannot be reutilised. I understand that this is in line with Government policy, which is to move away from institutionalised settings. While I agree with Government policy in this regard, with the closing of placements, this will only place more pressure on the HSE and not-for-profit organisations to try to relocate placements for those on waiting lists. Along with this, in addition to the issue, the in-year capacity levels will be impacted negatively as a result of regulatory requirements. No placement across this State should be closed until another one is opened. That is my firm belief.

We must also recognise services like the Brothers of Charity in my constituency of Cork North-Central that have done such wonderful work in many areas of my home county. I have an uncle who has been working in the Brothers of Charity, Lota More, for more than 20 years. I have seen at first hand the care and commitment to the development of these adults with disabilities, which must be recognised.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and for offering me the opportunity to respond.

The Minister knows that there are many reasons why people seek residential supports. For some, it is by way of services to allow them remain in their own homes with family. For others, it is a residential service. The aim has been to facilitate living and inclusion in the community.

Increasing the provision of disability residential services is a key priority area for this Gov-

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ernment and the HSE, and there has been significant investment in residential services over recent years. In July 2023, the Government approved the disability action plan in order to address capacity deficits which had been identified in the disability capacity review. From this, the action plan for disability services was developed, providing a multi-year framework for service expansion and strategic policy development with a view to maximising effectiveness and impact. The action plan has informed budget deliberations and the prioritisation of areas for development in the coming years. It is a living document which will be reviewed and updated in the light of priorities, policy considerations and the funding available under the current and subsequent budgets.

Unlike the position for capital expenditure, where multi-annual commitments are made within the national development plan, my Department is obliged to adhere to the public sector financial procedures, whereby Exchequer funding for current expenditure is allocated on an annual basis, following the annual budgetary process. As a result, it is not currently possible to enter into multi-annual funding agreements for disability residential services.

Although multi-annual funding is not available, the Minister wishes to reiterate that this Government is committed to providing support to people with disabilities and significant investment has been provided to specialist disability services, including a budget increase from €1.7 billion at the close of 2017 to over €3.2 billion in 2025. Supporting residential services accounts for approximately 60% of the total specialist community-based disability services budget.

Some €106 million in additional funding has been provided to residential services in budget 2025. This includes €78.68 million to meet the incremental cost of 2024 new developments and €27.9 million in new funding in respect of 2025. This funding also supports additional moves from nursing homes and decongregation to community settings. In recent years, the number of residential places delivered has exceeded what has been initially envisaged in the HSE national service plan. In 2024, 220 new residential places were delivered.

I see all the great work that is done out there. I know we need to do more but it is a commitment in the Government to work with all the different services.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I appreciate that. As regards the 2021 disability capacity review to which the Minister of State referred and the projected need for a minimum of 1,900 residential placements by 2032, which we want to get to, and if we continue in the same vein of the previous four years, which is not mentioned in the response, with 140 placements opening each year, give or take, there will be 400 fewer than the figure. The same disability capacity review asked for an extra 3,900 placements needed to return to pre-2008 levels. This is shocking. For someone new to this House, it seems we are going backwards. This is political will, or the lack thereof.

It is not the same for many families and their sons or daughters. One family has been in contact with me. I have known this family all my life. I grew up with them and their sons, one of whom has a disability and needs access to residential placement. The place he is in for day services is something he and his family have fallen in love with. This gives great comfort to his family and his parents in particular. However, they cannot get a commitment as to whether or not he will have a residential placement should, God forbid, anything happen to either of them. They continue to fight long and hard for residential commitment or placement for him but to no avail. This is not the Ireland we want, and I know the Minister of State would agree with me

on that. Having tried so hard to even get a meeting with senior management in the disability team of the HSE, they came out of that meeting two weeks ago with still no guarantee as to what will happen to their son. This family does not want sympathy or empathy; they want a firm commitment. However, that cannot be provided to them. When they make contact with me, they should be given the commitment. However, I cannot because I do not see a genuine commitment from the Government.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I understand the challenges. I know there is significant demand for residential placements at a level which consistently exceeds supply. We are living longer and we need to do more. I can assure the Deputy that the Government is committed to funding and to working on this. Challenges in providing these services include workforce challenges that apply to all specialist disability services, the acquisition of suitable housing stock and the increasing cost of providing residential care. Regulatory compliance is important in residential services and HIQA continues to inspect all designated centres for people with disabilities. This is critical to providing assurances that the quality of life of those living in residential services is appropriately addressed. In order to address these challenges, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality continues to engage with the HSE, Department of housing, and other relevant stakeholders to explore various ways of responding to demand while appropriately managing the significant levels of funding provided to residential services. Finally, the Minister would like to reiterate the importance of ensuring that we continue to support people with disabilities to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, with a person-centred approach across all services provided. I can see the Deputy's commitment and dedication and I want to thank everyone involved for the work they do. I thank the Deputy for bringing this to the House today.

Hospital Services

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The people of Monaghan deserve adequate health services, the same as anybody else in the State. We are fortunate to have a hospital in Monaghan, given closures in other communities across the State under previous Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments. We are fortunate to have incredible, hard-working staff in our local hospital, staff who provide among the highest standards of care, all too often in challenging circumstances not of their making. Monaghan is one of the areas where successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments have not only failed to deliver adequate services but have callously ripped crucial health services from the heart of our community. The care provided by workers in the minor injury unit is of a standard we expect from our healthcare professionals. However, the standard we expect can only be met by them when they have access to the equipment we expect to be available.

Some weeks back, a former town councillor, Tommy Hagan spoke to Northern Sound radio and to me outlining that he had to be referred to Cavan General Hospital because the minor injuries unit in Monaghan could only do X-rays below the knee. At the same time, people presenting at the accident and emergency department in Cavan can wait up to 24 hours. Does the Minister of State believe this situation is acceptable? How has she examined the need for more services in Monaghan Hospital? There is no MRI machine there and the HSE informed me that patients from Cavan and Monaghan have access to MRI services in Cavan. However, the waiting list in Cavan is significant, with more than 500 people waiting for over three months, an additional 500 people waiting for six months to a year and 58 people waiting for over a year.

The HSE assures me that all referrals are vetted by a consultant, but I genuinely struggle to believe it. Does the Minister of State think it is credible that any referral is issued with a view to an MRI being carried out at some vague, indeterminate stage somewhere down the line? That does not sound like adequate access to me.

The Minister of State cannot tell me that an MRI machine would not be impactful or give value for money. The HSE tells us it cannot determine this without a feasibility study, but that there is not a plan for a feasibility report because there is no service requirement, as people have access to Cavan. Over 1,000 people whom a consultant has determined to be in need of a scan are waiting three months to a year. Some 58 people are waiting for more than 12 months and we are told there is not a need to examine the possibility of a machine in Monaghan Hospital and the impact it would have. The gall of circular logic is utterly astounding. Does the Minister of State accept that the approach of successive Governments to strip services from Monaghan Hospital has been a failure? I appeal to her to finally commit to restoring services and investing in County Monaghan.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy. I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the services provided at Monaghan Hospital. I absolutely see the Deputy's concerns. The Government is committed to the ongoing development of our regional hospitals, including Cavan and Monaghan Hospital. Cavan General Hospital and Monaghan Hospital operate as a single hospital, with an integrated managerial and clinical governance system, care pathways and support functions. Since 2020, the Government has allocated significant resources to improve services, enhance patient care and better meet the needs of patients using the hospital. There has been substantial investment in the hospital in recent years. The budget for the hospital has increased by 30% from €114 million in 2020 to €149 million at the start of this year.

At Monaghan Hospital, the number of beds has increased significantly since 2020 and there has been an increase of 70% in staffing. I absolutely agree with the Deputy in complimenting all of our hospital staff. They do an excellent job and we do appreciate the work they do. This is one of the largest increases in staff of all hospitals nationally over this period. Investment in the hospital has enabled a number of important service developments. A minor injury unit now operates 12 hours a day, seven days a week. I did hear what the Deputy said about the concerns regarding the injury unit. I will bring that back to the Minister. A frailty intervention therapy team and early supported discharge team have been put in place. These teams will help identify at-risk patients and will help ensure that patients get the right care in the community or at home where possible. At Monaghan Hospital, there is also ongoing development of pain services, haemochromatosis and an expansion of cardiology services. These improvements greatly enhance the supports provided to patients and their families and lead to better, more appropriate care, delivered in the right setting.

I am aware of recent news reports regarding bed allocation rates at the hospital, particularly in relation to the rehabilitation and step-down beds. The HSE has advised that bed occupancy rates vary from time to time due to factors such as infection prevention and control, building works and the criteria for patient admission. Figures from the HSE show that overall occupancy in these beds has been at 85% or higher over the past year. For rehabilitation beds, the average occupancy rates are 95% from January 2024 to present. The hospital fully recognises the importance of rehabilitation and step-down beds to patients and their families. The Deputy is right that it is about the patients and their families. These are a critical support in enabling patients who may have been treated in another hospital to recover further before being dis-

charged home. Every effort is made to ensure that these beds are maximised while recognising that there can sometimes be factors which impact on the number of patients who can be cared for. We do see the challenges. I am glad the Deputy is highlighting them because we need to make sure we work on these challenges.

The HSE also recognises the importance of access to diagnostic services such as MRI and CT scanners. Referral to these radiology services is based on clinical need. The HSE has not made an application for CT or MRI facilities at Monaghan. However, Cavan and Monaghan Hospital has made an application to replace the existing MRI scanner located in Cavan. The project has been approved and works are expected to be completed by the end of this year. There has been significant investment and expansion at Monaghan Hospital and the Government continues to support the very high quality care being delivered to patients in the region.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Minister of State. It is disappointing to see that the Minister is not here today. I would love to see these issues raised with her. I am leaving it with the Minister of State and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach to ensure these issues are raised with the Minister. To be clear, the substantial investment the Minister of State talked about is not enough.

10 o'clock

The minor injuries unit and the MRI scanners are only examples of what we have to deal with in Monaghan. Similarly, both CT scanners for Cavan and Monaghan Hospital are in Cavan. The people of Monaghan have been left behind. The provision of an MRI and a CT scanner in Monaghan would contribute to alleviating the huge waiting lists in Cavan. I am giving the Minister of State a solution. I could also speak of the many other services in a similar situation. I appreciate the Minister of State is new to her office. I hope she can consider what I say to her today. She always says to bring solutions to the problem, so I am bringing one. The people in Monaghan and across this State cannot afford to endure more broken promises from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, which have not tackled any of the waiting lists. I heard the Minister for Health conducted a spot-check in the emergency room in University Hospital Limerick recently. I would like her to do the same in Cavan and Monaghan. She should come and do a spot-check and see how overcrowded the hospital in Cavan is and how doctors and nurses are at their wits' end. It is unsafe. Something needs to be done. I am giving the Minister a solution to the problem - put the proper equipment into Monaghan hospital and that will reduce waiting lists. This is needed in Monaghan for the restoration in full of each service taken away by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael with the promise of an efficient health service, which the Minister's party has failed to deliver. Will the Minister make a commitment? Finally-----

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

Deputy Cathy Bennett: With the leniency of the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, I also ask that the Minister look to plan GPs in the towns of Cavan and Monaghan. People are struggling to get GP access. Will she look into that also?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy again for her contributions on Monaghan hospital. It is right that we acknowledge the excellent care provided by the staff, as the Deputy said herself. I will go back to the Minister for Health and request that she pay a visit, as the Deputy asked. The Government is committed to ongoing development and investment in regional hospitals. Significant investment in capital developments at Cavan and Monaghan

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Hospital includes two- and three-storey extensions currently at design stage, which is a good news story. They will further improve the hospital environment at Cavan and Monaghan Hospital, particularly for cancer patients. In line with the programme for Government commitment to Sláintecare, a number of service developments are also under way, aimed at improving access. I mentioned the frailty intervention therapy team and early supported discharge team, supporting the flow of patients through the hospital. Figures from the HSE showed overall bed occupancy at Monaghan to be 85% or higher over the past year. For rehabilitation beds at Monaghan hospital, the average occupancy rate was 95% to January 2024. The HSE has advised that clear clinical pathways exist to support the current arrangements of CT and MRI scanners in the region. It has not submitted a business case for CT or MRI services at Monaghan hospital but I reiterate Government support for the hospital.

I assure the Deputy I will bring all of these concerns back to the Minister. I thank the Deputy again for highlighting them. It is important we make changes. We are committed to funding our hospitals and services.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I reiterate we are here to work with the Minister of State and provide solutions.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy.

Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

The general election campaign for Fine Gael got off to a very bad start because a video emerged of Michael O’Leary launching the election campaign of Deputy Peter Burke, now the Minister responsible for this area, including, unfortunately, workers’ rights, saying the things Fine Gael and its supporters say to each other when they think videos are not on and these things are not going to be public. Michael O’Leary endorsed a Government led by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil and said: “Let’s put two parties back in government that can deliver”. He also said: “We need a government that delivers for enterprise ... it’s vital that we elect a government that gets shit done ... I can think of nobody here, certainly in the current government, who demonstrates more action, more energy ... than Peter Burke.” Michael O’Leary, of course, is a notoriously anti-worker and anti-trade union employer.

The investment and support of Michael O’Leary has paid off. So far, in just over 100 days of this Government, anti-worker measure after anti-worker measure has been pursued. Previous commitments have been dropped, such as the extension of sick leave, which we were promised at the time. We wanted to stitch the increase in sick leave into the legislation but the Government argued there was no need and that we should not worry because it would do it. It is now being delayed, with Fine Gael proudly trumpeting to business that it is delaying it. There is also the delay of the promised living wage. Just saying that people on the minimum wage should have the very basics of what they need to survive is no longer a commitment by the Government. That was kicked out. The Government has also kicked out something this Dáil voted for, namely, to end the outrageous situation of so-called sub-minimum wages and super-exploitation of young people who are legally paid even less than the minimum wage.

We have a Government that is consciously working against the interests of workers and for the interests of big corporations and the likes of Michael O’Leary. This is the situation in a country where we have immense wealth. We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet we have the highest rate of low pay in the European Union. One in five workers is low paid, representing more than 420,000 workers. On top of that, one in ten workers experience bullying or harassment, there are conditions of precarity and employees here work longer hours and have fewer holidays and less protection against dismissal than their European counterparts. That is rife and part of the so-called voluntaristic model of industrial relations the Government trumpets, which tries to make it difficult for trade unions to organise workers and for workers to get organised. I will provide an example. The people operating cameras for the Oireachtas right now are an example of the kind of conditions of precarity. These are workers doing a job. They should be directly employed by the Oireachtas but they are not. They are outsourced. When there were no Dáil sittings for an extended period when the election was called and then when Government negotiations were going on, they were not paid at all. The rates they are paid are about half of the normal freelance rates for camera operators and the other work they are doing. It is scandalous but shows this is rife in terms of bad working conditions for workers. Those same workers are faced with grocery and energy prices that are still sky high and rents rising at a rate of approximately 10% a year.

The best way for workers to deal with all of these challenges is to get organised into trade unions and to fight for better terms and conditions. Even with the terrible legal regime in this country and the horrific elements of the Industrial Relations Act 1990, all the evidence shows that if you get organised in a trade union, you will be able to combat bullying and discrimination, improve the atmosphere and safety in your workplace, and increase your wages. All the evidence shows that being in a union gives a premium of at least 10% in wages and a series of other benefits.

The benefits of high levels of unionisation go outside of the workplace. The evidence shows that where there are higher levels of unionisation, there are lower levels of inequality, including wage inequality, across the economy. With higher levels of unionisation, a greater share of the value created by workers goes to the workers themselves as opposed to going to profit. A key reason the balance has shifted with more and more of the wealth created going to corporations is this attack on trade unions, which was heralded by Thatcherism, Reaganism and so on. The consequence is that while workers in the 1970s were getting 55% of the value that was being created, that has been driven down to 40%. Even under the current regime, workers should join trade unions and transform them into being fighting, democratic organs.

We should be clear that we have a Government that is working against workers getting organised in trade unions. I got an answer to a question to the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, recently. I asked if he was aware that large employers in receipt of Government contracts, Abtran and RelateCare, which are anti-union employers, with Abtran refusing to engage with the industrial relations machinery, are refusing to recognise trade unions or engage in collective bargaining, and what the Minister of State is going to do about it. The answer I got is the answer that I presume we will get in the speech from the Minister in 13 minutes’ time. It stated that we have a “voluntary system of industrial relations that is premised upon freedom of contract and freedom of association. ... The Government fully supports the right of any worker to join and be active in their trade union. Employees have the right under the Constitution to form associations and trade unions” and an employee cannot be discriminated against. It continued, “Under Irish law, there is no requirement for an employer to recognise trade unions for the purpose of

collective bargaining.”

The Government says that workers have the right to join trade unions but employers have the right not to deal with those trade unions. It is all premised on this illusionary equality between employees and employers, whereas bosses have the cards here. If you do not work, you cannot provide for your family. It is why we have a situation whereby workers have historically combined and have won minimum wages, have won the weekend, have won 40-hour weeks and so on. It is why workers need to combine and act collectively, but the Government says to employers not to worry, that they can simply ignore the workers and do not need to engage with them.

That is the purpose of this Bill. It introduces mandatory trade union recognition, so that when 20% of a given set of workers join a trade union, the employer is legally mandated to engage with that union through the industrial relations process. That is what it is about. It is very simple. It is about a basic element of democracy in the workplace. It is a measure that is supported, in a recent Ireland Thinks opinion poll, by 70% of people in this country.

An example of a situation it deals with involves the second biggest company in the world, Amazon, owned by the second richest man in the world, Jeff Bezos, a notoriously anti-union individual and employer. The richest man in the world, Elon Musk, is also a notoriously anti-union individual and employer. There is a pattern. We know that Amazon is expanding in Ireland. It now has 6,500 workers. That will increase even further. We know it is renowned for poor working conditions. It denied and then was forced to retract the denial of workers in America being forced to pee in bottles because they are not provided with appropriate breaks, toilet facilities and so on. Huge wealth is being made off the backs of exploited workers in poor conditions. All those workers in Ireland could join a trade union and Amazon could say it is not dealing with them. This is a company that spends about \$10,000 a day on fighting unions and trying to keep unions out of its shops. It spent over €10 million in 2022 and 2023 on trying to defeat unionisation. We need to match the effort of those workers in Amazon in this country, fighting to build unions and get organised, with a legislative framework that gives them the right to be in that union and compels the employer to deal with them.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Once again, this is a Bill that has had to be brought before the Dáil because the Irish Government persists with this illusion that people have the right to union representation. It is Orwellian that you have the right to join a union but your employer does not have to recognise it, so you really do not have a right. If the Government is serious about workers’ rights, this is a key one. In the early 1980s, about 60% of our workforce were in unions. Now it is one in four. The trade union movement is largely becoming public sector. It is becoming more female because women workers are often located in the public sector. There are now more women than men in trade unions, ironically.

The people who are being particularly ill-served are young people and migrant workers, who also make up a huge part of our workforce. However, over two thirds of non-union members aged 16 to 24 would vote to establish a union if they could. They are positively disposed towards being in unions. Young workers are significantly less secure and more anxious in their work than older counterparts. One in five young workers are worried about losing their job and having a reduction in pay if they join a union. Half of young workers aged 16 to 34 are worried about a reduction in their pay in particular. That survey was done by UCD. It shows how positively disposed towards unions people actually are. However, they are not joining them. I think there are a number of factors there. There is the anti-union culture that pervades private sector

workforces. We also have to say that the trade union leadership should be actively recruiting workers in a much more serious way.

We should look at a few things. A positive aspect of this Bill is that it obliges employers to further engage with workers, after recognition, on their wages and conditions. Unions have suffered extreme losses of membership due to the anti-union sentiment, particularly of American multinationals which are consciously attracted here by our Government, yet a message is sent out that people do not join a union and if they do, they will not be tolerated. That is a conscious policy by the Government.

There is an EU directive, which the Government has not implemented, on adequate minimum wages in the EU. It obliges governments to assist where less than 70% are covered by collective bargaining. The Government is meant to make that easier but it ignores this. Owen Reidy, who is the general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, said, “The government voted for this directive in Brussels over two years ago but has ignored it and obfuscated in Dublin ever since. The Directive is about the state being obliged to promote collective bargaining so workers and employers can negotiate in the workplace and at sectoral level to improve living conditions.” There are many other quotes about it from leading figures in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, saying how unacceptable it is that the Irish Government has not implemented that directive.

I raise strikes for trade union recognition too. I have been involved in supporting workers on such strikes over many years. Companies like Aldi and Lidl, which now proliferate through the country, have a conscious anti-union policy. I supported young workers in Aldi in the early 2000s, who joined the union on Parnell Street and were sacked. In theory, they were not sacked for joining the union because companies cannot do that legally. They find other means to sack them, such as giving them work they cannot do and creating difficult conditions. That is the *modus operandi* of companies, to flout our Irish law. The retail sector was traditionally very unionised, because workers fought for those rights. There is now a significant anti-union policy, not just in Aldi and Lidl, but in the two big private sector employers in this country, Tesco and Dunnes. Workers there have long-standing trade union memberships but the companies are actively not recognising the workers and their union.

In Tesco, in December 2024, members of Mandate trade union launched public protests following Tesco management’s decision to deny workers their right to be represented by their union and its refusal to agree an adequate pay increase. Tesco management is refusing to collectively bargain and is instead imposing its own pay awards on the workers, not what the union is actually fighting for. This was not due to lack of profits of course - Tesco sales profits rose by 10% but workers only got pay increases of less than 4%. One of the Mandate representatives said the company’s actions could only be seen as a clear act of bad faith and textbook union-busting tactics.

I also want to mention Dunnes Stores, an Irish company with a rotten tradition of dealing with trade unions and workers. We know this from going back to the anti-apartheid strike and it has continued to have this policy for 40 years. In 2015, Dunnes workers had to hold a ballot for the right to have their union engaged with by Dunnes. The company also refused - I do not know how the Minister of State feels about this - to recognise Labour Court recommendations. We all know Labour Court recommendations are not compulsory. Workers can also reject them but when they do we hear nothing but abuse of those workers in the media. That does not happen when employers reject them.

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It is incredible that very recently, in December 2024, Mandate urged Dunnes Stores to engage on outstanding elements of the comprehensive 2024 pay and benefits claims. The 5% increase they got was a win for Dunnes workers but Mandate highlighted the lack of progress on paid maternity and paternity leave. A growing number of competitors in the retail sector have introduced paid leave for new parents and Mandate believes it is time for Dunnes Stores to do the same. This is one of the biggest companies in the country refusing to give the most basic rights to its workers, particularly women workers who make up a large percentage of its workforce.

We also know the last-minute contracts are designed to militate against trade union membership and recognition because it is very difficult for a young or new worker brought in to know what their contracts are. We know workers with union membership are not allowed on the shop floor in many of these places. Of course, we also have to be realistic here. We want workers to join unions but those unions must be fighting unions. The Debenhams workers were a highly unionised workforce and look what happened to them. Unfortunately, because they received no support from their union leadership, they had to do it all themselves and self-organise during a pandemic in a very difficult situation where the company had bolted and left them.

As I have said before, the Government needs to do a number of things to ensure workers never again lose even their redundancy, never mind the paltry claim given to them by the courts. We need fighting trade unions. Much of the union leadership is hiding behind the fact that there are anti-union laws. They can organise against anti-union laws. The Industrial Relations Act, a significant impediment to workers having the right to effectively organise, can be breached and challenged. That is what you do to get rid of unjust laws. Again, the Debenhams workers and others did it by having mass pickets when the stock was being taken out of shops.

It is critical that the trade union leadership makes itself relevant again in this era because it is clear young workers and migrant workers want to join unions. I am assisting migrant health-care assistants, as the Minister of State will know, who are joining the Unite trade union. It is very positive to see this for migrant workers but there also needs to be a fighting lead given by all the unions to recruit in these sectors and actually represent them. They need to challenge unjust and anti-union and anti-worker laws that successive governments have kept in place.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I welcome the opportunity to discuss Government's position on Second Stage of this Private Members' Bill, the Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021. The Bill aims to establish a legal mechanism for trade union recognition for workers, who constitute at least 20% of employees in an employment or any category within that employment. It also proposes criminal sanctions for employers who fail to recognise and engage with the trade union. After careful consideration, Government will oppose this Bill for several compelling reasons. I will outline these reasons and the plans the Government has for strengthening supports for collective bargaining this year.

Legal advice provided to the Government since the Bill was originally considered by this House outlines how this Bill gives rise to an apparent breach of Article 40 of the Constitution, at least insofar as it proposes an employer be compelled to recognise and engage with a trade union under threat of criminal sanction. Article 40 of the Constitution guarantees the right of citizens to form associations and unions. The Supreme Court has also held there is no duty on employers to recognise unions. Any legislation which seeks to compel an employer to consult or engage with a trade union would therefore be at significant risk of being found to be uncon-

stitutional. In addition, the Bill fundamentally misrepresents the legal basis of employment regulation orders, EROs, which are intended to be sectoral wage-setting mechanisms negotiated at joint labour committees, not applicable to individual employers or trade unions.

Certain sections of the Bill, such as those related to unfair dismissal for seeking trade union recognition, are already covered under existing legislation, specifically the Unfair Dismissals Acts. It has been the consistent policy of successive Irish Governments to promote collective bargaining through legislation and by the development of an institutional framework supportive of a voluntary system of industrial relations that is premised upon freedom of contract and freedom of association.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 defines “collective bargaining” as comprising voluntary engagements or negotiations with the object of reaching agreement regarding working conditions or terms of employment or non-employment of workers. There is an extensive range of statutory provisions designed to support collective bargaining. The freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively are also guaranteed in several international instruments the State has ratified and is therefore bound to uphold under international law.

This long-standing tradition of a voluntarist system has served us well through the decades. Ireland’s attractiveness as an investment location and the basis for much of our competitive advantage have been due to the stability and industrial peace provided by our voluntary model for social dialogue. This has also fostered a stable and co-operative industrial relations environment, facilitated numerous successful resolutions of industrial disputes and the negotiation of collective agreements that have benefited both workers and their employers.

The voluntarist system of industrial relations allows for tailored solutions that meet the specific needs of different sectors and workplaces. By fostering a co-operative and non-confrontational approach to industrial relations, the voluntarist system has contributed to industrial peace and stability. The system is based on mutual respect and trust between employers and trade unions. A strong and well-functioning collective bargaining system supports productivity and fair wages, especially in low-paid sectors. For example, the 2024 sectoral employment order for the construction sector comes into effect on 1 August and will introduce higher rates of pay for craft and general construction workers. Their pay will increase by 3.4% in August 2025 and by a further 3.2% in August 2026. The sectoral employment order process is a statutory wage-setting mechanism provided for in the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 and is based on the principles of collective bargaining.

In addition, three new employment regulation orders came into effect last year, covering workers in the early years learning, security and contract cleaning sectors. These agreements demonstrate how effective the joint labour committee system can be when representatives of employees and employers voluntarily negotiate together to identify a mutually beneficial agreement.

Members will also be aware of the directive on adequate minimum wages, which aims to promote collective bargaining on wages in all EU member states. It sets out that each member state in which the collective bargaining coverage rate is less than a threshold of 80%, as is the case in the majority of member states including Ireland, shall provide for a “framework of enabling conditions” for collective bargaining and shall also establish an action plan to promote collective bargaining by end of 2025. There is no obligation on member states to reach any

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prescribed level of collective bargaining coverage within any defined time period. In 2023, a technical group was established with the social partners to discuss collective bargaining and Ireland's action plan. It has been meeting regularly and constructively. The capacity of our social partners to engage effectively in collective bargaining is also a key element of the directive. I hope that the Government can further support the social partners in this area. Government supports for collective bargaining is reflected in the programme for Government which contains a commitment to finalise an action plan on the promotion of collective bargaining by the end of this year.

I am pleased my Department held a public consultation process on the promotion of collective bargaining from 14 April to 12 May. My Department is now carefully reviewing the submissions received. It is intended that the consultation will help guide us in finalising the proposals, both legislative and administrative, which may be considered for inclusion in Ireland's action plan. I want to make the process of finalising this action plan as open and transparent as possible.

I also highlight the many positive and progressive changes to workers' rights which the Government has introduced in recent years. These employment law developments have resulted in significant improvements for conditions of workers. I would like to mention the legislation introduced in July 2024, which provided for the establishment of the Employment Law Review Group, ELRG. This work kicked off in January of this year, when the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, announced the appointment of the chairperson and members of the ELRG. Since then, the inaugural meeting of the group took place in March and the group's work programme has been agreed and published on the Department's website. The work programme contains three items: the determination of employment status; review of the Unfair Dismissals Act 1997; and review of the notice period in the minimum notice of terms of the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2018. The work of the group will be critically important in the coming years. It will provide a unique, independent and expert analysis on our suite of employment rights and protections.

Another important development took place in January this year when the European Communities Organisation of Working Time (Defence Forces) Regulations 2025 was signed into law. These important regulations provide for the statutory protection of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997, which now applies to members of the Defence Forces. In 2024, the Employment Permits Act 2024 introduced significant changes, including the introduction of a new seasonal employment permit. This is a short-term permit which will allow non-EEA nationals to work in seasonal employment for up to seven months per year.

Last year also saw the commencement of the rights to request remote working under the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023. In July of last year, we saw the commencements of the Employment (Collective Redundancies and Miscellaneous Provisions) and Companies (Amendment) Act 2024. This amended the Protection of Employment Act 1977 to further enhance the protection of employees facing collective redundancies, caused by employers' insolvency.

Since the introduction of statutory sick leave in 2023, business owners, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, have consistently raised concerns about the collective impact of such measures, in light of rising costs of input and security costs. We saw the introduction of statutory sick pay, which marked a key policy development for Ireland. The entitlement was originally for three days and was increased to five days in January 2024. Recent research from

the Department has shown that firms in the retail, accommodation and food services sectors are likely to be more impacted should the statutory sick pay entitlement increase from five days to seven days. Following this work and in line with relevant legislation, statutory sick pay will remain at five days.

Another piece of legislation which has had a significant positive impact for workers is the Payment of Wages (Amendment) (Tips and Gratuities) Act 2022. This Act has been in operation for more than two years and obliges employers to distribute tips fairly and to prominently display the tips distribution policy for its employees. Regarding the wider work in this area, there has also been significant development at EU level with my Department to engage in work within the EU platform work directive, which entered into force on 1 December 2024 and which will be transposed by 2 December 2025.

The Government will continue to protect the measures which have been put in place to support collective bargaining, within a volunteerist, industrial relations framework, which has served the State well to date. It is also important to do this in a manner that is ambitious, balanced, legislatively sustainable and cognisant of the views of the public consultation that my Department will conclude, on the basis that the Government opposes this Private Members' Bill, while reiterating our continued support for proactive engagement with workers, their representatives and their employers.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank Deputies Paul Murphy and Ruth Coppinger for bringing forward this important and timely Bill. As a State, Ireland is well behind other EU states in terms of the rights of workers to be represented by a trade union. In most other EU states this is legally guaranteed. Ireland is completely out of line with most of our European neighbours. This right has been resisted by successive Governments and big business down through the decades. While the Constitution guarantees the right to be able to join a trade union, an employer does not have to recognise it and can simply refuse the right of staff to collective bargaining and the protection that union membership offers.

Employers have greater social and economic powers than workers. That is just a simple fact. The only power that a worker has is through combining with their co-workers so they cannot be picked off individually. This tactic is often used and I have witnessed in workplaces. Hundreds of thousands of low-paid workers have no representation and very few rights. The percentage of workers in the private sector who are now unionised is very low at the moment. This needs to change. In many sectors, employment has become casualised, with no set hours. Short-term contracts are common as are so-called employment agencies. Workers' rights in many cases have gone backwards and that needs to change. Hard-won basic rights have been undermined by union-busting activities. Workers who join a trade union are sometimes targeted by their employers and victimised. There are good examples of that around this State. One group of workers will be played off against another, which is common practice. In some cases, unionised workers will be cleared out of a business and replaced in a relatively short time by lower-paid, non-unionised workers. This can be seen happening around this country. In the beef industry, that happened in some beef plants.

While previous Ministers have stated that they fully support the right of any worker to join a trade union and be active therein, those are hollow words, which have no meaning, because they cannot be brought into effect. If asked about joining a union, workers, in many cases, will express a fear of being targeted by their bosses because of being a union member.

Imagine the uproar if IBEC, the Irish Hotels Federation, the IFA or other organisations, which legitimately have a right to collectively negotiate, were told by Government that they could not represent their members and that it could only deal with them individually. There would be uproar in this country. It is time to close the loophole in Irish law. It is time to bring industrial relations into the 21st century. It is time to catch up with our EU neighbours.

I heard the Minister of State say that the Government has committed to bringing in collective bargaining. I ask him not to back-pedal on this. He should put his foot on the accelerator and drive this on. We need to move into the 21st century with industrial relations in the country. I appeal to all TDs to support this good Bill.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Deputies Murphy and Coppinger and their staff for bringing this very important legislation forward. I support the Bill and its intention to provide mandatory union recognition where 20% or more of the workforce are members of a union. Union representation is extremely important to ensure that union reps have access to their members' places of work. This is vital. It is also important that unions are able to negotiate with employers on pay, hours and conditions. Sadly, this is not always the case in Ireland, as employers have no obligation to even acknowledge trade unions. We have seen many examples of many employers who failed to engage with trade unions at all, which is unacceptable today.

Most of the private healthcare sector does not recognise or engage with trade unions. We all know examples of big companies that refuse to recognise trade unions for collective bargaining. I will not name and shame them but it is not hard to find reports of companies with hundreds of employees who are not recognised because there is no union recognition nor is it hard to find people with negative experiences of trying to get their employers to recognise unions. I have personal experience of employers failing to recognise or engage with trade unions in the past. Trade unions offer numerous benefits to their members and are so often needed for the purposes of negotiation and representation. A union can make a significant difference when fighting for fairer and better conditions for workers and assisting them to access legal protections in workplace disputes and financial resources.

Workers have a right to be represented. We all know the value of the trade unions. In many situations, the presence of a trade union representative is crucial. Unions representing health-care workers have been instrumental in reaching agreement with the HSE and the WRC over staffing and recruitment. They demanded changes to how staffing vacancies in the HSE were reviewed and also called on the health service to accelerate the recruitment process for vacant posts. Unions representing the firefighters in Donegal have been vital in fighting for adequate resources and accountability.

Workers have the right to organise and be heard. It is shocking that Ireland remains one of the few European countries where there is no right to union recognition. This needs to change. It is a change that the Government has to process. I urge the Government to progress this Bill.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Deputies for bringing forward this important Bill. The aims of the Bill are honourable, and that is why Sinn Féin is happy to support it being progressed to Committee Stage.

The establishment of a clear legal process for trade union recognition from employers if at least 20% of employees are members would be a very positive step for workers' rights in this State. The North is forging ahead on workers' rights issues in view of the introduction of the

good jobs Bill by economy Minister, Dr. Caoimhe Archibald. Under that legislation, unions will have enhanced rights to request workplace access for recruitment and members' engagement. This will open up collective bargaining across a wider range of sectors. The Bill will also reduce the threshold for the number of employees required before a union can apply for recognition from 21 to ten.

Sinn Féin has long stood in support of trade union recognition and the fundamental right of workers to be represented by their unions. I acknowledge the work done by my colleague Deputy Louise O'Reilly in this space with regard to support and progression of trade unions and trade union representation. Our position is rooted in the core belief that every worker deserves fair representation, dignity and the ability to collectively bargain for better wages, conditions and rights. Unfortunately, the Government is at odds with our progressive stance. Since coming into power, this Government has attempted to renege on workers' rights commitments made during the general election campaign. The introduction of the living wage in 2026 has been shelved until 2029 at the earliest. The introduction of pension auto-enrolment has been paused indefinitely. The increases in statutory sick leave entitlements have been delayed as well. Delay follows delay. The Minister of State did not delay in increasing the number of junior Ministers and their €45,000 top-up payments. That was a priority for this Government, which continues to argue against the living wage.

I ask again about the EU adequate minimum wage directive. This is important legislation. It is probably one of the most important pieces of legislation to have emerged in a long time. Government speakers may assert that this directive negates the need for trade union recognition, but there has been no action from the Government on transposing it into domestic law. Where is the work plan committed to in the programme for Government? It was not in the Government's spring legislative programme. We are halfway through 2025 and there is no sign of a work plan. I urge the Government to take action and not engage in more delays. Our all-island economy is becoming more integrated. This is a good thing in the face of so much global uncertainty. Going forward, it makes sense that legislation on workers' rights should be standardised on an all-island basis.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I thank People Before Profit for bringing forward this Bill. I wish to reaffirm our commitment to the rights of workers across Ireland and outline our support for any meaningful reforms that will strengthen a worker's ability to be heard, respected and fairly represented in the workplace. Every worker deserves dignity, fairness, respect and the right to collective bargaining. These are fundamental principles that are essential for building a just and equitable workplace.

Sinn Féin supports the Trade Union Recognition Bill, and it is something we have campaigned for. This is crucial legislation that aims to establish a clear, accessible and enforceable legal framework for trade union recognition. This legislation is not just about legal formalities; it is about empowering workers, ensuring that their voices are heard and safeguarding their rights in an increasingly complex employment landscape. Recognition is a fundamental step towards fairer industrial relations, allowing workers to negotiate for better wages, improved conditions, and secure employment rights. Such measures are necessary to uphold the rule of law, prevent abuse and ensure that employers cannot bypass or undermine workers' rights by means of delaying tactics or intimidation. Moreover, the legislation would empower the Labour Court to investigate disputes relating to recognition thoroughly. After an investigation, the court would issue written recommendations, including the reasons for its decision. If the court finds that a trade union is genuinely representative of at least 20% of the workforce, it

will recommend that it be recognised, either through recognition orders or other appropriate redress. Transparency is key. All decisions made by the Labour Court would be published and made available for inspection, with protections for the contents under absolute privilege. This openness would create trust and accountability and ensure fair treatment.

Legislation alone cannot solve all issues. We recognise that the current voluntary system of trade union recognition often fails many workers, especially those in sectors such as retail and hospitality. Unfortunately, recent developments have shown a worrying retreat by the Government from commitments made during election campaigns. Only six months after the general election, it has been broken promise after broken promise. Instead of prioritising workers' rights, the Government cites economic uncertainty as an excuse to delay or weaken reforms, but economic challenges must not be used as an excuse to undermine fundamental rights. Protecting workers' rights is an investment in our society. It is an investment in fairer, more productive workplaces that benefit everyone.

Sinn Féin is committed to continuing the fight for legislative reforms that make trade union recognition a legal right, not a matter of voluntary agreement or employer discretion. We will push for laws that protect workers from anti-union practices, bullying, and harassment. Genuine collective bargaining, where workers and employers negotiate on an equal footing, is vital for fair wages, safe working conditions and job security.

Sinn Féin remains unwavering in its belief that workers must be empowered, protected, and respected. We will continue to champion reforms that enshrine trade union recognition as a legal right, eliminate exploitative practices and promote genuine collective bargaining. Only when workers are recognised and their voices heard can we build workplaces of equality, dignity, respect and fairness for all.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will start by thanking the Deputies for bringing forward this motion. I also genuinely commend the Minister of State for delivering that script with a straight face. I was quite shocked by what I heard. You would honestly think that it was worth celebrating that the Government had promised ten days' paid statutory sick leave and is now cutting that in half. You would think workers would be on the streets absolutely commending the Government for the fact that it has kicked auto-enrolment to touch yet again. How many times is it now? The Government has been talking about auto-enrolment for 20 years. How many times has it kicked this touch? The Government knows the people who will benefit most from auto-enrolment are low-income workers. It knows that its friends in industry and its high-earner friends all have nice, tidy private pensions. It will move heaven and earth to ensure those pensions are protected, but ordinary workers and workers on low incomes can wait.

The same is true of paid domestic leave. We proposed ten days; the Government cut that in half. Again, there has been delay after delay. Workers are at the back of the queue time and time again. The Government talked an awful lot about the living wage in the run-up to the election. It was not even five minutes in office before it kicked that to touch. Again, that is a benefit for low-income workers so it would have absolutely no interest to the Minister of State or his partners in government. It is not even that we see the influence of Deputy Michael Lowry. We see that every day of the week, but the Government was like this anyway. It never had an interest in workers or their 'rights, and that was writ large all over the Minister of State's script. He talked about the compelling reasons to oppose the Bill. There are not any. I read the script and then read it again. There are no reasons contained within it. If the Minister of State is honest, he will know that.

The Minister of State referenced the commitment to finalising an action plan to promote collective bargaining. I thought that was a joke. You do not need to promote collective bargaining. Workers are not stupid. A blind man on a galloping donkey knows that if you are in a trade union, you will be better off at work. Workers know that. What they want is protection. Unions know that. What workers want is the right to organise, and they need that. The Minister of State is nodding but his script absolutely contradicts every commitment he has given to workers. He says it and then does not deliver. Workers do not need an action plan to promote collective bargaining because they know collective bargaining is good idea. Study after study shows that. What workers need is a Government on their side and the right to organise.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I thank the Independent and Parties Technical Group for introducing this Bill and giving us the opportunity to speak on the issue to which it relates. I am a trade unionist and have been since I entered the workforce as a teenager. I am the Sinn Féin spokesperson on community development. I worked for many years in the community and voluntary sector. What I want to talk about in the brief time I have is the need for this Bill on trade union recognition to advance trade union recognition for all workers.

I am speaking to the Minister of State on an issue in the Houses of Parliament, so he might at least do me the courtesy of listening to what I have to say, if he does not mind. We need to advance trade union recognition for all workers, but in particular those in the community and voluntary sector, where many workers who are doing public work for our communities and who are paid from the public purse are not afforded trade union recognition by their employers. I have seen at first hand the work carried out by section 39, section 56 and section 10 organisations. Their workers are members of trade unions for a reason: they have a lousy deal. They have been negotiating in good faith but some of their employers do not recognise their right to collective bargaining and their trade unions. That needs to change. Their right to trade union recognition is ignored, their right to collective bargaining is blocked, and the Government is complicit in this. SIPTU, Fórsa and my union, Unite the Union, have been crystal clear that staff in this sector not only have lower pay than their colleagues in the public service but also have weaker terms and no bargaining power, despite their organisations being publicly funded to deliver public services. These workers have balloted and organised, and they have even walked off their jobs – jobs they love and that are a vocation for them – not for the sake of profit or special treatment but for basic recognition, for respect. It is not just an industrial relations issue; it is also a question of rights and, to be very frank, a failure of the Government. My colleague Deputy O'Reilly laid it out. The promises were made but quickly forgotten.

The Trade Union Recognition Bill offers a clear and simple remedy, and my party will support it. We will have feedback and contributions to make when, I hope, it gets to Committee Stage, but it does need to be advanced. The rights to organise, be represented and bargain collectively are basic rights all across the developed world. Ireland is an outlier. The Government loves to compare this country to EU member states but we compare very poorly when it comes to trade union recognition. Therefore, it is long past time that this issue was advanced. I ask the Government to do the decent thing here and let it advance.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank Solidarity and People before Profit for introducing this Bill. I am sure Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett is watching this debate closely today. I wish him all the best. I know everyone else feels the same.

I am a proud Irish republican and also a proud union member, which I have been all my working life. Republicans and workers right across this island – workers are republicans – are

building towards an island based on the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation. When the Citizens' Army stood up for workers, it protected all workers and built a link between the cause of Irish unity and the cause of labour. That is why Sinn Féin stands on the side of workers. It is why workers' rights and equality are entwined in the party's principles and policies. It is why we would deliver a right to organise. James Connolly once said, "Men perish, but principles live." We have lost many great republicans but their principles live on. Their dedication to workers' rights on this island and to the people who call this island their home is our driving force. We now have a Government that wants to row back on promises it made to workers. It wants to undermine the cause of labour and blame it on tariffs and economics.

David Krause once said of Jim Larkin that his aim was to organise unions, not strikes. One hundred and twelve years later, we must still fight for the right to organise. Just as republicans stood against William Martin Murphy and the king of England in 1913, we stand today against the current Government and its kingmaker, Michael Lowry. Patriots know that the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland. The people of Ireland will be free only when we own everything from the plough to the stars.

Deputy Ann Graves: I thank the Deputies for introducing this Bill. It goes to the core of how workers can defend and improve their pay and conditions of employment. Workers need a Government that is on their side. For far too long, workers and their rights have just been an afterthought. Right now, Ireland, disgracefully, has what is among the most restrictive trade union legislative regimes in the developed world. The implication of these restrictions has been a decline in working conditions, living standards and real incomes, along with the marginalisation of trade unions and workplace democracy. It is time for workers and their rights to be at the forefront of the political agenda. Giving workers the tools to bargain for themselves will lead to better lives. We should be working in partnership with trade unions to modernise industrial relations and ensure that workers' voices are heard. Key to this is legislating for the right to organise and ensuring workers have access to unions and information about their rights from day one on the job. A strong trade union movement is essential for economic productivity and the fair distribution of growth benefits, and it would provide for an increased resource for the WRC and HSA and for the legislative right to collectively bargain.

Workers want to join and be represented by a trade union of their choice, so why can workers in Ireland not avail of what is a human right, that is, to be represented by a trade union? Collective and consecutive Governments have consistently denied them this right, hiding behind the so-called voluntarist model of industrial relations. This simply allows employers a veto and they can refuse to engage, as many of them do. Strong trade unions are the greatest driver of economic equality, and the more equal the country is, the better it does in a whole range of areas.

The EU adequate minimum wage directive recognised the benefits of trade union organisation and collective bargaining. These benefits include tackling poverty and declining wages and providing social cohesion. From the 1960s to the 1990s, Ireland had a collective bargaining coverage rate in excess of 70%. Since then, it has declined to around 34%. The new directive effectively implies we need to increase the number to 80%. Passing this Bill will go some way towards meeting our obligations under the new EU directive. While the Bill is welcome, it does not go far enough. We need a whole suite of measures so the trade unions can do their job and increase living standards for workers and their families. I have been a trade union member since the day I started to work, which was a long time ago. I have been a local representative and a sectoral representative. Everybody should have that right.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: This is a Bill that my party and I will be supporting. I am a proud member of SIPTU and have been for a number of years. The aims of the Bill are sound and seek to provide a legal basis for trade union recognition by employers where 20% of employees are members of a union. In the 21st century, it is appalling that not every worker has fair representation, dignity and the ability to engage in collective bargaining.

The Bill is incredibly important, particularly as the current Government made no mention in the programme for Government of the implementation of the adequate minimum wage directive. This is a directive about the promotion of collective bargaining and states taking an active role in promoting it. The Government has already missed the 2024 transposition deadline. The directive needs to be implemented because the Government cannot be relied on to protect workers' rights. That is a simple fact. We have seen a commitment to implementing a living wage suspended from 2026 until 2029. We have seen the indefinite suspension of auto-enrolment since the general election. We have seen, since the general election, the suspension of increases to paid sick leave. On commitment to workers after commitment to workers, there has been a rowing back since the election campaign. The Bill needs to be enacted so we do not have to rely on either the State or the private sector to support workers' rights.

Fórsa has had to embark on a campaign to seek a fair and equitable pension for school secretaries and caretakers. That campaign is ongoing and it is one I support. The Respect at Work report shows union-busting is not just a memory from the 1980s or from 1913 but that it is happening now, in 2025.

11 o'clock

There are lots of quotes in that report. I recommend the Minister of State read it.

The Bill is needed. There needs to be a universal right to trade union representation and it is critical for most low-paid and vulnerable workers. It is the right thing to do for workers. It is the right thing to do, period.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is hard to believe that, in 2025, we are introducing a trade union recognition Bill and that there is a need for it, but that is the world we live in. I thank my colleagues in People Before Profit-Solidarity for tabling it.

