



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 20 Bealtaine 2025

Tuesday, 20 May 2025

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

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

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I extend a céad míle fáilte to the students of Coláiste Eoghain from Buncrana and to the women from the Breaffy walking group in Castlebar. They are all very welcome.

At 10 o'clock this morning, Cara Darmody, a 14-year-old disability campaigner, began a 50-hour protest outside the Dáil and she joins us in the Gallery as well. I extend a very warm welcome to her and to her father, Mark. Cara is an exceptional and amazing young woman who has stepped forward to fight not just for her brothers Neil and John but for all of the children so badly failed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. At the heart of Cara's protest is one simple demand, namely, that the Government comply with the law and ensure no child is left behind. Children with disabilities are legally entitled to an assessment of needs within six months and yet 15,296 children are left well beyond this timeframe, some for years, delaying their access to vital therapies and appropriate school places. The HSE anticipates that this dire situation will get worse. By the end of 2025, there could be almost 25,000 on waiting lists for assessment of needs.

I have been contacted by so many parents over the last week and they all have the same story. One mother got a letter on Friday to acknowledge her application for assessment of needs and was informed that the waiting list is in excess of three years. Another told me her son is on the list for an appointment which has been cancelled over and over again. Another parent's daughter got a letter saying it will be between 24 and 33 months before she will be seen, and this child is already on the list for over a year. I work with parents every day in my own constituency. In the north-inner city, the waiting lists would make your eyes water and it is even worse in Cabra. Even when you get your assessment of needs, the fight continues for therapies, school places and very basic services.

The Government has broken the law over and over again. There is a legal requirement on the Government to provide an assessment of needs within six months and it has broken this over and over again. Children are being failed dramatically, left in limbo while they wait for the

supports to which they are entitled. How is it that children are so badly failed? Why is it that people