We all know about the headwinds and all the other terms that are used as regards tariffs and the dangers relating to AI, and we all accept that. Unfortunately, however, we have a Government that has gone straight for the jugular on workers' rights. We were promised the introduction of a living wage in 2026, which will now happen in 2029 at the earliest. Pension auto-enrolment was meant to happen in September 2025 and is now paused indefinitely. The statutory paid sick leave entitlement was due to increase from five days to seven, but that has been delayed indefinitely. We were able to take that action pretty fast.

We know the issues with bogus self-employment. Many in the film sector talk about the blackballing that needs to be dealt with and we need engagement from unions to deliver on that. It is also a significant issue in the construction sector and probably affects our ability to actually deliver. We have all dealt with employees who do not have trade union recognition or a right to collective bargaining, and in moments of difficulty, they are forced into a situation of having to select individual workers from the point of view of being able to attempt to negotiate, sometimes against world class teams put forward by-----

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An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Thank you.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----some of the biggest companies in the State. None of this is good enough in any way, shape or form.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Thank you, Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have also raised the issue many times of personal assistants.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): The next speaking slot is-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Fórsa has a pay claim at the moment, but it is awaiting, as is the WRC, a review that needs to be carried out by the Department of further and higher education. That is a necessity.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Thank you, Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I understand that the Minister of State would agree with me on the basis of her interest in those with disabilities.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Next we have the Labour Party slot. I call Deputy Lawlor.

Deputy George Lawlor: Ba cheart dom a rá ar dtús go bhfuil mé ag ullmhú mo Bhille féin maidir le haitheanas na gceardchumann, rud atá ina ábhar imní do Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre le fada an lá. Is fíor a rá go bhfuil leibhéal ardtábhachta ag baint leis an mBille seo sa Teach seo agus go deimhin sa tír seo. I have been preparing my own Bill on trade union recognition, which is a long-standing Labour Party concern. However, none of us has a monopoly on wisdom when it comes to law reform, and I am happy to make my contribution by way of amendments to this Bill, if it goes to Committee Stage, rather than launch a separate proposal. Accordingly, I am happy to confirm that my party will be supporting this Bill.

This issue resonates deeply within the fabric of our society. In my town of Wexford, the handed-down stories of the foundry workers' lockout of 1911 still run deep in the veins of Wexford people. The reason the workers were locked out was the demand for union recognition among their fellow workers. The local leader of the locked-out men was a man called Richard Corish and such was the fondness and affinity for Mr. Corish as a result of his leadership during the campaign for union recognition that he went on to become a local Labour Party TD and was mayor of Wexford for a remarkable 25 years in a row while serving as TD for Wexford concurrently. Following his death, his son, Brendan Corish, won the by-election and served as Labour Party TD for 35 years before my immediate predecessor, Brendan Howlin, took over and served for 37 years as Labour Party TD. The cause of labour and trade unionism runs deep in my town and constituency and courses through the veins of many Wexford people.

The traditional model depended on trade unions mobilising a critical mass of employees to join and participate in trade union action. However, in a gig economy era, with transient, insecure and poorly organised workforces, trade union density is bound to decline where it is most needed and the issue of statutory recognition rights for trade unions becomes more pressing.

The Constitution guarantees the right of citizens to form associations and unions, but the courts have not to date had to consider specifically whether the Constitution would have an impact on an attempt by legislation to require employers to recognise and negotiate with trade

unions. It is true that at least one judge made an observation that employers have a constitutional right not to recognise trade unions. Mr. Justice Geoghegan stated in the Supreme Court decision of *Ryanair Limited v The Labour Court* in 2007:

...as a matter of law Ryanair is perfectly entitled not to deal with trade unions nor can a law be passed compelling it to do so. There is an obvious danger however in a non-unionised company that employees may be exploited and may have to submit to what most reasonable people would consider to be grossly unfair terms and conditions of employment. With a view to curing this possible mischief the Industrial Relations Acts, 2001 and 2004 were enacted. Given their purpose they must be given a proportionate and constitutional interpretation so as not unreasonably to encroach on Ryanair's right to operate a non-unionised company.

With respect to the late Mr. Justice Geoghegan, it seems far from obvious that his analysis on this point was correct. If a law to compel trade union recognition cannot constitutionally be passed, it must follow that a trade union strike aimed at compelling the company to recognise it would also be unconstitutional. It would be an unlawful conspiracy to infringe on the company's constitutional rights. Any strike seeking trade union recognition would be an actionable wrong, which could be enjoined and substantial damages could also be awarded. This is an important point. If Mr. Justice Geoghegan's line of reasoning was correct, any industrial action at a non-unionised workplace to secure trade union recognition would be unconstitutional, yet this is clearly not the law and has not been the law since trade union disputes were legalised in 1875. If an employer cannot seek an injunction to stop a strike aimed at securing trade union recognition, it must follow that employers' constitutional rights are not being threatened and that, if constitutional rights are not breached when a strike attempts to achieve this outcome, neither would they be breached if the result is achieved by statute. It cannot be the case that the Oireachtas is prevented from legislating for something a trade union is entitled to achieve through industrial action.

This is not the end of it, however. People talk of mandatory recognition as if conferring the status by law is simple and immediately effective. It is all very well to say the union must be recognised, just as it is very well to say road users must drive carefully or alcohol must be consumed responsibly. When the law proposes a positive obligation such as this, the real test is what it provides when people fail to live up to those obligations. What are the remedies? It is not enough for the law to state that the right of a union to represent its members for the purposes of collective bargaining shall be recognised by an employer. The problem is that, while it expresses the right sentiment, what is needed is something to give effect to it. Apart from declaring what ought to happen, legislation must set out what to do when it does not happen. No law can force workers or employers to sit down in the same room and negotiate in good faith, but what the law can do is set out what will happen if employers fail to do so. A third party, such as the Labour Court, must intervene and decide the union's claim without any input from the side that does not participate. In fact, it should be a very real fear that, if employers do not show up to a meeting, things can be decided in their absence. That should bring sensible employers to the table. Giving effect to the concept of trade union recognition involves much more than writing a single sentence. It includes setting out the procedure for deciding on the terms and conditions to be imposed in the absence of recognition, as well as a lot of practical considerations such as access to the workplace and to workers and facilitating workplace elections and meetings. In fairness, this Bill ticks many of those necessary boxes.

There is legislation that provides a remedy to employees who are disadvantaged while their

employer refuses to recognise and negotiate in limited circumstances. I pay tribute to my colleague, Deputy Nash, for steering that legislation through the Houses. It is open to us now to go further by extending that legislation to secure better and more effective trade union recognition and collective bargaining.

Any legislation has to recognise the phenomenon of poaching and have a viewpoint on it. If a new union tries to recruit members who already belong to an established union with long-standing negotiation rights, the employer may well refuse to recognise it and the employer may be supported by ICTU's anti-poaching rules. Those of us who support trade union recognition need to be careful to accommodate in our thinking precisely which union should be recognised and which union should not. It is in no one's interest to legislate for a free-for-all.

The legal framework for trade union recognition is fragmented and inadequate. While the Industrial Relations Act 1990 provided some protections for trade unions, it falls short of establishing a clear and consistent process for recognition. Many workers, especially those in non-unionised sectors, face significant barriers when attempting to organise. Employers often resist unionisation efforts and without a legal obligation to recognise unions, workers are left with limited recourse. The lack of legal recognition disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including migrant workers and those in low-wage industries. Workers in these groups often lack the resources and support needed to navigate the complexities of labour relations. By providing a legal mechanism for trade union recognition, we can level the playing field and ensure all workers, regardless of background or employment status, have the opportunity to join together and advocate for their rights.

The need for a legal mechanism for trade union recognition is not merely a legal or economic issue. It is a fundamental matter of human rights and social justice. By empowering workers to organise and negotiate collectively, we can create a more equitable and just society. In supporting this Bill, therefore, I believe we stand in solidarity, advocating for change and working to ensure the voices of workers are heard and respected. The time for action is now. It is beyond time to build a brighter future for all workers in Ireland, one where their rights are recognised, protected and celebrated.

I thank Deputies Coppinger and Murphy for tabling this Bill and I am proud to support it along with my party.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an nGrúpa Teicniúil um Neamhspleáigh agus Páirtithe as ucht an Bille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. We in the Social Democrats are happy to support this Bill. I speak first to some of the comments made by the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, in his response to this legislation. I wish to push back especially on the continued narrative we hear that the Constitution essentially says "No". I wish to draw the Government's attention to something I did two weeks ago when we were celebrating International Workers Day. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, an organisation I previously worked in, commissioned independent research in December 2023 that put paid to this idea. It asked whether the Constitution was a barrier or a facilitator to the rights of collective bargaining. Referring to its determination, I will read the final conclusion. I urge the Government and Deputy Lawlor, who just spoke about the Geoghegan ruling, which is gone into in detail in the report, to take note of it. It states:

We therefore conclude that Constitution is not a barrier to a statutory right to collective bargaining, and that no constitutional change would be necessary to facilitate a statutory

right of this sort. The legislature is free to pursue such a course, having careful regard to safeguards that would ensure all other relevant constitutional rights and principles are respected.

I appreciate that within the response, the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, was speaking to the specifics of this Bill. I put it to the Minister of State before us that there is a consistent pushing back that the Constitution is a barrier to the realisation of these rights, but it is not. The Government must get on board with this.

The second point I wish to touch on concerning the comments made by the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, is what he said about the voluntarist system, which he believes serves us so well. The phrases he used included “This long-standing tradition of a voluntarist system has served us well through the decades”, “The voluntarist system of industrial relations allows for tailored solutions” and “the voluntarist system has contributed to industrial peace and stability.” I think there is a bit of a typo there, though, because it has served us well as employers, not as workers and not as the State. This is the issue I have with the Government’s approach to workers’ rights. We are told the barriers to workers’ rights include the challenges for businesses to get up and running and meet all their obligations, and we appreciate that the Government has pursued a supportive programme of measures for employers and businesses. We agree with that in the Social Democrats and do not see any barrier to it. What we do have an issue with is the imbalance. Similar commitments are made to workers, which, sadly, are never delivered upon. One after the other, we see this happening again and again.

The reality is that we are out of step in continuing to support such a voluntarist model. The Bill speaks to the beginning of moving to a situation where employers must recognise trade unions and the right to collective bargaining. In the European Union, we have a goal of 80% of collective bargaining coverage, but Ireland’s rate stands at just 34%. If employers do not want to recognise trade unions, then they simply do not have to. This speaks back to the imbalance of power. I have worked in the private sector and the public sector and have been self-employed. As long as employers do not have to, they are not going to pursue anything that is going to affect their bottom line. This is just how the profit-making world works. The State, therefore, has to provide these supports for workers.

This situation speaks to the fact that, as a country, we have a long-standing tradition of trade unionism despite the poor record of Government. Tá tábhacht na gceardchumann fite fuaite i stair na hÉireann. Caithfidh foghlaim ón stair sin. We need to learn from that history and that is why the Social Democrats will be supporting this Bill.

Deputy Rory Hearne: To back up my colleague, we very much support this Bill. I thank our colleagues in People Before Profit for introducing it. This is important legislation. Collective bargaining is key in terms of Ireland and our economy. When we look at it, the Irish economic model has, unfortunately, been built on an undermining of workers’ rights by not ensuring collective bargaining is in place. When we look at the situation across the world, one of the key reasons inequality has risen to the level it has - the research shows this - is directly linked to the decline in trade unions and to workers being in trade unions. Part of neoliberalism was about smashing trade unions and ensuring workers did not have that bargaining power. That is the reality.

One of the issues in the context of Ireland’s high cost of living is what is called excessive profiteering. This is because workers do not have the ability and right to assert that they get liv-

ing wages. When we look at it, 145,000 workers are living at risk of poverty. In this economy that has been booming for so long, there is something problematic there. We still have large income inequalities for those in lower income jobs, who are suffering with low pay. This situation is linked to the inability to be in a trade union and the lack of a requirement for employers to have to support people and engage with workers in this regard.

While there are issues concerning the lack of trade union legislation, it is also important to highlight another aspect. Trade unions have done research - an example being the Respect at Work campaign - that has shown that union busting is going on in this country. The Respect at Work report found that 69% of workplace representatives had observed at least one form of anti-union behaviour by employers. The most common forms were the victimisation of union activists and discouraging workers from joining a union. It is disappointing because many workers, especially younger ones, want to join and be part of trade unions. The surveys show this. We need to see that trade unions can be and are an essential part of creating a sustainable, fair and socially just economy. If the Government was serious about protecting workers and supporting unions, it would support this Bill. It would act on the Low Pay Commission's recommendations, act on pension auto-enrolment, actually support unions and workers, and enact this legislation.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am proud to stand here today as a member of the Social Democrats but also as a trade union member and activist for decades at this stage. I thank People Before Profit for introducing this Bill. At its heart, it is about fairness, dignity in the workplace and the fundamental right of workers to a collective voice. This is not a radical idea, but a democratic one. When workers organise, they are not just protecting wages or conditions. They are advocating for a safer, more sustainable and more equitable workplace for everyone. In the education sector, which I have a particular passion for, unions have been vital in defending not just teachers, SNAs, school secretaries, school caretakers and school completion programme workers, but also the quality of education itself. I welcome the school group in the Public Gallery, and I hope they enjoy their visit.

Unions also fight for reasonable class sizes and supports for students with additional needs, and to ensure every worker has proper conditions such as parity of pay and a right to pension parity. Education unions have always looked beyond their own members' welfare, and yet too often their voice is sidelined. We have seen in our schools that temporary contracts and precarious work still exist. We have seen it during pay restoration struggles. We have seen it when Government have tried to divide teachers into tiers. If unions had not stood strong and been organised, their voice would not have been heard and there would not have been any progress. In further and higher education, staff are battling against precarious contracts, not being paid equitably and not having fair conditions. Lecturers are not being treated fairly and equitably and they have the responsibility of educating our next generation for the great creative thinkers and the people who will bring our economy forward. That was talked about extensively yesterday as being one purpose of education. I would argue that is one element, but not the be all and end all. In further education, teachers are on hourly contracts that do not recognise the hours of preparation put into every one of those classes, as well as marking assignments and work that comes back. These sorts of contracts are outmoded and should not be allowed. Those educators not only have to fight for their students but for pay parity and respect. It is deeply disrespectful and actually insulting. We will vote in support of this Bill. We are voting for the future of workers, so they do not have to beg for recognition they should have a right to. The Social Democrats believe in a republic where dignity in the workplace is not negotiable and where

people in every sector, including education, healthcare, retail and transport, are not treated as cost lines, but as the backbone of the country. That is why I will be supporting this Bill.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am impressed to hear the amount of credentials and the trade union members elected here, but unlike many of my colleagues I have never been a member of a trade union. I was employed while in college in the United Kingdom doing basic work behind bars and the rest of it. I never had an opportunity to join a trade union. I was self-employed. I ran bars and restaurants in Spain. I did not have an opportunity to get involved. I think I was a good employer as well. I then worked for a multinational company. I value the work of trade unions and I believe trade unions are an integral part of large organisations in particular. We can look at Dunnes Stores and hear the stories Deputy Coppinger spoke about and they are true. I have to commend Deputy Coppinger on the comments she made in the House today. I think they were fair and accurate, in particular when she spoke about how workers in Debenhams were let down by their trade union. I commend her on bringing that up in the House. I see the importance not only of money in the work trade unions do. It is also about the continuous bullying that goes on in a workplace. If you do not have the trade unions behind you, or if you do not have somebody to go to, it is very difficult and the workplace can be a lonely place. I do not think we put enough emphasis on the work trade unions do in sorting out, not big industrial actions, but the small negotiations and conversations between the union rep - the person on the ground - and the management team and getting cohesion before it ever escalates. That is work that goes unseen. That is work that is beneficial to the running of an organisation and to keeping an organisation happy.

When you look at mainland Europe, we are miles behind equity when it comes to trade unions. Look at what is happening right across Europe. You see the workers' rights there, particularly around bullying in the workplace. On the living wage and pension auto-enrolment, I understand why the Government has rowed back on that. I get it because it is difficult for businesses. It is difficult with tariffs coming down the line, but that should not be happening at the expense of the worker, at the expense of the person on the ground.

As has been mentioned in this House, there are many people working day in, day out doing everything right, but living below the bread line. We see every day in our shopping basket how difficult it is to make ends meet. Government has to stand up and take notice. It has to listen.

There is a tremendous amount of merit in this Bill. There are positives in this Bill. The Minister spoke about PRSI and tips and movement on that, which is important to note because I do not understand. I can hand over cash to somebody, for instance, a €50 tip, in a restaurant in Dublin tonight, or in Cork, but most of us are now tapping. That is the reality of life. That then has to go through the system. PRSI has to be paid on that. All the accounting has to be done on that if the worker gets it, so the €50 is no longer €50. However, if you hand over cash there is an exemption in the law already. Things like that need to be recognised and regulated. I commend my colleagues in the House on bringing this Bill through. I ask Government to look at it again and not to object to it for the sake of objecting because it is coming from this side of the House. There is a lot of merit in this.

Deputy Michael Collins: This Bill aims to improve workers' rights, but it also brings some challenges for small businesses, which would cause me to be concerned. I see Independent Ireland supporting this Bill going forward, but I want to raise concerns we have because there are a lot of concerns for small businesses in particular. Small businesses would no doubt have more paperwork and formal tasks like negotiations and dispute resolutions. This can take up

their limited resources and distract from their main activities and running their business. Second, mandatory union recognition could make it harder for small businesses to make a quick decision about staffing and operations. This could slow down their ability to respond to market demands or internal issues. There are legal risks. If small businesses do not follow the new rules they could face legal actions, fines or other penalties without legal teams, which most small businesses do not have. It might be tough for them to handle these issues, increasing the risk of mistakes. Formal union negotiations and disputes could cause workplace tensions or disruptions. Even small disruptions can significantly affect productivity and customer satisfaction in small businesses. There are financial impacts. Collective bargaining might lead to higher labour costs like increased wages or better benefits for small businesses with tight budgets. These extra costs could be challenging. While the Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021 aims to strengthen workers' rights, small businesses may face challenges with administrative tasks, flexibility, legal compliance, workplace harmony and financial stability. Small businesses are at this time undergoing huge difficulties. If we look at the costs even for a cafe or restaurant, they have VAT, rates, power, PRSI, PAYE, Internet, refuse, repairs and foods to be purchased.

This Bill, while it aims to protect employees' rights, which are hugely important, might cause great and further difficulty. Some of these businesses are fighting for the reduction of the 13.5% rate to 9%, which is not happening. At this time, the local authority in Cork is even hitting them with charges for the seats outside their doors. They are being hit with rates for seating. One person in west Cork told me they paid €700. That is another crippling cost for small businesses, so I have concerns for small businesses.

We will be supporting this going forward. However, I often meet people who come to my clinic and who have problems in their worker space. I ask them what their union is doing, and the answer I get is, "Nothing". I begin to wonder if there is a watchdog over unions. We can talk about protecting workers and their having a union, which is hugely important, but we also need to see a watchdog over the unions to see if they are delivering because it looks to me that in many cases they do not deliver for certain people. It causes great frustration and leads to me, a politician, asking how I can resolve the situation when they are paying into a union and the union will not resolve it. Where do I have to go? That is where it leads to difficulties.

Like my colleague, Deputy O'Flynn, I was both an employer and an employee for 30 years before I came into the Dáil. I was never involved in a union in my life. Thankfully, I was never involved in disputes, although in one sense I was in the community voluntary sector. We had issues with work schemes, although these people were not unionised. In one of the community voluntary groups I was involved with - I was chairman of it at the time - we had 70 workers through the rural social scheme, RSS, the HSE, the community services programme, CSP, Tús, the whole lot of them. Those workers, who were trying to deliver in the community, did not really have a union voice as such and that may have created protections for us as community and voluntary employers. However, being an employee and an employer for 30 years, I never felt the need to be in a union. I felt I was able to stand up on my own two feet and fight the cause if there needed to be a fight, although most of the time there was not. In the other situation, as an employer, I always tried to work closely with the people I was employing to make sure they were adequately looked after and that we did not bring a situation to a head. I find that many issues can be resolved before disputes get to a head. Unfortunately, there needs to be someone with some negotiating skills in every employment situation.

I saw the value in what happened with Debenhams, which Deputies O'Flynn and Coppinger mentioned. The employees of that company were treated terribly and that is where the benefit

of a trade union came in. As I said, however, there needs to be a watchdog over the unions too. Some small people get chewed up and do not get representation from a union where they should. I have seen that over the years. The first thing I do when somebody comes to me with a problem is ask what their union says. They may say their union is not representing their view. There are questions as to why a union that is meant to protect a person's viewpoints is not doing so at that point.

I have worries about small businesses. This Bill would create difficulties and would probably create extra costs. As I said a while ago, some of these small employers do not have legal people, so there are extra costs in trying to bring on people like that. We just have to be little careful. As I said, we will be supporting this Bill, but there are concerns we have that might need to be acceded to.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank all Deputies for some of the very strongly held views expressed on this particular topic.

The Government is fully committed to supporting workers and employers and delivering further supports for collective bargaining this year, following the public consultation. However, the Bill as proposed would leave the resultant legislation open to the possibility of legal challenge as regards an employer's right not to engage with or recognise trade unions.

Ireland's system of industrial relations is voluntary in nature. The approach set out in the Bill would undermine the voluntarist approach to industrial relations that has existed down through the decades. Our industrial relations legislation offers robust protections to trade unions to allow them to go about their business of protecting workers' rights. The freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively, as set out in Article 40 of the Constitution, are also guaranteed in a number of international instruments the State has ratified and which it is, therefore, bound to uphold under international law.

The Government continues to fully support the right of any worker to join and be active in his or her trade union. Under the Unfair Dismissals Act, an employee cannot be discriminated against or dismissed because he or she is a member of a trade union. Additionally, the Workplace Relations Commission's code of practice on victimisation refers specifically to "victimisation arising from an employee's membership or non-membership, activity or non-activity on behalf of a trade union" in specific circumstances, including situations where there are no negotiating arrangements and where collective bargaining has not taken place. A complaint under the code may be made to the Workplace Relations Commission under the Industrial Relations (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004, providing for up to two years' remuneration in compensation.

I will highlight the many positive and progressive changes to workers' rights the Government has introduced in recent years, resulting in significantly improved working conditions for workers. These include a new bank holiday in February; placing sick pay on a statutory basis; legislation on tips and gratuities; substantial increases in the minimum wage; enhanced protection for employees facing collective redundancies due to insolvency; legislation to provide the right to request remote working; and improvements to the employment permit system.

In 2025, we established a new employment law review group to look at issues such as unfair dismissals; provided that the statutory protection of the Organisation of Working Time Act is

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now applied to members of the Defence Forces; concluded a public consultation on extending the late working hours exemption for young persons to unlicensed premises - feedback from the consultation will guide our understanding of current working conditions for young people in both licensed and unlicensed workplaces; and advanced legislation to protect older workers with a contractual retirement age below the State pension age. We have also seen further developments across government, including the implementation of the EU pay transparency directive and the introduction of a pensions auto-enrolment system, which is also a programme for Government commitment and a key priority for the Minister for Social Protection.

This Government is committed to strengthening and protecting working conditions, fair treatment and fair wages for workers, and supporting businesses in addressing the challenges the enterprise sector is facing. The Government will finalise an action plan on collective bargaining by the end of this year, following the consultation process currently under way and in consultation with the social partners. I am confident this will address many of the issues of concern to the Opposition in a sustainable way, and I am firmly of the belief that this is the best way to support collective bargaining, businesses and workers in resolving issues of mutual interest.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome and strongly support the Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021. I compliment my colleagues in People Before Profit on bringing it forward.

Not only do I believe in the right of workers to join a trade union, but I also believe that employers should be obliged to recognise the union and negotiate with it on the pay and conditions of its members. I have been a proud trade unionist all my working life, during school holidays working in a meat factory, as a member of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and as a farm worker on Bulmers apple farm. I was a member of the Federation of Rural Workers and as an employee of a local tannery, I was a member of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union.

From December 1971, when I started work as a clerical worker with Waterford County Council, I became a member of the Irish Local Government Officials Union, now called Fórsa, and served as a branch officer and activist for the next 30 years. I served on the national executive of that union and was chairperson of its health and welfare division when I worked with the South Eastern Health Board. I represented the union on Clonmel Trades and Labour Council and served as the council's president.

My family has a tradition of union membership and activism. My father, Jim Healy, was a founder of the Clonmel branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1932, and his father before him, also called Jim Healy, was a union member at the turn of the 20th century when he worked as a carter with Murphy's Brewery in Clonmel and Thurles. My maternal grandfather, Patsy Meaney, was also a union member at the turn of the 20th century when he worked as a labourer with Clonmel Corporation Gas Company. My father-in-law was a branch officer with the Irish Union of Distributive Workers and Clerks and was condemned from the pulpit for leading a strike for better pay and conditions for members. As always, church authorities stood with the employers.

I strongly recommend union membership to all workers, especially young workers, at a time when casualisation, short-term and temporary employment are the order of the day. Unity is strength, and the trade union movement has won massive victories against all the odds, many of which we now take absolutely for granted. We won the eight-hour day - previously, workers worked for 14 hours in desperate conditions - the five-day week, public holidays, annual leave,

pension and sick pay schemes and much more.

The trade union movement should go back to its roots and remember the example of the men and women of the 1913 Lock-out. On this, the 109th anniversary of the Easter Rising, we should remember with pride the great trade unionist James Connolly, the 1916 leader executed 109 years ago last Monday in the Stonebreakers' Yard in Kilmainham Gaol by British crown forces, shot tied to a chair. Connolly's writings are as relevant today as ever. His book *Labour in Irish History* is a masterpiece. It is well worth reading and should be on the curriculum for our leaving certificate students.

Current Irish law entitles every worker to join a trade union but there is no obligation on an employer to recognise and negotiate with a union. It is at the whim of the employer to deal with the union or not. Trade union negotiated rates of pay and conditions are not only good for union members. Studies have shown that unionisation and trade union pay and conditions raise the wages and benefits of all workers.

This is a common-sense and reasonable Bill. It is important legislation which I fully support.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank all colleagues in all the Opposition parties who supported our Bill. I just point out that we will finish ten minutes early. The reason is that the Members of the Lowry group who fought so hard to get their time to speak on these matters presumably do not consider it important to come and speak about trade union rights or maybe they are embarrassed because they will be voting against trade union rights later on today.

I agree with one thing the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, said in her response, namely, that the "approach set out in this Bill would undermine the voluntarist approach to industrial relations that has existed down through the decades". That is correct and is precisely the point of the Bill, because the voluntarist system of industrial relations that has existed through decades is one that has worked in the interests of employers, not in the interests of workers.

The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, in the opening statement set out what he said were compelling reasons for the Government's opposition to this Bill. Effectively two were mentioned. First was the suggestion we often get in this place that it is unconstitutional and second was the reference to how great the voluntarist system is. In response to the suggestion that it is unconstitutional, Deputies Lawlor and Gibney addressed this point very well. This is a paper tiger that the Government hides behind to avoid acting. There is no basis or relevant rulings to suggest it will be unconstitutional. Compelling cases were made by Deputies Lawlor and Gibney. I want to add to that something the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, said at the end when she spoke about rights that are "guaranteed in a number of international instruments the State has ratified and which it is, therefore, bound to uphold under international law." I draw attention to the European Convention on Human Rights and a decision in *Demir and Baykara v. Turkey* in the European Court of Human Rights which has enormous relevance here. Up until that case, the European Court of Human Rights had effectively held that the right of workers to bargain collectively did not constitute an inherent element of freedom of association. The European Court of Human Rights had a similar position to the Government, which is that workers have the constitutional right or the right protected under the European Convention to join a trade union but that does not imply that the employer is compelled to negotiate with workers collectively. However, that court decision changed things. I am quoting here from a very important pamphlet from Daryl D'Art. A human right, the court held, must be interpreted "in a

manner that renders the right practical and effective not theoretical and illusory”. Consequently the court concluded “the right to bargain collectively with the employer had become an essential element of freedom of association.”

A year later, Demir was cited in another unanimous decision of the European Court of Human Rights upholding the right to union recognition and collective bargaining as integral to freedom of association. The way the Government is suggesting the right to freedom of association is protected is now effectively being characterised by the European Court of Human Rights as theoretical and illusory, lacking in legal validity.

There is already legislation which compels duties of consultation and recognition on employers - the Universities Act 1997, the Education Act 1998, the Institutes of Technology Act 2006 and the Railways Acts 1924 and 1933 - which have not been challenged on their constitutionality. It is not true that this would be unconstitutional.

On the idea that the long-standing voluntarist system has served us well over the decades, it was quite revealing that the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, stated the following: “A strong and well-functioning collective bargaining system [which we do not have, by the way] supports productivity and fair wages, especially in low-paid sectors”. The voluntarist model, whereby employers are able to accept that workers - all workers - have joined the union but the employer does have to deal with them, works for employers in low-paid sectors. It is part of the reason we have, relative to other European countries, the highest incidence of low pay. It is why we have such high rates of precarity. It is why we have fewer rights than workers in other European countries. That is facilitated by the Government’s anti-union practice which is clouded in the language of voluntarism.

The Government’s language on the adequate minimum wages directive is interesting. It has now said that there is no obligation on member states to reach any prescribed level of collective bargaining coverage within any defined timeframe. The Government has signed up to a directive requiring it to prepare an action plan to increase collective bargaining coverage to 80% - by the way the best way to do that is clearly by increasing union density and union membership - but then the Government says, “Don’t worry; we don’t actually have to reach that by any defined timeframe”. This means it is signing up to it in the knowledge that we never actually have to do anything about it. It is quite revealing in that it reveals why the Government continues to drag its feet on it.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the weekly division time this evening.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 11.47 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 12 meán lae.

Sitting suspended at 11.47 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The cost of living continues to bite hard on working people. Ordinary households are finding it very difficult to keep up with the never-ending barrage of rip-off bills, yet the Government seems oblivious to the pressure people are under. It seems content to sit on its hands and do nothing while workers and families barely get by. On the watch of this Government, households are hit by soaring costs across the board. The price of the weekly shop is through the roof. In the past year, the price of a pound of butter has increased by €1, the price of two litres of milk is up by 27 cent, the price of cheddar cheese is up by 79 cent and since 2022, the price of a bag of potatoes has doubled. The price of toothpaste and other basic toiletries is sky-high. Rent goes up and up. In the past year, rents went up by at least €100 per month. On average, people fork out €2,000 per month. That is the nightmare the Government has created for renters. Motor insurance has gone up by a whopping 9% in just 12 months. That is more than double the EU average. We have the highest electricity prices anywhere in Europe - €350 per year dearer than other countries.

People are working very hard. They are working all hours to make a better life for themselves and their families but they are being hit from all sides. They are contacting us at their wits' end. Here are some of the things they have told us. Amy said that the price gouging is unreal. She told us that the weekly shop for her family of five - two adults and three children - is now €260 and their most recent electricity bill was €460. David told us that his car insurance just shot up by €200. He said there was no crash, no claim and no change and that it was just a random slap in the face because the company felt like it. Fiona said "nine bloody euro for a bottle of shampoo that used to cost €4.50. These price hikes are an absolute joke". Susan said "it's getting impossible to keep the head above water. Everything except our income is going up and up and it's killing us". This is just a snapshot of the rip-off people are experiencing day in and day out.

By contrast, here is what the Taoiseach had to say in Brussels on Thursday. He said that he, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform had all ruled out a specific cost-of-living package in advance of the budget. This position was repeated by one of his Fianna Fáil colleagues on the radio yesterday. Hardworking people are being fleeced left, right and centre. Many have very little left at the end of the week, are forced to decide which bill to pay and which one to leave and are forced to cut back on the basics and the Government proclaims that it will not act and will not help. It is not lost on anyone that at the same time the Taoiseach rules out help for ordinary people, he had no problem delivering big pay hikes for his raft of junior and super junior Ministers.

Tá lucht oibre na tíre lomtha ag praghsanna atá ag dul in airde agus billí atá ag imeacht as smacht. Níl sé sásúil go bhfuil an Rialtas ag suí siar ag déanamh faic. The Taoiseach cannot leave working people and families high and dry. He must act. He should bring forward cost-of-living supports to ease this enormous pressure on households.

The Taoiseach: Ní aontaím leis an Teachta in aon chor. Níl an ceart aici. Tá níos mó déanta ag an Rialtas seo i dtaobh costas maireachtála agus an brú a íslíú agus a laghdú do chosmhuintir na hÉireann ná aon rialtas eile ar fud na hEorpa. Tá sé sin soiléir ón méid tacaíochta a thugamar sa cháinainnéis a bhí againn an Deireadh Fómhair seo caite. Is léir sin. I disagree fundamentally with the Deputy's presentation. No Government across the 27 member states of the EU has provided as much as this Government and the previous one did in terms of cost-of-living

supports. Quite exceptional once-off contributions were made, quite apart from the other significant provision we made within the mainstream elements of the budget. Over €7.3 billion was made available in temporary expenditure and €9.9 billion was made available in recurring expenditure in supporting household incomes.

We have been very conscious of the fact that at its peak, inflation reached a multi-decade high of close to 10% in Ireland. That was the position. This inflationary shock did have a significant impact on households, people and SMEs, so significant fiscal support was provided by the Government in specific cost-of-living measures that were temporary but also in taxation reductions in the past budget that will take effect this year, as well as other measures like the free school books scheme, public transport supports and hot school meals, all of which have been of significant assistance.

Budget 2025 provided for a further €2.2 billion cost-of-living package and included an increased payment in respect of the rent tax credit for 2024 from €1,000 to €2,000, the extension of the 9% reduced VAT rate for gas and electricity, the extension of mortgage interest relief until the end of 2025, a double month child benefit payment, two €125 electricity credits for households, two double week payments for all long-term social welfare recipients and €167 million for the increased cost of business schemes. The taxation measures in the budget will reduce income tax paid and the universal social charge.

Consumer price inflation has eased significantly from where it was over the past two years. Annual average inflation of 1.3% was recorded in 2024. This compares with 5.2% in 2023 and 8.1% in 2022. The latest data shows inflation was 2% in April. This the target rate of inflation used by the European Central Bank.

Notwithstanding the easing of the rate of inflation, the price level remains elevated and we are very conscious of that. Our agenda and objective in the budget when it comes in the autumn will be to provide within the social protection payment programme and do what we can on taxation to alleviate the pressures on people. We had an exceptional period in 2022 and 2023 and during Covid. The response has been exceptional by any yardstick. Sustainability matters in terms of public finances but it also matters in terms of longer term sustainable programmes in social protection, the tax code and the provision of public expenditure.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil daoine agus teaghlaigh faoi bhrú. Is í sin an fhirinne. Sustainability matters for families. Notwithstanding everything the Taoiseach lauded in his self-congratulatory soliloquy, Amy's groceries still cost €260 per week, her electricity bill was €460 and a bottle of shampoo that used to cost €4.50 is now €9. Yes, inflation has tamed but the cost-of-living crisis has not gone away. For the life of me, I cannot understand why the Taoiseach cannot accept people's experiences as bona fide. They include renters, people struggling to pay mortgages and childcare costs and people struggling to put bread on the table, pay the electricity bill and keep the show on the road. There is ample evidence that this experience is widespread. It is not simply those on social welfare payments. These are working families who are struggling and yet the Taoiseach is telling them "No". They cannot wait until October. We need cost-of-living supports and we need them with urgency.

The Taoiseach: I know the Deputy dismisses people on social welfare. She has just done so.

Deputy Pa Daly: No, she has not.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is not just about them. It is about working families. The Taoiseach is an intelligent man.

The Taoiseach: To be fair to her party, it moves along the spectrum from time to time in terms of the political narrative. The point, of course, is that what I did say was that provision has been made across the board in terms of taxation measures, the social protection code-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What the Taoiseach said is that he is doing nothing.

The Taoiseach: -----and milestone and significant breakthrough initiatives. Every child going to school in this country now has free books.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government cut the *per capita* rate of the scheme.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy had said that to me three or four years ago, she would not have believed we would do it but we did. We have also significantly expanded the hot school meal programme. These are universal, long-lasting programmes that are now embedded in the public expenditure programme. I recall the Deputy in high dudgeon when we were doing the cost-of-living packages, saying they were once-off measures, were not good enough, etc. On the public expenditure side of the next budget, we will do everything we can to ensure we can reduce pressures on families and, in particular, children.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: On 4 March, the Taoiseach told me, rather tetchily, “There is no resiling or rowing back from our commitment to addressing the issue of climate change”. All I had done that day was to raise concerns that the new Government was not serious about climate action. That view was grounded in my reading of the programme for Government and the Taoiseach’s ministerial appointments. He was quick to tell me then how wrong I was but I will give him an example of why I was right. On energy infrastructure, it is clear that the Government is making all the wrong choices. Crucially, it is making the wrong choice between clean renewables and polluting fossil fuels.

On Monday, Friends of the Irish Environment was granted leave for judicial review proceedings in respect of the Shannon liquefied natural gas, LNG, development. I am mindful not to comment on matters that are live before the courts, but Government policies on LNG are something about which the Taoiseach and I have spoken often. Our climate spokesperson, my Labour Party colleague Deputy Ciarán Ahern - whom we congratulate and welcome back from paternity leave this week - has taken up the matter with the new climate Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien. We might recall that when in the Department of housing, the Minister opened the door to commercial LNG with his massive planning Act. At the time, he and the then environment Minister downplayed the impact of that change in policy. Now in the climate Department, the Minister, Deputy O’Brien, is implementing policies that clearly favour filthy fuels over clean energy infrastructure. When asked about it, Fianna Fáil talks up the energy security element but where is the wisdom or security in only now starting to build a gas terminal that does not fit with our emissions targets and will not even be ready until after the Government is supposed to have finished the transition to renewable energy? Meanwhile, sea levels and household energy bills are rising as the cost-of-living crisis deepens, and the profits of big energy companies are also rising. We are watching the impacts of climate change in the world around us and the Government is not doing enough to address it.

In April, we learned that 30 wind turbines off the coast of Galway will not be built. Those turbines could have powered 350,000 homes each year and avoided 550,000 tonnes of emis-

sions each year. They could have created a raft of new green jobs outside Dublin. The developer cited challenging market conditions in the offshore wind sector as a reason not to proceed. Who is to say that other projects such as this will not collapse? What is the Government doing about it?

LNG is not a cost-effective energy source, apart from the environmental damage involved. More than 61% of LNG projects are cancelled or abandoned. Providers are paid to stay on stand-by, waiting for the day we need them to help out with supply. The proposal before the courts is a ten-year capacity contract worth €494 million. Those costs are likely to be passed onto ordinary households through the capacity payments tariff when Ireland is already one of the most expensive countries in the EU for electricity. Hard-pressed households will be footing the bill again. What is the Government going to do about this? Will it invest in renewables instead of fossil fuels?

The Taoiseach: Just because the Deputy says something does not mean it is true. What I said to her on the most recent occasion she raised this issue, when she said she had read the programme for Government, was that the whole agenda was to create a narrative and presentation that this new Government, which is just a few months old, is somehow-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Just answer the question.

The Taoiseach: Will the Deputy allow me to answer the question without the heckling and interrupting?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Please do. I was urging the Taoiseach to do so.

The Taoiseach: I know Sinn Féin's bona fides in climate change is exemplary.

The presentation of the narrative by Deputy Bacik is to characterise the Government as being somehow not in favour of measures to address climate change. Nothing could be further from the truth. The bottom line in terms of the climate action plan and the agenda ahead of us is that we are fundamentally committed to renewables and investment in them.

The Deputy mentioned a private application and litigation relating to it. That is not a Government initiative but a private sector initiative. People are entitled to take initiatives. The Government has announced an initiative on energy security. I say respectfully that it would be irresponsible of the Government not to act on the advice we have received in respect of the energy vulnerability of the country. We need sufficiency in renewables and the capacity to withstand any interruptions to our energy supply. This is a serious issue. I would not play it down or understate the energy security dimension to the decision taken by the Minister and the advice he received in respect of it. On another day, if things went wrong, there would be loud choruses in this House asking why decisions on energy security were not taken.

On renewables, everything we can do to accelerate offshore wind energy will be done. Previous Governments involving Fianna Fáil and other parties led the revolution on onshore wind in this country. We have a good record in respect of onshore wind and the integration of renewables with the electricity grid. It is a good story for Ireland at European level and elsewhere. The challenge now is to do it for offshore wind. We will do everything we can to accelerate renewables and endeavour to get offshore wind farms built as quickly as possible. The Government has already had a series of meetings about substantial investment in the electricity grid, which will be required. It will be of a significantly higher scale than what we invested over the

previous five years under price review 5. Price review 6 will come close to doubling what was spent on the grid in the past five years.

On biodiversity, we have radically transformed the situation for the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Its budget has been doubled over the past four years. There has been a substantial increase in the numbers of staff. The Government is going to continue with that agenda.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I stand by my remarks. Actions speak louder than words. For all the Taoiseach's protestations, we are not seeing actions from this Government that indicate a seriousness about tackling climate change. This is not just a matter of presentation. The Taoiseach said it is irresponsible to oppose LNG. He again raised the issue of energy security but a commercial LNG plant is not about guaranteeing energy security. What would be ways of guaranteeing energy security would be investing in renewables, ensuring that we have decent infrastructure and using State investment in battery storage infrastructure. We are seeing reports from Gas Networks Ireland and EirGrid stating that the existing infrastructure is already capable of meeting future demand, even in the event of extreme supply disruption. Why do we need this commercial facility? Locking us into new fossil fuel infrastructure when our emissions are still so high will have a further effect. It will see Ireland further overshoot its climate targets so that families and households will foot the bill for the eye-watering fines associated with missing targets. That will be an issue for households in a cost-of-living crisis and there is no guarantee of energy security.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows that the emissions inventory report of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, from July 2024 shows a decrease of 6.8% in Ireland's greenhouse gas in 2023 compared with 2022, which itself saw a 1.9% reduction on the previous year. This is the lowest that our greenhouse gas emissions have been in three decades below the 1990 baseline. That is significant given that in that period, we have had a population increase of 1.5 million, over 1 million new homes and more than 1 million extra vehicles on our roads. The performance by Ireland in respect of this issue has been quite strong. The last Government made significant investments and decisions that are already bearing fruit and will continue to do so into the future. The energy security initiative will apply to State-led energy. The Deputy knows that. She is, I think deliberately, conflating that with a private sector initiative. I invite the Deputy to talk to the officials in the climate Department in respect of energy security. We can arrange that briefing for the Deputy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is more than two months since my colleague Pádraig Rice first asked the Taoiseach about disturbing reports of an audit of hip surgeries on children at three separate hospitals. Back then, the Taoiseach said the audit process was in its final stages. That was ten weeks ago. The parents of the children involved have received no further information since. They have been told the audit is in its final stages for months. The Taoiseach repeated that same mantra yesterday and refused to provide any timeline for the publication of this report. In fact, he bristled at the notion that he would even be asked the question.

Let us be very clear: the audit is independent, but that does not mean the Government should be totally in the dark about when parents will finally get some answers. If it is, this raises further questions about the Government's competence and control of this scandal. We had the ridiculous situation yesterday where neither the Taoiseach nor the Minister for Health were able to tell us how many letters had been sent to families by Children's Health Ireland. These letters are not connected to the audit, we are told, and have been sent to families whose children were operated on over the past 15 years. The Government is entirely ignorant about how many

families may even be involved. That is really staggering. Has anyone in the Cabinet thought of picking up the phone and asking Children's Health Ireland and Cappagh hospital how many letters have been sent or is the Government too busy trying to maintain plausible deniability about the crisis to ask these basic questions.

The Taoiseach has accused Opposition TDs of trying to politicise this issue. Would he accuse parents who are desperate for information of the same thing? We are trying our best to get information for them. I have been contacted by parents whose children may be impacted by this and who are deeply distressed. They watched their children suffer terribly through serious surgery and now they wonder whether the surgery was necessary at all. Did their children go through all that pain and trauma for nothing? The least they deserve is a date for when these questions will be answered. The notion that no one can provide an indicative date is not just implausible; it is insulting.

The Taoiseach hinted yesterday that he knows more than he is willing to say publicly. He said the audit may be published sooner than we think. Will he stop with the evasion and level with us? When will the families involved have the answers they need? When will the audit be published? When the Taoiseach was asked yesterday how many letters had been sent to parents, he did not know the answer. Getting an answer on this should be straightforward. It is simply not credible that no one would have this basic information. The Taoiseach has had the past 24 hours to find out. Can he now tell us how many letters were sent out to parents whose children had operations over the past 15 years?

The Taoiseach: Children's Health Ireland, CHI, commissioned the audit. This is a very serious issue. It is of very serious concern to both the parents of children and to children who might now be teenagers. The audit is in respect of the period 2021 to 2023 and relates to developmental dysplasia. The decision by CHI to commission an audit was made in order to have an independent look at it and make sure that if there was untoward behaviour or something wrong happened, it would be highlighted and the facts found. It is a mission to find the facts. Government has no objective in hiding anything.

The Deputy uses language which, I understand, from an Opposition perspective, he may want to use. I refer to words such as "insulting" and "staggering". No one is insulting anybody. There is no desire on my behalf or that of anyone in government to insult anybody. It is too serious for that. We are talking about children who have had operations. The least we owe to the parents and families involved is the facts. We need to be independent in how we procure those facts.

I have obviously not seen the final audit or anything but a draft report, apparently, was published. CHI felt parents whose kids had this operation in the past might be concerned, so it wrote a general letter to people going back over a long period. It did that with a view to trying to help to allay anxiety. Now, it is as if the number of those letters is the key answer to something. It is not, actually. The letter is quite general, from what I have seen.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is not actually true. That is untrue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, it is not your question.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, it is not your moment.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not true.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: The generic letter I have seen essentially states that it relates to a follow-up to surgery at Children's Health Ireland to correct developmental dysplasia and that an audit is under way. It also states, in terms of skeletal maturity-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is misleading the Dáil.

The Taoiseach: Please, now. This is not about politics, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: But you are misleading the Dáil.

The Taoiseach: I am not, now.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are misleading the Dáil.

The Taoiseach: This is outrageous behaviour by you, now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please, it is not your question.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is fine, sorry.

The Taoiseach: Deputy O'Callaghan is entitled to an answer. It is not the Sinn Féin Deputies' question.

An Ceann Comhairle: And the Deputies will have time to come back.

The Taoiseach: You have been doing this since this Dáil began, and I ask you to stop because it is too serious. I have no interest in hiding anything - none.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have the letters here.

The Taoiseach: Why would I? For God's sake, reflect on what you are trying to assert. I am as serious about it as anybody is. It is horrendous if anything wrong was done but we need to find out the full facts. That is what we want to do in terms of the parents and children involved. That is it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. You can come back in. Deputy O'Callaghan to respond.

The Taoiseach: The Minister asked CHI to please tell her how many letters are out there, but the context of the letters is as important as the number. The final point I would make is my understanding is that the audit will be ready - fairly imminently, I hope. I do not govern that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, you are over time. I call Deputy O'Callaghan.

The Taoiseach: I cannot force the pace in respect of that.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Thanks, Taoiseach. The parents who have been in contact with me are deeply worried about the situation. They do not know who to turn to for information and are finding that very frustrating. They want a timeline on this. They also want to know how many letters have been sent out. The Taoiseach does not have that information at present. Is that the situation? He is not able to tell us. When will he be able to tell us how many letters have been issued? How, as Taoiseach of the country, does it take him this long to establish

something basic as how many letters have been issued? Surely that figure is known by Children's Health Ireland. Why is it not able to give the Taoiseach that kind of basic information straight out?

The Taoiseach: We need to tease that out. What are we saying about the letters that have been sent out? Yesterday a word was used, namely "recall". Once a number is announced, people will draw all sorts of conclusions from that number. My understanding is the letter has gone out to children who have been operated on, potentially as far back as 2010, or to parents in respect of a child. The important point is to get the audit published. CHI has been asked today by the Minister to publish the number in any event, as has Cappagh. This is because CHI and Cappagh are involved here. The core issue is the audit, not the number of letters sent out to a cohort of people going back over a number of years. The letter I have read is generic. Others may have got different letters. I do not know about that and would not have access to that. The bottom line is that I would hope we will have the audit before the end of next week.

Deputy Seamus Healy: One million Irish people, the Taoiseach's ancestors and mine, starved to death during the Great Famine in the 1840 and 1850s. Two million of us were driven to cross the Atlantic in coffin ships in search of mere survival. Thousands of us died on those ships. At home, our people died in cabins, in ditches, on the roads and in workhouses. There is hardly a parish in the country that has not a famine graveyard. To this day, the awful devastation of the Famine is imprinted in our minds, our hearts and our very souls. While the failure of the potato crop was the initial cause, the appalling vista is that the Famine could have been avoided but for the deliberate actions and inaction of a foreign imperial Government. The continued export of shipload after shipload of food from Ireland while we starved was thoroughly disgraceful and inhuman.

Today, 2.3 million Palestinians are facing starvation. All reputable international organisations say that 500,000 Palestinians are facing catastrophic levels of hunger while another 1 million are facing emergency levels of hunger.

The State of Israel and its defence forces are deliberately starving the Palestinian people. They have blocked all food aid to Gaza since 2 March and, in the words of the Israeli defence minister, no humanitarian aid will enter Gaza. The shiploads of food exported from Ireland during the Famine can be compared to the 3,000 truckloads of food being blocked by the Israel Defense Forces on the borders of Gaza.

I acknowledge and appreciate the Taoiseach's description of this as a war crime and I acknowledge and appreciate the involvement of the State with South Africa in the international courts, but we must do more. This State and the Taoiseach, because of our famine history and our neutrality, have a unique moral authority and obligation to do everything in our power to stop the genocidal starvation of 2.3 million human beings in Gaza.

The Israeli state must face consequences. The Taoiseach has himself described it as a war crime.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. He should conclude.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I believe this country must take action that is within our control, like stopping the Central Bank from facilitating the sale of Israeli state bonds, stopping all military flights through Shannon, even if that is a temporary measure-----

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

Deputy Seamus Healy: -----prosecuting airlines that are bringing armaments through our airspace and immediately reintroducing the occupied territories Bill in this House.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy, and I do not say it patronisingly, for very eloquently presenting the case and the comparison with our own national trauma during the 19th century in terms of the Great Famine and a deliberate policy now being perpetrated by the Israeli Government in respect of denying the basic necessities of life to the people of Gaza. It is quite shocking that Israel would, in a very deliberative way, conduct and prosecute a policy of this kind against an entire population. As I said previously in the Dáil, it is wrong in principle and in law to inflict hunger and suffering on a civilian population, whatever the circumstances, and this behaviour clearly constitutes a war crime.

In that context, we are working with other like-minded member states in the European Union - I have raised this with the President of the Commission - and, indeed, wherever we can to bring about international pressure on Israel to allow the basic necessities of life and unhindered aid into Gaza. The level of malnutrition among children is absolutely shocking and appalling. The trauma that has been visited upon the children of Gaza is lifelong. Many have been orphaned and many have lost siblings, parents and uncles and, of course, entire families have been wiped out by the shocking bombing of a very urban and densely populated environment.

In terms of the issues the Deputy has raised, we will continue to work with Spain, Slovenia, Norway, Iceland and other countries where we would have similar views in respect of this, and to try to get a stronger position from the entire membership of the European Union, at a minimum, in respect of the humanitarian situation and to get Gaza opened to aid.

The people in Gaza are trapped in Gaza. The Deputy mentioned in terms of famine that people can escape but people are trapped in Gaza due to the military activity and the bombing, but also the starvation and not having access to outside assistance or outside support. There is no shortage of humanitarian aid outside of Gaza at Rafah and other locations. There is no shortage of neighbouring Arab states that want to supply aid and support. The issue is getting it in there in the first instance. Now, the latest manifestation of Israeli policy, in endeavouring to control the entirety of the aid programme, is also reprehensible and unacceptable. We will continue to do what we can to get Gaza open for humanitarian aid and assistance.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I am sorry but that is not good enough. We have to do more. Gaza is absolutely shocking. We have genocide and war crimes every hour of every day. The Palestinian people are being starved and bombed every hour of every day. Time is not on their side. Half a million are in a catastrophic state of hunger and starvation. Surely some country, or some leader, must stand up and take dramatic action to stop this. The Taoiseach has already said that this is a war crime. We went through something similar ourselves in the 1840s and 1850s. We have, and the Taoiseach has, the authority - the international authority - to do something practical and dramatic to stop what is happening. These people are being starved to death. The Taoiseach has the opportunity to lead the international opposition to this. For God's sake, please do so.

The Taoiseach: I take the Deputy's point, although I do believe we need key powers to intervene. We need key powers, such as the US and major European Union-----

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Deputy Seamus Healy: We can do things without them.

The Taoiseach: Hear me out, please. Major European Union countries-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: We can do things ourselves.

The Taoiseach: We have done it. Ireland on its own is not going to shift the dial on this.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I acknowledge what you have done but there are things you can do, and there are things this country can do, and they can do it now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please allow the response.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Something dramatic needs to be done to stop this situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy, you have had your time. You must allow the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: I just want to make the point. I have noticed a shift in European opinion on this. The bigger powers, quite frankly, have to intervene here because of what is happening morally, and we will, too, but-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We cannot wait.

The Taoiseach: -----the *realpolitik* of this is very clear to me. The big powers-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: Big things start small.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate we are all-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: It is a desperate situation.

The Taoiseach: I am just stating the facts. It is very clear to me that the major powers have to intervene to get Israel to change course and stop doing what it is doing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the other Members, I welcome, on behalf of Deputy Keira Keogh, the students from Coláiste Pobail Acla in County Mayo, and their teachers, Mr. Jason Ó Mongáin and Ms Mairead O'Reilly; and also Councillor Eddie Ryan and his wife, Nora, and friends from Galbally in County Limerick, who are with Deputy Richard O'Donoghue.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Tom Brabazon: As this is a justice-related issue, I first want to offer my personal condolences and commiseration to the family and colleagues of Garda Kevin Flatley, who tragically lost his life at the weekend in the course of his duty.

The issue I wish to raise with the Taoiseach is that of the 999 dispatch system, particularly in respect of the Garda. People in general are not aware of the changes that were made by the Commissioner, in that they are no longer in a position to ring their local Garda stations and there

is now an obligation on them to ring 999 in all incidents, no matter whether they are small or large, serious or otherwise. This is counterintuitive for members of the public who have been around for a long time and view 999 as something for a very serious incident or emergency. Members of the public are sometimes required to ring 999 for a minor issue, perhaps a small gang of youths who may be acting in an intimidating way, yet, at the same time, it is potentially a quality-of-life-changing issue.

Most of the public are still unaware of this new system. They find it very frustrating when they ring their local Garda station and are told they have to ring 999 instead. However busy the local stations may have been in the past, where a call has been made, people were always more likely than not to get a call back or a visit from a local garda after reporting an incident. However, under this 999 system, a 999 caller in many cases does not get a call back and may never hear back from gardaí. This is because calls are triaged in 999 call centres and limited resources are despatched to the most serious incidents. As late as yesterday I received a WhatsApp message asking whether the local Garda station was still taking calls. I witnessed in my constituency a minor public order incident escalating to a very serious life-threatening issue. This happened yards from a local Garda station. By the time the issue was triaged in the 999 system it was ten or 15 minutes later and the perpetrator had disappeared. The same person turned up at the same shopping centre the next morning. The system may be working from a Garda management point of view but, unfortunately, from a consumer point of view it seems to be quite weak.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Brabazon for raising the issue. I take the essence of his point on local Garda stations having the capacity to respond to calls but this would not be uniform throughout the country. There are times when Garda stations are open and not open, particularly in the middle of the night, and this could create limitations.

As Deputy Brabazon knows, between 2019 and 2020 it was discovered that hundreds of 999 calls were prematurely cancelled or classified as non-criminal by control room operators, sometimes without dispatching officers or accurately logging the incidents. As a consequence of this, the Policing Authority commissioned an independent expert, Derek Penman, to carry out a review. He is a former chief inspector of the constabulary in Scotland. This review found that victims were left unsupported and crimes were not investigated. It made a number of recommendations designed to improve the service members of the public receive when they phone 999 for assistance. At that time, the Garda Commissioner issued an apology and An Garda Síochána accepted the findings of the report.

The 999-112 emergency call service was significantly modernised, reflecting the changes recommended by the independent report. The Policing Authority reviewed the implementation of Mr. Penman's recommendations and it was extremely positive about the changes made. These calls are routed through the regional control centres and prioritised for response. GardaSAFE, the new Garda computer-aided dispatch system, was rolled out incrementally throughout the organisation in 2023.

The other issue, which Deputy Brabazon said, is that what might appear trivial on the surface, such as a noise complaint, a confused caller or a welfare concern, can sometimes mask deeper problems such as a mental health crisis, domestic abuse or situations involving vulnerable people. In some instances, in the aftermath of the 999 call controversy where serious incidents were wrongly dismissed, erring on the side of caution has helped to rebuild public trust to ensure no legitimate cry for help is ignored. That said, I will reflect on what Deputy Brabazon

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said and I will speak to the Minister for Justice in respect of whether back-up can be provided via local Garda stations.

Concerns have been raised by members of An Garda Síochána and the GRA as gardaí can be frustrated in terms of particular calls that may fall well below the threshold of a criminal complaint. This can strain resources and lead to a use of resources that is not the best. There is legislation and it is an offence to waste Garda time.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I thank the Taoiseach and I welcome the fact he will raise the matter with the Minister for Justice.

The Taoiseach: I will do that and I will come back to Deputy Brabazon because there is an issue in terms of how we best utilise local facilities and local resources in response to issues that could be dealt with in a quicker and more accelerated way rather than burdening the central system.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to return to the issue of the hip dysplasia surgery raised by my colleague, Deputy Cian O’Callaghan. The Taoiseach has misled the Dáil. To set the record straight, the letters were sent to parents on foot of an early recommendation of the audit, and it says so in the letter. This was recommendation No. 4.2.1, to be precise. The recommendation refers specifically to the recall of children. We know with regard to cases between 2021 and 2023 that 561 recalls are in question. The very same letter, word for word, not a general letter or a different context but the same context, the same audit and the same letter, has been sent to families of children who had surgery as far back as 2010. This letter also refers to an early recommendation from the audit. It is the same letter and the same situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I ask Deputy McDonald to remain within the time, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach needs to be clear on how many of these letters have been sent and how many recalls are envisaged.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I suspect the Taoiseach actually knows that number and is choosing not to share it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will ask the Taoiseach to respond within the time, to be fair to all Members.

The Taoiseach: I have seen a copy of a generic letter, which does not mention the word “recall”.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: But it mentions the early audit.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please Deputy, let the Taoiseach respond.

The Taoiseach: CHI has commissioned the audit. I will say it one more time. I am not endeavouring in any way to cast aspersions on anyone raising questions here. However, aspersions are being laid at the door of the Government.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Because you mislead the Dáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Attempts have been made and the words “ducking”, “dodging” and “diving” were used yesterday by the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes.

The Taoiseach: That is a false assertion by the Deputy. The Government wants the facts and I want the facts. Deputy McDonald has no-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Then share the facts.

The Taoiseach: When the audit is complete. I know what Deputy McDonald is at. Unfortunately, it is quite-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Jesus Christ, they are implementing the audit recommendations. Do you not know what has been happening for the past eight weeks?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is uncalled for Deputy Doherty. We will move on to Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: He is shouting again. Mr. Angry is at it again. I am simply saying-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do you not know?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: Stop the theatrics; it is too serious.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They are implementing the audit recommendations.

The Taoiseach: Angry theatrics are par for the course from you and it is wrong to do it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You misled the Dáil.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do you not know what is happening? It is disgraceful that you would not do this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to raise concerns with the Taoiseach about the Government’s so-called free HRT scheme. I pay tribute to Joe Duffy, who has announced his retirement from “Liveline”, for shining a light through the programme on the experiences of women in menopause, women dealing with a cancer diagnosis and others whose lives have been made liveable by access to hormone replacement therapy. As we all know, the cost is prohibitive and supply remains an issue. The Taoiseach announced a very welcome new HRT scheme that would be

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free but the deadline for the introduction of the scheme is almost upon us. There are only 18 days until 1 June. Women throughout the country are contacting us all. They are so anxious to know what is happening.

Most pharmacists tell us they cannot implement the scheme and the reimbursement scheme, apparently, has problems with IT. We need to hear that the scheme will be up and running on 1 June. It sounds like it is becoming an omnishambles and women need to know whether they will have access to free HRT as promised on 1 June.

The Taoiseach: It is not an omnishambles. Yesterday, the Minister spoke in the Dáil. She is working very hard on this issue. We must always remember the Government is contracting this service, in this case from pharmacies, as we do from general practitioners also. It should be possible to do this fairly and in the best interests of the women of the country. The Minister is working very proactively on this. The agenda, and the objective, is to get this brought to a conclusion by the deadline that has been set.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Billionaire Denis O'Brien, who was found by a tribunal to have given corrupt payments to Michael Lowry, has a new problem with the rights for ordinary Irish workers. Speaking at a recent event, O'Brien described working from home as a load of nonsense and part of an entitlement culture that has totally destroyed our work ethic and compromised productivity. I will park the irony of a man who was awarded a mobile phone licence after he made secret payments of €500,000 to a Minister decrying an entitlement culture, and instead focus on how he is completely factually wrong. Ireland is one of the most productive countries in the world. The right to work from home has helped to increase our labour force, removing barriers for people who have disabilities, lone parents and others. What is nonsense is the fact that the right to work from home in this country is so weak. Employers need only consider a request. There is no obligation to provide for the right. Perhaps if it were stronger O'Brien himself would not have had to have become a tax exile in Malta.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Will the Taoiseach take this opportunity to criticise O'Brien's remarks? Does the Government have plans to strengthen the right work from home?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: The general assessment of remote working in Ireland has been positive. Over time we need to evaluate it, through a whole-of-society approach to the evaluation of remote working. It certainly is good for climate. It certainly is good for congestion within cities and towns. It is good for individuals. It has helped increase participation in the workforce and it creates a flexibility that is also beneficial. There are also arguments for the need for people to be in workplaces for a sufficiency of time, particularly younger people in terms of mentoring, socialisation and all of that. Rather than-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----the comments of that particular individual the Deputy has referenced, I think-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----that is not the core of this. The important part here is that we continue

to evaluate-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, you are over time. Please.

The Taoiseach: -----and productivity seems to have increased.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have been for many years seeking a ban on counselling notes being used in trials because it is so traumatising and damaging. This weekend, Jacqueline Connolly, the sister of Clodagh Hawe, who was murdered along with her children by her husband, spoke about a priest who pleaded confessional privilege who had vital information relating to those crimes but was able to not give that information by the laws of the State. We have a situation where victims of gender-based violence can have their therapy notes ceased but somebody who has information about a serious crime, if a priest, can keep it all secret. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Justice favour ending this practice. They have said so in the past. Next week, survivors of gender-based violence are due to meet the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We need an end to this practice, not to leave it in the hands of a judge.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The mere fact-----

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----one's counselling notes can be seized is what is traumatic and damaging.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, you have got to prepare within your time or we are not going to fit everybody in.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am just finishing the sentence.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was interrupted because they were all talking during it.

An Ceann Comhairle: But that is their prerogative, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was not sure if the Taoiseach could hear me, so I stopped.

The Taoiseach: I heard the Deputy. The Deputy may be aware that the Minister has brought the heads of the Bill in respect of the issue of counselling notes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: And it is not good enough. It is not ending the practice. It is just-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is not prepared to listen to the answer.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has raised the issue. The Minister has brought legislation. It will go to pre-legislative scrutiny and people will have an opportunity to input into the Bill.

The Minister is acting on it, and has acted on it, and no person in this country is above the law.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: But they clearly are.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach is injecting confusion into the hip operation scandal. Yesterday in the Dáil, I asked him about the letters that were sent to parents covering a period as far back as 15 years ago. I asked on what basis those parents were being sent the letters if they were not part of the two-year audit. In his answer, the Taoiseach gave a number of contradictory statements. He said first of all that the letters recalling patients were part of a routine follow-up of appointments. He also said that the letters were because the Department had identified patients not included in the audit but may have been affected by the findings. He said that the letters were sent because the media had reported on the draft audit report. RTÉ is reporting that the letters were sent a recommendation of an unpublished review. All of these things cannot be true at the same time. Will the Taoiseach correct the record of the Dáil yesterday and state exactly the purpose and the reason these individuals received those letters and give clarity to the parents on this matter?

The Taoiseach: I have experience. I know what is going on here. The Deputy calls for clarity but what he wants is confusion. What the Deputy wants is to be able to say that it is incoherent, it is drip-drip, it is bit by bit whereas I am asking can we not wait for the audit to be completed and given to the Minister, with the Minister to share it with the Oireachtas, the public and, above all, the families that may be affected by this and the general population of those who had the operation. That is simply all I am saying but I am not so sure-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are multiple different reasons for these letters being sent out to the parents and they are contradictory.

Deputy John Connolly: I wish to ask about the basic income for artists pilot scheme. It is almost three years to the day since the application process closed for applicants who wanted to participate in the scheme. Over 9,000 applied. Some 2,000 were successful in the pilot scheme, which had a three-year lifespan and comes to an end this August. There have been a number of interim reviews of the scheme and reviews by bodies external to the Department, which have noted the positive impact it has had for the artist and the creative industry. My understanding was there would be a review by the Department as the end of the scheme approached and that that would guide the future of similar schemes. Are we anywhere near that review being completed? There is some uncertainty for those artists who are currently in the scheme. It would be good to provide clarity around future plans of the Government in this area.

The Taoiseach: I would accept that. Obviously, there is some degree of uncertainty. Most artists on that scheme, by the way, were very positive about the impact of the scheme on artists, and particularly those on the lower income spectrum of earning artists. I will talk to the Minister for arts and culture to get more information in terms of the reviews but also future plans.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I want to raise the issue of the proposed closure of Herbert Road in Bray. It is an essential route for residents, emergency services and local businesses and almost everyone in the town and the wider area is against its closure. The closure of the juncture will create significant traffic congestion in north Wicklow. Closing Herbert Road and improving the bus corridor should not be mutually exclusive. A more balanced approach would be to terminate the southbound bus lane before the Herbert Road junction.

As a result of BusConnects, the recent loss of the 145 bus route, which serviced many

estates on or near Herbert Road, is causing significant hardship for elderly residents. For example, residents in this area, who once had a direct bus to Loughlinstown hospital, now must swap buses or walk what are often unsustainable distances to the new bus stops.

Sustainable investment in rail infrastructure is the most effective long-term solution for this area. Fast-tracking the Luas green line extension to Bray and Fassaroe would provide reliable and efficient alternatives to car travel.

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

Deputy Edward Timmins: It is time to support the entire community of Bray.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is, while the Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to the national roads programme, it is Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, that is responsible for the delivery of the national roads programme. It has informed the Department that Wicklow County Council has just completed the option selection phase for the N11-M11 bus priority scheme. The project team made presentations to elected members of Bray municipal district, Wicklow County Council and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. The options selection report details the proposed extensive enhancement at junction 7, which will make the operation of the junction more efficient and resolve much of the delay apparently currently being experienced as well as handling the revised traffic pattern after implementation of the scheme.

It seems there needs to be further engagement with TII. In terms of BusConnects, that would be an NTA responsibility. I can alert the Minister for Transport that the Deputy has raised the specifics of that but engagement with TII and the responsible authorities is key.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I want to bring to the Taoiseach's attention the serious situation concerning Women's Collective Ireland - Wexford. Through the Reach grant, the body held 131 courses and facilitated 1,180 disadvantaged and vulnerable women in Wexford. I was also contacted by Acquired Brain Injury Ireland Wexford and Waterford branch. Both organisations have been told by senior managers that it will take weeks before final decisions on the Reach grant's 2025 budget are made to allocate the funds to the groups. This is causing great upset and disappointment to our most vulnerable citizens, their case managers and volunteers alike, as it is making it impossible for the groups to organise classes and work groups and will set their plans back by as much as six months at a minimum, putting their future in disarray. I would ask the Taoiseach to intervene through the relevant Department and see that the process is fast-tracked for these vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The Taoiseach: I will do everything I can. I will raise the issue with the Minister.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Please do. It is serious.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy can send me the detail. I will forward this to the Minister concerned and we will come back to the Deputy with a reply.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: In the recently published HSE capital plan, there is no mention of the planned primary care centre for Gorey. While primary care centres are enormously successful, this has been promised since 2010. During the previous Seanad, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, took four Commencement matters from me on this and she took a Topical Issue

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earlier this year. There has been no progress by the HSE. When the former Minister, Stephen Donnelly, met HSE estates in November 2023, it indicated this would be a top priority. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, when she was before this House, assured me that the call to tender would be issued by the end of quarter 1 this year. I have raised the matter with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Will the Government facilitate an urgent meeting between the Minister, me and other representatives of north Wexford, where this is an important issue, to finally address it? I have no confidence in HSE estates to address an issue that has now been running for 15 years but for which it still has not issued the call to tender.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is - I will check it - that it may have gone out to tender as part of a bundle that could involve Lismore primary care centre as well.

1 o'clock

There has been a lot of progress made on primary care centres over the last four to five years. Gorey is a huge and growing town and area.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: We have had no progress.

The Taoiseach: I hear what the Deputy is saying. I will talk to the Minister and get her to respond to the Deputy in respect of the issue.

Deputy George Lawlor: I raise an issue affecting 11,000 customers in the Wexford area who are served by the Kilmallock Bridge water treatment plant. Based in Ballymurn, the plant supplies Castlebridge, Curracloe, Ballymurn, Crossabeg, Glenbrien, Screen and Oilgate. Last October, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I attended the unveiling of two new treated water storage reservoirs and associated works. At that time, the programme manager for Uisce Éireann promised continuous provision of water. Since last October, there have been at least 16 outages. The problem is the continuous difficulties in the plant itself. The infrastructure outside the plant was provided in the form of reservoirs and improved associated works but the plant is quite old and requires major intervention. Will the Taoiseach speak to the relevant Minister about this to ensure the investment required in the plant is made so that the money spent on the reservoir, which was most welcome, is not wasted? As the Taoiseach can imagine, tourism in an area such as Curracloe will explode in the summer season. This is causing major difficulties and problems.

The Taoiseach: It is a beautiful part of the country.

Deputy George Lawlor: It is indeed.

The Taoiseach: Again, our bathing water continues to improve because of the provision of additional wastewater capacity. I note that the Minister is also from the sunny south east. I will certainly talk to him about the wastewater requirements there. We are looking at capital for Irish Water. Additional capital will be provided. We will endeavour to progress that.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is related in the *Irish Examiner* that, at a meeting of Cork City Council last Monday evening, a number of councillors stated that Cork city is a no-go area and that there are parts of the city that you cannot go into. Another councillor, Seán Martin, stated that we have to take back our city. Does the Taoiseach agree with his Fianna Fáil colleagues on Cork City Council that the city is now unsafe and that it is a dangerous city in which people do not feel safe? Is he willing to put together a task force as he did for Dublin in May 2024? Is

he willing to provide finance to the city to allow An Garda Síochána to put extra police on the street? I would like to hear his opinion. Does he believe that Cork city, the city that we share and which we love, is unsafe for the general public? It is of great consequence for traders in the city when such a perception is out there and when long-standing elected members from the Taoiseach's party are saying the city is unsafe. We have to address that.

The Taoiseach: I absolutely agree. Reflecting on the last number of years, there is a perception that urban environments are not as safe as they once were. I refer to the centres of different cities. That is the perception in Cork, although it is a beautiful city with a beautiful city centre and there are continuous improvements to the public realm. I believe people are specifically talking about the city centre at particular parts of the night and different times of the day. I have spoken to traders who have witnessed an improvement of late. There has been an additional Garda presence. We need more gardaí deployed across the country, including in the south and Cork, as they leave Templemore. Additional resources for the improvement of the public realm are also needed. These have been provided. Substantial investment has been allocated to Cork City Council in respect of the public realm in the city. We also need to reimagine city centres. We need more residential accommodation in city centres. That will inherently improve security. That is part of this agenda.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the approval of more special classes for the coming school year. I recognise the commitment of the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to build further on the progress made to date. We still need more investment in special education. One particular aspect of the approval of special classes that I wish to see reviewed is class size. The present threshold for pupil enrolment for such classes at primary level is six. This militates against smaller rural schools, where the threshold of six pupils with additional needs may be difficult to achieve. Children with additional needs who need a place in a special class should not have to travel unduly long distances for an appropriate class. Those children also have less chance of attending the same school as their siblings, which adds to the challenges their families face. I am also very conscious that a large percentage of primary schools under the patronage of the smaller churches, the Protestant churches, have small enrolments and should not be disadvantaged in the approval and establishment of special classes.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for the interesting point he has raised. I was the one to introduce the threshold of six for a special class with two SNAs and a teacher back in 1998 when we took a very significant decision in a Government memorandum. It is fair to make that point about a model for rural schools and schools whose numbers are quite low. I will talk to the Minister for Education, Deputy Helen McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, who has responsibility for special education, to see if a model can be designed for smaller rural schools. This might be based on a cluster. Perhaps a support base could be organised. I will certainly look at that. There has been exponential growth in the number of SNAs since that time. There are now 23,000 special needs assistants in our schools. The point is well made. I understand that this issue forms part of ongoing discussions on forward planning with officials in the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise with the Taoiseach the issue of a family in Sligo, the family of Jimmy Loughlin. Jimmy was murdered in 2018. Unfortunately, the person who killed him had a long-term mental health illness. The situation evolved over a number of years. The family is now looking to get a serious incident report from the HSE. The HSE is supposed to compile such a report. It started it but never finished it. When the family looked into the

situation, they discovered that this man had years of engagement with mental health services and that there had been years of failure. An Garda Síochána even wrote to the HSE asking it to intervene because of the danger it felt this man posed when he had serious episodes. This situation arises for many people. The outcome at the end is often suicide but, in this particular situation, this family lost a loved one. They want that serious incident report to be completed and finished. Failing that, will the Government commence a full public inquiry into this situation? There was a similar situation in Nottingham in more recent times and the authorities there held a full public inquiry so that lessons could be learned and so that such a situation would not happen again. It is broader than this family's request but it is also about them getting a serious incident report into what happened.

The Taoiseach: Would that report come from the HSE?

Deputy Martin Kenny: It should come from the HSE but it has failed to provide one.

The Taoiseach: We will let the HSE know that the Deputy has raised the issue and ask that a serious incident report be completed. I do not know the background of the case. I extend my sympathies to the family of Jimmy Loughlin on what transpired here. I do not know if it was referred to the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, which could be one way of-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: It would be for the Mental Health Commission.

The Taoiseach: Well, it depends. It may be for the Mental Health Commission in respect of mental health issues but there may be broader issues. That should be the direction of travel rather than a full public inquiry, which could take a very long period of time. It is a serious issue the Deputy has raised and I will follow up on it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I will write to the Taoiseach with the full details.

Deputy Paul Lawless: A pint in a pub is a healthier pint. There is a social dimension and, crucially, there is a referee. Government policy over recent years has hurt rural pubs. An average of 150 pubs close every year. Over the last 20 years, 2,000 pubs have closed. I raise the issue of excise duty and various different taxes. A third of the cost of a pint goes on excise duty. It is the second highest in Europe and it is hammering rural pubs. Rural pubs are the centre of our communities. They are not just local businesses. They are the heart of where fundraising happens and the focal point or pivot point of our communities. I know of a local public who dispensed eye drops for a local bachelor for many years until he died. That is what the rural pub in Ireland is. The VFI is seeking a modest 40% rebate on excise duty. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with the federation and to reduce the cost of excise duty to protect rural pubs.

The Taoiseach: Over the last number of years, the Government has allocated significant investment to pubs. The investment during the Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented and enabled many rural pubs to develop good outdoor facilities and so on. That is a good thing and very positive. I do take the Deputy's point about socialisation being good for you. Professor Luke O'Neill has written in his *Sunday Independent* articles about socialisation being a very important metric or factor in mental and physical well-being.

There is a multifactorial reason for closures of rural pubs. It is not all just about the excise duty. There are other factors. Society is changing. For example, when a person retires from a family-owned pub, very often the younger generation does not necessarily want to take over the pub because of the way the economy is, with full employment and so on.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Will the Taoiseach engage with the VFI on the excise-----

The Taoiseach: I am just saying what the reality is.

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

The Taoiseach: We are all familiar with it. We have all enjoyed a pint in a pub.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Will the Taoiseach engage with the VFI?

The Taoiseach: Will I engage in having a pint?

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: We always engage with the VFI.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Will the Taoiseach advise if there has been a change of approach with regard to medical cards? Over the last while, a significant number of people have come to me, especially older women who have had medical cards for a long time and whose cards are now suddenly being taken away from them. Has there been a change of approach? Figures released to me show an increase in the number of people who are applying for medical cards but a decrease in the number of medical cards being issued. As well as medical cards, a lot of people have come to me who have not been given a discretionary medical card. We see in the numbers there has been a halving in the number of discretionary medical cards issued in the last number of years. I am trying to get to the bottom of this. Has there been a change of approach? If the Taoiseach is not aware of a change of approach, will he find out if there has been a change of approach by the Department?

The Taoiseach: Part of the reason could be the expansion of medical card eligibility. More than 1.5 million people now have a medical card. There has been exponential growth in that number. The previous Minister took significant steps in successive budgets to expand coverage. I am surmising but I will ask the HSE and the Minister to get some background information or statistics for the Deputy. I presume and surmise that quite a lot of people who had discretionary cards and who may not have been entitled-----

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: It is both.

The Taoiseach: Just hear me out. Some people who might not have been entitled because of income ineligibility are now entitled-----

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: It is both.

The Taoiseach: -----so they move from discretionary to automatic entitlement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps the Deputy will send her question to the Taoiseach.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Next week marks the tenth anniversary of the momentous marriage equality referendum, which was a landmark moment in our social and political history. Today, ILGA-Europe published its report ranking European countries on LGBT human rights and policy protections. Ireland was ranked 14th on that list, which is mid-ranking. There are significant gaps in access to trans healthcare, gaps around hate speech laws, gaps in our equality legislation, a lack of non-binary recognition, gaps in intersex rights and no ban on conversion practices. Will the Taoiseach join the growing call for Ireland to set the goal of being the best

place in Europe to be LGBT and will he publish an action plan to reach that goal?

The Taoiseach: It is difficult to believe that ten years have passed since that momentous referendum and the huge endorsement of marriage equality by the Irish people. We have come a long way in respect of LGBTQ rights. We still have some distance to go. It is extremely important in public discourse, particularly in relation to trans rights as I said here yesterday, that we acknowledge every person's journey through life, that we have full respect for that and that we conduct any debate in a respectful, sensitive and intelligent way. That is important for the country in terms of our values, which were really the reason that referendum was passed so emphatically. I will work towards the agenda the Deputy has set and I know the various Ministers, particularly in justice and in other areas such as equality, will also.

An Ceann Comhairle: As we are just coming to the end of the speaking time, I will offer Deputies Conway-Walsh and Ó Muirí 30 seconds each and allow the Taoiseach to respond to them both together.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome the students and teachers from Coláiste Pobail Acla here today. I know the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, would want to do likewise. While we are on the subject of Achill, which the Taoiseach will know is one of the most beautiful places in the world, there is a severe shortage of facilities for young people on the island such as a youth centre. They need a permanent home and a permanent youth centre. I met Foróige in Dún Ibhíre last Sunday. It is doing marvellous work.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is the question. What importance is the Government putting on facilities for young people, especially in rural areas?

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I will ask about e-scooter speeds. E-scooters are a welcome part of any mobility strategy but those who speed on them are a danger to themselves and everybody else, including pedestrians and cyclists on the road. There is a 20 km/h speed limit but it is difficult to enforce in reality. I understand it from An Garda Síochána that it is a statutory limit. Will the Taoiseach consider giving An Garda Síochána the power and technology to seize e-scooters, to test them to make sure limiters are on and operational and, if not, to confiscate them?

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Conway-Walsh's question, I too welcome the students from Coláiste Pobail Acla. Cuirim fáilte faoi leith rompu chuig Teach Laighean. On the facilities for young people, working with the LEADER programme, county councils and the State, we can provide good quality youth centres. I have been in different parts of the country where some have done it better than others. I was recently in Tulla and there is a fine centre there. The Government is very committed and interested in doing that and getting partnerships together to provide good quality facilities. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, will meet Foróige next week, I believe.

On Deputy Ó Muirí's question, I will talk to the Minister for Justice. The Deputy is absolutely correct; there are issues with dangers and vulnerabilities. If An Garda Síochána could have additional powers, they may act as a deterrent and it may never have to use them, even if the powers are there.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome students from Skerries Community College student

council, who are here at the request of Deputy Grace Boland.

Water Services (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013 to give the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) the legislative remit to develop a code of practice for water service outages and to amend the Water Services Act 2014 to establish a dispute resolution mechanism for customer complaints regarding service interruptions and outages.

This Bill would ensure that Uisce Éireann properly communicates with and, more importantly, supports households and businesses during water outages. I thank Deputies Ó Broin, Gould and Guirke for co-sponsoring the Bill. I especially thank Muireann Meehan Speed for her work in preparing the Bill.

The Bill mandates Uisce Éireann to develop a code of practice for water service outages. The legislation mandates measures such as a dedicated response for vulnerable, domestic and business customers; a detailed communication plan for all customers, public representatives and local authorities, including two-hourly updates; the duty to provide emergency replacement water within agreed timeframes; and thresholds for rebates and compensation following planned and unplanned interruptions.

There are very significant issues. I draw attention to the issues in the Kilbreena Estate in Dunboyne, County Meath, as well as many other areas across the State.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I welcome the introduction of the Water Services (Amendment) Bill 2025. The Bill represents a crucial step forward in ensuring that access to clean, safe and reliable water remains a fundamental right for all our communities. For too long, residents in areas like Enfield, Clonard, Ballivor and Trim have faced ongoing water outages, with one example of over 300 residents in Clonard relying on water tankers daily.

Recent Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, reports have highlighted serious deficiencies in water infrastructure, revealing the urgent need for reform. Water levels in lakes such as Lough Bane in my area are dropping dramatically and are not keeping pace with increasing demand. During periods of good weather, the situation gets worse and water levels get lower. This has been highlighted with Uisce Éireann by me and the Lough Bane Anglers' Association.

The Bill reaffirms our commitment to improving the quality and resilience of our water services. It is a clear message that water is a public good and not a commodity to be privatised or charged for unfairly.

The proposed legislation aims to ensure Uisce Éireann properly communicates with and supports households and businesses during water outages, an issue that continues to cause severe disruptions in Meath West. Sinn Féin has brought forward this Bill to reflect the deep frustration of impacted communities and to hold Uisce Éireann to account. We need a proactive approach that ensures our water infrastructure is fit for purpose and capable of meeting the

demands of our growing population.

This legislation is about safeguarding the fundamental right to reliable water services and ensuring that those responsible are held accountable for failures that have persisted for far too long. It is time-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Thomas Gould: I apologise.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: It is time to prioritise investment and proper planning to prevent future crises and to support the communities that rely on our water systems every day. From my experience of Uisce Éireann in recent years, I can say that its customer service for elected Members is very poor. A Member could send it an email and receive no reply, despite repeated follow-ups. As I have said before, Uisce Éireann is hard to deal with. Elected Members need to be treated with priority. If we ask it questions, we are representing our constituents in many cases, who want answers from us.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I apologise, Johnny.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I forgive you.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Members go in and out of the Chamber turning their mobile phones on and off. These things happen and I apologise.

I commend my colleagues, especially Deputy O'Rourke, on the work they have done on this Bill. Deputy O'Rourke saw a problem and is putting forward solutions. When the Government created Uisce Éireann, it built a company that was so allergic to transparency and accountability it is like a fortress. It is impossible sometimes to get information from it. It takes months to get answers to basic questions. It refused to properly communicate with this Bill. That is the whole point of this - communication is vital when it comes to the supply of water, particularly when there are water outages or when water is not safe to drink. This has a particular impact on vulnerable people. Uisce Éireann says it has a register of vulnerable customers, but it does not communicate with them properly. I asked it once about a constituent of mine who has limited sight and other people who are blind and live in my constituency. Uisce Éireann told me to get them to ask their friends and family to fill a jug of water and put it in the fridge for them. That is not a response. How is Uisce Éireann protecting vulnerable people with that? Must those vulnerable people always wait for neighbours, family or friends to come around?

I know Deputies O'Rourke and Guirke have had huge issues in their constituencies with water outages and subsequent problems with communication. I have had the same problems myself. We have a huge problem in Cork with brown, dirty and unsafe water. Uisce Éireann is failing to communicate. What this Bill would do is it would safeguard and protect people when it comes to having clean drinking water. Sinn Féin is also hoping that this Bill would put communication at the heart of Uisce Éireann's job.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: As the motion on leave to introduce has been agreed, I ask the Deputy to move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.23 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.23 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.23 p.m. and resumed at 2.23 p.m.

Driving Test Wait Times: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the national driver test service. I will share time with the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer.

By way of background, the Road Safety Authority, RSA, has statutory responsibility for the national driver test service under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006. The service has a target average wait time of ten weeks between when someone applies to sit a test and the test taking place. As Deputies are aware, however, the current wait times are far in excess of the ten week target. At the end of April, wait times had grown to 27 weeks on average nationally, while in the locations with most demand this was in excess of 40 weeks. I acknowledge Deputies' legitimate concerns and frustrations about this issue which is having a negative impact across the country and I agree it is vital that the public experience an efficient and dependable driver test service when undertaking their learning to drive journey.

The growth in wait times has arisen due to a fundamental mismatch between the demand for driver tests and the available testing capacity in the RSA in recent years. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, understandably, given the public health measure introduced at the time, a large backlog of tests built up. However, incoming demand is now at record and growing levels, driven by such factors as inward migration and a rising population, which means a significant backlog has persisted. To address this capacity issue, sanction was issued in September 2024, and remains in place today, for up to 200 permanent driver testers. This represents a doubling of the comparable sanction at this point three years ago. Recruitment is ongoing, but it takes time for a national competition of this scale. Once new recruits are employed, they also must undergo an intensive training programme to ensure they are equipped to carry out a very important role relating to the safety of our citizens. I will go into it in more detail shortly, but I have asked the RSA to consider options to compress the training period without compromising standards or quality assurance.

With these caveats noted, the Deputies may wish to learn that the first new recruits from the September 2024 recruitment campaign have been carrying out live tests since April, with a second tranche entering training this week and a third to commence training before the end of May. With additional tranches of new testers entering the service across the month, I am confident that we have turned the corner and expect that we will see wait times begin to reduce this month, with the pace of that reduction then accelerating across the summer.

14 May 2025

Everyone in this House has heard from their constituents about the issues and challenges that extended driver test wait times are causing, the serious impact they are having on people's ability to work and study. Since coming into office, I have prioritised progress on this issue. I met the RSA leadership team on 1 May to discuss its plans for restoring the service to target and the associated timeline of November for doing so. I rejected this plan and made it clear to the RSA that, after several years of significant delay in obtaining an appointment for a test, people cannot wait another six months for the service to be restored. I asked the RSA to take the proposals away and return to me with an improved plan within two weeks. Following a meeting with the CEO this morning, I am pleased to say that, with some additional measures, the RSA now believes it can bring forward the date at which it will reach its full staffing complement by three months and can achieve its target of a ten week wait time in September. I have asked the RSA to publish this plan on its website next week, report progress against it on a fortnightly basis and publish that report on its website. If the fortnightly targets are not met, I have requested that contingency planning begin immediately to add additional testing capacity to the system if it is needed, such as availing of temporary support from retired testers or the driving instructor sector. However, I would much prefer to see the RSA outperform its targets in the coming months and bring the achievement of the ten week target forward to August.

The driver testing wait time is currently far above the service level agreement of ten weeks. As I noted, at the end of April the average wait time was 27 weeks and at some of the busiest test centres, the current wait time is 43 weeks. This is an unacceptable amount of time to be waiting for a test and it has been trending in the wrong direction. These rising wait times have been driven by rapidly increasing demand as the population has grown. This demand can be seen by the number of learner permits in circulation and the record number of advanced driving instructors now working in the sector to deliver lessons to drivers.

The busiest year in the history of the service was 2024, with the RSA receiving just under 275,000 new driving test applications, which was 10% above the RSA's projections. These applications also add to the backlog that arose following the pandemic and has persisted as a result of incoming demand outstripping the RSA's capacity to deliver tests. Waiting times increased last year from April onwards as the number of driver testers in employment declined due to a mix of retirement, fixed-term contracts reaching their conclusion and testers taking up alternative offers of employment. To try to meet the demand, there was extensive overtime working by driver testers to mitigate the impact on customers, an incentive programme for testers to deliver additional tests, the introduction of the short notice cancelled slot system and the continuation of a priority list for healthcare workers. In total, over 250,000 tests were delivered last year. As it impacts the service, I also highlight that over the last two years 8,000 people have not shown up for their driving tests. This is not acceptable either. From what I understand, some candidates are failing to notify driver testers that they cannot make tests and are therefore denying slots to other people. I accept that emergencies can happen on occasion, but 8,000 no-shows is simply not good enough.

The Department of Transport has sought to support the RSA in meeting this demand and addressing the issue of lengthy driving test waiting times by sanctioning additional driver tester positions to increase capacity in the system. In March 2023, in response to a request from the RSA for the sanction of temporary driver testing roles, the Department issued sanction for up to 75 additional driver testers on fixed-term contracts of up to two years. It is also important to highlight that average driving test waiting times significantly improved as a result of this sanction, from a peak of 30.4 weeks in August 2023 to 14.9 weeks in April 2024. However, the

total number of testers in employment at any point never exceeded 176 and, as already outlined, declined during 2024. At the end of April, the current figure for full-time testers was 141, with many of these involved in training the new recruits currently rather than delivering tests.

Following its long-term assessment of capacity requirements, the RSA prepared a business case for the permanent sanction of additional driver testers. On receipt of this business case, the Department moved swiftly to sanction 70 additional driver tester posts on a permanent basis in September 2024. The total permanent sanctioned driver tester headcount is 200, representing a doubling of the permanent headcount in just over two years from 2022. The recruitment process is under way and the first tranche of new testers are being deployed into service. As additional testers enter the system, testing capacity will increase and progress should be seen on reducing waiting times in the months ahead. Additional testers are being assigned to test centres nationwide as the candidates complete their training. I understand the home bases of the first tranche deployed at the end of April are in counties Cork and Dublin, though it is important to note that driver testers can be deployed anywhere in the country in response to demand pressures. The home base is therefore not always relevant. While the long-term fix for this issue will be the recruitment and onboarding of new driver testers by the RSA in the months ahead to reach its sanctioned staffing ceiling, this process takes time. In the meantime, the RSA has brought in some other measures to assist to some extent. I acknowledge the work of the existing cohort of driver testers over the past 12 months. They have done their best in very challenging circumstances to mitigate growth in waiting times to the greatest extent possible, particularly in view of the mismatch between testing capacity and demand.

In late 2023, the driver testing booking system was updated to allow for unused test slots to be made available for candidates to take up at short notice. The RSA makes such appointments available for candidates to book on the MyRoadSafety portal daily. Candidates are recommended to check regularly as they may be able to secure an earlier booking slot than would otherwise be the case. This change to the system has also brought the percentage of testing slots utilised up to 98% today, having historically averaged around 95%. This measure alone has created thousands of additional tests each year. There are also no limits on overtime provided hours worked remain within the European working time directive. Last year, around 10% of tests were being delivered through overtime outside the core driver testers' hours, while staff working in other roles within the RSA who had previously trained and worked as driver testers carried out thousands of additional tests at the weekends. I commend the staff for their efforts in this regard. To provide greater transparency, the RSA publishes detailed monthly information on the driver testing service on the CSO website, including the breakdown of waiting times and distribution of testing capacity by test centre. Deputies have raised concerns in relation to the number of driving test centres around the country and I am informed the RSA is collaborating with the Office of Public Works regarding the driver testing estate. Several options have been reviewed where issues with existing centres have arisen. New test sites are being proactively sought in south Dublin and Drogheda, and I hope to hear that these efforts have reached a successful resolution soon.

While new testers will bring additional capacity in the short term, the Department of Transport in December 2024 commissioned an external independent review of the Road Safety Authority, RSA. This review was motivated in part by the underperformance of the authority in the delivery of key public services, including the driver testing service. On 5 November 2024, the Government approved publication of the review and noted the proposal to radically reform the RSA. This reform will seek to separate out the customer service aspects of the RSA, such

as driver testing, from its advocacy role. Ultimately, a more focused approach in each area will hopefully contribute to improved road safety outcomes and service delivery.

The Government's current road safety strategy, which runs to 2030, follows international best practice, aligns with EU targets and the Vision Zero ambition for 2050. Vision Zero is the aspiration to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries by 2050 while increasing safe, healthy and equitable mobility for all. As an interim target, countries across the EU are aiming to halve deaths and serious injuries this decade. Together with road safety partners, the Department of Transport is leading the development of the phase 2 action plan under the strategy, which will run from this year to 2027. This plan, which will be adopted in the coming months, will set out high-impact actions that will contribute to Ireland achieving the goal of reducing road fatalities by 50% by 2030 and putting Ireland on track to achieve Vision Zero. As with the RSA reform process noted above, a longer term priority under this action plan will be the comprehensive review of the driver testing curriculum to ensure it adequately prepares drivers for modern driving conditions. As part of this exercise, measures that can help to improve the driving test pass rate from its existing level of around 50% will also be considered. Ultimately, these reduce demands on the service in the form of retests.

Everyone in this House is acutely aware of the hardship being caused by excessive driving test wait times. The Government does not consider the current situation acceptable and significant staffing sanction has been put in place to help alleviate this issue. My officials and I are actively engaging with the RSA on how it can accelerate the recruitment and deployment of additional driver testers and we will be receiving a fortnightly report on progress across the coming months. With the first new recruits entering service in April, we should see some progress in reducing waiting times by the end of May. That is not too long away. This progress will accelerate across the summer as additional tranches of recruits complete their training and enter live testing. With this additional capacity, the RSA plans to achieve the ten-week target in September. In the longer term, the reform of the RSA and the introduction of a revised curriculum and testing regime will be important measures in delivering a better service.

Everybody in the House has people who are suffering, whether it is young people or front-line workers, because of the lack of service. We just cannot allow it to continue. I will be using all of my energy and will be tick-tacking with my officials on an ongoing basis. I will be monitoring the progress being made by the RSA at two-week intervals to see if we are achieving the targets set down. I have asked the authority to look at putting in place contingency measures if necessary. Deputy Michael Murphy, who is present, is chair of the transport committee. He will also be working closely with me and the Department to ensure that we get this problem resolved, not just in the short term but also in the interests of making sure that driving test delays will not be a subject that every public representative has to deal with daily.

Deputy Pa Daly: There are 83,000 people waiting for driving tests. The number is up by 10,000 since the start of the year and 20,000 over the past six months. The average waiting time is more than 27 weeks, as the Minister of State indicated, which is way over the statutory maximum of ten. In April of last year, the Fianna Fáil Minister committed to significant progress being made between October and the end of the year. He claimed we would get back to the ten-week waiting time early this year. Like many other promises made in the run-up to the election, however, that commitment was not kept. Matters have got far worse since we asked the Government to take action. In February, we tabled a motion that contained a suite of measures to tackle the huge backlog, including matching resources - as the Minister of State said, there is currently a mismatch - expediting the recruitment of driving test instructors, the

number of testers has since declined, and plugging the gaps in a number of driving test centres. Predictably, our proposals were ignored.

The Government says there is a problem. It promises to fix it, but then it is business as usual. Many of the now Government-supporting TDs in the Regional Independent Group were highly critical of these delays when in opposition. They made it clear that they believed it was within the Government's gift to resolve the issues of resourcing with political will and ambition. Now that they are in government and standing with the Government, supporting it on good days and bad, they are all trying to wash their hands of the issue.

There are many frustrating delays, but it is not just that. Learner drivers are trapped in insurance contracts, the average cost of which is approximately €3,000 per year. There are other cost-of-living measures, including how motorists here are paying some of the highest prices for motor fuel in the EU. This morning, we learned that drivers in the South are paying 25% more than their counterparts in the North. This is in part due to punitive measures like the carbon tax, which punishes ordinary people when they have literally no alternative. How is this a just transition? With each passing day, it becomes increasingly clear that this Government is out of touch.

I cannot let the opportunity of speaking about the TV footage of what is happening in Gaza and the deliberate famine being imposed on the people pass. I am reminded of the speech Parnell gave in Ennis, County Clare, when he stated that when a man takes land from which another has been evicted, "you must shun him in the street when you meet him ... isolating him from the rest of the country, as if he were a leper of old - you must show him your detestation of the crime he committed."

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thanks, Deputy.

Deputy Pa Daly: I will finish on this. We instead are sending a representative to a song contest, which has been used-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As important as it is, Deputy, it is not part of this debate.

Deputy Pa Daly: -----as a propaganda tool by Israel over the years. We should not be sending anyone there.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Many young people in my constituency have been waiting months on end for their driving tests. It is incredibly disappointing that the delays in this regard have worsened since this issue was last raised by us in February. Being able to drive is an absolute necessity for any young person who lives in a rural community in the context of their independence and allowing them to lead an adult life and secure work and educational opportunities. The Government often appears out of touch with that reality, particularly when we consider recent hikes in the cost of fuel, insurance and so on, but especially when it comes to the outrageous delays people face in securing driving tests.

In County Galway, up to the end of April, there were more than 4,000 people waiting for a driving test invitation. This includes more than 600 people waiting for tests at the Loughrea test centre and 800 waiting for tests at the Tuam test centre. Those waiting for a test invitation can expect a 22-week waiting time for a test in Loughrea or 26 weeks for a test in Tuam. This flies in the face of the Government's statutory maximum waiting period of ten weeks. I note the Minister of State's comments, but these come three months on from our motion in February that

included a suite of measures to tackle the backlog, increase the funding of permanent driving instructors to end the reliance on temporary instructors, address the shortfall in the number of driving test centres throughout the country by mandating the OPW and the RSA to plug the gaps and implement a strategic plan to achieve that statutory maximum waiting time of ten weeks. The Government has ignored all of that for the past three months. None of these proposed solutions has been implemented in the interim. We need less hot air and bluster and more actual solutions to tackle this backlog. We also need action.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The RSA has a statutory maximum target of ten weeks from the time a learner driver books their test until they are given a date to sit the test. The last time that target was reached was in July 2022, almost three years ago. Since then, as is evident across the State, things have got much worse. There are extended waiting times, a shortage of testers and a system that is failing both those it is meant to serve and in its basic function. In Meath, we have seen at first hand the impact of these delays. The Navan testing centre has the longest waiting time in the State, at 43 weeks. Amazingly, this is getting longer. This time last year, it was 16 weeks. When we last discussed this matter in February, it was 41 weeks. Young people, including students, who are eager to gain their independence are being left stranded. Workers, including essential workers who need their licences, are left stranded and, in many cases, locked out of employment or unable to participate fully in their communities. This is yet another issue that the Government has allowed to develop. Again, it is not taking young people into consideration. It is no wonder so many young people are emigrating. The Government response so far has been completely inadequate. We need urgent action to be taken on this issue. We need to increase the number of driving testers, maximise the number of testing hours and streamline the booking process in order to ensure that everyone has fair and timely access to a driving test. The best time to act was two years ago. The next best time to act is now.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Is í seo an chéad uair dom labhairt leis an Aire Stáit. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis agus guím ádh mór air sa phost nua. The wait time for a driving test in north Kildare is far too long. It has been this way for a long period. As of last month, people in my constituency are waiting an average of 28 weeks for a test in Naas. It was 24 weeks last April and a staggering 31 weeks in April the year before. In a reply to a parliamentary question on waiting times last September, I was informed by the Department of Transport that it was doing all it could to alleviate waiting times by sanctioning the employment of an additional 70 driving testers. Yes, the backlog has ballooned by more than 10,000 since the start of this year. In February, Sinn Féin brought forward a Private Members' motion on this matter and highlighted lots of different ways the Government could tackle it. Tá faic déanta ag an Rialtas faoi. Now, people are waiting a long time just to get a test, ag fanacht agus ag fanacht. We have to reduce emissions by encouraging people to leave the car at home, but with the shambles that is our public transport service in north Kildare, the Government has left people with no option. Every day I hear about train availability during peak commuting hours and how the fair fares have badly affected people in Sallins and Kilcock in particular. This is an issue that has to be looked at again. We cannot increase fares for people.

This morning, I heard on KFM about the 821 bus from Newbridge to Sallins and the impact on constituents in Caragh. Small buses instead of large ones have been put on the route and people are being left at the bus stop in Caragh as a result. Those who cannot rely on public transport are forced to wait 28 weeks for driving tests in Naas. Last week, a constituent who applied for a test six months ago told me that she will be waiting until the end of June for a test. That really is appalling. What is happening is having a particular impact on our young people

in the context of their independence and their ability to get to work. I wish the Minister of State the best of luck in making sure we get this matter sorted.

Deputy Mark Ward: I want to talk about the scandalous waiting times at the driving test centre in Tallaght. The latest figures I have show that over 20,000 people in Tallaght are waiting for driving tests. This is a rise of 1,500 in the past six months. The only direction waiting lists go in this country is up. The statutory minimum time to sit the test is ten weeks. The waiting time in Tallaght is now a shocking 43 weeks. Being obliged to wait 43 weeks to do a driving test is unacceptable. When I did my driving test, there was a second test centre on Fonthill Road. For some inexcusable reason, this was closed down. That put more pressure on the Tallaght test centre. I have repeatedly campaigned for an additional driving test centre in the south Dublin area. I received a response from the RSA which stated that there are plans to open an additional centre in south Dublin and that it is currently looking for a suitable facility. I welcome this response, but there seems to be a lack of urgency in opening this second centre. Can the Minister of State find out what progress has been made in identifying a suitable location for this second test centre in South Dublin? When will it open? People in my area simply cannot be left to wait for 43 weeks. We need to see urgency from the Government, but we also need to see urgency from the RSA.

People rely on passing their test to facilitate them in their education, employment, accessing healthcare and everything in between. The delays to which I refer are pushing up the cost of driving. It is estimated that the cost of waiting to learn to drive can be up to €3,000. That is the increase for people who are on learners' permit and paying high insurance premiums for insurance. It also relates to the test. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would look into those two matters. We need a second test centre in the south Dublin area.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Like me, the Minister of State represents a rural constituency. As a result, he understands what a massive problem it is if a person is obliged to wait seven months - that is the current waiting time in County Donegal - for his or her driving test. In my home area of Buncrana on the Inishowen Peninsula, the waiting time has doubled in a year. We are getting representations from young people who are desperate and their parents about the jobs or opportunities they will not be able to take up. This has a major impact in rural counties. The Minister of State knows that public transport just does not work across rural counties like Donegal. People do need to have cars to get to their places of education and work in order to provide for their families. It is just unacceptable.

My colleagues brought forward the motion in February, and there were solutions. That motion was agreed by Government, but nothing has happened of real substance. It is absolutely clear, and I am sorry to say this, that the RSA appears not to be fit for purpose when it comes to driving tests and management of the system. There has been a failure to recruit the necessary personnel and put the necessary resources in place. I find it astonishing that we would say to somebody that he or she will have to wait seven months - it is longer in other places - for this essential test.

We appeal to the Minister of State to engage in some straight talking, to intervene and to have a plan, not just to agree. The Government made time available for these statements, but we need action now. What is happening is absolutely outrageous. The Minister of State knows better than anybody who represents a rural constituency what having a licence means to people.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: As my colleague Deputy Mac Lochlainn stated, people are wait-

ing seven months for driving tests. As of April, 83,000 people were on the waiting list. Matters are getting worse because 10,000 more joined the list in the past three months. This is simply out of control, and the Government is sitting on its hands while it is happening.

In some cases, the impact on these individuals is immense. I have been contacted by a young woman who was born and bred in an Irish-speaking community in the Gaeltacht. Tá grá aici don teanga agus tá sí ag iarraidh a bheith fostaithe ag obair leis an teanga ó thaobh na teilifíse de agus a leithéid. She wants to work in the Irish language sector in television. She was offered a job, but she needs to travel for 25 minutes each day in order to access that job. She has a car, which she has been able to pay for, and insurance, which she has been able to pay for, but she needs an accompanying driver because she has not passed her driving test. She has to wait seven months. She has been left in a situation where she cannot take up that job. She will likely have to leave the Gaeltacht area in which she lives and move to a city where she can access transport in order to travel to and from work. It is absolutely ridiculous.

This is not an issue that fell out of the sky or happened overnight. It has been going on for a significant period. What we see are not improvements; we see the situation getting worse. It is no wonder that the Garda reported a 95% increase in the number of detections of unaccompanied drivers. This is because drivers simply either cannot go to work or they have to sit at home, so they are taking a risk and are getting caught by the Garda. Obviously, it is a risk they should not be taking. If there was an accident, they would not be insured. It is absolutely ridiculous. Are they doing this out of malice? Are they trying to beat the system or defy the rules? No, they are not. They want to drive legally. They want driving tests, and the State is preventing them from getting them within a reasonable period. It is not acceptable, and the Government needs to get its finger out and act on this. We need to give certainty to people about when this issue will be resolved and when it is likely that they will be able to sit their tests within the normal period.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Before I begin, I take the opportunity to offer my heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Garda Kevin Flatley, as well as to his colleagues in An Garda Síochána. It is an unimaginable tragedy that his life would be taken as he was carrying out his duties in the interests of making our roads safer. Reading the tributes from those who knew him and worked with him, we really get a sense of what a thoroughly decent man he was. My thoughts are with all of those who loved him. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

It is not that long ago that we were discussing this issue on foot of a constructive motion brought forward by Deputy Daly and Sinn Féin. It was a practical motion. It was reasonable and constructive and the Government did not oppose it, which was welcome. Reading back over the transcript of that debate, though, there was a noticeable absence of any sort of commitment from the Minister or his junior Ministers to implement any of the calls made in the motion. They were not calls asking the Ministers or the Government to move the sun, moon and stars. They were simply asking the Government to take responsibility and act to address the backlog and waiting times for driving tests. I am happy to be corrected if I am wrong, but the only squeak I have heard from the Department on this issue in the more than two months since that debate was a single press release entitled “Minister Canney instructs the Road Safety Authority to address Driver Testing delays”. I hope he would do that.

The Minister of State’s press release referred to an RSA plan to bring wait times back to ten weeks by November next. The junior Minister told the RSA to review the plan and bring the date forward. I am certainly glad he is treating the issue with urgency now. I appreciate the clarity he has brought today stating that the waiting times will be brought down or that the

aim is to bring them down to a ten-week target by September. Forgive me if I do not hold my breath on that. We heard from previous transport Ministers that this issue would be sorted by particular dates and then those targets were missed. We would then be given another date and that would also be missed. The first of these promises came in April 2023, when the then Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, said that wait times would be down to ten weeks by the end of quarter 1 of 2024. Two years later, however, matters have become much worse.

Even since we discussed this issue in late February, the national average waiting time has increased from 24 weeks to 27 and a half weeks, which does not bode particularly well. As we know, in some places, learner drivers have to wait far longer, including in Tallaght in my constituency. At the test centre there, waiting lists are the longest in the country, standing at a whopping 43 weeks. This means that about 18,500 people in Tallaght are waiting approximately ten months each for a test. This is just not good enough. This is having real, tangible knock-on effects for my constituents in Dublin South-West. I have been contacted by numerous people who are affected by the backlog and the wait times, as we all have been across the Dáil in our various constituencies.

One young constituent who got in touch with my office has a mother with Alzheimer's disease who is no longer able to drive. My constituent has not been able to help her because he is still waiting for a driving test. There is a financial impact for this young lad as well because having already spent a considerable amount of money on the mandatory 12 driving lessons, in circumstances where he has no one to accompany him in the car and while he is waiting so long for a driving test, he is spending more money getting a few supplementary lessons to make sure the rules of the road, etc., remain fresh in his head before he does his driving test in ten months' time.

3 o'clock

Another constituent was in touch to say that he had applied for a driving test in mid-April and had been given an estimated test date of 12 January 2026. This constituent is one of the tens of thousands of adults stuck living at home with his parents. In his contact with my office, he was keen to stress that he did not usually get upset by things he could not control, such as the housing crisis, but the massive backlog in waiting times was really getting to him.

This is not just about having a driver's licence for the sake of it. We are seeing people missing out on job opportunities and students dropping out of college because of the lack of decent public transport options. Much-needed apprentices, those who will be working and helping us to get out of the present housing crisis, need vehicles to get to and from jobs and to carry equipment. They are forced to either pause or drop out of their apprenticeships altogether because they cannot get driver licences.

There are other knock-on effects, some that are particularly concerning like the impact on our paramedic services, the haulage sector and public transport provision. Ultimately from a transport-emissions perspective, we need to see public transport and active travel being the preferred and most accessible transport option for the majority of people, but regrettably we are not there yet. Issues remain over connectivity, accessibility and reliability of our public transport networks. Despite a very welcome increase in Local Link buses brought in by the last Government there is still a lack of public transport in some part parts of the country and this needs to be urgently addressed.

As it stands, the reality is that many people are forced to rely on private car use through no fault of their own and so it is imperative that these wait times are sorted out. Investment in the RSA to help it address this issue as well as the Government's plans for investment in new road infrastructure must be done in tandem with significant investment in public transport and active travel infrastructure and services. So that we are not so reliant on private car use, those options, those alternatives, need to be available to everyone.

As the Minister of State alluded to, for-profit, third-party apps are popping up telling users when and where tests have been cancelled, effectively allowing them to skip the queue for online places but at a price. I welcome that the RSA is aware of this and is hopefully clamping down on it. I have concerns about people's personal data being shared with these anonymous and unaccountable third-party applications run by private companies. There is some merit in the RSA, itself, offering some service like this. There were similar issues with the online booking system for immigration permissions and visas in about 2016 and these issues were resolved successfully by the Department of Justice. Perhaps some lessons can be learned from that because it is clearly not an efficient use of resources if test slots go unfilled, especially given the current backlogs and waiting times. The last thing we want is a slot not being used because of a last-minute cancellation. While there is some place for these real-time updates to people, I would much prefer if the State were giving these updates in real time rather than relying on for-profit private companies that we cannot trust doing it.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: As the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will be well aware, a car is an absolute necessity in any rural part of Ireland now. In a number of parts of my constituency of Cork North-Central, a car is an absolute necessity because public transport is not available. The Minister of State will be just as inundated as I am by the number of people contacting us looking for representations to get their driving tests much faster than the predicted date. I concur with everything my colleague Deputy Ahern said in his speech. A man in Mallow has been waiting for nine months for a driving test and that is only an estimation of the date as opposed to actually getting a test. If someone gets a test date, there is no guarantee that the test will actually be fulfilled on that date. That is the issue we are having with driving tests across the country.

Yesterday, I spoke about the lack of apprentices in the fields that we so badly need, particularly plumbers, carpenters and tradespeople. The majority of these people also rely on the car as a means of transport because public transport is not freely available to them. However, these people cannot rely on the car if they cannot get to do a test. That is simply the bottom line here. A young man my own age living just outside Mallow contacted me. He wants to be a paramedic but unfortunately had to turn down the position of paramedic this year because his driving test had not been completed.

While the announcement of new testers to be added to the system is absolutely to be welcomed, we cannot wait until November 2025 to see the full allocation of testers. I appreciate that testers are to be added and the Minister of State might clarify that. It is very important that testers be added immediately and fast-tracked as quickly as possible. I appreciate the Minister of State will do everything in his power, but it is people of my age who are suffering from this. We cannot continue to have a flawed system. I would appreciate if the Government could fast-track the number of testers in the system while also importantly providing public transport in rural parts of our constituencies.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I have a deep sense of frustration with the testing system in the

country, particularly in Nenagh. I feel the need to vocalise the frustrations particularly of young people who regularly contact me in my constituency office. Nenagh has one of the lowest pass rates, if not the lowest, in the country. It is well below 40% while the national average appears to be somewhere just about 50% at the moment. Waiting times are excessive and are increasing. It is deeply frustrating for young people in a rural area like the constituency I represent or the constituency the Minister of State represents to put their names forward only to be told to sit back for a few months awaiting an invitation to apply. When they get the invitation to get their date, they have to wait a number of months more. People aged 17, 18 or 19 in a rural area want that bit of independence. They may have a summer job or a part-time job but cannot get to that because they cannot get their test in time. They are doing everything right, doing their lessons and meeting all of the requirements but then they are sitting and waiting. I am trying to get across that sense of frustration today because that sense of frustration has been brought to me so regularly in my constituency office.

I also have an issue with tests that do not go ahead for one reason or another, such as a problem with the tax disc or a problem with the lights. I accept that the car needs to be road-worthy and safe, which is fair enough. However, what happens to that slot when we have such a backlog in Nenagh? It does not get filled. The driver tester has to go back in and wait for the next person to come. Cancellation slots and priority slots are very difficult to get, and it is really frustrating for young people waiting for that.

Another example relates to apprentices. A number of people of a younger age are mad to start an apprenticeship. We need them to start their apprenticeships and yet often it is being held up. It is hard to get priority from the RSA to get their test dates moved forward or get them into a cancellation slot.

I welcome the chance to raise this here today because it is very important, particularly to the young people I represent, that those concerns are heard and addressed. We need more testers and we need them rapidly. We need to investigate why some centres like Nenagh have such an appalling fail rate compared with others. I hope those concerns will be taken on board today and can be brought back to Government.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome the Minister of State's initial comments where he outlined the measures he had taken to try to repair this system which is clearly broken. While I recognise that this is something he has inherited, the measures he outlined at the outset of the debate will go some way towards remediating the issues presented here. As has been well outlined by others, it is deeply frustrating for people who want to move on. They may have a professional opportunity. I am familiar with the case of someone who wants to emigrate and wants to get a driver licence beforehand, but unfortunately may not be able to do so by the time that person is due to leave. I share the concerns of others.

I will talk locally for a minute. At the outset of his contribution, the Minister of State mentioned that the time people were waiting for the invite varied from location to location. I think he mentioned 42 weeks as being one of the longest. I know where that is. That is in the west of Galway city. I would support any effort to increase the number of testers in that location.

I have a query about the personnel who work in each testing centre. Something I find puzzling has to do with how there are two test centres in the environs of Galway city, one in Carnmore in the east and the other in Clybaun in the west. There are nearly 1,300 applications in Carnmore, with an estimated time to invite of 21 weeks, and just over 1,100 in Clybaun,

with an estimated time to invite of 42 weeks. While both centres have approximately the same number of applicants, the time one must wait in Clybaun is twice what it is in Carnmore. Could we get some clarity on that? Do all test centres have the same staffing levels? The Minister of State will be aware that the facility in Clybaun is a temporary one but it is important that we maintain a driving test centre on the west side of Galway city. We hope the Minister of State will help to remediate the traffic concerns of Galway. Having a test centre on each side of the city is important.

I was approached recently by somebody who had availed of a driving licence in the US, moved to France, had that US driving licence recognised in France, was given a French driving licence, came to Ireland and despite having an EU licence in France, cannot get an Irish driving licence to replicate the US one. I would like the Minister of State to examine this.

Deputy Joe Neville: I will continue in the same vein as some of the other Deputies from across the country. People from my constituency also use test centres in neighbouring constituencies. People from north Kildare would have used Fonthill in the past, but they now use Tallaght and Naas predominantly. We have seen wait times increase. My colleague in north Kildare, Deputy Cronin, referenced a 28-week waiting time in Naas while her colleague referenced 43 weeks in Tallaght. Those are the waiting times for people in north Kildare. When I looked at the website today, the first note I saw from the RSA said that a reasonable waiting time would be between ten and 12 weeks. Obviously, we are missing those basic targets.

I want to be fair because this was an issue when I first started learning to drive many years ago. The waiting time could be a year or even 15 months, so it was not unusual then. It was wrong and made doing the test difficult for my friends and I. Ultimately, they were able to resolve the situation. I will not say the issue went away, but it definitely seemed to have repaired itself for the next generation of drivers. I do not know whether it is due to the pandemic or the subsequent impacts, we seem to be back to where we were in 2010 and 2011 and we have seen a deterioration. The impacts are the same as they were when we went to do the test. Somebody looking to get a job or a student starting college needs to drive, which is becoming more common because of the lack of or difficulties with student housing as people come to Maynooth University. We know bus and rail services are under pressure. My constituency has seen increased fares in the third area of the county.

I welcome the work of the Minister of State and the opportunity to discuss it with him on behalf of the citizens of north Kildare.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the Chamber because this discussion is timely in view of the fact that so many of us have been bombarded by constituents. I support all of the contributions made so far. A total of 80,000 people nationally are waiting for tests. That is quite a substantial number, consisting of young people, students, and people wanting to get access to education or employment. Not being able to avail of a test places a restriction and real burden on people.

In recent times, there have been targeted advertisements on social media encouraging people to travel abroad to sit their driving tests. Regardless of whether this is a legal or viable pathway forward, it speaks volumes about the level of frustration people are feeling. We have to be honest. We should not be expecting people to travel considerable distances to avail of a driving test. The backlog needs to be tackled head on. I applaud the Minister of State for saying that he will do just that. We need additional testers, extended testing hours and a properly

resourced plan from the RSA to bring the numbers down quickly.

In the meantime, we cannot ignore the alternative, which is public transport. Every morning in my constituency, we see students and workers heading into Galway city shoulder to shoulder in a two-carriage train service at maximum capacity. This should not be the case and we need to work with Irish Rail to improve capacity, particularly on morning services.

We all know there is an issue with delays but it would be fundamentally wrong to blame Covid-19 for all of these ills. Resources are the biggest issue we have. In that regard, I would ask the RSA to do what the Minister of State has suggested, that being, to improve capacity and turnaround times and ensure that the people who are waiting for far too long can avail of a driving test so they can get that first job.

Deputy Seán Crowe: There were 18,000 people on the lists at the Tallaght driving test centre at the start of this year. This was the highest figure in the State. The Minister of State and I had one or two conversations about it. It was taking seven months on average to get a test. It was reported at the start of April that the Road Safety Authority was planning on opening an additional driving test centre in south Dublin. This is something I have been advocating for in the House for several years and while I am glad that there has finally been an acknowledgement of the problem, it should never have taken this long. There has been a refusal by successive Governments to accept that no test centre is meeting the statutory maximum of ten weeks under the service-level agreement. Ten weeks is all it should take, but one could be waiting up to ten months at some testing centres.

More and more learner drivers are being stopped on the roads driving unaccompanied. I am not condoning it but what can we expect to happen when people have done their lessons and we then force them to wait for six, eight or ten months for a test?

What the people of south Dublin want to know is whether a location has been identified for the new testing centre. Has a recruitment campaign for staff begun and when can we expect the first test to be held? These are reasonable questions. None of this should take more than a few weeks. The demand is clearly there. There are only two other centres in south Dublin, namely, in Tallaght and Deansgrange. That presents a huge choice of areas to place a new centre. I raised this matter when Tallaght and Deansgrange had the highest numbers in the State. There should be no obstacles to the centre's opening soon unless there is a lack of political will to do so. If the Government and the RSA are serious about their obligations to learner drivers, it will be up and running before the end of the summer because the level of service currently being provided simply is not good enough. We are denying people access to employment, education and childcare and it cannot continue.

I am probably in one of the lucky areas because it is an urban area and there is alternative transport but one hears of students who cannot get to the likes of UCD because of really poor service. While we should be improving public transport and encouraging its use, we cannot deny that, for many, learning to drive is an important life skill in itself and a driver licence is one of the most popular forms of identification for use in everyday life. My focus is on Tallaght because I am its local representative, but this cannot stop with Tallaght. We need to identify where population demands necessitate additional centres and we need to ramp up the number of permanent testers. Every week and month we delay is only adding thousands of learner drivers to a chronically overloaded system. The Minister of State should do whatever he can. It needs to be fixed and the sooner, the better.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The last time we discussed driving test wait times was in February as part of a Sinn Féin motion. At that time, the wait time in Wicklow was 26 weeks. It is now 33 weeks so the situation has got unusually worse. In Meath, the wait time is now a staggering 43 weeks. According to CSO data, wait times have grown in nearly every county. The situation is going backwards, unfortunately. It is clear there is a systemic problem. There are issues with the RSA and I welcome the fact that there will be a review of that entity. I also welcome the fact that the Minister of State is taking this seriously and gave the RSA a two-week deadline to come up with solutions. It would, unfortunately, appear that he has been sold a pup. In the solutions in the report he has been given by the RSA, I see nothing that will make the difference we need. It talks about hurrying up the recruitment process. Last September, the Government sanctioned the recruitment of 70 new testers. Are any of them in place? The RSA is just starting recruitment. That recruitment process is taking an incredibly long time. This was also mentioned in February. It is a long time for any recruitment process.

The other thing that is noticeable to me is that I do not know what the salaries are for those jobs but they are fixed-term contracts. Is that not the case? Are they not fixed-term contracts for less than two years? The Minister of State is shaking his head. Are they full-time jobs? They are. Are there going to be any fixed-term contracts? That was a part of the problem. Those who were recruited were on fixed-term contracts for 18 months. Of course, that makes it difficult to provide job security.

Deputy Seán Canney: That is in the past.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is in the past and going forward, they will be full-time jobs. I welcome that.

I was not aware that these staff can be moved. One could be living in Dublin and be required to go to a centre that is a long commute away. I imagine that lack of certainty makes it difficult to recruit when people are required to travel considerable distances.

I acknowledge the current staff, who have been put in a difficult position in recent years. I can imagine that the stress for someone who is the only tester in a particular county is difficult. The RSA needs to look at pay and conditions to ensure that it is offering a job people wish to apply for and that it includes job security.

As I mentioned during the previous debate, we need the same kind of provision under the service-level agreement as we have with the NCT to the effect that if the RSA does not provide the test within a certain period, it is free. If there were a financial sanction on the RSA to the effect that if it did not provide the test within the ten-week period, the test was free, it would move the RSA along considerably in terms of providing this fundamental function.

I am worried that coming up to the new college term, many young people who have been unable to get their tests will be driving unaccompanied because they cannot get housing or accommodation where they are going to college. It is important that the RSA expedite this to ensure that people who need a car for college or a job can get their tests. We do not want any more learner drivers who should not be driving unaccompanied doing so, as we have seen to date.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The waiting time for the driving test needs to be treated like the emergency it is. The situation is getting worse, not better. As of April, the average wait time for the Wilton driving test centre in Cork was 35 weeks. In March, the relevant figure was 31 weeks. For the test centre in Mallow, the average wait time is 36 weeks, which is nine months.

These are not just numbers. They represent thousands of real people across Cork who are stuck in limbo. These are young people seeking independence, people who need to drive for work and apprenticeships, and many others who require a licence to get on with their lives. Somebody said in jest recently that it would be easier to train to become an astronaut than to get a driving licence in Cork at the moment.

I welcome the Department's sanction for additional permanent driving tester contracts and I hope that will bring down the wait times. The problem is that we have been here before. One instructor told me that he had watched time and again as the waiting lists went up from six months to eight months, temporary contracts were introduced, which meant waiting lists went down, but then they went back up again thereafter. It is good that there are permanent contracts now but we must ask why the Department did not see this coming. Why is the Department not constantly hiring driving testers? It seems to be reacting to waiting lists rather than planning ahead.

I will propose some solutions. We should extend the testing times, particularly in the summertime when we have more daylight and longer days. We should consider offering overtime to testers and offering tests on Sundays, particularly when new testers are coming on board. As my colleague mentioned, consideration should be given to whether people should get a refund if they are waiting longer than the ten-week target set by the Department and committed to last year by the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris.

Getting a driving licence should not be so difficult. No one should have to wait for nine months. The current system is clearly not functioning and we need a solid response.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister of State for his statement. The crisis in driver test waiting times is disproportionately affecting rural constituents and people in towns such as Youghal, where public transport links are extremely poor. The rural bus link improvements that, in fairness, we saw in some parts of the country during the previous term of Government unfortunately did not reach villages such as Whitegate, Ballycotton, Cloyne, Clonnagh and Mogeely.

The housing crisis has meant that many young people are unable to afford student accommodation and must live at home. They are, therefore, reliant on a car. We know that a large proportion of people do not pass the test on the first attempt and, therefore, long waits have a cumulative effect on them.

I have been contacted by numerous people in my constituency of Cork East whose working lives and college lives have been seriously disrupted as they await tests. One constituent who got in touch in recent weeks told me that her daughter had been awaiting a test since November 2024 and her projected test date would be in August 2025. She lives in a part of rural north Cork from where it is not possible to travel to work by public transport.

A constituent from Fermoy contacted me recently to say that a relative's driving test in Mallow was cancelled for the second time in two weeks with less than 12 hours' notice. My constituent had to book off two days of annual leave to drive her relative to the test.

There has been recent correspondence from the Minister of State's Department outlining the recruitment drive by the RSA, the freeing up of unused test slots and the availability of overtime for test drivers. The Minister of State also spoke about permanent contracts. All of that is welcome, but as my colleague, Deputy Whitmore, pointed out, the recruitment process is far

too excessive. We need a greater sense of urgency from the Department to address the issue.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State for his statement. I can imagine how difficult it is to sit here and listen to every single Deputy talk about the challenges in his or her area, but I am going to have to add my own to the list. Being unable to get a test affects people in so many different ways. It is not just about their independence. It is about being able to reach whole swathes of the country that are only accessible by car. Many constituents have contacted me about how their inability to get a test is stopping them from availing of job and educational opportunities. Those with caring responsibilities have it even worse. It is hugely frustrating and out of their control. It simply represents a public service that is not given the resources it needs.

I will give the Minister of State a sample of some of the most recent emails I have received. One woman has been waiting for a test for more than 39 weeks. An individual has been told to wait eight months for a test. A student who needs to sit the test to drive to college has a nine-month wait ahead. A young man desperately needs a full licence because his job requires it but has been given a wait time of months before he can sit the test.

Although this is a perennial problem that arises again and again, the solutions do not have to be that complex. We must create and fill new posts. We must ensure that the terms and conditions are adequate. As my colleagues have pointed out, it is not fair that we would ask too much of one person in one centre and be dependent on him or her. We need to plan so we do not reach these crisis points again and do not have to reiterate the frustrations of all our constituents, who are contacting us about these issues.

We can speed up these processing times without compromising standards, which is crucial, but it requires investment in overall capacity.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I raise the lack of a driving test centre in Drogheda town. Louth Deputies have beaten a path to the RSA over the years and have continuously raised this issue in the Chamber. All they have ever received are generic replies stating that the Office of Public Works, OPW, and the RSA are continuing to try to find a suitable site. It is on record that a number of these sites have been proposed, yet nothing seems to please the OPW or the RSA. It beggars belief that despite the suggestions from various TDs, including my former colleague Fergus O'Dowd, not one suitable site can be found in Drogheda. A site needs to be identified with urgency as the population of County Louth and Drogheda is growing rapidly and we are completely out of sync with the rest of the country. I will give an example. Counties Carlow, Laois, Offaly and Kilkenny have nine testing centres to service a population of 340,000. Counties Meath, Louth, Cavan and Monaghan have four test centres to service a population of more than 500,000. That is over half a million people. Portlaoise town has a population of 24,000 and has two test centres. Drogheda has a population tipping 50,000 and no test centre. This is grossly disproportionate and hugely unfair to the people of County Louth and of Drogheda and the surrounding areas. I seek the Minister of State's urgent attention and ask him to intervene and secure a site for a driving test centre in Drogheda. Given the length of time it has taken up to now to get nowhere, I am asking the Minister of State to help us to get somewhere.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for facilitating this debate. I have heard him debating the topic in the Dáil previously and I appreciate he gets the severity of the problem. It is difficult to understand how we are still in this position. Over two years ago, in my previous role as councillor, I had a motion on delays in driving tests. At the time I

got a response from the RSA which indicated recruitment was taking place and it was working hard to address the issue. Unfortunately, it has got worse rather than better. The impact it has on people's lives has been outlined. It disproportionately impacts young people because they are, by and large, the people seeking a driving test. Many of them do not have access to public transport so it is putting their lives on hold in terms of plans for work, travel, personal endeavours and so on. People send us emails outlining their circumstances and the reasons they desperately need a driving test for health, personal or family reasons. I know the Minister of State understands this and is doing everything he can. I welcome the initiatives that have been undertaken: the push for recruitment, the full-time contracts and the overtime. We have to look at shorter term solutions. There has to be a reset and we have to clear the delays currently in the system so people have a reasonable waiting time. I understand ten weeks is the objective of the RSA.

The application process needs to be looked at. It is quite cumbersome. I have had several contacts from people saying they have received numerous invitations to try to get a slot but when they look for one, there is none available. That can be very frustrating. I ask the Minister of State to continue trying to improve the situation. As well as plans for recruitment and so on, we have to look at short-term measures to get the reset in place and clear the huge backlog.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Recently published data reflecting a consistent increase in waiting times for driving tests is deeply concerning. I welcome the Minister of State's opening statement and thank him. This has been a focus for him since his appointment and, as Chair of the Oireachtas committee on transport, I look forward to working with him.

The RSA's target of a ten-week average waiting time is not being met. One year ago, it was 15 weeks. In January, it had risen to 21 weeks, and by last month, it was more than 24 weeks. In my home town of Clonmel, the waiting time is 28 weeks. In Tipperary town, it is also 28 weeks. I have heard colleagues in the Chamber say it is as high as 48 weeks in some test centres. It is simply not good enough.

As Chair of the Oireachtas committee on transport, I can confirm that, in consultation with my fellow members, consideration is being given to inviting the RSA as our first witness. I will be consulting all committee members on this. Our first meeting is scheduled for next week to agree a work programme.

These waiting times are bad for those frustrated by delays and detrimental to the overarching goal of this Government, this Chamber and this society to reduce road deaths and create safer roads for everybody. We have to be steadfast in our determination to build capacity in the RSA to cope with the current testing demand. I also hope in the near future we will legislate as a Chamber for the issue of learner permits. I suspect demand will subsequently grow as well.

We need to be more ambitious. Ten weeks' waiting time is too long. When an individual has completed the 12 compulsory lessons, he or she should be able to sit a test within four weeks. I call for a review of the service level agreement with the RSA.

I look forward to engaging with the Minister of State, my colleagues on the Oireachtas committee on transport and, crucially, the RSA constructively and productively in a bid to get to the bottom of why waiting times have grown so considerably in recent months and what can be done to address this as a matter of priority. We need action from the RSA so our young people can realise the ambition at 17 or 18 years of age to achieve a full driving licence.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Looking at the whole problem, it is evident the national average waiting time for a driving test is 27 weeks. Waiting times in Raheny test centre in my constituency are up from 15 weeks in April last year to 33 weeks in April this year. That means if you book a test now, you may not get it until December or January. In Killester test centre, waiting times are up from 17 weeks in April 2024 to 25 weeks in April 2025. That could mean waiting until October. This has a huge impact on young people in particular as they are the cohort most often looking to become qualified drivers. For many young people, learning to drive marks a significant milestone in their transition to adulthood. It empowers them to take control over their own mobility, no longer relying on parents or guardians. A driver's licence enables access to everyday activities like work, sports, volunteering, education and healthcare without having to rely on others. It allows young people to take some of the burden from their parents or guardians by driving younger siblings to school, sports activities, shopping, medical appointments, etc. For families dealing with illness or disability, having a young driver in the home can be life-changing, providing flexibility, safety and timely support.

Many jobs require a driver's licence as a condition of employment, especially in trades, construction, healthcare and delivery services. A large number of apprenticeships programmes require learners to have at least a learner permit. Workers in hospitality, retail, care and emergency services often start or finish outside public transport hours; therefore, a licence is essential to employability. Some education courses require a driver's licence, like paramedic studies in the University of Limerick. A constituent of mine has been in touch to seek help for her son, who wished to apply for this course as he aspires to become a paramedic. However, the University of Limerick has a strict requirement that students must hold a full driver's licence to secure a place in the programme in January. The closest date was in June.

We require a learner driver to be accompanied by a qualified driver. There must be an accompanying *quid pro quo* of an efficient driving test system, allowing people to have their test done expeditiously. Will the Minister of State look at employing, on a temporary basis, driving instructors from the commercial schools?

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In February this year, I addressed the House during a debate on a Sinn Féin Private Members' motion in relation to the driving test backlog. We outlined our proposal to address the backlog, not for the first time. I ask the Department to redouble its efforts regarding the recognition or exchange of international driving licences. This would decrease the number waiting, whether it be the long-term diaspora seeking to return home or those arriving to work in the health service. With a shortage of carers, this has to have the potential to alleviate the backlog while contributing positively in other areas.

The Minister for Transport should want to intervene to address the ever-growing backlog relating to driving tests, a backlog that prevents people from being able to drop their children to school, drive to important appointments, take up employment in all areas, go to college or simply go about their ordinary day-to-day business. Let us take stock of the impact the Minister has had to date. In the past two months, since Sinn Féin brought forward the Private Members' motion, in County Monaghan, to give an example, the waiting time grew from 20 weeks to 22 weeks and the number of tests carried out decreased by 27%. It is not surprising, therefore, that the waiting time for tests has grown by 12% while the number of tests scheduled decreased by over one third.

The worsening situation is not surprising given we have 50% fewer testers today than we had at the beginning of 2023. There is currently just one sole tester in County Monaghan. We

need more testers and more centres. By the summer's end in County Monaghan, and in every county at this rate, we are on track to see a dramatically increased number of people waiting up to six months for a driving test. They will be out of pocket and their lives will be negatively impacted, and the Minister will ultimately be responsible.

What I ask of the Minister, and it is bizarre that it must be asked of him, is to take ownership of this issue, accept that, as Minister for Transport, he is ultimately responsible, and take on board and implement Sinn Féin's proposals to tackle the backlog. What is needed now is urgency from the Minister for Transport. Please do not pass the buck to the RSA or any other State agency, tsar or kaiser that the Minister may dream up.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: To conclude, I ask the Minister to please hire more testers, create more test centres and allow the exchange of international driving licences.

An Ceann Comhairle: I point out to Members that we need to prepare within the time allowed. I call Deputy Murphy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I wish to share time with colleagues.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The target of ten weeks waiting time is a pretty sick joke for those who are waiting months to get driving tests that they absolutely need to be able to get around to do their jobs, collect their kids and do all of the things that, for many people, mean driving is essential in this country as it currently is. A year ago, the average waiting time was 15 weeks, not the target of ten weeks; in January, the average was 21 weeks; and right now the average is 23 or 24 weeks. Tallaght is reported as having the worst service in all of Ireland, having hit 35 to 43 weeks. I have been contacted by many constituents who are pulling their hair out and asking what they are meant to do when they have been waiting almost a year for a driving test.

One person who contacted me said he applied in November 2024. He was told he should expect to receive his invitation to book his test in the week commencing 15 September 2025, almost an entire year later. Another told me just this month that he has accepted the many blockers put in front of him without any assistance from the State due to his level of income. He has completed the 12 lessons and has now been provided with an estimated driving test date of 12 January 2026, over eight months after he applied.

The fundamental issue here is testers. We are paying the price for recruiting no testers last year. Yes, there is an increase in the number of testers this year, which is welcome, but it needs to be ramped up.

I will finish on the point that, in addition, we do not need to force people to drive but instead offer public transport. We need to deal with the ghost buses and roll out free, frequent and accessible public transport to people so they are not so reliant on having to drive.

Deputy Seamus Healy: South Tipperary needs two additional driver testing centres, one at Carrick-on-Suir and one at Cashel. South Tipperary is particularly badly affected by the huge current backlog. The centres at Clonmel and Tipperary town have delays of 28 weeks, or seven months, which is simply not good enough. We have very poor public transport and there is no adequate transport serving major employers, schools and colleges in the area, like Abbott

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Ireland Vascular Division, Boston Scientific, Questum, Tipperary County Council, Tipperary University Hospital, Tipperary Further Education and Training College and the Technical University of the Shannon. We need at least two new centres to deal with the current situation in south Tipperary.

In the last three months, the number waiting has jumped by 11,000, from 72,400 to 83,486. The delay in April 2024 was 14.9 weeks and it is now 27.3 weeks, which is simply not acceptable. While I welcome the Minister's opening statement, I find it difficult to accept or believe that the RSA will have the ten-week target date achieved by September of this year. I wonder if, in fact, the RSA is fit for purpose in this regard.

More needs to be done. New centres need to be opened and new permanent and full-time driving testers need to be appointed urgently.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to speak. As has already been pointed out, the consequences of the debacle are that younger people and those without a full licence are paying huge insurance costs. On top of that, it is limiting people from taking the opportunities that are there for work and education, and it is also contributing to isolation. Having said that, I reiterate what Deputy Murphy said about the need for integrated public transport.

I welcome the Minister's speech and that he is taking a hands-on approach, but I find it difficult to understand how this happened. I know we have had an independent review of the Road Safety Authority and that there will be changes. However, it seems to me that the Road Safety Authority had been shouting for some time that it did not have enough staff. The Minister in his speech took pride in the fact that we have sanction for temporary driving testers on a two-year contract and we now have sanction for 200 permanent driving testers. I have no idea how this could not have happened in a proactive manner given the service level agreements between the Government and this entity. What happened? What was the fault with the service level agreement? What were the penalties if the targets were not reached? It is not that I am big into penalties; I am more into doing it correctly and learning from our mistakes.

How did this happen? If the Road Safety Authority back in March pointed out that it needed extra driving testers and the Government responded by sanctioning two-year contracts, how was it not seen then that this service was in trouble? Why did it not look at the service level agreement and what was necessary, given the backlog and the increase in the number of people? People are waiting nine or ten months for a driving test, with awful consequences, and there are also about 8,000 who are not showing up. I realise that certain changes have been made for the good, and that people can get a test if somebody cancels at short notice and so on. However, this is a public service that should operate in a very positive way. It should be the good side of the public service, where trained people are given tests to enable them to be more independent. Instead, we are talking about a debacle.

On the point raised by my colleague from Galway West regarding the moving of the driving centre to Knocknacarra from Westside, I ask for an assurance that it will go back to Westside as soon as possible.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The importance of the driving licence issue cannot be overstated, in particular for workers in rural areas. For example, in County Laois, many workers have to get to work in Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Portarlinton or Graiguecullen and they are travelling from outlying areas such as the Swan, Ballinakill, Errill, Rathdowney and other areas where

there is no public transport early in the morning, or any area in the Slieve Bloom mountains, such as Camross, Clonaslee and places like that. It is important that we fix this. Public transport will never cover all townlands, and I accept that. We are trying to link up the villages and great progress has been made on this with Local Link, but often a village is five miles away and people need a car to get there. People also need a driver's licence for their employment. Take, for example, home help as typical. People in construction and delivery drivers all need a clean driver licence.

There has been a big crackdown on driving with a provisional licence and the Garda is very active on it. We accept this needs to happen. People cannot be on a provisional licence forever. There is also the fact that a lot of young drivers pay sky-high insurance because they cannot get a driver test, or a second or third driver test to get over the line to get a full driver's licence. We need to deal with this.

It is very important that we improve and shorten testing times. This has gone on for years. I and other Deputies have raised this many times over several years with various Ministers but it has got worse. The figures for those waiting for a test, and the length of time they are waiting, are absolutely shocking. The average estimated wait time is 27 weeks, as the Minister of State confirmed. For an invitation, which does not guarantee a test, the wait time is six months in Birr in Offaly and more than six months in Portlaoise. There could be an additional six, seven, eight or nine weeks before people actually get the test. I have the figures that show this. I tried it myself on the website to see what would happen and it confirmed that it takes more than seven months to get an invitation. The numbers waiting for a test are shocking. There are 1,092 people waiting in Portlaoise and only 216 of these are scheduled for a test. The statutory maximum time is not being met and that is a breach of the service level agreement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: This is a public body accountable to the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Prepare to speak within the time. We now move to a Government slot.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We need to employ more testers. In the meantime, in the short term, we should give people overtime to clear the backlog and deal with this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The time should be reduced to six weeks and not 12 weeks.

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

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: When it comes to driver testing wait times, the story in Dublin Bay North is no different from anywhere else. In February 2025, Raheny had a wait time of 33 weeks, up from 14 weeks in February 2024. The pass rate in Raheny is 55.1%. The number of tests done in Raheny in April 2025 was 468, which was down from 642 in April 2024. This is a reduction of almost 30%. There is a similar story in Killester, with a wait time of 28 weeks. The RSA target, as colleagues mentioned, is ten weeks. The pass rate in Killester was 45.5% in April this year and the number of driver tests done was 316, which was down 35%.

On the other side, statistics from An Garda Síochána for Dublin metropolitan region north show the number of learner drivers caught driving unaccompanied was up from 200 in quarter

2 of 2023 to 324 in quarter 2 of 2024. The number of vehicles seized also increased in a similar way. The need for reform of the RSA system in Dublin Bay North, like everywhere else, is confirmed by the high number of applicants who fail their driver test. As I mentioned, the percentage in Raheny is 45% and in Killester it is 55%. All of these candidates who fail go back into the system, reapply and put more pressure on an already significant backlog. RSA reform in this area is urgent and long overdue.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: As this is my first opportunity to speak, I want to take a moment to mark the sad death of Garda Kevin Flatley and extend my deepest condolences to his family, friends and colleagues in An Garda Síochána, including those who knew him in O'Dwyer's GAA club in Balbriggan and St. Finian's GAA club in Newcastle.

As other Deputies have done, I will begin by acknowledging that waiting times for tests are far in excess of what is acceptable and it must be a priority, as has been set out by the Government and other Deputies, to reduce these waiting times to ten weeks as soon as possible. As have other Deputies, I have been inundated with contacts from constituents who are justifiably angry about the long wait for driver test appointments. This impacts on their personal and professional welfare. Notwithstanding the need to expedite the ability to exchange driver licences, some anecdotal evidence suggests people are going to other European countries, such as Georgia, to do their tests because the waiting times are much lower. This completely legal process sees the applicant acquire their licence in Georgia and then return to Ireland to exchange it for an Irish one a week or two afterwards. I am not casting aspersions on the Georgian testing system but I wonder whether it is the best way to teach learner drivers and embed a learner culture and learner behaviour. In Georgia people are allowed to overtake on roundabouts and they drive on the other side of the road. This needs to be taken into account in terms of how we encourage good driver behaviour on our roads for people who are starting out for the first time.

The issue calls into question the ability of the RSA to manage the system. Many constituents come to me to ask why it takes so many different stages to apply for driver test in this country. They ask why we cannot have a more streamlined approach. This is important because driver behaviour is a key determinant for road safety for all road users, not only motorists but also pedestrians and cyclists. An effective and efficient testing system is key to improving driver behaviour.

For people in my constituency, the Tallaght test centre has a wait period of more than 43 weeks, 20 weeks longer than it was at this point last year. This is too long and not acceptable, especially for those who need to access a driver licence for professional and personal opportunities. In recent weeks, the Government announced a second test centre in Tallaght, which will assist with the backlog. It is important this gets up and running as soon as possible. I acknowledge the steps that have been taken, such as the introduction of Saturday testing, additional morning and evening slots and the priority given to emergency services.

The big fear I have is that people perceiving the testing system to have so many delays in it will increase the number of no-shows, further compounding the issue we have, with more delays being clogged into the system. I know the Minister of State is aware of this but I encourage him to treat this as a priority in terms of the immediate need to deal with the backlog and to address the fact the RSA needs to be put in a position where it manages the system better.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: This is one of the things that utterly frustrates me as a Member of the House. Dealing with the delays in the driving system is not rocket science. It is about

scheduling appointments for testing, resources being in place and the testing taking place. Perhaps I am oversimplifying it but it is not something that is beyond the realms of the delivery of a public service. I have to ask the RSA why it is tolerating the excessive delays. The excessive delays we are speaking about in my constituency are up to 31 weeks, slightly above the national average. It is something that affects the entire constituency. This year, thousands of children will sit their junior certificate and leaving certificate exams. Can we imagine if we said to them they would be sitting their exams at some point between now and Christmas but we cannot tell them exactly when, and they will have to apply a week beforehand to see whether they can get a date? We would not tolerate that and we should not tolerate this.

The backlog has built up over time. It needs an interim response to deal with the backlog, and then we need to get back to a system where there is a waiting time of between six and ten weeks. As I said, it is not beyond the realms of possibility; it is about the basic provision of a public service. As others said, it impacts on people's lives and on their insurance costs. It has an impact on their employment opportunities. It has an impact on their ability to plan and progress. It is no wonder we have so many non-attendees. If someone books an event six months ahead, how do they know what might pop up at that time? A non-attendance rate is being baked into the system when people are allowed to book so far ahead.

I welcome the indication of the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, that all options are on the table. This type of can-do attitude is exactly what is needed. Let us not forget there is a responsible authority in the Road Safety Authority. It is responsible for delivering a public service. If it is not able to do so, perhaps it is time we need to start thinking about who can do it. When we budget for, allocate and provide a public service we should not tolerate the inability of people to deliver that service. We have to get back to a reasonable period of a delay of somewhere around ten weeks. It is not tolerable that it would increase every year, which is what has been happening.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I have a proposal that might be a solution. We have all diagnosed the problem fairly well at this stage. A total of 83,000 applicants were waiting for driver tests in April. The proposal I have today may help solve the long driver test waiting times. Will the RSA work with the approved driver instructors, ADI, in a more effective way? Often the ADI are not fully aware of all aspects involved in a driver test. I call on the RSA to co-operate and use the ADI. The approved driver instructors comprise a large resource of approximately 2,000 people who are not being fully used. They would have a large impact on driver test waiting times if they could be utilised.

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ADIs are trained, at great expense, to deliver driver education. All this knowledge and experience is not recognised by the RSA, however, even though it sets the standard for the ADI check test. Why not have driver-testing ADIs similar to those in the UK? An ADI will instruct someone and then use their professional judgment and experience to decide when he or she is ready for the test.

There is a disconnect in the present system from those who teach the learning outcomes - the essential driving training lessons - and those who are test those outcomes. This is causing the long waiting lists. Learners usually apply on the basis of the calendar as opposed to driving hours. Many no-shows are a result. Learners are not test ready as a result of a lack of educational direction.

An ADI-led training programme would be more beneficial. Currently, a learner driver applies for a test and can wait up to eight or nine months for it. They may contact the ADI for pre-test lessons. An ADI-led programme would allow ADIs, subject to training, to conduct tests outside their teaching areas. For example, a system of 25 hours of tuition plus additional personal driving hours and a three-week waiting list to sit the test would be better received by the public.

As stated, ADIs, have invested time and expense to be trained to RSA standards. Many have trained to a level in excess of the RSA standards through external testing qualifications, for example, the national diploma in advanced driving instruction, the Cardigan test and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents advanced driving test bronze, silver and gold. I am sure these qualified ADIs could, with additional training, make up the shortfall in the number of driving testers and help to reduce waiting lists to an acceptable level. The backlog, as other speakers pointed out, is creating many issues for those wishing to meet employment and education requirements, with many losing out on opportunities as a result of the long waiting lists.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The delays relating to driving tests have been going on for far too long. What is happening is causing huge stress for workers and is resulting in some having to turn down jobs or delay their starting dates while others, including college students, have longer commutes each week. When these delays started to become a serious problem a few years back, the excuse was that the backlog was due to Covid. That does not wash any more. The delays at the Raheny test centre in my constituency have jumped from 20 weeks in January to 32 weeks now. One constituent applied for a driving test in July of last year. She was informed that her test would take place in November. It was then pushed back to this month. That is a ten-month wait for a test. During that period, her workplace had moved back from allowing people to work remotely to having them on site four days a week. The fact she could not drive and had to take two buses instead added an extra ten hours to her commute each week. That is completely unacceptable.

If there is a surge in demand for services such as driving tests, it is the Government's job to provide additional resources. It is really not that difficult. This is merely another example of poor planning and poor management, and it has been dragging on for years.

We are even seeing companies popping up that are facilitating applicants taking driving tests in countries like Georgia that have short wait times and that allow tests to be taken in English. When they pass the test, they can exchange their licences for Irish ones. All this can be done in a matter of weeks and at a cost of up to €1,000. It tells you how desperate people are if they are availing of this option.

Waiting times must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Clearly, we need more capacity. That means more driving test centres and more permanent testers. What is happening is having a hugely negative effect on families, workers and students so Can we finally have a degree of urgency in respect of this matter?

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, said on 1 May, "The current delays in the driver testing system are simply not acceptable." He also said, "People deserve a national driver testing service that they can rely upon", and that he will continue to hold the RSA to account until we see meaningful progress. To be honest, we are all fed up of hearing the same old line over and over again. I have young adults and their parents texting and ringing me. They are begging me - as is the case with everyone here - to get driving tests for

them. All we get back as TDs are the same generic answers and the usual spin.

Previous speakers referred to 35- and 43-week waiting times in Tallaght. I am delighted they got a second testing centre, and they deserve that. People in Skibbereen are waiting between 40 and 44 weeks for driving tests. For example, I am aware of the case of a young lad went to sit his test recently. The tester checked his insurance disc and said it was not valid as it was black. In fact, it was a dark green. I saw it because the young man brought it into the constituency office. A blind man would have seen what colour it was. The tester informed him he would not do the test for him and then went on to cancel other tests for that date - he obviously had a bad day - citing some excuse or other. The Garda has told the young lad his disc is correct. The insurance company has sent a letter to the RSA stating this was a correct disc but the latter will not admit that what happened to this young lad was wrong. I have asked the RSA to deal with this matter but to no avail.

I have young adults being offered jobs but they cannot take them up because they cannot get driving tests. The other side of it is that their insurance costs are not getting any lower because they have not passed their tests. I have parents who have terminal cancer and who need their children on the road to take them to hospital and to appropriate appointments. They cannot do so, however, because they cannot get driving tests. It is not good enough. Things have to change, and change immediately.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I almost feel sorry for the Ceann Comhairle because she is hearing the same story over and over again from every Deputy who has spoken.

The Minister of State, Deputy Jerry Buttimer, and I share a constituency in Cork. He will be aware that 39 weeks is the average waiting time. We seem to be a country of waiting lists. We are very good at creating waiting lists and long waits for everybody. Families are being discommoded. It is not working.

The RSA is not fulfilling its duty. There was a suggestion made by other speakers - those on the Government benches made it as well - that we start using the services those who teach people to drive and use them, when suitably qualified, as testers. This would not mean that the driving instructor who gave a person their 12 lessons would give them their licence. However, we could start using the services of these people who are accredited and who have been teaching people how to drive for the past number of years or for the entirety of their careers. That should be allowed to happen, regardless of whether a guy is a driving instructor in Mallow and is testing someone in Cork or a guy from Cork is testing someone in Mallow.

The reality is that the current system is not working. Every TD has told the Minister of State that. Everyone has said the same thing over and over again today. So something is wrong. Something is broken.

Families are being discommoded continuously. Young people who cannot get to college are delaying taking up their courses and so on. What is happening is unacceptable. We are going to have to think outside the box a little.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Like others, I raised this matter back in February. There has been very little, if any, progress since that time. What is happening is quite frustrating for TDs constituents. This is not really a local issue, although I do want to raise a local aspect in a moment. There has been no real progress since February. I mentioned at the time the need to implement the service level agreement requirement of ten weeks as is set out in section 28 of

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the Road Safety Authority Act. When replying, will the Minister to State indicate if there are any real consequences for the RSA if this is not done?

I listened to the Minister of State's introductory speech. I welcome the fact that the RSA will have to report on various matters at two-week intervals. We will monitor that and see how it goes. I am not sure whether this will result in the system being any quicker but at least we will know in real time what is happening.

None of this explains the historic delays. Covid was mentioned. We have passed the fifth anniversary of the Covid restrictions at this stage, and we should have been addressing the backlog well in advance. While I very much welcome the current Government initiative, its arrival was belated. That is something we have to be careful of.

We need more driving test centres. Other TDs mentioned that there are requirements in their areas. In south Dublin, we used to have a number of centres in Churchtown and in the Terenure-Rathfarnham area. We have one in Tallaght at present. The RSA is looking at bringing one back in the south Dublin area. I have written to the authority to suggest that need two - one on the Lucan-Clondalkin side and the other in the south.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Incompetence is the defining characteristic of this Government, which has displayed a complete inability to deliver services. In many areas, the USSR did a better job of delivering services than this Government. Right now, delivery of a whole range of services is grinding to a halt across the country. There are places in this country where you cannot get clean water from the taps. The electricity drops in 50,000 homes every week. We are talking about a very basic and simple service here but people are waiting 30 or 40 weeks for a driving test to be delivered. It is mind-boggling. It is bananas how this Government is just not able to deliver simple things. That is before we talk about the likes of the national children's hospital, the national maternity hospital or any of the other big projects the country is waiting for. Let us look at the urgency shown by this Government. The Dáil has sat for 35 days since the general election. That reflects a lack of urgency coming from the very top in the delivery of services in this country.

At the start of the year, Meath was already the county worst hit by delays in testing. That delay has grown a further eight weeks since the start of the year. The Government is talking about a national target of ten weeks. In Meath, people are waiting an average of 42 weeks to get a test. There should not be a waiting time of more than a fortnight to get a test but people are waiting 42 weeks. We were told in March that we were going to get three extra testers in the county but there is no sign of them as of yet.

I was recently contacted by a constituent who had failed a test. She went onto the website, which is atrocious and always crashing, and managed to get a date for her next test. She just failed last week. When is her date for the test? She will get a date for the test in January. This Government should hang its head in shame in light of the wait time for that particular woman. She said that when she left, she was told that four or five other people had roughly the same experience.

Never in my 18 years as an elected representative have I seen it this bad in County Meath. This is a particular problem for Meath because we do not have many transport options. We are the biggest commuting county in the country with 85,000 people having to commute to work every day. The vast majority of these have to commute outside the county. In no other county

in the country does the majority of workers have to leave the county to get to work. Only 1,000 people per day use a train because the trains only skirt the edge of the county. Navan is the biggest town in the country without a rail line. We have been waiting on that. It has been promised by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for decades now. Many buses are now ghost buses but, if they do pass, they are often full before a passenger can get on. People therefore do not have an option. The Government is not providing a public transport system for them to get to work and it will not allow them to get a licence to drive a car to work. That is not fair.

If a person fails a test, they can now download an app to try to be put on a cancellation list. The Government is charging €45 for that app. Not only is it refusing to provide the service, but it is rubbing salt in the wounds of the constituent or citizen who is simply trying to get a cancellation date for his or her next test. It is not fair and it is in no way good enough.

Deputy Emer Currie: Last year, nearly 19,000 vehicles were seized by An Garda Síochána for being uninsured following the introduction of the new Irish motor insurance database. That is a positive development that makes our roads safer. In comparison, gardaí seized approximately 5,000 vehicles from unaccompanied learner drivers even though there are approximately 370,000 learner permits in the State according to the RSA and an Aviva Insurance survey this year found that 28% of motorists had driven unaccompanied on a learner permit while only 36% of drivers said they had never done so and did not know someone who had. We need the same level of commitment in clamping down on unaccompanied learner drivers. Fourteen unaccompanied learner drivers were involved in collisions in 2023. Fines of €160 and two penalty points are simply not enough. The mixed messages to learner drivers need to end. The loophole whereby learner drivers can apply for a driving test but not take it and then keep driving with a provisional licence must be closed without further delay. Even though there is no excuse for unaccompanied learner drivers being on the road, a sluggish driver testing system, a culture that turns a blind eye and half-hearted penalties add to the practice.

Last week, it was reported in the news that our local driver testing centre in Mulhuddart had a waiting period of 28 weeks, which is very close to the current national average. However, people contacting my office say it is closer to 40 weeks. We gained a testing centre at Maple House but lost the centre at the Carlton Hotel and have seen a 54% increase in our waiting list since the end of 2022. The centre at Maple House alone has seen a 22.5% increase in its waiting list in just over a year, showing that demand is not just sustained, but accelerating. I ask the Minister of State to expand capacity, to recruit more testers, to extend opening hours, if needed, to put an end to the profiteering by some in securing cancellations and to ensure that people can access driving tests in a timely and fair way. We need a system that puts road safety and the integrity of driver behaviour first.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this matter. I disagree with the previous speaker. I believe learner drivers should be allowed to drive without someone accompanying them in the car. I live in a rural county and west of Ennis there is no Luas line, no DART and no public transport of any significance. It is costing youngsters in the region of €600 to €1,000 per month to stay in on-campus student accommodation. They simply cannot afford it and it is not available anyway so mom and dad buy a car and get a learner permit for their son or daughter, who then drives that car to and from college every day, sometimes bringing other students who live in the catchment area to the college campus with them. We are criminalising all of these young people with the requirement that they must have an accompanying driver in the car with them. It is unacceptable. There is no public transport network and this criterion is unacceptable. It is criminalising a lot of young people who just cannot have that college

experience on campus. They are living at home and using their car to get in and out. If there is a smarter or more sensible way to approach this, it is to work in tandem with the insurance sector because many insurance companies require learner drivers not to exceed a certain speed. Surely that is the way to have controls on how they drive rather than this punitive rule requiring them to always have an accompanying driver in the car with them, which is not realistic. The Minister of State can imagine that, if we were to really apply the spirit of that law in a rural area, the mom or dad would have to take time off work to drive their child to college and sit in the car while they attend eight hours of lectures before driving home. It just does not work in practice. The reality is that we are criminalising many young people every day with this.

I suggest that we look at a secondment system to get driving instructors into driving tester roles. I was a primary teacher for many years and, when there were gaps in our sector, people were seconded out of the classroom into the inspectorate or other roles supporting the education sector. In recent years, there seems to be a trend of testers leaving the role and going into private driving instruction. I am sure the hours are better. Perhaps the pay is better. I do not know the reasons but I am sure the Minister of State's officials can gauge that. To second some of them out or to require testers to move beyond their county and test across county boundaries in another town 30 or 40 miles away, as others have suggested, would free things up. The waiting lists in Clare are very long. This is very punitive in rural areas where we do not have the DART, the Luas or other public transport.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Like previous speakers, I have serious concerns about the significant delays to driving tests across my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. A solution to this issue needs to be accelerated as soon as possible. We have to allocate new testers to locations throughout the country that are experiencing long delays. The delays drivers in Carlow and Kilkenny are facing are just not acceptable. People spend months and months learning how to drive. It costs a lot of money but they are then met with a long waiting time for their tests. We have to do better. In the last month alone, I have spoken to people, mostly young people, from Piltown, Mullinavat, Stoneyford, Graiguenamanagh, Callan, Thomastown, Kells, Ballyhale, Kilmanagh, Ballyragget, Conahy, Paulstown, Saint Mullin's, Borris, Rathanna, Ballinakill and Bagenalstown, all of whom are waiting patiently to sit their tests. It is particularly unfair to our younger people, some of whom are desperate to get their driver's licence, perhaps for health or work reasons. It is just not acceptable. In Kilkenny, to get a new test, you are looking at 23 or 24 weeks depending on the test centre. In Carlow, it is either 24 or 26 weeks, depending on whether it is done in the Carlow centre or the centre at the Talbot Hotel Carlow. These exponential waiting lists are unacceptable for learner drivers and they are just not fair. I was astonished recently to learn of the low number of driver testers throughout Carlow and Kilkenny. There are only five testers between the two counties. We cannot tackle the long waiting lists such as we have with only five testers. I am informed there is a process ongoing to hire and train more testers to the highest possible standards. I welcome the Road Safety Authority, RSA, approach to tackle these waiting lists and lack of testers. I believe that last September the Department sanctioned the recruitment of an additional 70 driver testers, bringing the overall driver tester headcount to 200, which is double the 2022 number of 100 but it is not enough. I understand that recruitment campaigns of this size can take time but I look forward to new driver testers being assigned to help tackle the backlog. Carlow and Kilkenny need to be prioritised.

Yesterday I spoke with a young woman who has been promoted in her job. She is absolutely delighted but as part of her new job and her new role she needs to be able to have access to a full driving licence. It is a requirement for work but she is prevented from advancing her career.

She is on a waiting list to get a driver test and it is just not acceptable. Young apprentices in my constituency are on to me regularly with the same thing. They need the licence for work and there is no priority given for work purposes. It just needs to be improved and sped up dramatically.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The statements today from around the country have been quite insightful. Naturally many Deputies here are extremely frustrated with the delays they are seeing in their constituencies. In Kildare North, for example, 4,024 people are waiting for a driving test. That is up from 3,303 last year, which is 691 more for the same time period. We are also told that the national average waiting time in March 2025 stood at 24.1 weeks. Many Deputies here have complained about that delay and understandably so. In Kildare North it is 30 weeks, which is an additional six weeks to try to get a test in County Kildare. The difficulty is there is only one test centre in Kildare, which is based in Naas, and there is no other test centre throughout the county. If we look at the population centre of the north east of the county, where I hail from, around Maynooth, Leixlip, Celbridge and Kilcock, there is no test centre. As part of this, a test centre in that area would also be able to look after people in Meath coming from Dunboyne, and some people from Dublin, which is in close proximity.

I have had numerous representations made to me in relation to this. We have heard various stories about how these delays are impacting people on a human level. I will give just one example of a constituent who could not get a test in Naas, is on the list for a test in Tallaght, and has been waiting 43 weeks. This is almost ten months and far beyond what is being stated. He cannot pick up and drop off his young children from crèche and from school because he is still awaiting this test. Another constituent has been waiting almost seven months, which is 30 weeks. This is impacting her independence and ability to work. Many of the people who are being impacted are young people who are doing their driving test for the first time. It is just not good enough, particularly in rural areas but also in urban areas, and it is impacting families in particular.

I am asking two things. What are the Minister of State's plans to address this crisis in Kildare? Will a second test centre be opened in Kildare?

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Driving test waiting times are a shambles. This is clear from the discussion today. I regularly get emails from constituents. Constituents are given absurdly long waiting times to be called to sit their driving tests. This means people are forced to pay very high insurance costs because the Government simply cannot get its act together on this issue. I remember almost five years ago the issue was raised in the Chamber quite a lot. At the time Covid was the reason for delays in driving tests. We are, however, now in 2025 and we are still dealing with the issue. The backlog has ballooned by more than 10,000 since the start of the year.

In February, Sinn Féin brought forward a motion proposing a suite of measures to tackle the issue head on. While the Government did not oppose the motion, it certainly seems it has ignored it. The best we got was lip-service and there is probably more of that in stock today.

I recently received a query from one constituent who is a young mother. She is having to pay a very high rate of insurance. She badly wants to sit her test, but it is not scheduled to take place until later this year. She is also concerned that the driving centre in Clifden could close for the summer. I have written to the Minister of State's Department about this and I understand this will be passed on to the RSA, but I have not yet gotten confirmation about it. I am certainly

hoping that nothing as daft as a test centre closing is planned given where we currently are with the backlogs. As of the end of last month, 1,277 people were waiting for a test in the Carnmore centre. There were 1,106 people waiting in the centre in the Clybaun Hotel, with 299 waiting in Clifden. Between February and April, the numbers waiting increased across all Galway-based test centres. The only ones who benefit from this situation are the insurance companies which can charge higher rates for longer. Great news for them as they increase premiums as per usual.

If people cannot do the test to get a full driving licence, it impacts on their lives. It has a huge impact for apprentices who might want to start their apprenticeship but it is a distance away and they need to be able to drive to it. This is a serious issue for them because they cannot start that apprenticeship. It is the same for somebody who wants to start a job in places that are more rural such as Clifden, which is one and a half hours drive from Galway. That is a serious issue for people. It is also a big issue for people who are trying to access housing. In Galway city, for example, often there are no houses within the HAP limit, which means people have to look further afield. If a person cannot drive, it is a serious issue.

This issue has been raised for a number of years now and we need to get to the bottom of it. We need to tackle the issue head on. I would like the Government to listen to the proposals by all Members on it. The Government did not oppose the Sinn Féin motion in February but there has not been action. That is why we are still dealing with the issue. I ask the Minister of State to please act.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to the final speaking slot for other Members. We will begin with Deputy Carol Nolan.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I have written to the new Chair of the Oireachtas transport committee to demand the appearance of senior management from the Road Safety Authority before the committee members. The RSA is clearly an organisation not fit for purpose, with an increasingly bad track record that is generating chaos for learner drivers and industry sectors such as hauliers. Last year there was a call, and indeed an expectation, that the RSA would be disbanded given its failure to tackle the learner driver waiting time crisis. Unfortunately, that came to nothing with the result that as of this March, over 81,000 people were waiting for a date for their test. This is a rise of 10,000 from the 75,000 who were waiting in February. We now have wait time increases of an average 24.1 weeks, which is a more than a 140% increase on the RSA target time of ten weeks. How is that defensible? How is the RSA still in place given the prolonged nature of this crisis, which is severely disrupting tens of thousands of people on an annual basis?

This is also causing huge concern to organisations such as the Irish Road Haulage Association, which through its own freedom of information investigation, has established that thousands of people are driving on provisional licences in Offaly. This clearly points to a system in absolute crisis. It also points to increased levels of danger on the roads because learner drivers are being forced to make hard choices between travelling to work and to apprenticeships or sitting at home with no access to work or education.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire Stáit. Again, on this subject, we have unity in the House. We have a shambolic and an extortionate process that must change as a matter of urgency. I will ask a few questions as to why. Is there a problem with testers? Are there human resource issues? Is it population increase related? Is it a symptom of a public transport deficit? If we do not analyse the reasons, then we will not come to timely solutions.

Taking County Meath in its entirety, one test centre in Navan has a 42-week to 43-week wait time. Believe it or not, Meath is actually classed as a rural county so the necessity for driving and driver permits is extremely important. Apprenticeships were referenced. It is highly impactful, with delays for apprentices, for students getting to college, for the carers of those who are most vulnerable, or for carers who are non-Irish nationals and are waiting for their test in order to travel to clients. I will end on this point. I do not mean to be challenging, but who will take this problem by the scruff of the neck as a matter of urgency and sort it out?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I raised this matter by way of question to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, about a week ago and I am still very concerned about it. Today, I have six new people who are looking to get their tests brought forward. Two of them will not get their tests for seven months. This is what they have been told. I will give an example. One of them is a young fella from Cahersiveen who can do his apprenticeship in Tralee if he can get there. He has work to do at home in the evenings and he would dearly love to do this apprenticeship, but his parents cannot drive him all the way to Tralee in the morning, go home and then come back to pick him up in the evening. Likewise, a young fella from Headford near Killarney wants to do the agricultural course in Clonakilty but he is afraid he will not be able to take up this chance. His mother is working and he is trying to manage the farm at home. His father died a few years ago. There are things like this.

The last day I was talking to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, I asked him if we could have an amnesty. If a test cannot be carried out in ten weeks, let the driver drive unaccompanied until the test takes place. Will the Government consider that? We need to give young fellas a chance. Even if we were to curtail their driving for 12 hours a day so they would not be driving at night, that would cover them for work, apprenticeships and so forth. Perhaps something like that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: This is an emergency. I am asking the Government to do something, please. This happened last year-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----and the summer holidays will take a lot of the testers away and the test wait time will get longer.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Gan amhras, nílimid sásta maidir le tréimhse fanachta na dtástálacha tiomána. Tá an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Canney, ag obair leis an Aire chun tréimhse fanachta na dtástálacha a laghdú.

I recognise that my response to the debate will probably be no different from what was said by any of the Members who have spoken. We are all frustrated by the delay. As Deputy Timmins said, the diagnosis is well documented, but this debate is important because I hope it will lead to ongoing change.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, on his proactivity with the RSA. Members are genuinely frustrated and have raised real, legitimate frustrations on behalf of their constituents. Like me, no day goes by that we do not get a phone call about or request for a driver test.

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I reiterate that the Government recognises the need to address the long-standing issue with service provision and to ensure that a reliable, high-quality driver test service is available throughout the State. The Government and I understand the unacceptable wait times for driver tests is having a profound and significant impact on people. Ordinary people are trying to get a job or go to college and exist. It particularly affects those in rural Ireland where the public transport, despite advances, is in some cases limited. We are all in agreement that we need to deliver decisively on the long-standing issues relating to service provision and ensure that a reliable, high-quality driver test service is available throughout the State, regardless of where people live.

Not only is achieving the ten-week target time important for learner driver experience of the service, it is also a vital component of delivering on our road safety strategy and the ambition to halve the number of road deaths and serious injuries this decade. Ensuring drivers are well trained and equipped to deal with the challenges of modern driving makes us all safer on the roads.

As the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, outlined, our population has significantly increased in recent years, putting additional demand on the driver testing service with a record number of applications received last year. I accept that is no crumb of comfort to those waiting, but it is a fact. The operation of the service is under the statutory remit of the RSA and we have sought to support it in meeting this increase in demand through a number of staffing sanctions in recent years. Most recently, 70 additional driver testers were sanctioned on a permanent basis in September last year, with a sanctioned headcount of 200 today, which has been a near doubling of staff sanctioned in just two years. This reflects the Government's commitment to addressing this issue. Prior to this, the RSA requested sanction for 75 testers on a temporary basis, which was approved by the Department in March 2023. This temporary sanction was the correct decision at the time. Under the temporary sanction, significant progress was made between August 2023 and April 2024, with wait times halving from 30 to 15 weeks. Deputy Timmins's proposal merits real consideration and I hope the ADIs, RSA and the Department can engage further on this suggestion.

The progress that was made under the previous sanction before the loss of testing capacity should give us confidence that the additional capacity now entering the service on a permanent basis will deliver improved waiting times on a sustained basis going forward. The RSA, in its meetings with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has been confident that the permanent positions now on offer will attract and retain more testers than was the case with the temporary sanction. The fact it remains in place permanently will allow the RSA to build the vacancies as they arise in response to demand up to the ceiling of 200 on an ongoing basis going forward. Members' suggestions on different times, cancellations and operating on different days, including weekends, should be actively considered and pursued. As the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, previously mentioned, interest in the recent competition was extremely high, with 1,400 people applying at the initial stage and more than 300 making it through to the final driving assessment stage.

Members should be aware that the first tranche of new testers was deployed into service in late April and I understand the next tranche begins training this week, with a further tranche of testers to begin their training before the end of this month. As additional testers enter the system, testing capacity will increase and progress should be seen in reducing wait times in the months ahead. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in his opening statement referenced the initial RSA plan for restoring waiting times to ten weeks, which it was required to develop as

a condition of its staffing sanction. It targeted restoration by November of this year. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and all of us in the Department of Transport and in this House deemed it to be unacceptable when he met the RSA at the beginning of May. New proposals were brought to him today on the delays. To reiterate a point made by the Minister of State, the RSA believes it can achieve the ten week target in September by introducing efficiencies in the tester training programme, while avoiding anything that undermines training or safety standards. It will publish its plan later this week and report again in a fortnight. In the event that it misses its targets, it will also immediately commence work on a contingency plan to add additional capacity to the system should the need arise.

Deputy Toole asked who would take responsibility and drive it. I am confident that the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will. We have to get this right. The contributions of all Deputies today illustrate the importance of this. With the report every two weeks and publishing the progress report, I hope real accountability will lead to changes and proactivity. Additional capacity will help to address the systemic mismatch between supply and demand that has developed in recent years as our population has grown. However, it is also important to recognise the steps taken by the RSA and efforts made by individual testers to mitigate the impact on customers to the greatest extent possible where the current recruitment campaign is ongoing. There was extensive voluntary working of overtime by driver testers last year to help to meet demand and this is continuing, including at weekends. To support this, the RSA ran an incentivisation programme for overtime last year and a similar offering is under consideration for this year. The RSA has introduced IT system improvements to maximise the number of test slots utilised and reduce the number of tests lost to cancellation and no-shows. Once a person has been invited to book a test, slots released at short notice following a cancellation can now be booked on the *myroadsafety.ie* portal. Such slots will be added every day and the new system has seen the overall percentage of testing slots utilised increase from 95% to 98%.

Deputies may wish to note that the RSA transparently publishes detailed monthly information on the driver testing service on the CSO website, including the breakdown of waiting times and the distribution of testing capacity by test centre.

Separately, while new testers will bring much needed additional capacity in the short term, in the long term, there are two significant initiatives that should help to improve delivery of the service. The first of these is to reform the RSA, informed by the recommendations of the 2024 Indecon review presented to the Government in November last year. A core principle of this review is that the RSA's customer service and operations roles be separated from its wider road safety advocacy role and this should improve focus and delivery for both. Alongside this, focus on work carried out to date under the forthcoming phase 2 of the action plan under the Government's road safety strategy, the RSA will complete its review of the driver testing curriculum and progress implementation of its recommendations in the period to the end of 2027. This review should be implemented holistically, along with any required reforms to driver instruction to help ensure that new drivers are equipped for modern driving conditions and the pass test rate increases from 50%, thereby reducing demand on the driver testing system.

The Government recognises the important significant impact that long-term waiting times for driver tests are having on people, in particular, on those residing in rural areas where there is an issue with a public transport deficit. It is important, however, that we do not compromise testing standards and instead ensure the recruitment of sufficient driver testing capacity of an appropriate standard to support safe road use. The current recruitment campaign is well advanced. Additional capacity has now entered the system and further testers will do so in the

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coming months. We expect to see wait times progressively reduce to the target of ten weeks from this month onwards.

I thank Members for their contributions. Genuinely, the Minister and Ministers of State in the Department of Transport all understand the frustration and annoyance and we are working hard to ensure we meet the ten week requirement.

Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Bill 2024: Céim an Choiste (Atógáil)

AILT NUA

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 20:

Ar leathanach 13, idir líne 8 agus líne 9, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“Leasú ar alt 8 den Phríomh-Acht

7. Leasaítear alt 8 den Phríomh-Acht tríd an bhfo-alt seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh fho-alt (9):

“(10) Déanfaidh an tÚdarás tionól poiblí a eagrú i ngach ceantar atá sainithe de réir alt 26D nach déanaí ná bliain tar éis an tAcht seo a achtú chun tuairimí an phobail Gaeltachta a lorg maidir le feidhmeanna Údarás na Gaeltachta a leathnú agus déanfar a gcuid moltaí a chuimsiú i dtuarascáil a bheidh le foilsiú agus le cur faoi bhráid Choiste Gaeilge an Oireachtais nach déanaí ná 18 mí tar éis an tAcht seo a achtú.”.

Is leasú cuibheasach simplí é seo ar shlí amháin. Táimid ag iarraidh go gcinnteofar san alt seo nach ndéanfar dearmad ar an bpobal i gcoitinne agus go mbeadh siad lárnach agus muid ag díriú ar cheist fheidhmeanna Údarás na Gaeltachta. Nuair a bhí tús á chur leis an bplé ar an mBille seo ag an stad réamhrechtach - nó fiú roimhe sin, nuair a bhí plé á dhéanamh maidir leis an nGaeltacht agus feidhmeanna an údaráis - bhí trácht ar fheidhmeanna breise a thabhairt don údarás agus tacaíocht a thabhairt dó chun ról níos lárnaí a bheith aige. Tá athruithe tar éis tarlú thar na blianta ón mbunról a bhí ann. Tréaslaím leis an údarás as an obair atá á déanamh aige ag an stad seo leis an gcaiteachas atá leagtha síos dóibh. Molaim an cur chuige atá tar éis a bheith aige, ní hamháin ó thaobh tionsclaíocht agus fostaíocht a mhealladh chuig ceantair Ghaeltachta ach a chinntiú, tríd an bhfostaíocht sin a mhealladh, go bhfuil bunús níos láidre sna ceantair sin chun a chinntiú go mbeadh an pobal in ann maireachtáil.

Tá a fhios againn ar fad - labhraíomar faoi cheana agus b'fhéidir go labhróimid faoi arís níos déanaí - faoin bhfadhb bhunúsach atá ann anois maidir le cinntiú go bhfanfaidh an pobal sna ceantair seo agus nach mbeidh bánú ag tarlú mar a bhí roimhe seo. Thréig a lán daoine na ceantair Ghaeltachta thar na blianta agus na cianta toisc nach raibh fostaíocht ná seirbhísí ann, de bharr an Ghorta agus toisc go raibh bochtanas i gceist leo. Diaidh ar ndiaidh, tháinig an pobal i réim. Tríd an bhfeachtas Ghluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta, d'éirigh leo roinnt de na cearta a bhí ag dul dóibh a bhaint amach. Tharla maolú ar an imirce as na ceantair sin toisc go raibh poist iontu agus toisc go raibh seans go mbeadh daoine in ann maireachtáil iontu. Tá sé athraithe go hiomlán arís an uair seo, agus ní de bharr easpa post. B'fhéidir go bhfuil roinnt

de sin i gceist, ach don chuid is mó, is leis an easpa infreastruchtúir, seirbhísí agus tithíochta ach go háirithe a bhaineann fadhbanna na Gaeltachta anois. Sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag lorg go mbeimis ag díriú ar fheidhmeanna níos leithne a thabhairt don údarás chun a chinntiú go mbeidh an t-údarás in ann bheith lárnach sna hathruithe is gá dó a ghlacadh chun cuidiú leis an bpobal a bhfuil sé in ainm is a bheith ag freastal air.

Rinne Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge 20 moladh ina ghrinnscrúdú ar an reachtaíocht seo. I dtús báire, mhol an comhchoiste “gur cheart don Aire go ndéanfar cinnte de go mbeidh na feidhmeanna cuí ag Údarás na Gaeltachta ionas gur féidir leis tabhairt faoina chuid oibre go héifeachtach.” Síleann Sinn Féin nach féidir leis an údarás tabhairt faoin obair ar fad atá aige gan tacaíocht bhreise. Cad iad na feidhmeanna sin? Níl sé de chead againn na feidhmeanna a liostáil, mar a luaithe is a chuirfimis liosta le chéile de na feidhmeanna gur chóir go mbeadh ag an údarás, rialófaí na leasuithe sin as ord de bharr go gcuirfí muirear ar ioncam an Stáit nó an phobail. Sin an fáth go bhfuil orainn teacht timpeall air. Rinne an comhchoiste an moladh sin.

Nuair a foilsíodh an reachtaíocht, ní raibh na cumhachtaí nó na feidhmeanna breise seo soiléir agus níl siad ann. Tá an leasú seo ag triail teacht timpeall ar an block atá orainn maidir le moltaí praiticiúla a chur chun cinn chun cuidiú leis an údarás na feidhmeanna breise seo a comhlíonadh, agus go mbeadh ar an údarás tionól poiblí cosúil le citizens’ assembly a reáchtáil i ngach uile toghcheantar laistigh de bhliain ó achtú an Bhille seo. Táimid ag iarraidh an chumhacht a thabhairt ar ais don phobal áitiúil chun féachaint cad iad na héilimh, fadhbanna agus bearnaí atá ann ó thaobh seirbhísí de agus cad, dá réir, iad na cúraimí breise don údarás, lena fheidhmeanna breise, amach anseo, agus go mbeadh reachtaíocht eile ann díreach ag déileáil le ceist fheidhmeanna an údaráis. Nuair a moladh na leasuithe seo ag amanna difriúla thar an gcúpla bliain dheireanach agus nuair a dúradh gur cóir go mbeadh an reachtaíocht seo ag déileáil leis, dúradh linn go mbeadh an reachtaíocht seo ag déileáil le ceist thoghchán an údaráis agus go dtiocfadh reachtaíocht eile chun cinn amach anseo. Tá muid ag triail ag déanamh cinnte de, tríd brú a chur, go mbeidh an comhthionóil seo i gceist i ngach uile ceantar. Táimid ag cinntiú go mbeidh an reachtaíocht eile ag teacht. Nuair atá an reachtaíocht seo rite, níl a fhios againn cén uair a bheidh an Roinn nó an Aire ag díriú isteach ar na bearnaí atá aitheanta againn cheana. Dá bhrí sin, táimid ag iarraidh go mbeidh cinnteacht i gceist.

Agus muid ag díriú isteach ar cheist an údaráis, d’iarr mé go díreach Leabharlann an Oireachtais conas mar a chaitear le pobail dá leithéid i dtíortha eile - pobail teangabhunaithe atá imeallach nó nach bhfuil chomh láidir sin. Rinne Seirbhís Leabharlainne agus Taighde an Oireachtais imscrúdú ar eagrais eile do phobail mionlaigh teanga chun fáil amach an bhfuil difríocht mhór i measc na cúraimí éagsúla atá faoina stiúir. Níl aon eagrais díreach mar an gcéanna leis an údarás, ach tá cinn eile gur féidir díriú isteach orthu, mar shampla ceann atá bunaithe i gCríoch Lochlannach le haghaidh an pobal Sámi. Tá dualgas ar leith ar an Stát dul i mbun comhrá leis an bpobal mionlaigh maidir le haon ábhar thábhachtach a bhféadfadh tionchar a bheith aige ar stádas an phobal sin. Bíonn cead ag an bParlaimint Sámi moltaí a chur chun cinn chuig na húdaráis. Tá stádas i bhfad ar níos láidre ag an bpobal Sámi i gCríoch Lochlannach ná mar atá faoi láthair ag pobal na Gaeltachta. Sin an sórt rud ar chóir dó a bheith níos láidre.

Thar na blianta, ní raibh an tacaíocht nó an chosaint céanna ag pobal na Gaeltachta, toisc go raibh siad imeallach sna comhairlí contae agus ó thaobh an Stát de. Nuair a ardaíodh na ceisteanna seo, déanadh neamhaird orthu agus níor tugadh an stádas ceart do na moltaí a bhí ag teacht ón bpobal. Déanadh neamhaird ar an údarás toisc nár aithníodh i súile an mhaorlathais an ról

atá aige an tionsclaíocht a chur chun cinn nó an ról lárnach atá aige an teanga dúchais a chosaint sna ceantair ina bhfuil sé bunaithe agus lonnaithe go fóill. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag déanamh cás go bhfuil eisceacht i gceist. Tá an cás sin déanta ann féin toisc go bhfuilimid ag déileáil le húdarás ar leith don Ghaeltacht, ach táimid ag iarraidh go mbeidh an údarás sin in ann cásanna eisceachtúla a dhéanamh chun dul i mbun oibre nach bhfuil á déanamh ag na heagrais Stáit eile. Luadh Uisce Éireann mar shampla d'údarás nach bhfuil chun díriú isteach ar chás eisceachtúil a dhéanamh don Ghaeltacht i gcomparáid le ceantair iargúlta eile ina bhfuil an Béarla chun cinn. D'fhéadfainn na bóithre tuaithe a lua mar shampla eile. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil gach uile bóthar tuaithe chomh tábhachtach lena chéile, ach má tá beocht agus todhchaí ár dteanga náisiúnta ceangailte le bóithre tuaithe i gceantair áirithe, atá b'fhéidir níos iargúlta i gcomparáid le ceantair eile, ba chóir go mbeadh stádas níos tábhachtaí acu. Is féidir é sin a dhéanamh trí tacaíocht a thabhairt don údarás ionas gur féidir leis an údarás a ladar a chur isteach sa scéal. Más gá ciste ar leith a chur ar bun le déileáil le ceisteanna uisce, ceisteanna infreast-ruchtúr nó ceisteanna leictreachais i gceantair áirithe, is é sin an sórt céim breise a ghlacfar leis.

Is é an moladh atá agam ná go mbeidh an cheist sin á phlé, á chíoradh agus á chur chun cinn sna ceantair difriúla. Níl cónaí orm sa Ghaeltacht agus mar sin ní bheidh mé ag déileáil leis sin. Tá an pobal áitiúil á rá má tharlaíonn rudaí ar leith - tá an t-eolas acu - beidh sé i bhfad níos éasca orthu clainne a thógáil agus a chinntiú nach mbeidh daoine i gceantair iargúlta nó imeallacha ag bogadh isteach sna cathrachra nó ag tréigeadh na Gaeltachtaí. Bheimis ag mealladh daoine le Gaeilge nó daoine a bhí ag cónaí sna Gaeltachtaí roimhe seo isteach sna ceantair sin, toisc go mbeidh na seirbhísí ar fáil is go bhféadfaí na tithí a thógáil. Bheimis ag fáil tacaíocht ón údarás, ní hamháin ar cheisteanna tionsclaíochta agus fostaíochta, ach ar cheisteanna eile chomh maith. Sin an fáth go bhfuil an moladh seo chomh tábhachtach.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Aontaím le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, go háirithe i dtaobh an leasú seo. Tá cuspóir leis na leasuithe ar fad atá curtha síos agam féin agus ag mo chomhghleacaí taobh liom, agus leis na leasuithe atá curtha síos ag an bhFreasúra go hiomlán, cuid acu ag teacht ó Chonradh na Gaeilge. Is é an téama ginearálta atá ag rith tríd na leasuithe seo ná an daonlathas agus Údarás na Gaeltachta a dhéanamh chomh daonlathach agus freagrach is gur féidir go dtí muintir na Gaeltachta agus pobal na ceantair Ghaeltachta. Bunaíodh é le freastal orthu. Is é sin an príomhspríoc atá againn ar an taobh seo den Teach, agus ba cheart go mbeadh sé ina sprioc againn go léir sa Teach seo agus i dTithe an Oireachtais.

An rud is tábhachtaí ná go mbeadh cluais éisteachta á thabhairt go dtí pobal na Gaeltachta mar gheall ar na rudaí atá ag cur srian agus bac ar na ceantair sin, mar shampla i mo cheantar féin, Gaeltacht na nDéise. Ní cúrsaí fiontraíochta agus fostaíochta a thuilleadh atá ag cur srian orainn. Buíochas le Dia tá leithéidí Nemeton, Red Shoe agus dreamanna eile nach iad san earnáil léiriúchán teilifíse. Tá Coláiste na Rinne againn maraon le fiontraíochtaí eile ag tabhairt fostaíocht. Ní hé sin an rud is mó, ach is é sin an rud is dócha a bhfuil Údarás na Gaeltachta dírithe air. An fhadhb is mó i nGaeltacht na nDéise - táim cinnte go bhfuil sé seo fíor i nGaeltachtaí eile i ndiaidh dom caint le daoine astu - ná tithíocht. An dara rud ná seirbhísí poiblí, mar shampla oifig an phoist sa Rinn. D'éirigh an mháistreás poist as a post nuair a bhí sí réidh éirí as, agus ní raibh éinne toilteanach an chonradh nua a chuir An Post ar fáil a thógáil. Ní dhéanfadh sé aon chiall - bheadh siad ag cailliúint airgid ag glacadh leis. Fiú dá mbeadh siopa agus suíomh acu, agus nach mbeadh cíós i gceist, bheadh siad ag cailliúint airgid leis an seirbhís poiblí sin a chur ar fáil. Is é sin an rud atá ag cur isteach ar phobail Gaeltachta.

Mar an gcéanna leis an gcuan i gCé Heilbhic a dhreideáil, caithfear é a choimeád glan ionas gur féidir le báid iascaireachta teacht agus imeacht, agus dár ndóigh an bád tarrthála teacht is

imeacht. Sin iad na rudaí atá ag cur srian agus ag cur isteach ar an bpobal Gaeltachta i mo cheantar, ach níl siad mar aidhmeanna ag Údarás na Gaeltachta. Nílím ag seasamh anseo ag rá gur cheart go mbeadh Údarás na Gaeltachta ag déanamh conradh An Post níos fearr, ach ba cheart go mbeadh sé ar a laghad ag tabhairt éisteacht agus freagracht chun stocaireacht a dhéanamh ar son na ceantair Ghaeltachta, agus níl sé. Táimid ag rá sa leasú seo gur cheart go mbeadh Údarás na Gaeltachta ag éisteacht leis na pobail Gaeltachta. Ba cheart go mbeadh sé in ann stocaireacht a dhéanamh agus an tionól bliantúil seo a eagrú ionas go mbeidh an comhrá seo ag dul ar aghaidh. Sílim go bhfuil slí timpeall air sin. Níor ghlac an Rialtas lenár leasuithe i dtaobh na toghcháin chun iad a dhéanamh níos daonlathaí agus chun an bord a dhéanamh chomh daonlathach agus is féidir, ach ar a laghad is slí timpeall air sin atá i gceist anseo. Mura bhfuil an Rialtas sásta glacadh lenár leasuithe, agus is léir nach bhfuil, b'fhéidir go bhfuil slí eile gur féidir linn cluas éisteachta a thabhairt do na pobail. Ná déan dearmad go bhfuil muid anseo ag caint faoi eagrás Stáit atá bunaithe chun freastal ar phobail Gaeltachta.

5 o'clock

Is é sin an cuspóir atá ag Údarás na Gaeltachta. N'fheadar, muna bhfuil an struchtúr ann sa dlí chun maoirsiú a dhéanamh ar an gcaidreamh sin, an mbeidh sé ag tarlú i gceart. Fágfaidh mé mar sin é ar an gceist áirithe seo. Tá ciall ag baint leis an leasú. Impím ar an Aire glacadh leis nó roinnt machnaimh a dhéanamh air le féachaint an féidir linn glacadh leis.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Tá an-áthas orm an deis a bheith agam labhairt ar an mBille tábhachtach seo. Is céim chun tosaigh agus chun cinn í an reachtaíocht seo a neartóidh ról an údarais i saol sóisialta, cultúrtha agus eacnamaíochta ár bpobal Gaeltachta.

Mar urlabhraí Fhianna Fáil nua ar an nGaeilge agus ar ghnóthaí Gaeltachta, fáiltím roimh an sprioc atá ag an Rialtas struchtúr an údarais a nuachóiriú agus níos mó daonlathais a thabhairt ar ais trí bhord na gcomhaltaí tofa agus ceaptha araon. Is ceart agus cóir go mbeidh pobal na Gaeltachta i lár an chinnidh ar an tslí a rachaidh muid amach anseo. Is céim eile dhearfach í bunú na dtrí coiste réigiúnach atá le teacht. Tabharfaidh siad guth níos láidre do phobail áitiúla ó na réigiúin Ghaeltachta éagsúla. Cinnteoidh siad go mbeidh cinntí níos oiriúnaí dá mná tí féin.

Fáiltím freisin roimh an bhforáil a éilíonn go mbeidh cumas sa Ghaeilge ag comhaltaí an bhoird agus acu siúd a bheidh ar na coistí. Ní mór dúinn, mar Stát agus mar phobal, sampla láidir a thabhairt agus ár dteanga a chur i gceol gach cinneadh a dhéanann muid.

Tá mé ar aon intinn leis an leasú a chuirfeadh ar chumas an údarais tuilleadh gnímh a dhéanamh i réimse na tithíochta. Más mian linn pobal Gaeltachta beo a bheith againn, ní leor caomhnú na Gaeilge amháin; caithfidh muid áiteanna maireachtála inbhuanaithe a chruthú don chéad glúin eile.

Is mian liom roinnt moltaí agus inní a roinnt leis an Aire. Impím air machnamh a dhéanamh orthu de réir mar a chuirfear an reachtaíocht i bhfeidhm. Ar an gcéad dul síos, má tá muid chun na struchtúir nua seo, na coistí réigiúnacha san áireamh, a chur i bhfeidhm i gceart, ní mór na hacmhainní cuí a chur ar fáil, is iad sin maoiniú, foireann agus tacaíochtaí praiticiúla. Ní leor reachtaíocht amháin; caithfear í a chur i bhfeidhm go héifeachtach. Caithfidh soiléireacht agus cothromaíocht a bheith ag baint leis na critéir Ghaeilge do chomhaltaí. Caithfidh muid a chinntiú nach gcuireann riachtanais dhocht bac ar dhaoine atá tiomanta don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht, agus a bhfuil saineolas luachmhar acu, ach nach bhfuil líofacht iomlán acu sa teanga. Molaim go ndéanfaí feachtas eolais chuimsithigh sna Gaeltachtaí roimh na toghcháin.

Má tá muid dáiríre faoin daonlathas, caithfidh an pobal tuiscint a bheith acu ar an bpróiseas agus ar na ról.

Is Bille tábhachtach é seo. Is léiriú é ar thiomantas an Stáit don Ghaeltacht, don Ghaeilge agus don phobal atá ag iarraidh maireachtáil trí mheán a dteanga féin. Molaim an tAire agus a fhoireann as an obair atá déanta. Tacaím leis an mBille. Tá mé ag súil le bheith ag obair leis an Aire agus le comhghleacaithe sa Teach seo le cinntiú go n-éireoidh leis go huile is go hiomlán. Is ball den chomhchoiste Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta mé agus tá mé ag súil le bheith ag obair leis na Teachtaí Dála agus Seanadóirí eile ar an gcoiste sin, chomh maith leis an Aire.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: D'oibrigh muid as lámha a chéile go dtí seo ag iarraidh an Bille seo a chur chun cinn. Bhí agus tá muinín agam as an Aire. An uair dheireanach nuair a bhí sé anseo, d'éist sé linn agus muid ag caint, tríd ár nguthanna sa Dáil, maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta agus na chumhachtaí atá nó nach bhfuil ag an údarás. Bhí an tAire chun cruinniú a bheith aige leis an údarás, le BÁNÚ agus le cibé eagraíocht eile. Thug sé gealltanais shollúnta dúinn go ndéanadh sé sin. Chuir mé mo mhuinín san Aire. Maidir le cuid de na leasuithe seo, is dócha go raibh Sinn Féin sásta gan iad a chur chun cinn mar chuir muid ár gcuid muiníne san Aire. Ba mhaith liom go ndéarfadh an tAire cúpla focal faoin méid a tharla idir an uair dheireanach a bhí sé os ár gcomhair agus anocht.

Maidir leis an leasú seo, ní thuigim an fáth a bhfuil an Rialtas in aghaidh leasuithe mar seo. Is rud thar a bheith simplí é go mbeidh tionól ann bliain tar éis an Acht a bheith achtaithe chun cluas éisteachta a thabhairt do chosmhuintir na Gaeltachta ar an dtalamh. Is dócha gurb í an teachtaireacht is láidre atá cloiste againn ná go bhfuil an cluas bhodhar faighte acu go dtí seo, go háirithe ó thaobh chúrsaí pleanála agus tithíochta. I gcomhthéacs phleanáil teanga, tá easpa cinnteachta agus rudaí mar sin. Tá an cluas bhodhar á tabhairt. Is bealach dearfach é seo chun fóram a chur ar fáil ionas go mbeidh muid in ann éisteacht leo, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs Údarás na Gaeltachta agus an bhoird. Stopfaidh mé ag an bpointe seo. B'fhéidir go bhfuil freagra dearfach ag an Aire.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí Dála as na leasuithe seo. Ón uair dheireanach a bhí mé anseo, bhí cruinniú agam le príomhfheidhmeannach Údarás na Gaeltachta agus cathaoirleach Údarás na Gaeltachta faoi chúrsaí tithíochta amháin agus faoi na pleananna a bhí acu agus an plan atá á réiteach acu. Tharla rud agus chaill mé seachtain mar gheall ar rud pearsanta. Mar sin, ní raibh seans agam aon chruinniú eile a bheith agam, ach beidh cruinnithe eile agam. Beidh cruinniú agam leis an Aire tithíochta, an Teachta Browne, roimh dheireadh na míosa seo. Ní hamháin go bpléifidh muid na treoirlínte Gaeltachta ach pléifidh muid na cumhachtaí atá ann sa dlí pleanála nua faoi chúrsaí Gaeilge agus faoi na treoirlínte nua atá ann. Scrúdóidh muid iad agus b'fhéidir go mbainfidh muid úsáid astu.

Tá mé chun cruinniú a bheith agam le príomhfheidhmeannaigh na n-údarás áitiúla sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá seachtar acu ann. Beidh cruinniú agam leis an ngrúpa príomhfheidhmeannach sin. Tá mé ag ceapadh go dtarlóidh a lán de na cruinnithe sin sula dtiocfaidh muid ar ais chun Céim na Tuarascála a dhéanamh.

Gabhaim chomhghairdeas leis an Teachta Connolly as a bheith tofa mar Chathaoirleach ar an gcoiste Gaeilge nua. Beidh seans againn na nithe seo a phlé ansin. Gabhaim buíochas chomh maith le hiarChathaoirleach an choiste sin, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh.

Bhí cruinniú an-suimiúil agam le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta. Tuigim anois an plean. Oibreoidh sé le mo Roinn agus leis na hoifigigh i mo Roinn, mar aon leis na hoifigigh sa Roinn tithíochta. Tá mé chun cruinniú a bheith agam le BÁNÚ, le TINTEÁN agus le Conradh na Gaeilge sna céad seachtainí eile le go mbeidh plean againn. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais go dtí an dream seo atá sa Chamber mar is iad a bhfuil an tsuim is mó acu sa réimse seo. B'fhéidir go mbeidh seans againn cruinniú neamhfhoirmiúil a bheith againn. Tá mé an-sásta teacht os comhair an chomhchoiste nuair atá sé bunaithe, ní hamháin chun cúrsaí tithíochta a phlé, ach aon rud a bhaineann le mo Roinn a phlé freisin.

Is é sin an saghas update ón oíche dheireanach faoi na leasuithe seo. Níl mé ag iarraidh gach leasú a dhiúltú. Ní hé sin mo bhealach. Bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an díospóireacht sin. Is tábhachtach go dtuigeann muid go bhfuil na coistí réigiúnacha an-tábhachtach i gcomhthéacs a lán de na rudaí a dúirt na Teachtaí Ó Snodaigh agus McGuinness. B'fhéidir go mbeidh na coistí réigiúnacha in ann cúrsaí cosúil leis an oifig an phoist sa Rinn a phlé. Ní bheadh mórán suime ag muintir Chonamara in oifig an phoist na Rinne, ach is cinnte go mbeadh cuid mhór suime ag an gcoiste réigiúnach é sin a phlé. Luíonn roinnt de na rudaí eile leis na húdaráis áitiúla. Tá mé ag ceapadh, le leasú amháin i ndiaidh leasaithe eile, nach bhfuil mé ag iarraidh éalú a thabhairt do na húdaráis áitiúla ón jab go gcaithfidh siad déanamh. Níl mé ag iarraidh na dualgais sin a thabhairt go dtí an údarás.

Maidir leis an méid a léigh an Teachta McGuinness, tá sé iontach an méid atá ag tarlú sa Rinn. Is obair mhuintir na Rinne agus obair an údaráis is cúis leis sin. Is iontach go raibh siad in ann béim a chur ar chúrsaí tionscadail agus cúrsaí fiontair agus go raibh siad in ann pleananna a dhéanamh. Sheas siad leis na daoine a bhunaigh na gnóthaí sin agus chuidigh siad leo. Tá jab le déanamh ag an údarás. Tá sé leagtha amach go réasúnta. Tá sé fós tábhachtach. Tá sé iontach go bhfuil rudaí chomh hiontach ansin ach b'fhéidir nach mbeidh siad amach anseo agus beidh an t-údarás in ann seasamh le muintir na Roinne chun poist agus comhlachtaí nua a chur le chéile. Tá dainséar ann má thugaimid jabanna breise don údarás nach mbeidh an bhéim sin ann. Táimid ag teacht ar ais agus ar ais go dtí an pointe sin.

Maidir le cúrsaí freagrachta agus daonlathais, tá an toghchán ann. Caithfidh gach duine sa Teach seo agus gach duine sna húdaráis áitiúla dul os comhair ár bpobal roimh gach toghchán. Mura bhfuilimid ag déanamh ár gcuid oibre, beimid imithe agus sin é an bealach a dhéantar é. Tá freagracht ann trí chóras an toghcháin agus go gcaithfidh daoine obair a dhéanamh. Freisin, tá mise mar Aire freagrach don Dáil, don Seanad agus don choiste mar gheall ar an obair atáimid ag déanamh sa Roinn. Mar sin tá freagracht ann sna cúrsaí sin freisin. Níl mé in ann glacadh leis an leasú seo. Dírím ar ais chuig na coistí réigiúnacha a mbeidh in ann cuidiú le grúpaí áitiúla le cúrsaí áitiúla i gcásanna nuair atá difríochtaí b'fhéidir. Caithfidh na húdaráis áitiúla seasamh suas freisin agus gach cuid de chúrsaí áitiúla agus an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht a chosaint.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá sé go maith gur cuireadh tús leis na comhráit maidir le tithíocht. Arís, tá súil agam go bhfeicfear na treoirlínte am éigin i mbliana mar tá sé chomh fada sin ó gealladh iad. Tá a fhios agam trí dhéileáil leis an Aire agus leis na hAirí Gaeltachta eile nach bhfuil an locht orthu in a lán slite in ainneoin go gcuireann na hAirí tithíochta an locht orthu toisc an mhoill. Tá fadhbanna maidir le heisceacht a dhéanamh as ceantair Ghaeltachta i gcomparáid le ceantair eile atá ag lorg plean níos cuimsithí maidir le tithíocht ina gceantair féin. Táimid ag déileáil le seoid ar leith anseo áfach agus má chaillimid an tseoid seo, sin é. Ní féidir í a athchruthú. Mar sin, tá cosaint ar leith ag teastáil. Nuair a théann tú siar go dtí an reachtaíocht a bhí ann i dtús báire nuair a bunaíodh Údarás na Gaeltachta agus an tAcht a

ritheadh in 1978, d'aithin iad siúd a chur le chéile é seo. D'aithin siad, toisc feachtas chearta sibhialta na Gaeltachta, go raibh gá le húdarás agus go mbeadh feidhmeanna ar leith aige. In ainneoin nach raibh sé leagtha síos go beacht, luaitear in alt 9 san Acht seo go bhfuil sé mar fheidhm bhreise ag an údarás “chun forbairt na Gaeltachta a chur chun cinn ó thaobh teanga, cultúir, sóisialachta, gnéithiúlachta agus geilleagair”. Tiofadh mé ar ais go dtí na bunfhadhbanna arís.

Sna blianta ina dhiaidh sin, díriodh isteach i dtús báire ar an bhfadhb ba bhunúsaí a bhí ann, is é sin nach raibh fostaíocht ann chun muintir na háite a choimeád sna ceantair sin. Is í sin an fhadhb ba bhunúsaí in 1978 agus 1979. Na daoine a d'aithin agus a chur an fhadhb sin chun cinn ná an pobal áitiúil, pobal na Gaeltachta, ní an Rialtas ná na húdaráis áitiúla. Ní hiadsan a tháinig chun tosaigh leis na fadhbanna seo. Bhí aitheantas ann go raibh stádas ar leith ag pobal na Gaeltachta. Bhí aitheantas ann gur thuig siad a gceantair.

Aithním agus molaim na coistí réigiúnacha agus tá leasú eile agam maidir leo siúd ach beidh siad ag tarlú diaidh ar ndiaidh. Beidh na coistí sin ag déileáil le ceisteanna nuair a dhúntar oifig an phoist má tharlaíonn sé sin. Is é sin an sórt jab atá acu - cosaint a dhéanamh ar rudaí mar seo agus déileáil le cúrsaí ó lá go lá, gach trí mhí nó pé uair a bhíonn na cruinnithe ann. Cosúil leis na comhdhálacha saoránach eile atá tar éis tarlú, agus bhí ceann ann maidir le drugaí agus coinbhinsiún ar an mBunreacht chomh maith a rinne déileáil le réimse rudaí, an cheist atá an-seo, áfach, ná go mbeadh an comhthionól saoránach seo sna ceantair Ghaeltachta agus an jab a bheadh aige ná a fhiosrú cad iad na feidhmeanna breise ar ghá a liostáil nach bhfuil tugtha ag an Rialtas don údarás go dtí seo.

In alt 9 sa bhunreachtáíocht, bhí sé i gceist go dtabharfaí na cumhachtaí sin le hordú ón Rialtas. Ní raibh gá go mbeadh reachtáíocht nua ann. Is é sin an bunchoincheap a bhí ann. Bhí aitheantas ann go raibh na fadhbanna seo ann agus gurb é seo an bealach chun tabhairt fúthu. Anois agus muid beagnach 50 bliain níos déanaí, caithfidh an t-údarás nó muidne mar Theachtaí i gcóras daonlathais díriú isteach ar cheisteanna nua agus b'fhéidir roinnt do na seanceisteanna a bhí ann agus ansin tabhairt faoi na fadhbanna sin a leigheas. Leag mé síos roinnt de na fadhbanna a thuig mise ón taobh amuigh. B'fhéidir go bhfuil tuiscint níos fearr ag an Aire. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil tuiscint níos fearr ag an Teachta McGuinness atá in aice liom. Tá sé níos gafa le ceantair Ghaeltachta ná mar atá mise agus mé lonnaithe i mBaile Átha Cliath ach ní hé sin le rá go bhfuil aineolas orm mar tá na feachtais nó na grúpaí difriúla tar éis roinnt dóibh seo a chur chun tosaigh ag Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus Pobal Labhartha na Gaeilge thar na blianta agus fiú roimhe sin agus mé ag buaileadh agus ag déileáil le ceist na Gaeilge leis na cianta. Tá mé den tuairim gur gá dúinn díriú isteach air sin.

Luaigh mé an taighde a rinneadh roimhe seo maidir le pobal na Sámi. Ní hé Parlaimint na Sámi an t-aon a bhfuil cumhachtaí nó aige nó plé á dhéanamh. In ainneoin nach bhfuil aon eagrais eile díreach cosúil le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta, tá eagrais eile ar fud na hEorpa, idir eagrais stáit agus neamhrialtais, a bhfuil ról difriúla acu. Tá roinnt acu ag déileáil le cúrsaí timpeallachta, cúrsaí meáin, an comhionannas, cearta daonna nó forbairt inmharthanachta. Fiú na grúpaí sin, tá siad ag déileáil le ceantair imeallacha agus déanann siad déileáil le cúrsaí oideachais. Mar sin seachas an tacaíocht bhreise a thugann Údarás na Gaeltachta do na cúrsaí nó na coláistí samhraidh agus b'fhéidir beagáinín eile ó thaobh cuidiú le daoine atá ag lonnú sa Ghaeltacht teacht ar an teanga féin, níl aon phlé ar, nó ní cuid de bhunról an údaráis faoi láthair é, caiteachas maidir le cúrsaí oideachais sa Ghaeltacht. Tá agus beidh níos mó á dhéanamh aige. Tá ról lárnach ag an údarás agus aithníodh sin i bpobal oideachais na Gaeltachta. In ainneoin sin, áfach, tá an ról lárnach ó thaobh oideachais fós leis an Roinn oideachais agus ní cóir

go mbeadh sé ciotrúnta ar cad atá á aithint ag an bpobal áitiúil nó ag an údarás áit atá bearnaí i gceist, agus mar an gcéanna le rudaí eile. Déanadh aitheantas nuair a bhí muid ag déileáil leis an Acht pleanála anuraidh go raibh gá le stádas ar leith. Ní dheachaigh an Stát chomh fada is a shíl mise gur chóir dó dul. Ba chóir go mbeadh i bhfad Éireann níos mó de ról ag an údarás. Tá ról breise aige. Aithnímid é sin agus tá súil againn gurb é sin ceann de na fáthanna go bhfuil na húdaráis áitiúla ag tabhairt aird ar na fadhbanna pleanála ar deireadh thiar thall. Níl muinín agam go ndéanann na húdaráis áitiúla aon rud ach an minimum faoi láthair. Tá i bhfad Éireann níos mó ná an minimum ag teastáil chun déileáil leis an ngéarchéim atá sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá i bhfad Éireann níos mó cur chuige agus infheistíochta ag teastáil. Ní thiocfaidh sé sin ó na húdaráis áitiúla, mar tá a lán acu i ngéarchéim maoinithe cheana féin agus níl an t-airgead breise acu. Caithfidh na húdaráis áitiúla é sin a roinnt de réir mar a deir na comhairleoirí áitiúla leo. Má tá ceist maidir le bóthar, córas séarachais nó a leithéid, má tá an t-airgead le caitheamh, is ar bhonn daonlathach ag an gcomhairle áitiúil nó de réir tosaíochtaí phríomhfheidhmeannach na comhairle sin a tharlóidh sé. Is í sin an áit a dtarlaíonn an neamhaird nó an easpa cur chuige maidir le ceantair imeallacha Ghaeltachta le lucht vótála an-bheag nach bhfuil láidir go leor chun tromlach nó tionchar iomlán a bheith acu ar na comhairlí áitiúla. Is é sin an fáth go raibh an frustrachas ann maidir leis an údarás.

Níl mise i measc na ndaoine a thug tacaíocht iomlán don choincheap go mbeadh comhairle nó údarás áitiúil ar leith ann bunaithe do na ceantair Ghaeltachta ar fad. Níor shíl mé go mbeadh sé praiticiúil, ach is é sin an léiriú a bhí ann, go raibh frustrachas ann go raibh sé chomh dona ag an stad sin cúpla bliain ó shin, go raibh roinnt ball de Chonradh na Gaeilge agus eagraíochtaí eile ag rá gurbh é sin an t-aon bhealach le cinntiú go mbeadh údarás áitiúil éigin ag díriú isteach air agus ag tabhairt faoi na fadhbanna bunúsacha a aithníodh ansin. Tá rudaí tar éis dul in olcas ó shin, go háirithe maidir le tithíocht. Gan chur chuige, gan chiste ar leith agus gan chur chuige Rialtais chun tacú agus treorú a dhéanamh ar an maoin nó na projects móra gur gá tarlú tríd an gcomhairle áitiúil ag an stad seo, de bharr an easpa muiníne sna comhairlí áitiúla, rachaidh rudaí in olcas ó thaobh infreastruchtúir, séarachais, uisce, bóithre, céanna agus gach rud eile ar an liosta. Tá daoine eile sa Teach seo atá i bhfad Éireann níos cáilithe ná mise chun daoine a threorú air sin.

Tagraím do bhuninfreastruchtúr an chomhphobail. Má theiptear siopaí a mhealladh i gceantair áirithe nó má dhúntar siopa an phoist, búistéir nó gruaigeadóir agus an áit á tréigeadh acu, tá fadhb bhunúsach ann. Is é sin an fáth gurb é an bealach is tapúla chun iad seo a cheangal isteach le chéile ná tríd an gcomhthionól atá á lua againn sa leasú seo. Comhthionól saoránach a bheadh i gceist a thabharfadh tuairisc laistigh de 18 mí i ndiaidh achtú na reachtaíochta seo. Ansin bheadh orainn plean a chothú chun déileáil leis sin. Más gá is féidir reachtaíocht bhreise a thabhairt isteach chun na feidhmeanna sin a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, nó mar a luaigh mé agus mé ag tagairt don bhunalt, treoir Rialtais a cur i bhfeidhm, más gá. Ní gá ach treoir Rialtais a chur i bhfeidhm. Caithfidh an maoiniú teacht le treoir Rialtais. Tá mé fós gafa leis an moladh seo.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Luaigh an tAire na treoirlínte pleanála Gaeltachta. Mar a dúirt mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, táimid ag feitheamh leis na blianta leis na treoirlínte sin. Tá ár gceantair Ghaeltachta i gcrúachas i ndáiríre. Tá clanna óga ach go háirithe i gcrúachas mar gheall ar easpa tithíochta. Tá sé seo pléite againn go mion minic sa Teach seo de bharr theip an Rialtais tithíocht inacmhainne agus shóisialta a fhorbairt sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Anuas air sin, theip ar an Rialtas creatlach chuimsitheach a bheith ar fáil ionas gur féidir leis na húdaráis áitiúla cead pleanála a thabhairt do chlanna óga sna ceantair seo. Is daoine iad

seo a bhfuil gaol acu leis an gceantar agus atá, i go leor cásanna, ag obair sa cheantar agus ar tógadh sa cheantar seo iad, ach ní féidir leo bheith ina gcónaí sa cheantar nó a bpáistí a thógaint sa cheantar. Caithfimid dul i ngleic leis sin.

An bhfuil amlíne ag an Aire maidir le cathain a fhoilseofar na treoirlínte pleanála Gaeltachta? Táimid ag feitheamh le tamall an-fhada. Aontaím leis an Aire nár cheart dúinn ligint leis na húdaráis áitiúla, leis an bhfeidhmeannas sláinte, leis na gardaí nó leis An Post gan a bheith freagrach ar na pobail ar bhonn náisiúnta. Mar gheall ar an tslí ar bunaíodh Údarás na Gaeltachta, is féidir an argóint sin a chasadh siar. An bhfuilimid ag ligint leis an IDA, le Enterprise Ireland agus leis na hoifigí fiontraíochta áitiúla timpeall na tíre gan a bheith freagrach díreach mar go bhfuil Údarás na Gaeltachta ag cruthú fostaíochta agus fiontraíochta? Ní dóigh liom go bhfuilimid. Tá an t-údarás ann ar an tuiscint go raibh cás ar leith sna ceantair Ghaeltachta, agus go bhfuil tábhacht ar leith dár náisiún agus dár dtír na ceantair Ghaeltachta a choimeád beo. Tá siad ag díriú isteach ar fhadhb a bhí ann sna 1980idí agus 1990idí cur leis an méid fostaíochta agus fiontraíochta sna ceantair seo. Tá obair fós le déanamh ina leith sin i gceantair áirithe.

Is é an pointe a bhí á dhéanamh agam níos luaithe ná go bhfuil an deacracht tar éis athrú. Níl ár gceantair Ghaeltachta i mbaol de dheasca easpa fostaíochta agus fiontraíochta; tá siad i mbaol de dheasca easpa tithíochta, seirbhísí poiblí agus na rudaí a ndéanann áiteanna tarraingteach do chlanna óga cur fúthu sna ceantair sin. Is cinnte go bhfuil áiteanna Ghaeltachta ina bhfuil tuilleadh fiontraíochta agus fostaíochta de dhíth. Nílím ag rá nach amhlaidh, ach an ganntanas is mó atá ann do dhaoine ná cúrsaí tithíochta. Is é sin an pointe a raibh á dhéanamh agam. Má táimid chun Údarás na Gaeltachta a choimeád mar eagrais atá dírithe ar aonaid Gteic a chruthú, tacú le monarchana teacht isteach sna ceantair, páirceanna gnó a bhunú agus tacú le hábhar fiontraíochta agus fostaíochta amháin - cé go bhfuil sé sin go léir an-tábhachtach, ní cheart go mbeadh sé mar an t-aon sprioc amháin nó an fheidhm is mó ag Údarás na Gaeltachta - an bhfuilimid i ndáiríre ag freastal ar ár bpobal Gaeltachta? Ní dóigh liom go bhfuilimid. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil an taobh seo den Teach ag iarraidh go mbeadh níos mó feidhmeanna ag Údarás na Gaeltachta chun dul i ngleic leis na rudaí eile sa tslí a bhfuil sé tar éis dul i ngleic le cúrsaí fostaíochta agus fiontraíochta thar na blianta nuair a bhí sé sin mar an baol nó riosca ba mhó dár bpobal Gaeltachta. Ba chóir go mbeadh sé anois in ann dul i ngleic le seirbhísí poiblí, cúrsaí tithíochta agus cúrsaí pleanála. Níl sé sin le rá go mbeadh sé ag déanamh obair an fheidhmeannas sláinte, obair na ngardaí nó obair na n-údarás áitiúil, ach go mbeadh sé ag comhoibriú leo, ag cur brú orthu, go mbeadh sé ag déanamh stocaireachta agus ionadaíochta ar ár bpobal agus go mbeadh sé ag cinntiú go bhfuil cás na Gaeltachta cloiste go láidir ag na heagrais Stáit maidir le pé pleananna atá á ndéanamh acu. An tslí is fusa chun é sin a dhéanamh ná bord iomlán daonlathach a bheith ann ina bhfuil baill thofa freagrach dá bpobail. Níor glacadh leis na leasuithe sin. Tá sé sin déanta, ach anois an leasú atá againn ná go mbeadh an fóram nó tionól sin ann laistigh de bhliain amháin ionas gur féidir le daoine teacht isteach agus úinéireacht nó smacht a bheith acu ar an eagrais atá bunaithe díreach chun freastal orthu. Sin an leasú atá os ár gcomhair.

Tá an Teachta Ó Cearúil imithe ón Teach anois, ach teastaíonn uaim a chur ar an taifead go nguím rath air agus é ceaptha anois mar urlabhraí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta Fhianna Fáil. Impím air dul i dteagmháil leis na pobail Ghaeltachta mar níl siad pioc sásta leis an mBille seo. Níl na ceanneagraíochtaí, Conradh na Gaeilge nó na hoifigigh pleanála teanga sásta. Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil roinnt mhaith daoine laistigh d'Údarás na Gaeltachta sásta, le bheith macánta. Tá daoine le fis laistigh den eagraíocht sin atá ag iarraidh níos mó a dhéanamh chun freastal ar na pobail Ghaeltachta. Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil siad sásta. Tá seans nach bhfuil siad á rá é sin i gcrúinnithe leis an Aire agus nach bhfuil sé fíor do gach uile dhuine laistigh den údarás ach caithfimid

éisteacht leis na daoine a bhfuil an saineolas agus an taithí acu agus an rud ceart a dhéanamh leis an leasú seo agus leis an mBille ina iomláine.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I dtús báire, níor thug an tAire aon chúis nach bhfuil sé sásta glacadh leis an leasú sin. Is dócha go bhfuil eagla ag an gcóras roimh thuilleadh daonlathais. Níor glacadh le leasú a chinnteodh go mbeidh cruinniú poiblí ag an údarás gach uile mhí. Leis an leasú seo, bheadh cruinniú amháin in aghaidh na bliana chun cluas éisteachta a thabhairt do dhaoine. Níl aon fhreagracht eile i gceist. Níl aon dualgas eile i gceist. Níl muid ag cur tuilleadh brú ar an údarás seachas chun éisteacht le daoine ar an talamh agus fóram mar sin a thabhairt dóibh. Is dócha go bhfuil eagla ar an Rialtas roimh thuilleadh daonlathais ach b'fhéidir go bhfuil mé mícheart. Má tá, cuirfidh mé mo lámha suas ach is é sin an chuma atá ar an scéal. Ag dul tríd an bpróiseas seo, níl an Rialtas sásta le haon leasú a thugann tuilleadh trédhearcachta don phróiseas. Is é sin an rud atá ag teastáil. Dhiúltaigh an tAire leis an leasú roimhe seo, a bhain le cruinniú poiblí, agus araile.

Rinne an tAire pointí ginearálta agus gabhaim buíochas leis astu. Chuaigh sé i dteagmháil le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus beidh sé ag dul ar ais. Beidh sé ag bualadh le TINTEÁN agus BÁNÚ agus ag dul ar ais go dtí na húdaráis áitiúla. An mbeidh sé sin déanta roimh Chéim na Tuarascála because is é sin an rud-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: Táim ag iarraidh go mbeidh.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tuigim. Tá tábhacht leis sin. Bhíomar sásta géilleadh le cuid de na leasuithe. Bhí an formhór acu curtha isteach ag Sinn Féin agus bhí cúpla ceann agam féin. Aontaím le formhór na leasuithe. Bhíomar go léir sásta géilleadh le cuid acu mar thug an tAire a bhriathar go dtiocfadh sé ar ais agus go mbeadh tuilleadh deiseanna againn sa Fhreasúra ag Céim na Tuarascála. I ndáiríre, braitheann sé ar an méid atá le rá ag Údarás na Gaeltachta faoi na fadhbanna agus constaicí atá aitheanta aige. Dar liom, tá neart cumhachtaí ann ach ní saineolaí mé. Ba mhaith liom a fháil amach ón Aire cad iad na fadhbanna atá ag an údarás agus cad é an bealach chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh agus an t-údarás a láidriú ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta. Má leanaimid ar aghaidh leis an mBille seo agus an t-aon mhír atá ann ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta, beidh sé go dona because, sa mhír sin, níl i gceist ach cumhacht shoiléir a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta talamh a dhíol do approved housing bodies. Is é sin an t-aon rud atá curtha isteach ag an Rialtas ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta. Ní leor é sin. I ndáiríre, níl mé sásta leis sin a bheag nó a mhór. Más rud é go mbeimid in ann, tar éis na gcrúinnithe, leasuithe a chur chun cinn le chéile chun an Bille a láidriú agus aitheantas a thabhairt don ghéarchéim atá ar an talamh, bheinn sásta. Ba mhaith liom obair as lámh a chéile leis an Aire ach braitheann sé ar an bpróiseas as seo amach. Ba chóir go mbeidh na cruinnithe sin críochnaithe, go mbeidh sé soiléir cad atá á rá ag na heagraíochtaí ar an talamh agus go mbeimid in ann na leasuithe cuí a chur chun cinn ag an leibhéal sin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Ar an gcéad dul síos, tá mórán measa agam ar an triúr Teachta. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil mé ag glacadh leis na leasuithe ach, mar gheall ar an meas sin, ní bheimid ag teacht ar ais le haghaidh an chéad Chéim eile sula mbeidh cruinnithe againn faoi chúrsaí tithíochta leis na grúpaí agus leis an údarás. Mura bhfuil na Teachtaí sásta, beidh seans acu leasuithe a chur síos. Ag croí an Bhille seo, táimid ag dul ar ais go dtí toghcháin a scriosadh 12 bhliain ó shin. Bhí toghcháin ann agus bhí guth agus rogha na ndaoine sa Ghaeltacht in ann dul amach. Tá sé sin ag croí an Bhille seo. Níl an Teachta in ann a rá go bhfuil eagla orainn roimh dhaonlathas agus muid ag tabhairt ar ais toghcháin ionas go mbeidh daoine in ann a rogha daoine a chur ar bhord an údaráis seachas rogha duine amháin, is é sin, an tAire.

Táimid ag teacht ar ais go dtí an difríocht atá eadrainn. Tuigim agus seasaim leis an Teachta McGuinness. Táim ag iarraidh go mbeidh daoine in ann tithe a chruthú sa Ghaeltacht agus clanna a bheith acu inti. Táim go mór i bhfabhar é sin sa Ghaeltacht agus i gceantair nach bhfuil sa Ghaeltacht freisin. Dúirt an Teachta nach raibh easpa post ann - is iontach an rud é nach bhfuil - ach go bhfuil easpa tithíochta ann. Tá fadhb mhór i leith cúrsaí tithíochta. Is páirt den fhreagra é an t-údarás ach tá eagla orm go bhfuil na Teachtaí ag rá gurb é an t-údarás an t-aon fhreagra amháin ar an bhfadhb seo. Ní hé an t-údarás an freagra ina aonar. Tá sé iontach go bhfuil cúrsaí fostaíochta chomh láidir agus atá siad ach níor tharla sé sin trí sheans. Tharla sé sin de bharr taithí fhoireann an údaráis. Bhí siad in ann seasamh le daoine a bhunaigh comhlachtaí beaga atá ina comhlachtaí móra anois. Bhí foireann an údaráis in ann seasamh leis na daoine sin a bhunaigh comhlachtaí ina bhfuil poist anois mar gheall go raibh siad dírithe ar an jab sin. B'fhéidir go bhfuil sé seo á rá agam de bharr mo sheanphoist sa Roinn fiontair ach tá sé sin an-tábhachtach. B'fhéidir go mbeidh fadhb againn le poist ag an am seo an bhliain seo chugainn. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuilim ag iarraidh go mbeimid dírithe ar phríomhról an údaráis, is é sin, cúrsaí fostaíochta, fiontair agus pleanála. Gan dabht, tá sé páirteach.

Tá suim mhór ag an údarás. Bhí cruinniú iontach agam leis an gcathaoirleach agus an príomhfheidhmeannach agus tá suim mhór acu a bheith ina bpáirt den fhreagra sin. Tá siad ag iarraidh obair leis na húdaráis áitiúla agus leis na grúpaí áitiúla chun é sin a dhéanamh. Táim buartha faoi false expectations, mar a thugtar orthu as Béarla, dá dtabharfaí na cumhachtaí seo don údarás agus dá ndéarfaí leis gurb é an freagra i leith cúrsaí tithíochta na Gaeilge. Táim buartha faoi na expectations sin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach a rá go bhfuil suim ag an bpríomhfheidhmeannach agus ag an gcathaoirleach. Bhí sé soiléir go bhfuil suim ag an mbord freisin. Ba mhaith leo a bheith ina bpáirt den fhreagra ach ní hiad an freagra ina n-aonar.

Ag dul ar ais go dtí an leasú seo, mar a dúirt mé, tá na coistí réigiúnacha ann chun na fadhbanna sna ceantair áitiúla a phlé. Caithfidh gach coiste réigiúnach tuarascáil a thabhairt do bhord an údaráis. Beidh deis ann cúrsaí áitiúla a phlé. Ní bheidh an bord ag plé cúrsaí áitiúla amháin. Beidh rudaí eile á bplé aige freisin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Níl mé chun mórán moill eile a chur air seo. Go bhfios dom, níl aon duine ag iarraidh baint ó ról an údaráis maidir le tionsclaíocht, fiontar agus mar sin de. Is ról tábhachtach é sin agus tá sé tar éis sé sin a chruthú. Ach, is é sin an ról a bhí ag Gaeltarra Éireann i dtús báire. Nuair a bunaíodh Údarás na Gaeltachta, cuireadh leis an ról. Ní gá ach féachaint ar an mbunreachtáíocht. Is í an chéad fheidhm atá ann ná:

Déanfaidh an tÚdarás caomhnú agus leathadh na Gaeilge mar phríomh-mheán cumarsáide sa Ghaeltacht a spreagadh agus cinnteoidh sé gurb í an Ghaeilge a úsáidfear a mhéid is féidir nuair a bheidh a fheidhmeanna á gcomhlíonadh aige agus thar a cheann.

Leanann sé ar aghaidh. Tá mé den tuairim – ní aontaíonn gach duine liom – go bhfuil an chumhacht ag an údarás cheana féin chun tithe a thógáil, talamh a cheannach agus talamh a chur ar cíos. Ní gá le reachtaíocht nua mar tá sé leagtha síos. Is é seo an áit a dtagann an Béarla agus an Ghaeilge i bhfeidhm. Nuair atá bunreachtáíocht i gceist, is an Ghaeilge atá níos tábhachtaí. Deir sé in alt 10(7):

Chun críocha an ailt seo, beidh de chumhacht ag an Údarás talamh, foirgnimh, margaí, áitribh nó gléasra a fháil, a ghlacadh ar aistriú, a shealbhú, a dhíol, a mhorgáistiú, a léasú, a ligean nó a dhiúscairt ar shlí eile agus foirgnimh, margaí, áitribh nó gléasra a thógáil, a athrú nó a chothabháil.

Tá an focal “áitribh” ann, a chiallaíonn áit ina bhfuil cónaí ar dhaoine. Clúdaíonn sé foirgnimh chomh maith. Níl aon ligean síos nó srian ar an údarás tithe a thógáil. Dá rachfaí go dtí an chúirt agus dá bhfiafraí cad é ata i gceist leis an bpíosa seo, is an leagan Gaeilge a bheadh i gceist. Deir sé sa leagan Béarla that it is “to maintain buildings, markets, premises or plant”. Nuair a fheiceann tú ar an bhfoclóir, tá tithe i gceist leis an bhfocal “áitribh”. Is ionann é agus habitats.

Tá gá leis an údarás talamh breise a cheannach, ní hamháin do thithe ach chun tionsclaíocht a mhealladh chomh maith. Beidh an gá sin ann i gcónaí. Nuair a thógann tú rud cosúil le monarcha anseo nó Gteic ansiúd, nó má thógann tú tithe, beidh an gá sin ann, cosúil le haon údarás eile a bhíonn ag déileáil le tithíocht nó foirgneamh a thógáil nó a cheannach. Níl an buiséad caipitil le blianta anuas mór go leor le déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an t-údarás ag cur leis an dtalamh nó an banc talún atá agus a bheidh ag teastáil uaidh. I go leor bailte, deir daoine go bhfuil go leor talaimh ag an údarás, ach tá a lán talaimh imeallaigh nach bhfuil go hiontach aige. Níl a lán acu maith go leor agus níl siad sna háiteanna ina bhfuil siad ag teastáil. Tá áiteanna eile ann. Tá sé go maith go bhfuil an talamh sin acu, áfach. Mar is eagrais Stáit é, caithfidh sé fiúntas éigin a fháil as an dtalamh, in áit é a choinneáil ar mhaithe lena choinneáil. Caithfidh talamh a bheith ag an údarás chun cur leis na haidhmeanna atá aige atá leagtha síos sa reachtaíocht.

Sa chás seo, agus tagaim ar ais go dtí an pointe seo, níl muid ag iarraidh cur as don údarás, ná do na húdaráis áitiúla ach oiread. Tá muid ag iarraidh go dtabharfar seans do ghnáthphobal na Gaeltachta, tar éis don Bhille a bheith rite. B’fhéidir go mbeidh toghchán i lár baill. Glacaim go mbeidh. Glacaim go mbeidh sé cuibheasach tapa. Is díospóireacht a bheidh i gceist maidir leis na feidhmeanna, na ról agus na rudaí ar ghá don údarás tabhairt fúthu. Ina dhiaidh sin, cuirfidh pé Aire atá sa ról sin ag an am - b’fhéidir gur an tAire reatha a bheidh ann – plean le chéile le díriú isteach air seo. B’fhéidir nach mbainfidh roinnt de na hábhair a bheidh ardaithe sna cruinnithe sna chomhthionóil seo leis an údarás in aon chor. B’fhéidir nach mbeidh aon duine ag iarraidh cur leis seachas cancrán amháin ar chúl an tseomra. Sa deireadh thiar thall, is é sin an daonlathas. Bheifí ag tabhairt seans dóibh ceisteanna a ardú agus freagraí a fháil. Is rud iomlán difriúil atá i gceist leis na coistí réigiúnacha. Is cuid de ghnáthoibreachas an údaráis a bheidh ann. Beidh na coistí ag déileáil le conas is féidir cinntí atá glactha ag bord an údaráis nó ag an Rialtas a chur i bhfeidhm. Ní hé go mbeidh siad á lorg seo ó thús. Níor chóir go mbeadh eagla ar aon duine roimh a leithéid. Níl ann ach bealach chun na tuairimí atá ag an bpobal a mheas.

Mar a dúirt mé, ghlac mé páirt sa choinbhinsiún bunreachtúil agus chonaic muid ar fad na torthaí ó na tionóil shaoránach nó citizens’ assemblies. Níl eagla ar aon duine roimh díospóireacht. Is é sin an méid a bheidh ann, is é sin, díospóireacht agus tuairisc á sheoladh ar ais chuig an Aire, an Dáil nó an t-údarás ag leagan amach na rudaí atá de dhíth. Is féidir ansin a rá go bhfuil nithe áirithe indéanta, go bhfuil gá le hairgead breise chun nithe eile a dhéanamh agus go bhfuil rudaí eile nach bhfuil inbhainte amach ach gur féidir a chur ar aghaidh chuig an bord sláinte nó an Roinn Oideachais le go ndíreodh siadsan orthu. Sin a bhfuil i gceist leis an leasú seo. Is trua nach bhfuil an tAire sásta glacadh leis.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Cén bealach a seasann an leasú?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá mé á bhrú.

Cuireadh an leasú agus faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis diúltú dó.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Bogfaidh muid ar aghaidh go leasú Uimh. 21, atá in ainmneacha na dTeachtaí Ó Snodaigh agus McGuinness. Tuigim gur pléadh an leasú seo cheana in éineacht le leasú Uimh. 15. Cén bealach a seasann an leasú sin?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: An é seo leasú Uimh. 15?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Bhí leasú Uimh. 21 i ngrúpa le leasú Uimh. 15. Is leasú Uimh. 21 atá idir lámha againn, atá in ainmneacha na dTeachtaí Ó Snodaigh agus McGuinness. Pléadh cheana fhéin é le leasú Uimh. 15.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 21:

Ar leathanach 13, idir líne 8 agus líne 9, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“Leasú ar alt 8 den Phríomh-Acht

7. Leasaítear alt 8 den Phríomh-Acht tríd an bhfo-alt seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh fho-alt (9):

“(10) (a) Déanfaidh an tÚdarás iniúchadh ar fhadhbanna bonneagair sa Ghaeltacht, le haire ar na córais iompair, uisce, séarachais, fuinnimh, leictreachais, agus cumarsáide, agus an tionchar atá acu ar inmharthanacht sna pobail Gaeltachta, ar sholáthar tithíochta agus ar fhorbairt tionscail, agus déanfaidh sé tuarascáil a fhoilsiú nach déanaí ná sé mhí tar éis an tAcht seo a achtú ina liostófar moltaí ina leith agus ina léireofar an maoiniú a bheadh ag teastáil ó Chiste ar leith faoi chúram an Údaráis chun tabhairt faoi na fadhbanna seo a réiteach agus inmharthanacht na Gaeltachta a chinntiú.

(b) Déanfaidh an tAire ráiteas a fhoilsiú nach déanaí ná sé mhí tar éis fhoilsiú na tuarascála de réir mhír (a) ag sonrú gach gnímh atá glactha nó atá le glacadh ag an Aire agus ag eagrais stáit chun na moltaí a chur i bhfeidhm.”

Cuireadh an leasú agus faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis diúltú dó.

ALT 7

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Tá leasú Uimh. 22 as ord.

Níor tairgeadh leasú Uimh. 22.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Tá leasú Uimh. 23 in ainm an Aire, an Teachta Calleary. Tá leasuithe Uimh. 23 go 36, go huile, bainteach lena chéile.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabh mo leithscéal. An féidir na leasuithe sin atá le chéile a athrá?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Is leasuithe Uimh. 23 go 36, go huile, atá á bplé againn. Bhí muid ar leasú Uimh. 22, a bhí as ord.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Le cead an Chathaoirligh Gníomhaigh, is mian liom cúpla focal a rá maidir le leasú Uimh. 22.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Níl mé cinnte. Ní dóigh liom

gur féidir nuair atá leasú as ord. Déanfaidh mé seiceáil mar tá mé nua leis seo. Ag deireadh na leasuithe i gcomhair alt 7, beidh deis ag an Teachta teacht isteach le labhairt faoin alt é féin. Is é seo an chéad uair dom é seo a dhéanamh agus tá mé beagáinín cúramach faoi. Tá muid tar éis bogadh ar aghaidh ar aon chuma chuig leasú Uimh. 23. Tuigim go bhfuil leasuithe Uimh. 23 go 36, go huile, gaolta lena chéile agus go bhfuil rangú molta le haghaidh díospóireachta. Tá siad in ainm an Aire.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá leasú amháin i measc an ghrúpa sin in ainm an Teachta Ó Snodaigh.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Iarraim ar an Aire leasú Uimh. 23 a bhogadh.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 23:

Ar leathanach 13, líne 19, “6 chomhalta” a scriosadh agus “7 gcomhalta” a chur ina ionad.

Ba mhaith liom a lua ag an bpointe seo go bhfuilim ag breathnú ar cúpla leasú féideartha eile a thabhairt isteach ar Chéim na Tuarascála. Baineann an chéad cheann féideartha le sprioc earcaíochta Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, is é sin go mbeidh 20% díobh siúd a earcaítear chuig comhlachtaí poiblí inniúil i nGaeilge faoi dheireadh 2030. Féachfar leis an leasú féideartha seo a chinntiú go bhfuiltear siúd a éiríonn leo ardú céime inmheánach a bhaint amach, de thoradh uasoiliúna sa teanga agus a leithéid, sa chomhaireamh don sprioc earcaíochta 20% seo. Tá sé seo ag teacht le holl-aidhm na forála agus go deimhin an Achta, is é sin, go mbeidh líon dóthanach foirne ag comhlachtaí poiblí chun seirbhísí poiblí méadaithe agus feabhsaithe trí Ghaeilge a chur ar fáil don phobal.

Sa chomhthéacs seo, tá sé an-tábhachtach go ndéanfar gach rud is féidir le spreagadh a thabhairt do chomhlachtaí poiblí agus d’fhostaithe reatha na hearnála poiblí i gcomhthéacs uasoiliúint Ghaeilge a éascú. Más féidir uasoiliúint a dhéanamh anois, go háirithe ag na gráid níos sóisearaí, ciallaíonn sé go mbeidh líon níos mó daoine le Gaeilge ar fáil chun glacadh leis na gráid níos sinsearaí sna blianta amach romhainn i dtreo na sprice 20%. Tá an-chuid staitisticí dearfacha ann sa spás seo anois le tacú leis an méid seo, idir an méadú suntasach atá tagtha agus atá ag teacht ar líon na ndaoine atá ag glacadh páirte i gcúrsaí oiliúna Gaeilge san earnáil phoiblí le blianta beaga anuas – d’ardaigh an figiúr sa Státseirbhís 123% idir earrach 2022 agus earrach 2025 - agus an líon ard a luaigh sa suirbhé don phlean náisiúnta gur mian leo cur lena n-inniúlacht sa teanga.

Is iad na leasuithe féideartha eile atá á bhfiosrú agam faoi láthair ná: seasamh na gceann comhairimh i gcomhthéacs fhorálacha Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003 a chinntiú; agus lipéid tagartha Choimisiún na Meán sa reachtaíocht sin a leasú ó Bhéarla go Gaeilge.

Rachaidh coiste réigiúnach i gcomhairle le grúpaí pleanála teanga sa limistéar ina leith a mbunófar an coiste chun comhairle a thabhairt don údarás agus chun cuidiú leis i gcomhlíonadh a fheidhmeanna sa limistéar sin. Léiríonn sé seo an ról atá ag na coistí réigiúnacha - táimid ar ais ag na coistí sin - ó thaobh na hionadaíochta de.

Is fiú a rá chomh maith go bhfuil oifigeach pleanála teanga ar bhord reatha de chuid Údarás na Gaeltachta agus go bhfuil iaroifigeach pleanála teanga air chomh maith. Mar a sheasann rudaí, ní cheapaim go bhfuil gá ar leith go mbeadh spás oscailte d’oifigeach pleanála teanga ar

na coistí. Is cinnte go mbeidh comhráite fiúntacha idir na coistí agus na grúpaí pleanála teanga. Dá bhrí sin, ní féidir liom glacadh le leasú Uimh. 24 ag an bpointe seo ach tá suim agam é a phlé.

Tá sé i gceist ag an Rialtas go mbeidh seachtar comhalta i gceist leis an gcoiste réigiúnach a dhéanann an t-alt 10A(6)(b) molta tagairt dó. Baineann an coiste réigiúnach seo le Gaeltachtaí na Gaillimhe, na Mí, agus Thuar Mhic Éadaigh. Déanadh cinneadh duine sa bhreis a chur leis an gcoiste seo chun a chinntiú go mbeidh ionadaíocht láidir ag Tuar Mhic Éadaigh. Leis an leasú seo, beidh an comhalta boird thofa i Maigh Eo mar chomhalta ar an gcoiste réigiúnach don iarthar chomh maith le coiste an tuaiscirt. Faoi láthair, ní fheicim go bhfuil aon chúis ballraíocht na gcoistí réigiúnacha eile a mhéadú. Toisc go bhfuil an leasú seo á dhéanamh, beidh gá le mionleasuithe teicniúla ar na huimhreacha a thagann ina dhiaidh agus iad uilig a athrú de réir seo. Molaim leasuithe Uimh. 23 agus 25 go 36, go huile, don Teach.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Luaigh an tAire go mbeidh leasú eile ag teacht. Dar ndóigh, déileálfaimid leis nuair a thiocfaidh sé os ár gcomhair. Tagraím don cheann maidir leis an 20% atá le teacht ar Chéim na Tuarascála. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil an Stát ag aithint an tréanaracht a bhfuil a lán dóibh siúd atá sa Státchóras ag déanamh cheana féin chun feabhas a chur ar a gcuid Gaeilge. Luadh thar na blianta go raibh gá le níos mó infheistíochta chun cuidiú leo siúd atá sa Státchóras cheana féin. Luaigh muid cúpla uair ag an gcoiste gur chóir go mbeadh cuidiú tugtha dóibh atá ag tabhairt faoi dhianchúrsaí. Más gá, ba chóir go mbeidh saoire ón obair acu chun cuidiú le hiad a thógáil go dtí an leibhéal cuí chun go mbeadh siad san áireamh sa 20%. Nuair a bhí caint ann, thuig mise i gcónaí nach iad atá nua-earcaithe isteach sa chóras amháin a bhí i gceist ach go mbeadh daoine a fhaigheann ardú céime san áireamh freisin. Caithfimid a dhéanamh cinnte de go sroichfimid an 20% sin. Níl ach cúpla bliain eile fágtha agus ní fheicim go bhfuil muid chun an 20% sin a shroicheadh. Bhí sé dúshlánach ag an tús ach beidh sé níos dúshlánaí fós de thairbhe na faidhbe bunúsaí atá ann maidir le scolaíocht ag an dara leibhéal agus an tríú leibhéal mura bhfuil cur chuige i bhfad Éireann níos dírithe chun go mbeidh níos mó daltaí ag teacht amach ó na meánscoileanna agus iad inniúil ar an nGaeilge. Níl sé sin ann agus ní bheidh sé ann má leanann leibhéal na ndíolúintí ag fás mar atá faoi láthair. Ní féidir linn brath go huile agus go hiomlán ar Ghaelcholáistí chun an 20% sin a chomhlíonadh mar tá níos mó post ann ná daoine atá ag teacht amach as na Gaelcholáistí. Tá jab fós ann ach tá sé go maith é sin a chloisteáil.

Táim fós ag fanacht ar an gcoiste comhairleach chun a leagan amach cé hiad na caighdeáin agus gach rud eile. Bhí siad sin lena bheith ann laistigh de chúpla mí den reachtaíocht a bheith rite. Tháinig an tuarascáil agus an plean náisiúnta amach roimh an Nollaig, i mí Dheireadh Fómhair seo caite. Bhí toghchán againn so ní raibh muid ar fad dírithe isteach air ach ní raibh aon spriocanna ann. Níl an rangú nó na categories sin tugtha. Tá súil agam go mbeidh sé ann laistigh de chúpla seachtain. Tá a fhios agam go raibh cruinniú eile ann i mí Aibreáin a bhí dírithe air sin. Is léir go raibh dul chun cinn éigin ag tarlú sa choiste comhairleach ach, go dtí go mbeidh sé leagtha amach go mion, tá na heagrais agus Ranna Stáit fós ag fanacht agus tá roinnt acu fós gafa leis na scéimeanna so níl a fhios ag daoine cá bhfuil siad. Má táimid chun an 20% a bhaint amach agus na seirbhísí a chruthú do Ghaeilgeoirí, caithfidh sé sin tarlú. Fágfaidh mé é sin. Tiocfaimid ar ais chuige ach tá gá lena bheith níos dírithe faoin am a thagann muid ar ais ag an 20% ar Chéim na Tuarascála.

Is é sin an rud ait faoi. Táimid ag déileáil leis an mBille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú). Cuireann muid leasuithe chun cinn atá bainteach leis seo agus deirtear linn go bhfuil siad as ord. Ansin, tagann an tAire isteach le ceann maidir le hAcht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla. Tá baint ann

ach tá sé beagáinín as alt leis an gcuid eile.

Is é an leasú a bhfuilimid ag déileáil leis anseo ná leasú dár gcuid féin, Uimh. 24. Sula labhraím faoi, nuair atá na coistí réigiúnacha seo bunaithe, ba chóir nach mbeadh na comhaltaí nua amháin orthu ach go mbeadh daoine ann a thuigeann gnéithe eile de na ceantair, a bheadh in ann cuidiú leo agus go mbeadh an t-údarás in ann brath orthu. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag rá an mhéid sin. Tá sraith daoine anois ag obair i gceantair Ghaeltachta agus sna ceantair máguaird atá dírithe ar phleanáil teanga. Ní gá go mbeidh vóta acu ach tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh siad i láthair agus go mbeadh ról acu chun go mbeadh gach uile rud fite fuaite le chéile. Ba chóir go mbeadh an t-údarás agus na hoifigigh phleanála teanga ag obair as lámh a chéile agus, nuair atá pleananna á ndéanamh, go mbeadh siad in ann an tuiscint atá acu toisc an obair atá á déanamh acu a roinnt leo siúd atá tofa nó roghnaithe ag an Aire.

Dúirt oifigeach phleanála teanga linn sa choiste go bhfuil siad ag pointe anois a bhfuil deireadh ag teacht leis na pleananna teanga a ceadáíodh ar dtús agus go dtiocfaidh deireadh le níos mó as seo go ceann bliana. Tá siad fágtha gan treoir agus gan cheannasaíocht faoin gcéad chéim eile. Tá deireadh ag teacht leis na conarthaí a bhí acu. Tá roinnt acu ag teacht chun deireadh ag tús mí Iúil. An bhfuil cinneadh déanta maidir le síneadh a chur le conarthaí na n-oifigeach phleanála teanga seo? Tá géarghá le bogadh ar na conarthaí sin, ar an ról atá ag na hoifigigh sin agus ar an maoiniú gur chóir a bheith acu. Táim ag iarraidh go mbeadh sé sin mar chuid den ról atá acu agus go mbeadh a fhios acu go gcaithfidh siad a bheith ceangailte isteach leis na coistí réigiúnacha seo agus na cinntí atá á ndéanamh ag an údarás don cheantar ina bhfuil siad ag obair.

6 o'clock

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá sé ráite ag an Aire go mbeidh sé ag teacht ar ais le sraith leasuithe ar Chéim na Tuarascála. Ceann de na leasuithe sin ná a chinntiú go mbeidh ardú céime san áireamh don 20%. Má tá daoine a bhfuil inniúlacht sa Ghaeilge acu ag lorg ardú céime laistigh den chóras agus éiríonn leo an t-ardú céime a fháil, beidh sé sin san áireamh den 20%. Ní drochrud é sin. Aontaím leis, agus ceapaim go raibh sé ann, ach bhí beagáinín doiléire i gceist. B'fhéidir go bhfuil soiléireacht ann anois, ach tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach. Beidh an coiste ag díriú isteach go géar ar an sprioc 20% agus go mbainfear amach é. Sin an rud is bunúsaí atá ag teastáil chun seirbhísí poiblí a chur ar fáil má táimid dáiríre faoin nGaeilge.

Baineann na leasuithe eile os ár gcomhair le rudaí teicniúla, ach amháin go bhfuil méadú ó sé comhalta go seacht gcomhalta i gceist.

Níor thuig mé ar tharla maidir le leasú Uimh. 24 maidir leis an oifigeach phleanála teanga atá inár n-ainmneacha. An bhfuil an tAire sásta glacadh leis sin? B'fhéidir go dtiocfaidh an tAire ar ais maidir leis sin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Ní thuigim which atá i gceist. Tá suim agam é a phlé. Táim ag iarraidh tuiscint a fháil faoi cén treoir as a bhfuil na Teachtaí ag teacht leis an leasú sin. Conas a d'oibredh sé?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is toisc gur iarradh orainn an leasú sin a dhéanamh. Tá frása “obair na gcapall” ann. Tá obair na gcapall á déanamh ag na foirne beaga ar an talamh, go háirithe na hoifigigh phleanála teanga. Ní mór dúinn éisteacht go cúramach leo, mar tá siad ag obair i gcoinníollacha nach bhfuil rómhaith i ndáiríre. Níl cinnteacht ar bith i gceist. Níl a fhios acu an mbeidh siad ann an bhliain dár gcionn ó thaobh airgid agus cinnteachta de. Sin rud amháin atá ag teastáil go géar. Tá taithí againn, nuair a bhí Aengus ina Chathaoirleach ar an

gcomhchoiste agus roimhe sin, thaisteal muid ar fud na tíre ag éisteacht le daoine. Sin an taithí atá againn. Ní saineolaithe muid. Is dócha gur fiú éisteacht leis an taithí atá ag na hoifigigh phleanála teanga i mbealach atá dearfach. Cé mhéad leasú a bheidh i gceist ag an bpointe seo?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Níl aon uimhir beartaithe agam.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Níl aon uimhir ag an Aire maidir le líon na leasuithe fós.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Mar a dúirt mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, ní thuigim cén fáth a bhfuil leasú Uimh. 22, a chuir Conradh na Gaeilge isteach ach a bhfuil ár n-ainmneacha air, as ord ach go bhfuil leasuithe an-chosúil ón Aire ceadaithe. Is dócha go bhfuil double standard de shaghas éigin i gceist. Nílím, mar Theachta Dála agus ionadaí poiblí, sásta leis sin. Ní thuigim é. Is dócha gur ceart míniú a thabhairt ar sin mar tá daoine ag féachaint air seo. Níl a lán Teachtaí sa Seomra anois, ach tá daoine ag féachaint agus beidh daoine ag féachaint siar ar an díospóireacht seo. Is dócha go mbeidh sé á phlé sna ceantair Ghaeltachta, ar Raidió na Gaeltachta, ag na hoifigigh phleanála teanga agus ag na ceanneagraíochtaí amach anseo. Ba mhaith liom an deis roinnt aiseolais a fháil air sin.

Táim ag teacht go dtí ár leasú, Uimh. 24. Aontaím go hiomlán leis na Teachtaí Connolly agus Ó Snodaigh sa mhéid a dúirt siad. Seo iad na daoine go bhfuil an dualgas orthu na pleananna atá pobalbhunaithe agus atá curtha le chéile le hionchur an pobal Gaeltachta a chur i bhfeidhm. Is iad siúd na daoine atá ag caint leis na tuismitheoirí, na daoine óga, na daoine níos sine, na daoine atá i mbun fostaíocht a chruthú agus na daoine atá ag déileáil leis an ngéarchéim tithíochta go háitiúil. I mo chás féin, i dtaobh Chomhlucht Forbartha na nDéise, is é atá tar éis an cháis seo a ardú arís agus arís eile agus atá ag déileáil leis an údarás, leis an gcomhairle áitiúil agus an Roinn tithíochta agus atá ag cur pleananna le chéile. Ba cheart go mbeadh oifigeach pleanála teanga agus ionadaithe ón bhfoireann sin iniata sna comhráite seo ar a laghad.

Is maith an rud é go bhfuil an doras oscailte ag an Aire, ach tá an leasú anseo. Tá an leasú os ár gcomhair ag an bpointe seo. Tá ciall ag baint leis. Tá an-mheas agam ar an Aire, mar is eol dó, ach tá sé ag rá go bhfuil ciall leis, go dtuigeann sé, go bhfuilimid ag caint sa tslí chéanna agus go dtuigimid go léir ar an dá thaobh den díospóireacht seo na fadhbanna céanna agus go gcaithfidimid ar an dá thaobh den Teach bheith tiomanta agus déileáil leo. Ach, i ndáiríre, tá leasuithe ciallmhara curtha síos againn. Ní leasuithe uaim agus ó na Teachtaí Ó Snodaigh, Connolly agus daoine eile nach iad amháin, ach atá ag teacht ó Chonradh na Gaeilge atá ag déileáil leis na hoifigigh phleanála teanga agus atá ag éisteacht agus i mbun comhráite fud fad na Gaeltachta tríd an bhfeachtas TINTEÁN agus uile. Níl an tAire ag glacadh ceann díobh. Ní dóigh liom gur ghlac sé le hoiread agus leasú amháin. Ní thuigim. An bhfuilimid ag imirt na polaitíochta leis an gceist seo? Tá leasuithe ciallmhara againn a rialaíodh as ord. Ní ghlacaim leis sin agus ní dóigh liom go bhfuil sé i gceart. Is maith an rud go bhfuil an doras oscailte. Cuirim fáilte roimh sin, ach tá an deis againn glacadh leis an leasú. B'fhéidir gur cóir don Aire triail a bhaint as. Ní dóigh liom go dtitfeadh an díon nó an spéir isteach orainn. Seans go bhfaigheadh an tAire glaoch feargach ón Chief Whip. Ba chóir don Aire triail a bhaint as. Bheadh sé i bhfad níos éasca don Aire agus dá oifigigh glacadh i slí amháin leis an leasú ciallmhar, réasúnta agus proifisiúnta seo atá curtha faoina mbráid anois ná teacht ar ais agus cruinnithe a dhéanamh agus comhráite a bheith acu chun leasú eile a dhéanamh a bheadh an-chosúil leis i ndáiríre díreach chun an Príomh-Aoire a choimeád sásta. Sin í mo thuairim. B'fhéidir go nglacfadh an tAire leis an gcomhairle.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá deacrachtaí ann maidir leis seo. Tá 30 oifigeach pleanála te-

anga ann, agus an bhfuil na Teachtaí ag iarraidh go mbeadh gach duine de na daoine sin ar na coistí réigiúnacha mar gur-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Duine amháin ar gach coiste réigiúnach.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Cé a phiocfadh na daoine sin? Nílím ag magadh. Táim ag iarraidh é sin a thuiscint. Tá meas mór agam ar na hoifigigh phleanála teanga. Tá siad ag déanamh an-jab agus tá an ceart ag an Teachta Connolly ó thaobh na gcoinníollacha de. Caithfidh obair a dhéanamh ar an méid sin. Beidh mé ag cur béime ar sin le linn mo chuid ama mar Aire. Táim ag iarraidh é a thuiscint. Má tá 30 oifigeach ann, cé a phiocfadh na baill? An bpiocfadh an grúpa féin iad? B'fhéidir go n-oibreodh air roimh an gcéad Chéim eile chun oibriú amach cad a oibríonn. Tá suim agam go mbeidís páirteach sna coistí réigiúnacha, de bharr - mar a dúirt an Teachta - na hoibre a bhfuil á déanamh acu. Cén chaoi a n-oibreodh sé? B'fhéidir, roimh an gcéad Chéim eile, go n-oibreodh go léir é sin amach. Táim ag rá go bhfuil suim agam go mbeidís páirteach sna coistí réigiúnacha. It is just a matter of how it works.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Glacaim leis go bhfuil an tAire ag triail a bheith praiticiúil maidir leis seo. Is ceist í seo maidir le cé a roghnódh iad, ach is féidir linn é sin a athrú chun a chinntiú gur as a stuaim féin, stuaim an ghrúpa sin nó gur an t-údarás féin a roghnódh nó a cheapfadh comhaltaí na gcoistí réigiúnacha. Tá sé sin sa reachtaíocht cheana féin. In alt 7(8) luaitear gurb é “an tÚdarás a cheapfaidh comhaltaí na gcoistí réigiúnacha” agus luaitear anseo na comhaltaí “tofa”. Dár ndóigh, beidh sé uathoibríoch más comhaltaí tofa iad. Luaitear ansin go roghnófaí “daoine is comhaltaí de cibé údaráis áitiúla a chinnfidh an tÚdarás agus a ainmneoidh an t-údarás áitiúil sa limistéar”. Mar sin, cuireann an t-údarás ainmniúchán chun cinn ach ní leagaimid síos sa reachtaíocht seo cad ar ghá don údarás áitiúil a dhéanamh nó conas ar thagann sé ar pé duine atá ann. Glacaim leis gur rud éigin dá shórt a bheadh i gceist agus gur as a stuaim féin go dtarlaíonn sé, ach más gá rialacháin a chur le chéile gur ghá dóibh cinneadh ó thaobh cruinnithe a ghlacadh. Ní bheidh na hoifigigh phleanála teanga seo ann in aon chor muna ndéantar an cinneadh chun na conarthaí nua nó na treoir nua a thabhairt agus a leithéid. Tá jab le déanamh roimh dheireadh na reachtaíochta seo ar aon chaoi le cinntiú go bhfuil siad ann.

Toisc an méid atá ráite ag an Aire, tá mise sásta ag an staid seo an leasú seo a tharraingt siar, féachaint air agus é a chur arís ar Chéim na Tuarascála ionas go mbeimid in ann a chinntiú má tá fadhb ann ó thaobh na bhfoclaíochta de gur féidir linn tabhairt faoi. Sa deireadh thiar thall, tá príomhfáth amháin go bhfuil na coistí réigiúnacha seo á bhunú. Tá ualach breise, dár ndóigh, ar na daoine seo. Caithfidh go bhfuil daoine níos fearr ag an Aire i Maigh Eo ná mar atá in áiteanna eile mar beidh na daoine seo ar dhá choiste réigiúnach agus ní gheobhaidh siad aon tuarastal breise nó aon aitheantas breise. Ní fhaca mé aon rud a léiríonn go bhfuil siad chun aitheantas breise a fháil. Tá sé tábhachtach maidir leis na daoine atá ar an gcoiste seo go bhfuil an tuiscint acu ar an obair atá ag teastáil sa cheantar sin. Is é sin an méid atá muid ag iarraidh a dhéanamh. Is mian linn cinnte a dhéanamh de nach bhfuil neamhaird á dhéanamh ar na daoine atá ag obair ar an talamh agus nach mbeidh an duine ón údarás áitiúil nó an seisear nó seachtar baill don údarás tofa nó gan a bheith tofa - níl mé ag caitheamh anuas orthu sin - ag déanamh a gcuid oibre féin. Táimid ag cinntiú go mbeadh daoine ar leith gur chóir go mbeadh ar an gcoiste réigiúnach chun cinnte a dhéanamh go bhfuil an tuiscint sin ar gach uile ghné den saol atá ag titim amach sa cheantar Gaeltachta sin á thabhairt ar aghaidh chuig an gcoiste réigiúnach agus go bhfuil siad ag pleanáil dá réir. Is minic gurb iad na daoine sa ghnáthphobal nó na daoine atá ag obair go lánaimseartha a mbíonn an tuiscint sin acu níos mó ná siúd atá ar thuarastal nó ar liúntas do chomhairleoirí. Sílimid atá tofa i gcónaí go bhfuil an t-eolas ar fad againn agus is léir nuair a théitear go dtí an toghchán nach bhfuil an t-eolas ar fad agat. Is ag muintir an ghnáth-

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phobail a mbíonn an t-eolas agus iad siúd atá ag obair leo go minic. Bíonn i bhfad Éireann níos mó eolais acu agus bíonn siad in ann muid a threorú sa bhealach ceart. Is é sin atá i gceist. Níl aon chleasaíocht i gceist ach go bhfuilimid ag iarraidh cinnte a dhéanamh de má tá struchtúr nua á bhunú ó thús deiridh go mbeidh gach uile tacaíochta tugtha don choiste réigiúnach sin agus go mbeidh an plean teanga - is é sin atá i gceist dóibh siúd atá ag obair mar oifigigh pleanála teanga - lárnach sa choiste réigiúnach. Mar a dúirt mé, tá mé sásta leasú Uimh. 24 a tharraingt siar ag an staid seo.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá mo dhóthain ráite ach tá m'ainm ar an leasú sin. Tá mise sásta freisin an leasú a tharraingt siar mar tá an tAire oscailte chun breathnú ar an rud. Níl i gceist anseo ach réiteach praiticiúil i dtaobh an modh ainmniúcháin, agus ní gá ach glacadh leis an gcoincheap.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Díreach mar shoiléiriú, beidh orainn an leasú a bhogadh nuair a shroichimid leasú Uimh. 24 agus ansin é a tharraingt siar.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí. Tá sé leagtha amach go mbeadh consulting role ag na grúpaí pleanála teanga sna coistí réigiúnacha ach beimid ag obair leis an mbeirt Teachta chun an ról a phlé. Tosóimid ar an obair sin.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 24:

Ar leathanach 13, idir líne 27 agus líne 28, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“(c) Oifigeach Pleanála Teanga a bheidh ag obair sa limistéar arb ina leith a bhunófar an coiste réigiúnach.”.

Tarraingíodh siar an leasú faoi chead.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 25:

Ar leathanach 13, idir líne 27 agus líne 28, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“(9) Maidir leis an gcomhalta tofa don cheantar a shonraítear in alt 26D(1)

(a), beidh sé nó sí ina chomhalta nó ina comhalta freisin den choiste réigiúnach sa limistéar dá dtagraítear i bhfo-alt (6)(b).”

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 26:

Ar leathanach 13, líne 28, “(9)” a scriosadh agus “(10)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 27:

Ar leathanach 13, líne 31, “(10)” a scriosadh agus “(11)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 28:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 1, “(11)” a scriosadh agus “(12)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 29:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 3, “(12)” a scriosadh agus “(13)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 30:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 5, “(13)” a scriosadh agus “(14)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 31:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 7, “(14)” a scriosadh agus “(15)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 32:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 9, “(15)” a scriosadh agus “(16)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 33:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 13, “(16)” a scriosadh agus “(17)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 34:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 15, “(17)” a scriosadh agus “(18)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 35:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 24, “(18)” a scriosadh agus “(19)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 36:

Ar leathanach 15, líne 30, “(19)” a scriosadh agus “(20)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Cuireadh an cheist, “Go bhfanfaidh alt 7, mar a leasaíodh é, mar chuid den Bhille”, agus faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis glacadh léi.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Tá leasú Uimh. 37 as ord mar gheall nach bhfuil baint aige le fórála an Bhille. Pléifear leasuithe Uimh. 38 go 40, go huile, le chéile.

Níor tairgeadh leasú Uimh. 37.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 38:

Ar leathanach 17, líne 29, “mar” a scriosadh agus “agus” a chur ina ionad.

Maidir le leasuithe Uimh. 38 go 40, go huile, is athrú foclaíochta atá molta ag Rannóg an Aistriúcháin chun “mar a shonraítear” a athrú chuig “agus a shonraítear” atá i gceist. Ní athraíonn sé ciall an téacs. Is fiú a nótaíl ag an gcéim seo go mbeidh gá le leasuithe den sórt céanna á moladh ar Chéim na Tuarascála ionas go mbeidh na leaganacha Gaeilge agus Béarla ag teacht lena chéile. Phléigh an Teachta Ó Snodaigh é sin roimhe seo. San áireamh anseo, beidh leasuithe ar leathanach 23 ó líne 8 go dtí líne 27 chun “mar” a chur isteach in áit “agus” sna línte sin.

Ag an bpointe seo, glacfaidh mé an deis chun a chur in iúl go bhfuil sé i gceist agam leasú eile a thabhairt chun cinn ar Chéim na Tuarascála maidir le teideal an Aire. Mar is eol do na Teachtaí, tá aistriú feidhmeanna ag dul ar aghaidh faoi láthair agus beidh cúram na Gaeltachta ag teacht faoin Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail. Leis seo, tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh sonraí mar a bhaineann siad le teideal an Aire mar léiriú ar an athrú seo. Tá brón orm as cur isteach ach bhí sé tábhachtach é sin a rá.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 39:

Ar leathanach 17, líne 37, “mar” a scriosadh agus “agus” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 40:

Ar leathanach 19, líne 19, “mar” a scriosadh agus “agus” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá baint ag leasuithe Uimh. 41 go 47, go huile, le chéile agus pléifear le chéile iad.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 41:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 11, “in alt 26D(a)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(a)” a chur ina ionad.

Is ar mhaithe le botúin in uimhreacha na bhfo-alt atá luaite faoi alt 26E den Bhille a foilsíodh a cheartú atá na leasuithe seo de dhíth. Ní athraíonn aon cheann acu an bhrí atá le téacs an Bhille. Mar sin, molaim leasuithe Uimh. 41 go 47, go huile.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 42:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 12, “in alt 26D(b)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(b)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 43:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 13, “in alt 26D(c)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(c)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 44:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 14, “in alt 26D(d)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(d)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 45:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 15, “in alt 26D(e)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(e)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 46:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 15, “in alt 26D(e)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(e)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 47:

Ar leathanach 23, líne 17, “in alt 26D(g)” a scriosadh agus “in alt 26D(1)(g)” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 48:

Ar leathanach 25, líne 11 go líne 13 a scriosadh agus “Oidhreacht, lena n-áirítear an ceann comhairimh céanna a cheapadh agus acmhainní a chomhroinnt;” a chur ina n-ionad.

Leis an leasú seo, bainfear amach “agus caiteachais ghaolmhara a chomhroinnt idir an tAire agus an t-údarás áitiúil” ionas go mbeidh sé soiléir, i gcás go mbeidh toghcháin chuig an údarás ar siúl ar an lá céanna le toghchán eile, go mbeidh deis faoi na rialacháin an ceann comhairimh chéanna a cheapadh agus acmhainní a chomhroinnt ach go mbeidh na costais a bhaineann le toghcháin don údarás le híoc ag an Aire mar atá leagtha síos san alt nua 26B(5) atá molta. Molaim an leasú seo.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is ceist theicniúil é seo. Leis an leasú seo, tá an tAire ag iar-

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raidh nach mbeidh cead caiteachas a bhaineann le toghcháin chuig an údarás a chomhroinnt idir an tAire agus an t-údarás áitiúil. Nílím cinnte cad atá ag tarlú leis an leasú seo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Má tá toghcháin eile ar an lá céanna, beidh an tAire ag íoc na mbillí le haghaidh toghcháin an údarais amháin. Ní bheidh sé ag íoc as na toghcháin eile.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: B'fhéidir gur rud teicniúil é seo ach, má tá toghchán eile ar an lá céanna, beidh an fhoireann cheannann chéanna ann sna hionaid vótála. Beidh an leictreachas céanna á úsáid. Tá an tAire chun a íoc as a chuid den bhille iomlán amháin. Is é sin atá i gceist. Ghlac mé leis go mbeadh an bille le comhroinnt.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Lena bheith soiléir le haon Aire eile a bheidh i gceannas ar thoghchán a bheidh ar siúl ag an lá céanna, beidh Roinn na Gaeltachta ag íoc as na billí a bhaineann leis an toghchán údarais. Táim ag caint faoi na ballot papers don toghchán údarais agus na billí a bhaineann leis. Lena bheith soiléir le Ranna Rialtais eile, ní bheidh Roinn na Gaeltachta ag íoc billí le haghaidh Ranna eile.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tuigim.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh alt 8, mar a leasaíodh é.

ALT 9

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 49:

Ar leathanach 27, líne 28 agus líne 29, “ach ní bheidh sé nó sí i seilbh oifige ar feadh níos mó ná 2 théarma, cibé acu is téarmaí comhleanúnacha iad nó nach ea” a scriosadh.

Is ceann eile de na rudaí a phléigh muid sa chomhchoiste nuair a bhí muid i mbun grinnschrúdaithe é sin. Is ceist bhunúsach ó thaobh an daonlathais í. Má tá daoine lena bheith tofa, ní chóir go mbeimis ag cur srian ar an méid uaireanta gur féidir leo rith.

Tuigim cad atá daoine ag rá. Níl an srian sin ann d'aon toghchán eile, seachas toghchán na huachtaránachta. Tá seacht mbliain i gceist ansin. Tar éis dhá théarma, tá 14 bliain i gceist. Sa reachtaíocht seo, tá muid ag cur srian leis an tréimhse ama is féidir le duine a bheith tofa. Is faoin phobal áitiúil an cinneadh sin. Muna bhfuil daoine ag déanamh na hoibre, ní thoghfad iad. Tá súil agam gur mar sin a bheidh sé. Is é sin an slat tomhais a bhíonn ag an ngnáthphobal. Beidh sé ag pobal na Gaeltachta chomh maith. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil muid ag iarraidh a chinntiú nach mbeidh srian ar an méid téarmaí is féidir le duine a bheith ina chomhalta nó ina comhalta den údarás, go háirithe nuair atá scileanna agus eolas ag teastáil le cinntiú go n-éireoidh leis. Nuair atá daonlathas ann, bíonn an deis ag aon duine seasamh i dtoghchán. Má tá duine níos fearr ná mar atá an duine tofa ag an am, tá súil agam go n-éireoidh leo, má tá siad in ann é sin a chur trasna. Tá ceisteanna eile agam maidir le halt 9. Measaim go dtiocfaidh muid ar ais chucu agus muid ag dul tríd seo. Sa chás seo, áfach, is rud simplí atá i gceist.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Beidh mé an-ghasta mar tá sé ráite go beacht agus go soiléir ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, atá in éineacht liom. Tá m'ainm ar an leasú agus aontaím go huile is go hiomlán lena bhfuil ráite ag an Teachta Ó Snodaigh. I slí amháin, is féidir léamh a bheith agat ar an srian seo gur ardú céime é do bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta agus a chomhaltaí mar beidh siad ar chomhchéim le hUachtarán na hÉireann. Mar a

dúirt mo chomhghleacaí cúpla nóiméad ó shin, is iad seo an t-aon dream, agus is é seo an t-aon toghchán, a bhfuil srianta ama ag baint leo. Tuigim an dea-chleachtas, áfach. I dtaobh bhord an fhorais, mar shampla, tá dhá théarma i gceist. Tuigim é sin. Sa chás seo, áfach, níl muid ag caint ar bhord Stáit amháin. Tá muid tar éis an díospóireacht seo a bheith againn arís is arís eile. Cé gur bord Stáit é i slí amháin, is fóram daonlathach é chomh maith. Táthar ag cur srian ar an nguth daonlathach. Cé gurbh fhearr liom dá mbeadh gach uile chomhalta tofa, glacaim nach n-éireoidh linn leis an argóint sin mar tá an tromlach ag an Aire agus an Rialtas sa Seomra Dála seo. B'fhéidir gurb í an tslí timpeall air seo ná go mbeidh srian ama ar na comhaltaí atá ceaptha ag an Aire agus nach mbeidh aon srian ar na comhaltaí tofa. B'fhéidir gurb í sin an tslí timpeall air.

Glacaim leis nach bhfuil an tAire chun glacadh leis an leasú. Why break the habit of what seems like a lifetime don díospóireacht áirithe seo? B'fhéidir gurb í sin an tslí timpeall air, áfach. Impím ar an Aire féachaint air sin le go mbeidh cosaint ann don daonlathas agus nach mbeidh aon srian á chur ar ghuth na ndaoine.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Cé nach mbeidh mé ag glacadh leis an leasú ag an bpointe seo, tá an Teachta McGuinness tar éis freagra a thabhairt dom. B'fhéidir go dtiocfaidh muid ar ais ar an chéad Céim eile maidir le srianta an bhoird trí chéile. Caithfidh mé a rá, b'fhéidir de bharr go bhfuil mé anseo chomh fada sin, agus tá an Teachta Ó Snodaigh anseo níos faide ná mé, nach bhfuil mé i bhfabhar term limits le haghaidh toghchán. Is faoi na daoine an cinneadh sin. B'fhéidir go bhfuil rud ann sa mhéid a dúirt an Teachta McGuinness. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh muid in ann na scileanna a athrú agus an bord a athrú mar athraíonn scileanna. Má tá na Teachtaí sásta an leasú a tharraingt siar ag an bpointe seo, scrúdóidh muid na srianta seo don bhord ar fad roimh an chéad Céim eile. B'fhéidir go mbeidh muid in ann meascán a bheith againn. Tá mé ag ceapadh go bhfuil an freagra ag an Teachta McGuinness leis an méid a bhí á rá aige sa phíosa deireanach.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá mé sásta é sin a dhéanamh. Is ceist í. Ar a lán bord Stáit eile, ní bhíonn ach téarma nó dhó acu siúd atá roghnaithe ag an Aire. Bheadh socrú mar sin cothrom leis na boird eile. Is an píosa sin faoi na daoine atá tofa atá i gceist againn má táthar ag cur srian leis sin. Tuigim roinnt de na fáthanna go raibh an píosa sin ann agus go raibh daoine ag smaoineamh air. B'fhéidir nach raibh an ionadaíocht cheart tugtha roimhe seo. Uaireanta, bíonn daoine ag rá gurb é seo an bealach le fáil réidh le duine atá ag glacadh seilbh ar shuíochán, ag fanacht ann agus nach bhfuil ag déanamh na hoibre. Tá siad tofa ar bhonn an pháirtí atá taobh thiar dóibh. Tá súil agam go bhfuil an domhan athraithe anois. Tá an pobal níos oscailte, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs na meán sóisialta. Tá mé sásta, má tá na daoine eile a bhfuil a n-ainmneacha leis an leasú seo, é seo a tharraingt siar le féachaint an féidir linn déileáil leis mar atá luaite ag an Aire.

Is mian liom teacht go ceist eile. Níl leasú curtha isteach agam faoi, ach baineann sé leis an gcéad téarma a bheidh ann. Labhair muid roimhe seo, nuair a bhí súil againn go dtarlódh an toghchán seo anuraidh ag an am céanna is a bhí toghcháin na n-údarás áitiúla ar siúl, go mbeadh muid ag ceangal an ama leo ionas gur thréimhse chúig bliana a bheadh ann. Leis an gcéad téarma anois, más i mí an Mheithimh 2026 a bheidh na toghcháin, ba chóir go mbeadh ocht mbliain i gceist ionas go mbeadh sé co-ordinated leis na toghcháin eile. B'fhéidir go gcuirfidh mé leasú chun cinn ar an ngné sin. Is mian liom go mbeidh an tAire ar an eolas roimh ré faoin rud atá i gceist anseo. Muna dtarlaíonn sé sin, beidh na toghcháin seo as alt leis na toghcháin áitiúla agus Eorpacha. Bhí sé i gceist go mbeadh siad uilig ceangailte le chéile. Tuigim muna bhfuil sé sin i gceist a thuilleadh, ach is í sin an tuairim atá agam. Beidh muid ag teacht chun cinn san alt seo

le leasú le go mbeidh na toghcháin ar fad ar an lá céanna chun cuidiú le díospóireacht níos mó a bheith againn ag an am sin. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil daoine ann nach dtaitníonn an smaoineamh sin leo agus gurbh fearr leo dá mbeadh na toghcháin amuigh leo féin ionas go mbeadh daoine ag díriú isteach ar cheist Údarás na Gaeltachta. Níor tharla sé sin riamh cheana go bhfios dom nuair a bhí na toghcháin leo féin. Níor chuidigh sé leis an turnout ná leis an díospóireacht sna meáin Bhéarla maidir le ceist na Gaeltachta. Tá mé sásta, má tá na daoine eile sásta, leasú Uimh. 49 a tharraingt siar.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá leasú Uimh. 49 á tharraingt siar. An bhfuil achan duine sásta leis sin?

Tarraingíodh siar an leasú faoi chead.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Leanfaidh muid ar aghaidh go leasú Uimh. 50 in ainmneacha na dTeachtaí Ó Snodaigh, McGuinness, Quaide agus Connolly. Tá leasuithe Uimh. 50 go 52, go huile, bainteach lena chéile agus pléifear le chéile iad.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Leasú Uimh. 50 agus cad eile?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá brón orm.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabh mo leithscéal. Cad iad na leasuithe eile a pléifear le leasú Uimh. 50?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá leasuithe Uimh. 50 go 52, go huile, le chéile. An bhfuil an Teachta Ó Snodaigh chun leasú Uimh. 50 a bhogadh?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 50:

Ar leathanach 27, idir líne 32 agus líne 33, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“(c) tríd an mír seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh mhír 3:

“Critéir i gcomhair ceapacháin.

3A. Cinnteoidh an tAire, maidir le daoine a cheapfar chun an Údaráis, gur daoine iad, i dtuairim an Aire, a bhfuil ag gach duine díobh taithí agus tuiscint shásúil ar cheann amháin nó níos mó díobh seo a leanas:

- (1) pleanáil teanga;
- (2) cur chun cinn na Gaeilge;
- (3) fiontraíocht agus cruthú fostaíochta;
- (4) forbairt pobail;
- (5) cur chun cinn na n-ealaíon teanga-bhunaithe; agus
- (6) an earnáil teaghlaigh.”.

Baineann sé seo leis na critéir cheapacháin, ionas go gcinnteoidh an tAire maidir le daoine a cheapfar chun an údaráis, gur daoine iad, ina tuairim nó ina thuairim, a bhfuil ag gach duine díobh taithí agus tuiscint shásúil ar cheann amháin nó níos mó díobh seo a leanas: pleanáil te-

anga; cur chun cinn na Gaeilge; fiontraíocht agus cruthú fostaíochta; forbairt pobail; cur chun cinn na n-ealaíon teanga-bhunaithe; agus an earnáil teaghlaigh. Is Conradh na Gaeilge a chuir an moladh seo chun cinn. Is é sin an fáth a bhfuil na hainmneacha ar fad ann, is iad sin, na Teachtaí Quaide, Connolly agus McGuinness, in éineacht liom. Thuig muid an gá leis an leasú sin. Sa chéad dul síos, beidh an seisear a ainmneoidh an tAire mar chuid de bhord tofa. Caithfidh muid a chinntiú, toisc go bhfuil an deis ag an Aire, go bhfeiceann sé nó sí orthu siúd atá le hainmniú ionas go mbeidh ar a laghad, an taithí seo acu.

Mar a dúirt mé, is ceann acu seo atá i gceist agus tá liosta leagtha síos ionas go mbeadh saineolas breise, a luaigh an tAire, ag bord an údaráis. Tá pointe difriúla ann.

Maidir le leasú Uimh. 51, mura bhfuil duine as na n-oileán tofa, agus ní fheicim go mbeadh toisc go bhfuil na hoileáin agus daonraí na n-oileán chomh beag sin is go mbeadh sé deacair dóibh bheith tofa, tá gá go díreoidh an tAire isteach air le cinntiú go bhfuil duine de phobail na n-oileán i measc iad siúd atá ceaptha ar an mbord, le go mbeidh an tuiscint agus an saineolas a thagann ó maireachtáil ar oileán amach ó chósta na hÉireann, ar fáil dó. Is oileáin Ghaeltachta formhór iad siúd ar a bhfuil daoine ina gcónaí. Tá taithí ag na daoine sin ar dheacrachtaí ar leith agus tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh na fadhbanna sin le cloisteáil ag bord an údaráis.

Is leasú é Uimh. 52 ar leasú a bhí déanta in 1999, ag cur cosc ar fheidhmeach nó duine i gcomhshocráíocht dócmhainneachta a bheith mar chomhalta ag an údarás. Faoin bhfoclaíocht nua, ní bheadh feidhm ag an gcosc má tá an feidhmeach neamhnithe nó comhshocrúithe, scortha. Is dul chun cinn é an foráil seo a aithníonn nár chóir go leanfaí cosc ar aghaidh ar feadh saol duine atá tar éis fiacha a íoc. Thar na blianta bhí sé sin mar chosc sa Dáil. Dá mbeadh duine éigin “bankrupt”, ní fhéadfaí bheith ina Teachta Dála. Is féidir anois; éiríodh réidh leis sin. Tá an cosc sin i seanreachtáíocht Údarás na Gaeltachta agus mar sin, tá sé seo ag déileáil le sean-fhoráil seachas leis na cinn nua. B’fhéidir go bhféadfaí breathnú air sin.

Tá leasú Uimh. 53 as ord. Cuidíodh an leasú leis an reachtaíocht ach tá sé as ord. Tá súil agam go ndéanfaí cinnte de go mbeidh liúntas ceart ar fáil don duine atá tofa. Táimid ag leagadh síos critéir atá cuíosach docht, daingean agus tríd na leasuithe beimid ar fad ag cur ualach mór ar Údarás na Gaeltachta amach anseo agus ba chóir go mbeadh liúntas cuí i gceist. Ní ghlacaim leis go bhfuil an liúntas atá á íoc leis na comhairleoirí áitiúla maith go leor mar atá sé, ach os rud é go bhfuil ualach breise ag baint leis seo agus cé chomh leathan is atá na ceantair Ghaeltachta, ba chóir go mbeadh an liúntas a bheidh ag dul dóibh ar chomhchéim leis sin a thugtar do chomhairleoirí áitiúla agus tabharfaidh sé sin stádas ar leith don ról. Tá ceangail aige seo le leasú nach mbeadh “dual-mandate” i gceist ó thaobh comhairleoirí nó baill tofa an údaráis. Cuireadh an leasú as ord, ach is é sin an loighic taobh thiar de. B’fhéidir go dtiocfaimid ar ais le hiarracht eile a dhéanamh déileáil leis seo.

An deacracht atá againn mar Fhreasúra ná nach féidir linn coinníollacha pá nó tuarastal a leagadh síos inár leasuithe mar gheall ar an riail maidir le hioncam. Caithfimid deileáil leis sin má táimid ag cuir an focal amach tríd an reachtaíocht nua seo go bhfuil an t-údarás tábhachtach is nach mbeidh na comhaltaí nua ar an údarás ar an ngannchuid as an obair a bheidh siad ag déanamh ar son na heagraíochta.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gan athrá a dhéanamh ar an díospóireacht, bhí muid ag iarraidh go mbeadh gach comhalta tofa agus ní hé sin an cás. Dóibh siúd atá le bheith ceaptha ag an Aire, ba cheart go mbeadh sé leagtha síos go beacht sa bhunreachtáíocht na scileanna, an taithí agus an cumas a bheadh acu, ionas nach bhfuil aon dul as - táim cinnte nach ndéan-

fadh an tAire reatha an méid seo ach ní hé sin le rá nach ndéanfaidh Aire amach anseo é – agus nach mbeadh sé úsáidte mar political patronage. Is é sin an dainséar agus an bhuairt a bheith ar dhaoine. Sin an bhuairt atá orainne agus ar dhaoine sa phobal mar gheall ar na ceapacháin seo. Táim cinnte de nach ndéanfaidh an tAire reatha é sin, ach caithfidimid reachtaíocht maith a chur i gcrích chun nach féidir sin a dhéanamh agus nach bhfuil an saoirse céanna ag Airí amach anseo an méid sin a dhéanamh. Sin an fáth go bhfuil muid ag iarraidh go mbeidh sé curtha sa reachtaíocht is go bhfuil an leasú seo curtha os ár gcomhair ag na Teachtaí Quaide, Ní Chonghaile, Ó Snodaigh agus mé féin. Tá an téarmaíocht agus cuid den fhoclaíocht ag teacht ó Chonradh na Gaeilge. Léiríonn sé an suim agus an meon atá ag an Aire agus atá ag an Roinn i dtaobh an saghas duine gur ceart a cheapadh. Bheadh sé an-úsáideach má tá an t-údarás le dul chuig PAS, an Public Appointments Service, chun daoine a aimsiú, go mbeadh sé sa reachtaíocht nach féidir a rá nach bhfuil rud éigin ar fáil nó sa mhargadh, toisc go bhfuil sé sa bhunreachtaíocht agus caithfidimid go léir cloí leis, idir an Aire, an Roinn, PAS nó pé duine a bheadh ag déileáil leis.

Tuigimid uilig go bhfuil an méid i leasú Uimh. 51 difriúil. B'fhéidir nach dtuigimid os rud é nach bhfuil aon duine anseo ina gcónaí ar oileán. Tá sé difriúil. Cé gur ceantair Ghaeltachta iad i go leor cásanna, i gCorcaigh, i dTír Chonaill, ar Oileán Acla mar shampla agus i gcontae na Gaillimhe, is gur cuid iad na hoileáin de na contaetha agus na ceantair Ghaeltachta sin, is áiteanna ar leith iad agus tá dúshlán ar leith ag na pobail ar na hoileáin. Ar shlí amháin, tá níos mó de ghaol idir na hoileáin Ghaeltachta is na hoileáin Ghalltachta agus caithfidimid aitheantas a thabhairt do sin i slí amháin nó slí eile. Seo slí leis an aitheantas sin a thabhairt, mar aon le cosaint do na ceantair is lú daonra. Tuigim sin mar dhuine ó Ghaeltacht na nDéise. Tuigimid daoine ó Ghaeltacht Chontae na Mí agus Contae Chorcaí chomh maith. Tá dainséar i bheith beag i gcomparáid le Gaeltachtaí na Gaillimhe, Thír Chonaill agus Chiarraí. Is slí é seo le déanamh cinnte go bhfuil an guth sin cloiste ag leibhéal an bhoird. Arís mura bhfuil an tAire chun glacadh leis an leasú ag an bpointe seo, agus glacaim leis nach bhfuil, b'fhéidir is féidir féachaint ar conas is féidir déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an guth sin le cloisteáil.

Mar a dúirt an Teachta Ó Snodaigh faoi leasú Uimh. 53, is é an meon a bhí againn ón tús ná go mbeadh an stádas céanna ag Údarás na Gaeltachta faoin mBille seo le húdarás áitiúil, agus go mbeadh deis againn ardú stádas nó ardú cumhachta a thabhairt, cé go mbeadh na cumhachtaí difriúil; go mbeadh an t-údarás ar chomhleibhéal, cé nach mbeidh sé riamh ina húdarás áitiúil. Ní bheadh na cúraimí céanna ann ach bheadh an stádas céanna i gceist. Sin an fáth go rabhamar ag iarraidh go mbeidh gach comhalta tofa, nach mbeadh double jobbing nó dual mandate i gceist agus go mbeadh an pá céanna ag dul leis chun an tsaoirse sin a thabhairt do chomhaltaí bheith ag freastal ar an bpobal, ag éisteacht leo, ar fáil dóibh agus ag bualadh leo. Cé gur rialaíodh an leasú as ord, is é sin an fáth ar mholamar é agus is fiú an pointe é a dhéanamh.

Sa spirit den mhéid a bhí á rá cheana féin agus muid ag impí ar an Aire glacadh lenár leasuithe, mar a dúirt mo chomhghleacaí taobh liom, tacóimid le leasú Uimh. 52. Déanann sé ciall. Baineann sé leis an méid seo a dhéanamh oscailte. Go háirithe agus muid ag caint mar gheall ar chúrsaí fiontraíochta agus daoine atá ag iarraidh poist a chruthú agus fiontar a bhunú, uaireanta teipeann orthu agus bíonn orthu tosú as an nua arís. Baineann an leasú seo le gan phionós agus srian a chur orthu dá saol ar fad. Aontaímid leis sin.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Nílím cinnte má ghlacann nó nach nglacann an tAire le leasú Uimh. 50. Ach, arís, is rud thar a bheith praiticiúil atá anseo. Táimid ag iarraidh a chinntiú go mbeadh na critéir seo i gceist. Nílím ag rá go mbeadh na critéir ó Uimh. 1 go Uimh. 6 ag gach duine, ach go mbeadh ceann amháin acu ar a laghad. Mar a dúirt na Teachtaí eile, tháinig

na moltaí seo ó Chonradh na Gaeilge agus daoine ar an talamh atá a buartha faoin saghas ceapachán a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ann faoi Aire eile. D'fhéadfadh ceapacháin mar bhronntanas polaitiúil a bheith i gceist seachas go n-aithneofaí an ról mar ról thar a bheith tábhachtach. Tá gá le taithí - ní oideachas, ach taithí shaoil - agus scileanna faoi leith ag an té a cheapfar. Is rud praiticiúil é. Níl a fhios agam cén fhadhb atá ag an Aire leis.

Maidir leis na hoileáin is rud praiticiúil é leasú Uimh. 51 a chinnteodh go mbeadh ionadaíocht ag na hoileáin bealach amháin nó bealach eile. Bhain an chéad rún a chur mé faoi bhráid an Tí seo in 2016 nó 2017 le polasaí a fhorbairt do na hoileáin. Thóg sé an-mhéid ama, ach tá an polasaí ann. Níl sé bunaithe ar reachtaíocht, faraor, cosúil le hAlbain, áit a bhfuil polasaí bunaithe ar an reachtaíocht acu. Tá líon na lonnaitheoirí ar na hoileáin ag méadú an t-am uilig, de réir mo thuisceana. Ar a laghad tá polasaí againn tar éis tréimhse fhada. Ba chóir dúinn aitheantas a thabhairt don pholasaí sin. Is céim bheag í seo a chinnteodh go mbeadh ionadaíocht ag duine ó na hoileáin ann.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar is eol do na Teachtaí, dhéanfaidh leasú Uimh. 52 athrú ar an bhfoclaíocht mar a bhaineann sí leis na hiarrthóirí agus féimheacht in Acht Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979. Tá an leasú foclaíochta seo ag teacht le polasaí reatha an Rialtais i leith féimheacht. Molaim an leasú seo don Teach.

Maidir le leasuithe Uimh. 50 agus 51, a bhaineann leis na critéir i gcomhair ceapacháin, ní chím go bhfuil gá a leithéid a leagadh síos sa reachtaíocht mar gur ceisteanna riaracháin nó oibríochtúla atá iontu. Bíonn na cáilíochtaí agus critéir cheapacháin leagtha síos sa phróiseas riaracháin a bhaineann le PAS. Baineann na treoirlínte le PAS. Is sna treoirlínte sin an áit a leagtar amach na critéir agus na cáilíochtaí sin. Is ón Roinn a thagann na critéir sin. Leasaítear iad dá réir chun riachtanais reatha an bhoird ó thaobh scileanna agus taithí a léiriú.

Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh guth na n-oileán ann, ach leagfar é sin amach sna critéir a chuireann an Roinn go dtí PAS. Mar shampla, iarradh sa chomórtas a reáchtáil PAS in 2022 chun gnáthchomhaltaí a cheapadh go mbeadh taithí fhairsing a léiriú i réimse amháin díobh seo ar a laghad: cur chun cinn na Gaeilge agus pleanáil teanga; forbairt fiontraíochta agus cruthú fostaíochta; agus forbairt pobail nó cur chun cinn na n-ealaíon.

Chomh maith leis seo, athraíonn an saineolas a bhíonn ag teastáil ar bhord mar seo ó am go ham. Tá sé sin pléite agam ar feadh na n-uaireanta anois. Ní bheadh sé cuí go mbeadh liosta seasmhach sa reachtaíocht. Dá bhrí sin, ní féidir liom glacadh le leasú Uimh. 50.

Mar a dúirt mé, tá sé tábhachtach dom go pearsanta agus don Roinn go mbeidh guth na n-oileán ar an mbord, ach maidir le leasú Uimh. 51, rachaidh na treoirlínte go PAS. Táim i m'Aire. Tá an ceart ag an Teachta Connolly. Tá an polasaí Our Living Islands againn, agus tá sé tábhachtach go n-úsáidfear guth na n-oileán i ngach caoi. Ach aontaím go mór go gcaithfear treoirlínte PAS a úsáid chun é seo a dhéanamh agus go mbeimis in ann a obair amach cé as na hoileáin agus cén t-oileán a bheadh ann agus cén chaoi a bpiocfaimis an duine agus an guth sin. Ag an bpointe seo, dearbhaím go láidir go mbeidh guth na n-oileán ar bhord an údaráis, ach níl in ann glacadh leis an leasú ar an reachtaíocht seo.

Cuireadh an leasú agus faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis diúltú dó.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 51:

Ar leathanach 27, idir líne 39 agus líne 40, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

14 May 2025

“4B. Ceapfaidh an tAire duine chun an Údaráis as ceann de na ceantair a shonraítear in alt 26D arb oileáin amach ón gcósta iad más rud é nach ann d’aon chomhaltaí tofa as na ceantair sin.”.

Cuireadh an leasú agus faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis diúltú dó.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 52:

Ar leathanach 31, idir líne 5 agus líne 6, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“(f) i mír 7(2)—

(i) tríd an gclásal seo a leanas a chur in ionad chlásal (a):

“(a) má bhreithnítear ina fhéimheach nó ina féimheach é nó í agus mura mbeidh an fhéimheacht sin neamhnithe ná urscaoilte,”,

agus

(ii) tríd an gclásal seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh chlásal (a):

“(aa) más pearsa aonair é nó í is páirtí i gcomhshocraíocht dócmhainneachta (de réir bhrí an Achta um Dhócmhainneacht Phearsanta, 2012) nach bhfuil scortha d’éifeacht a bheith léi,”.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá leasú Uimh. 53 as ord de bharr muirear ar an ioncam.

Níor tairgeadh leasú Uimh. 53.

Aontaíodh alt 9, mar a leasaíodh é.

ALT 10

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá baint ag leasuithe Uimh. 54 go 57, go huile, 62 agus 63, le chéile agus pléifear le chéile iad.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 54:

Ar leathanach 31, líne 16 go líne 36, na focail go léir ó “Leasaítear” ar líne 16, agus an focal sin san áireamh, síos go dtí líne 36, agus an líne sin san áireamh, a scriosadh agus an méid seo a leanas a chur ina n-ionad:

“Leasaítear an tAcht Toghcháin, 1992—

(a) in alt 2, tríd an míniú seo a leanas a chur isteach i bhfo-alt (1):

“ciallaíonn ‘toghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta’ toghchán chun comhaltaí a thoghadh chun Údarás na Gaeltachta a dhéanfar de bhun Chuid IVA den Acht um Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979;”,

(b) in alt 11, trí “toghchán sonrach Eorpach, toghchán sonrach áitiúil nó toghchán sonrach do Mhéara Luimnigh, toghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta nó reifrinn” a

chur in ionad “toghchán sonrach Eorpach, toghchán sonrach áitiúil nó toghchán sonrach do Mhéara Luimnigh nó reifrinn” i bhfo-alt (2),

(c) in alt 14(2), trí “toghchán Eorpach, toghchán áitiúil nó toghchán do Mhéara Luimnigh, toghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta nó reifrinn” a chur in ionad “toghchán Eorpach, toghchán áitiúil nó toghchán do Mhéara Luimnigh nó reifrinn” i mír (c),

(d) in alt 17—

(i) trí “2024, i bpobalbhreith de réir Chuid 6 den Acht sin nó i dtoghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta” a chur in ionad “2024 nó i bpobalbhreith de réir Chuid 6 den Acht sin” i bhfo-alt (1), agus

(ii) trí “toghchán Eorpach, toghchán áitiúil nó toghchán do Mhéara Luimnigh, toghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta nó reifrinn” a chur in ionad “toghchán Eorpach, toghchán áitiúil nó toghchán do Mhéara Luimnigh nó reifrinn” i bhfo-alt (6)(c),

(e) in alt 165(1)—

(i) trí “Luimnigh,” a chur in ionad “Luimnigh.” i mír (h), agus

(ii) tríd an mír seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh mhír (h):”.

Cinntíonn leasuithe Uimh. 54 go 57, go huile, go bhfuil an fhoclaíocht sa leagan Gaeilge den Bhille seo agus an fhoclaíocht atá sa leagan Béarla den Bhille seo ag teacht lena chéile. Cinnteoidh sé seo go mbeidh téacs na reachtaíochta ar tagraíodh di agus a achtaíodh i mBéarla amháin roimhe seo ar fáil go dátheangach. Tá na leasuithe seo á lorg ar chomhairle an Ard-Aighne i gcomhthéacs gur cheart gach leasú sa Bhille a thionlacadh go dátheangach ag féachaint don riachtanas bunreachtúil go mbeadh Achtanna uile an Oireachtais ar fáil sa dá theanga oifigiúla. Dá bhrí sin, molaim leasuithe Uimh. 54 go 57, go huile, don Teach.

Baineann leasuithe Uimh. 62 agus 63 leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga, agus leasú á dhéanamh ar Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012 le sonrú a dhéanamh ar na Bailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus an bealach go n-aithnítear iad. Cinntíonn an leasú seo go bhfuil an fhoclaíocht soiléir. Tugadh faoi deara tar éis an Bhille a bheith foilsithe, nach raibh na tagairtí san alt cruinn agus is mian liom anois an deis a thapú é sin a cheartú. Molaim, mar sin, leasuithe Uimh. 62 agus 63 don Teach.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 55:

Ar leathanach 33, líne 1 go líne 5 a scriosadh agus an méid seo a leanas a chur ina n-ionad:

““(i) an vótaíocht i dtoghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta.”,

agus

(f) i Riail 14 den Dara Sceideal, trí “i dtoghchán do Mhéara Luimnigh, i dtoghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta nó” a chur in ionad “i dtoghchán do Mhéara Luimnigh nó”

i mír (5).”.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh alt 10, mar a leasaíodh é.

7 o'clock

ALT 11

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 56:

Ar leathanach 33, líne 7 go líne 10, na focail go léir ó “Leasaítear” ar líne 7, agus an focal sin san áireamh, síos go dtí líne 10, agus an líne sin san áireamh, a scriosadh agus an méid seo a leanas a chur ina n-ionad:

“Leasaítear alt 18 den Acht Toghcháin, 1997, i bhfo-alt (2), trí “an Achta Rialtais Áitiúil (Méara Luimnigh) agus Forálacha Ilghnéitheacha, 2024 nó an Achta um Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979” a chur in ionad “an Achta Rialtais Áitiúil (Méara Luimnigh) agus Forálacha Ilghnéitheacha, 2024”.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh alt 11, mar a leasaíodh é.

ALT 12

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 57:

Ar leathanach 33, líne 12 go líne 25, na focail go léir ó “Leasaítear” ar líne 12, agus an focal sin san áireamh, síos go dtí líne 25, agus an líne sin san áireamh, a scriosadh agus an méid seo a leanas a chur ina n-ionad:

“Leasaítear an tAcht um Thruailliú ó Bhruscar, 1997—

(a) in alt 19(7), tríd an mír seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh mhír (c):

“(ca) go mbaineann sé le toghchán, de réir bhrí an Achta um Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979, mura rud é go bhfuil an fógrán ann sula ndéanann an tAire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán ordú lena gceaptar an lá ar a dtógfar an vótaíocht, nó ar feadh 7 lá nó tréimhse is faide ná sin tar éis an lae is déanaí ar ar tógadh an vótaíocht don toghchán, nó”,

agus

(b) in alt 21(3), trí “pobalbhreith de réir bhrí Chuid 6 den Acht Rialtais Áitiúil (Méara Luimnigh) agus Forálacha Ilghnéitheacha, 2024, toghchán de réir bhrí an Achta um Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979,” a chur in ionad “pobalbhreith de réir bhrí Chuid 6 den Acht Rialtais Áitiúil (Méara Luimnigh) agus Forálacha Ilghnéitheacha, 2024,” i mír (b).”

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh alt 12, mar a leasaíodh é.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá baint ag leasuithe Uimh. 58 go 61, go huile, le chéile, agus pléifear le chéile iad.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 58:

Ar leathanach 33, líne 27 agus líne 28, na focail go léir ó “Leasaítear” ar líne 27, agus an focal sin san áireamh, síos go dtí líne 28, agus an líne sin san áireamh, a scriosadh agus an méid seo a leanas a chur ina n-ionad:

“Leasaítear Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003—

(a) in alt 9(4)(a) (a cuireadh isteach le halt 4(c) d’Acht 2021), trí “ná ní lú feiceálacht, infheictheacht ná inléiteacht an chuid den téacs a bheidh i nGaeilge ná an chuid den téacs a bheidh i mBéarla, agus” a chur in ionad “agus beidh sí chomh feiceálach, chomh hinfheicthe agus chomh hinléite céanna leis an gcuid den téacs a bheidh i mBéarla, agus”,

(b) in alt 9C(2)(b) (a cuireadh isteach le halt 5 d’Acht 2021), trí “ná ní lú feiceálacht, infheictheacht ná inléiteacht an chuid den téacs a bheidh i nGaeilge ná an chuid den téacs a bheidh i mBéarla, agus” a chur in ionad “agus beidh sí chomh feiceálach, chomh hinfheicthe agus chomh hinléite céanna leis an gcuid den téacs a bheidh i mBéarla, agus”,

(c) in alt 9D(3)(b) (a cuireadh isteach le halt 5 d’Acht 2021), trí “ná ní lú feiceálacht, infheictheacht ná inléiteacht an chuid den téacs a bheidh i nGaeilge ná an chuid den téacs a bheidh i mBéarla, agus” a chur in ionad “agus beidh sí chomh feiceálach, chomh hinfheicthe agus chomh hinléite céanna leis an gcuid den téacs a bheidh i mBéarla, agus”,

(d) in alt 10A (a cuireadh isteach le halt 6 d’Acht 2021)—

(i) tríd an bhfo-alt seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh fho-alt (1):

“(1A) Ní bheidh feidhm ag an alt seo—

(a) maidir le fógraíocht—

(i) a dhírítear ar lucht féachana agus éisteachta atá lasmuigh den Stát, agus

(ii) nach bhfuil i dteanga oifigiúil,

ná

(b) maidir le fógraíocht—

(i) ar sheirbhís craolacháin closamhairc,

(ii) ar sheirbhís meán closamhairc ar éileamh, nó

(iii) ar sheirbhís craolacháin fuaime,

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lena gcuirtear clár chun cinn.”,

agus

(ii) i bhfo-alt (2), trí na mínithe seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“ciallaíonn ‘Acht 2009’ an tAcht Craolacháin, 2009;

tá le ‘seirbhís craolacháin closamhairc’ an bhrí chéanna atá leis in Acht 2009;

tá le ‘seirbhís meán closamhairc ar éileamh’ an bhrí chéanna atá leis in Acht 2009;

tá le ‘clár’ an bhrí chéanna atá leis in Acht 2009;

tá le ‘seirbhís craolacháin fuaime’ an bhrí chéanna atá leis in Acht 2009;”,

agus

(e) tríd an alt seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh alt 19A:”.

Cinntíonn ailt (a), (b) agus (c) de leasú Uimh. 58 go bhfuil foclaíocht na bhforálacha ábhartha sa leagan Gaeilge d’Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003 ag teacht go hiomlán leis an leagan Béarla. Is ar chomhairle ó Rannóg an Aistriúcháin de chuid an Oireachtais atá na leasaithe seo á ndéanamh.

Cinntíonn alt (d) de leasú Uimh. 58 nach gá do chomhlachtaí poiblí tabhairt faoi bhearta díreireacha chun comhlíontacht le hAcht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla a bhaint amach, ag féachaint ach go háirithe do luach ar airgead don Státhiste agus do mhianta foriomlána an Achta sin. Tá na leasuithe seo á moladh de bharr ceisteanna a d’eascair ó fheidhmiú na forála seo. Ní gá a rá gur foráil thar a bheith fiúntach í an fhoráil fhógraíochta atá tar éis cur go mór le feiceálacht na teanga. Mar sin féin, tá cúpla iarmhairt neamhbheartaithe nótáilte ó cuireadh i bhfeidhm í agus, chuige sin, tá na leasuithe seo á moladh anois. Leis na leasuithe seo, cuirtear soiléiriú ar fáil maidir le cineálacha fógraíochta sonracha nach bhfuil sa chomhaireamh don fhoráil seo, eadhon fógraíocht a dhéantar thar lear i dteanga nach teanga oifigiúil í mar aon le blaisíní a chuirtear amach chun poiblíocht a dhéanamh ar chlár teilifíse nó raidió. Is de bharr aighneachtaí, ón gCoimisinéir Teanga san áireamh, a bhfuiltear ag áireamh na leasuithe seo. Ag eascairt ón méid seo ansin, is leasuithe iarmhartacha iad alt (e) de leasú Uimh 58 agus leasuithe Uimh. 59 go 61, go huile. Tá leasú Uimh. 61 ag féachaint chuige go dtiocfaidh leasú Uimh. 58 i ngníomh láithreach ar achtú an Bhille seo. Dá bhrí sin, molaim na leasaithe seo don Teach.

Ba chóir a nótáil go bhfuil sé ar intinn agam leasú ar alt 192 den Acht Rialtais Áitiúil, 2001, arna chur isteach le halt 48 den Acht Comhshaoil (Forálacha Ilghnéitheacha), 2011, a mholadh ag Céim na Tuarascála. Is leasú teicniúil é seo a bhaineann leis na feidhmeanna i dtaca le logainmneacha atá ag an Aire a bhfuil cúraimí na Gaeltachta agus na Gaeilge air nó uirthi. Leis an leasú teicniúil a bheidh á mholadh agam, deimhnítear gur ag an Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta atá na feidhmeanna sin i dtaca le logainmneacha, agus cuirtear deireadh le haon amhras dlíthiúil maidir leis an gceist.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá siad seo suntasach toisc nach mbaineann siad leis an mBille in aon chor. Tuigim an sórt cleasaíocht a tharlaíonn agus nílim chun cur ina gcoinne.

Caithfidh mé a rá, áfach, go gcothaíonn sé frustrachas sa Fhreasúra nuair a deirtear linn nach mbaineann an méid atá á iarraidh againn leis an mBille, agus ansin feicimid na leithéidí seo ag teacht isteach. Tá gnéithe praiticiúla i gceist sa chás seo. Tá soiléiriú á lorg againn faoin athrú. Tá an tAire á rá gur gá an leagan Gaeilge a athrú toisc go bhfuil an leagan Béarla i gceart. Meabhraím dó gur Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla is ea é. Tá sé scríofa as Ghaeilge agus rinneamar é a phlé trí Ghaeilge. Tá an leagan Gaeilge i gceart agus tá an leagan Béarla mícheart. Mar sin, tá sé ait go bhfuilimid ag athrú an leagan Gaeilge le cloí leis an leagan Béarla. Nílím ag rá go bhfuil an méid atá ag tarlú mícheart, ach sin atá i gceist. Ó thaobh an dlí de, is é an leagan Gaeilge an ceann uachtarach. B'fhéidir gur chóir dúinn a bheith ag athrú an leagan Béarla. Sa chás seo, measaim go bhfuil an ceart ag an Aire ach is ait an rud é. Ní tharlaíonn sé go minic toisc gur fíorannamh a fhoilsítear an dá leagan den reachtaíocht go chomhionannach mar a tharla i gcás in Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus mar atá ag tarlú anseo.

Ó thaobh an tarna ceist lena bhfuil an Aire ag déileáil, tá sé i gceist i leasú Uimh. 58 eisceacht a dhéanamh nuair atá comhlachtaí Stáit ag déanamh fógraíochta i dteangacha iasachta. Nuair nach bhfuil an fógraíocht á dhéanamh i mBéarla nó i nGaeilge, ach sa tSínis nó teanga eile, tuigim go bhfuil gá le foráil den tsórt seo. Ardaíodh an cheist agus tá an leasú seo ag déanamh cinnte den cur chuige atá i gceist. Nuair atá a leithéid ag tarlú, ba cheart dúinn a chinntiú go bhfuil na lógónna i nGaeilge. Mar shampla, d'ardaigh mé ceist scríbhinn an tseachtain seo caite faoi Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí. Is “OPW” atá sa lógó seachas “Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí”. Má tá siad ag déanamh fógraíochta thar lear, feictear “OPW” mar is é sin atá sa lógó. In ainneoin an rud atá ag tarlú anseo, díreach ar bhonn an lógó, go dtí go n-athrófar sin - níl Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla ag brú ar dhaoine na lógónna a athrú láithreach - nuair atá siad ag déanamh athrú ar bhrandáil agus mar sin de caithfidh siad iad a athrú go dtí Gaeilge. Is é sin an riail atá ann agus is é sin an freagra a thug an Aire dom an tseachtain seo caite. Dúirt sé nach raibh sé i gceist aige na héadaí atá á gcaitheamh ag foireann an OPW atá ag obair sa Ghaeltacht, nó na veaineanna nó a leithéid atá acu, a athrú toisc gurb é 2019 an uair dheireanach ar athraíodh iad agus b'shin roimh teacht i réim an leagan leasaithe d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla.

Ní hé go bhfuilimid ag cur i gcoinne na leasuithe seo ach ag cinntiú go dtuigeann gach duine gur fógraíocht é seo nach bhfuil i nGaeilge nó i mBéarla. An t-aon rud eile a impím ná má tá QR cód in úsáid nó ag tarraingt daoine i dtreo an Roinn nó an comhlacht Stáit atá i gceist, go ndéanfaidh sé iad a tharraingt go dtí an suíomh Gaeilge-Béarla. Uaireanta cuirtear rudaí mar sin suas agus nuair a dhéantar scanáil orthu, tógann sé go dtí an suíomh Béarla thú agus bíonn ort é a aistriú. Ní tharlaíonn sé sin i gcónaí ach nílím i gcleachtadh ar na bealaí chun teacht timpeall ar an domhan nua atá ann. Is gá go minic gan fhoclaíocht a bheith ar fhógraíocht - just lógónna, íomhánna nó a leithéid. Measaim go luíodh sé sin leis an rud a bhí taobh thiar de. Is rud eile atá i gceist má tá suíomh ar leith don tSínis ann. Má tá fógraíocht a dhéanamh sa tSínis, is féidir QR code a úsáid a thógann an duine go dtí an leagan Sínis den suíomh. Sa lá atá inniu ann, tá sé chomh héasca le cnaipe a bhrú agus an suíomh Gaeilge nó an suíomh Béarla a aistriú go dtí an tSínis.

Tá tuiscint éigin ansin.

Ó thaobh an chuid eile, cén fáth go dteastaíonn eisceacht ó fhógraí de chláracha in Éirinn ach go háirithe? Mar a luaitear, tá sé i gceist:

(a) gur i nGaeilge a bheidh 20 faoin gcéad ar a laghad d'aon fhógraíocht arna déanamh ag an gcomhlacht in aon bhliain, agus

(b) go ndéanfar 5 faoin gcéad ar a laghad d'aon airgead a chaithfidh an comhlacht ar fhógraíocht in aon bhliain a úsáid chun fógraíocht a chur amach i nGaeilge trí na meáin Ghaeilge.

Más craoltóir dhátheangach é RTÉ, ní cóir go mbeadh aon chomhlacht Stáit ag déanamh iarracht éalú ón dualgas atá orthu. Is trua gur tháinig sé seo isteach mar seo mar bheadh muid in ann níos mó ama a chaitheamh leis. Measaim go bhfuil siad ceart go leor ach b'fhéidir go dtiocfaidh mé ar ais ar Chéim na Tuarascála nuair a bhreathnóidh mé arís go díreach le féachaint an bhfuil aon fhadhb eile taobh thiar do na leasuithe seo mar tá eisceacht á thabhairt do chomhlacht Stáit atá ag déanamh fógraíocht ar sheirbhísí craolacháin closamhairc nó fuaimne chun clár a chur chun. Tá siad á mbaint ón ndualgas atá in alt 10(a) d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla. Glacaim leis gur RTÉ a bhí i gceist ansin. Níl mé céad faoin gcéad cad é an rud praiticiúil atá i gceist anseo, conas a n-oibríonn sé seo nó cad í an fhadhb a d'aithin duine éigin maidir leis na craolacháin closamhairc nó fuaimne nó cén fáth gur tháinig an chuid sin den leasú chun cinn.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): An bhfuil éinne eile ag iarraidh labhairt air sin?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá sé go léir ráite ag an Teachta Dála agus ní mé chun é a athrá ach tá sé deacair glacadh le leasuithe mar seo. Tá an tAire ag rá gur rudaí teicniúla amháin iad agus nach bhfuil aon athrú suntasach i gceist. An athruithe teicniúla iad seo? Sin rud amháin. Muna leasuithe teicniúla iad, ní féidir glacadh le hathruithe mar seo. Tá an méid sin le léamh. Dhírigh mise isteach air agus mé á léamh agus chuir mé marc le “sheirbhísí craolacháin closamhairc” freisin. Níl mé chun aon phointe a dhéanamh ag an staid seo mar níl mé in ann. Ba mhaith breathnú ar cad atá i gceist agus cad atá taobh thiar de seo. Má tá an tAire ag rá gur rudaí teicniúla iad, creidim é mar dúirt sé sin maidir le rudaí eile. Ach ní cloisim go soiléir uaidh gur rudaí teicniúla atá i gceist so ba mhaith liom breathnú air seo. D'iarr an tAire orainn leasuithe a tharraingt siar. B'fhéidir go mbeadh an tAire in ann an leasú seo a tharraingt siar ionas go mbeadh soiléireacht agus cinnteacht i gceist. Oibríonn sé sa dá threo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Táim sásta an leasú seo a phlé. Is rud beag é ach tá sé tábhachtach. Le bheith soiléir, táimid ag caint faoi leasú Uimh. 58. Tá leasú Uimh. 58 faoi chúrsaí teicniúla. Tá mé dul ar aghaidh leis na leasuithe eile.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá trí chuid dhifriúla ann-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: -----rud a dhéanann níos deacra é. Tá trí ghné dhifriúla.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim. Tá sé réasúnta simplí ach tá mé ag iarraidh go mbeadh muinín ag na Teachtaí as an bpróiseas mar sin tá mé sásta iad a tharraingt siar ach amháin an leasú faoi ainm na Roinne. Tá sé tábhachtach go leanfar ar aghaidh leis an bpróiseas sin.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Cén leasú é sin?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Níl sé sa ghrúpa seo.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): An bhfuil tú ag tarraingt siar achan rud ó leasú Uimh. 58 go dtí 61?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá muid ag baint leasú Uimh. 58 go dtí 61.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Na ceithre cinn. Tá leasuithe Uimh. 58 go dtí 61 á dtarraingt siar.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Fadhb ar bith.

Tarraingíodh siar an leasú faoi chead.

Níor tairgeadh leasuithe Uimh. 59 go 61 go huile.

Aontaíodh alt 13.

ALT 14

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 62:

Ar leathanach 35, líne 4, “2012 trí” a scriosadh agus “2012, i bhfo-alt (1), trí” a chur ina ionad.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 63:

Ar leathanach 35, líne 6, “i bhfo-alt (1)” a scriosadh.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh alt 14, mar a leasaíodh é.

ALT NUA

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá baint ag leasuithe Uimh. 64 agus 65 le chéile agus pléfar le chéile iad.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 64:

Ar leathanach 35, i ndiaidh líne 6, an méid seo a leanas a chur isteach:

“Leasú ar an Acht um Chosaint Sonraí, 2018

15. Leasaítear an tAcht um Chosaint Sonraí, 2018—

(a) in alt 39(3)—

(i) trí “de Pharlaimint na hEorpa, d’údarás áitiúil nó comhalta arna thoghadh nó arna thoghadh chun Údarás na Gaeltachta, nó” a chur in ionad “de Pharlaimint na hEorpa nó d’údarás áitiúil, nó” i mír (b), agus

(ii) tríd an mír seo a leanas a chur in ionad mhír (c):

“(c) iarrthóir lena thoghadh nó lena thoghadh chun oifig Uachtarán na hÉireann nó oifig Mhéara Luimnigh, chun Parlaimint na hEorpa, chun údaráis áitiúil nó chun Údarás na Gaeltachta nó iarrthóir ar chomhaltas de cheachtar Teach den Oireachtas.”,

agus

(b) in alt 40(5)—

(i) trí “d’údarás áitiúil,” a chur in ionad “d’údarás áitiúil.” i mír (c), agus

(ii) tríd an mír seo a leanas a chur isteach i ndiaidh mhír (c):

“(d) comhalta arna thoghadh nó arna toghadh chun Údarás na Gaeltachta.”.”.

Déantar leasuithe ar ailt den tAcht um Chosaint Sonraí, 2018 chun a chinntiú go bhfuil na cearta céanna ag iarrathóirí toghcháin Údarás na Gaeltachta agus atá ag iarrathóirí ar thoghcháin eile mar a bhaineann sé le rochtain a fháil ar shonraí ábhartha maidir le toghthóirí. Is rud caighdeánach é seo go mbeadh na sonraí seo ar fáil d’iarrthóirí in aon toghchán sa Stát agus mar sin molaim na leasaithe seo don Teach.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Níl fadhb ar bith againn leis seo. Is rud praiticiúil é seo a tharlaíonn d’aon ghuth agus ba chóir go mbeadh sé ann. Tá mé sásta tacú leis.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Níl Teachta ar bith ag iarraidh labhairt air seo.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh alt 15, mar a leasaíodh é.

TEIDEAL

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tairgim leasú Uimh. 65:

Ar leathanach 7, líne 11, “do leasú an Achta um Chosaint Sonraí, 2018;” a chur isteach i ndiaidh “2012;”.

Aontaíodh an leasú.

Aontaíodh an Teideal, mar a leasaíodh í.

Tuairiscíodh an Bille le leasú.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Cathain a thógfar Céim na Tuarascála?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Go luath.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Go luath.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tar éis na cruinnithe.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá a lán obair bhaile le déanamh.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá an daonlathas ag obair go maith faoin am seo.

Childcare: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Claire Kerrane on Wednesday, 7 May 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises:

- the challenges that exist in the Early Years Sector, including for parents trying to afford and access childcare places and for educators when it comes to pay and terms and conditions;
- the thousands of children on waiting lists for childcare places;
- the serious deficiencies in capacity in our Childcare Sector;
- the high costs of childcare that continues to exist with some parents paying over €1,000 a month; and
- the Early Years Educators who are underpaid and undervalued by successive Governments;

commends, the forty-three organisations who have come together to form the Together for Public, an alliance for a Public System of Early Childhood Education and Care, including children's rights groups, academics, trade unions, anti-poverty groups, equality and human rights groups, led by the National Women's Council of Ireland;

acknowledges:

- the Programme for Government commitment for the first time to public provision and to capital investment to build or purchase State-owned childcare facilities; and
- the inclusion in the Programme for Government to commit to “undertake a broad consultation and publish a detailed action plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system with State-led facilities adding capacity”;

calls on Government to:

- publish the terms of reference for the consultation and detail how the consultation will take place with a timeframe;
- engage with Together for Public, on the terms of reference for the consultation before commencing; and
- detail a timeframe for the action plan.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

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

“welcomes the significant prioritisation by the Government of measures designed to:

14 May 2025

- reduce out of pocket costs of early learning and childcare for families;

- better align the supply of State-subsidised early learning and childcare with demand;

and

- increase the pay and improve the working conditions of early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners, as well as develop career pathways and promote careers in the sector, in line with Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan (2021-2028);

acknowledges the unprecedented growth in State funding in the sector, which has increased by 142 per cent since 2020 to stand at €1.37 billion this year;

acknowledges and welcomes the major achievements of the funding model that provide a solid foundation from which this Government can build, in particular:

- the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), which is providing subsidies - universal, income-assessed and sponsored - to record numbers of children this year, with an allocation of €530 million in 2025;

- the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, which enjoys uptake rates in excess of 96 per cent and has removed barriers to accessing pre-school education, with data from a recent review showing that more than 40 per cent of families would not have been able to send their child to pre-school without this programme;

- the award-winning Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), that is supporting more than 9,000 children with a disability to access the ECCE programme this year, with AIM now expanded beyond the ECCE programme, where ECCE children are now benefitting from AIM support outside the ECCE programme hours, both in term and out;

- Equal Start, the funding model and set of universal and targeted measures to support access to, and participation in, early learning and childcare for children and their families who experience disadvantage, with 770 services designated as priority settings in receipt of targeted supports this year;

- Core Funding, with an allocation of €331 million in the third programme year towards operating costs (pay and non-pay) of providers to support;

- the introduction of a new fee management system, which in years 1 and 2 meant no increase in fees since September 2021 and in year 3 means the continuation of the fee freeze for a majority of providers, as well as a fee increase assessment process and a maximum fee cap;

- the introduction of targeted measures for small services, including a flat rate of €5,000 for services registered on the Tusla Early Years Register as sessional only and a minimum Base Rate allocation of €14,000 for centre-based services; and

- the introduction of two Employment Regulation Orders for the Early Years Services Sector, which came into effect in September 2022 and June 2024 providing minimum hourly rates of pay for early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners, increasing the wages of an estimated 73 per cent and 53 per cent of those working in the sector;

acknowledges that the allocation for the fourth year of this scheme, which will exceed €390

million, contingent on updated Employment Regulation Orders, will bring further investment into the sector;

acknowledges and welcomes the major progress in implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028), with the commencement of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Childminding Services) Regulations 2024 and relevant sections of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 making it possible for childminders to start applying to Tusla to go through the registration process and once registered by Tusla to apply to take part in the NCS;

further acknowledges and welcomes the latest data from a range of sources that shows capacity in the early learning and childcare sector is increasing in terms of the number of places and hours of provision that services are offering, the number of places opening, the number of staff in the early learning and childcare workforce and the number of parents supported through the various schemes and the numbers of children benefitting, with:

— data from the Early Years Sector Profile Survey showing that, between 2021/22 and 2023/24, the estimated number of enrolments in services rose by 19 per cent from 197,185 to 234,597;

— core funding application data showing that between Year 1 (from September 2022-August 2023) and Year 3 (from September 2023-August 2024) of the scheme, annual place hours increased by 15 per cent;

— data from Tusla on service closures and new service registrations showing a net increase of 226 in the overall number of services in 2024 and a six-year low in the number of service closures;

— data from the Early Years Sector Profile Survey showing that, between 2021/22 and 2022/23, the estimated number of staff in the early learning and childcare workforce rose by 8 per cent from 34,357 to 37,060; and

— data from the NCS showing that since May 2022, there has been a 136 per cent increase in the number of providers offering the Scheme and a 330 per cent increase in the numbers of children benefitting from the Scheme;

also acknowledges that there continues to be evidence of some families having difficulty finding appropriate places at a cost that is affordable and that despite progress in recent years owing to intervention by the State, the sector remains a low-paid one; and

welcomes:

— the commitment by Government to a reduction in fees paid by parents to €200 per month over its lifetime;

— the ringfenced allocation of €45 million to increase the pay of early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners this year through updated Employment Regulation Orders, with a commitment by Government for further progress in this area;

— the transformation of the Supply Management Unit into a Forward Planning and Delivery Unit, with important work underway in that Unit to develop a forward planning model and explore options to introduce public provision to operate alongside private and

community providers where there are shortfalls in capacity;

— the commitment to develop an Action Plan to ‘build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early education and care system with State-led facilities adding capacity’, with the scope of the Action Plan, the design of a comprehensive stakeholder consultation process to underpin it and the principles that should guide the delivery of this work well advanced; and

— while noting that further developments and investment are required, Dáil Éireann recognises that there are many positive and progressive elements to the current early learning and childcare sector and acknowledges the pathway for improving access, affordability and quality is set out in the new Programme for Government.”.

- (Minister for Children, Disability and Equality)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding childcare. On Wednesday, 7 May, 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, 83; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	

<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</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>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</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, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	

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<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, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendment No. 1 in the name of the Social Democrats cannot be moved.

Amendment No. 1 not moved.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	

<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</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>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	

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<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Parental Choice in Education: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Jen Cummins on Thursday, 8 May 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— more than 90 per cent of Irish primary schools are under religious patronage, while only 5 per cent are multi-denominational;

— a survey by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation found that just 4 per cent of teachers think preparing students for sacraments should be the responsibility of primary schools, while more than two fifths believe that faith formation should not take place at all during school hours;

— the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future of the 33rd Dáil, contained a target of at least 400 multi-denominational primary schools by 2030, "to improve parental choice";

— in reality, there are approximately just 170 such schools, with only 20 changing from a religious to a multi-denominational ethos over the past decade; and

— "Securing Ireland's Future", the current Programme for Government, contains no target at all on multi-denominational schools;

further notes that:

— the previous Government had committed to holding a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education; and

— the current Government has downgraded this commitment and has pledged to hold a "national convention";

regrets that:

— despite successive Governments stated commitments to educational pluralism, the vast majority of schools remain under religious patronage, even as demand for multi-denominational options grows;

— the Government's Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity process lacks transparency, ambition, and community empowerment;

— patronage divestment is stalling due to poor community engagement, lack of clarity in the process, and no obligation on patrons to cooperate; and

— schools wishing to reconfigure face financial disincentives and logistical hurdles, creating systemic inertia;

recognises that:

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— these ongoing delays directly undermine parental choice and the constitutional right to freedom of religion; and

— without decisive action, the goal of a pluralistic, inclusive education system will remain aspirational; and

calls on the Government to:

— reinstate the abandoned commitment to have 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030;

— adopt a policy that all new schools are opened under non-religious patronage;

— remove “faith formation” from the school day, with it to take place outside of school hours in line with the families beliefs;

— create a clear and independent mechanism for patronage change, via the establishment of a statutory framework for changing school patronage, with independent oversight to avoid conflicts of interest by existing patrons;

— repeal section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act 1998, so teachers cannot face religious discrimination; and

— establish a Citizens’ Assembly to make recommendations on the future of the education system, including how it might better reflect and serve a more modern, inclusive and diverse Ireland.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

— the Government recognises the importance of parental choice; and

— the Government is committed to seeking to increase choice for parents by ensuring that families can access both multi/non-denominational and faith-based education, in line with the Programme for Government commitment;

further notes that:

— enrolments in mainstream multi-denominational and inter-denominational primary schools rose by 87.5 per cent (from 23,721 to 44,476) over the 10-year period from 2013/14 to 2023/24;

— there are 172 primary schools with a multi-denominational or inter-denominational ethos (2024/25 school year), this includes 32 multi-denominational primary schools which transferred patronage and/or changed ethos to multi-denominational and schools established under the patronage divesting process;

— 51 of the 52 new primary schools established to cater for increased demographic demand since 2011 have a multi-denominational ethos;

— the Programme for Government, includes a commitment to ‘increase choice for

parents by ensuring that families can access both multi/non-denominational and faith-based education’;

— as part of delivering on the Programme for Government commitment, the Minister for Education and Youth has indicated that she intends to launch an online school specific survey of parents and school communities on what type of education they would like to see for their child and their school;

— in tandem with the proposed survey, the Department of Education and Youth will be providing clear information for parents and guardians to enable them to make an informed decision in relation to the different types of primary school patronage options;

— denominational schools have played an important role in primary education in Ireland for over a century, and they, along with other primary schools, have a strong history of inclusivity in serving their local communities and accept children of all faiths and none;

— under the Constitution, the provisions of article 44 recognise the rights of children to attend school without attending religious instruction at that school, the Education Act 1998 also provides that a school shall not require a student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent/guardian of the student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student;

— for historical reasons, most primary schools are State-aided parish schools, with the local Bishop as patron;

— it is recognised, including by the Catholic patrons, that more diverse provision is required to cater for our changing society;

— the Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity process has been developed in order to accelerate the delivery of multi-denominational schools, and this process supports transfers of schools to multi-denominational patrons, in response to the wishes of local communities;

— when a school transfers from the patronage of one patron to another, the school remains open with the same roll number, operating from the same school property and with the same school staff and pupils;

— all State-funded primary schools follow a common national curriculum and are subject to the same Department rules and regulations;

— the Programme for Government commits to holding a convention bringing together all stakeholders in education; and

— nationally, at post-primary level, 48.6 per cent of students are enrolled in multi-denominational or inter-denominational schools, 47.6 per cent are enrolled in schools with a Catholic ethos and 2.9 per cent are enrolled in schools with a Church of Ireland ethos, and the remaining 0.9 per cent is accounted for by post-primary schools with an ethos other than Catholic, Church of Ireland, inter-denominational or multi-denominational; and

calls on the Government to:

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— take any necessary steps to ensure that patronage transfers are facilitated, where parents and school communities support this;

— establish the level of parental demand for the primary school their children attend now or will attend in the future to change to a multi-denominational ethos by commencing the planned survey of primary school communities;

— continue to progress the reconfiguration process, with the goal of establishing a strong process, that has the support of patrons and local communities, and which will enable us to continue to increase the number of multi-denominational primary schools across the country;

— ensure that the Department of Education and Youth continues to engage with key stakeholders on the reconfiguration process; and

— continue to support school communities when schools are transferring patronage.”.

- (Minister for Education and Youth)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding parental choice in education. On Thursday, 7 May, 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, 84; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</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>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O’Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O’Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O’Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O’Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O’Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O’Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O’Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</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>	

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<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</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, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Jen Cummins and Cian O'Callaghan.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	

<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</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, Michael.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</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'Rourke, Darren.</i>	

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<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<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, Mark.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>		
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</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'Donoghue, Richard.</i>		
<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Jen Cummins and Cian O’Callaghan.

Question declared carried.

Housing and Critical Infrastructure: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Eoin Ó Broin on Tuesday, 13 May 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— decades of underfunding by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, in our water and electricity infrastructure, have created significant constraints to the increased delivery of public and private housing;

— the Commission for Regulation of Utilities has warned that data centres pose a risk to increased housing delivery, due to constraints in the electricity grid;

— Uisce Éireann have said that meeting the Government’s revised housing targets would require a significant increase in capital funding, above their current programme to increase water and wastewater capacity in urban and rural areas;

— the Irish Home Builders Association have repeatedly warned that the electricity grid, drinking water, wastewater capacity and connections are a constraint on housing delivery; and

— the Government’s proposed Housing Activation Office does not have the emergency powers underpinned by legislation as called for by the Housing Commission; and agrees that the Government must:

— as a matter of urgency, set out its plans for the funding of, and delivery of, increased capacity of critical infrastructure required for the delivery of housing, including the electricity grid, drinking water and wastewater;

— fully implement the Housing Commission’s proposal for a housing delivery oversight executive, with emergency powers underpinned by legislation; and

— properly resource our planning system, to ensure timely decisions are made on applications for the delivery of critical infrastructure and new housing.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“acknowledges that:

— population growth in recent years has been higher than anticipated, bringing a requirement for enhanced infrastructure and services, and the annual increase in population of 1.3 per cent, between Census 2016 and 2022, has exceeded the forecast increase of 0.8 per cent that underpinned the National Planning Framework in 2018;

— high population growth has been a driver of strong economic growth, and there are now a record number of people at work in Ireland, and this population requires housing and supporting infrastructure; and

— there has also been a growth in energy demand and in the energy intensity required for modern manufacturing and large-scale servers, due to the requirements of modern technology;

recognises that:

— the measures introduced under Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland, have helped establish a solid platform to ‘scale-up’ delivery of housing in the short-term, and secure a sustainable level of supply that will help us meet fully unmet and emerging housing demand;

— the measures committed to in the Programme for Government, including a new housing plan building on the successes of Housing for All, will help us meet the enormous challenge of delivering more than 300,000 new homes by 2030;

— a record level of investment is being provided for the delivery of housing in 2025, with overall capital funding now available of almost €6.8 billion;

— the Government’s new national housing plan will incorporate pragmatic actions to boost housing activity in the short-term, coupled with strategic deliverables to drive comprehensive systemic change and subsequent increase in supply into the long-term;

— there have been record levels of investment in infrastructure under the current National Development Plan for the period 2021 to 2031;

— Uisce Éireann has ramped up capital delivery for water services and infrastructure, from €300 million in 2014, to roughly €1.3 billion in 2024, and for 2025, the Exchequer will provide just over €2.2 billion in funding to Uisce Éireann;

— our water networks will require ongoing and sustained investment to bring these up to the required standard of treatment, to deal with population and housing growth, and to adapt to the impacts of climate change;

— the Programme for Government commits to investing additional capital in Uisce Éireann, and this is being considered in the context of the ongoing review of the National Development Plan;

— Ireland is currently experiencing high demand for new electrical connections driven by population growth, industrial development and accelerated electrification targets;

— over the last four years, ESB Networks has connected over 147,000 homes and businesses to the distribution network;

— in response to increased demand, the electricity system operators, ESB Networks and EirGrid, have prepared business plans that propose significantly increased investment in the electricity grid for the period 2026-2030, and the Government looks forward to the conclusion of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities Price Review Six strategy, which will provide a clear framework for investment in the electricity grid;

— the Government has established a new Infrastructure Division, that will lead infrastructure reform, overseen by the Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce;

— the Government has established a new Housing Activation Office (HAO), to identify and seek to address barriers to the delivery of public infrastructure projects needed to enable housing development, through the alignment of funding and coordination of infrastructure providers;

— the HAO will engage and align stakeholders, including local authorities, utility and infrastructure providers, industry and others, to ensure that infrastructure blockages are addressed in a coordinated way in order to enable housing development, and it will focus on infrastructure needed at a local or district level to support housing delivery on multiple sites, including social and community infrastructure needed to support the development of sustainable communities;

— legislative and system level reform of the planning system is progressing;

— the Government is prioritising the commencement of the Planning and Development Act 2024, on a phased basis, and the Act represents the most comprehensive review of planning legislation since 2000, and will reform and streamline the planning process, and support timely decision making for housing and strategic infrastructure projects;

— the Government is committed to improving the capacity and performance of the planning system, through the implementation of the Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources, approved in 2024; and

— on 30th April, 2025, Dáil Éireann approved the Revised National Planning Framework, and this provides the basis for the review and updating of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031, and local authority development plans to reflect critical matters such as updated housing figures or projected jobs growth, including through the zoning of land for residential, employment and a range of other purposes; and

affirms Government efforts to:

— prioritise infrastructure development as a critical means for increasing housing supply, noting the Government's commitments in the Programme for Government including, for example, the commitment to invest in water and energy infrastructure under the National Development Plan;

— resource a new HAO, to address barriers to the delivery of public infrastructure projects needed to enable housing development;

— expand the capacity of the construction sector as another key measure to scale up housing and critical infrastructure delivery to the levels necessary by 2030;

— deliver on the far ranging commitments in the Programme for Government, and

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informed by the Housing Commission’s proposals for the long-term reform of the housing system, accepting this is an appropriate response to the current housing challenges which Ireland is now facing; and

— deliver on the commitments in the Programme for Government relating to implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024, the Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources and implementation of the Revised National Planning Framework.”.

- (Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy John Cummins)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding housing and critical infrastructure. On Tuesday, 13 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, 82; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	

<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</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>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jen- nifer.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	

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<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, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</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>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata-sha.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	

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<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to Second Stage of the Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021 taken today. On the question, “That the Bill be

now read a Second Time”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2) that division must be taken now.

Question put: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 66; Níl, 82; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</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>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>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Butterly, Paula.</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>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	
<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</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>Hearne, Rory.</i>	<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</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>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	
<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	

<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</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>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	
<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</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>S+mith, Duncan.</i>	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
	<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</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, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Roche, Peter.</i>	
	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	

Dáil Éireann

	<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>	
	<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Ward, Barry.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Paul Murphy and Ruth Coppinger; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.19 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 15 Bealtaine 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.19 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 15 May 2025.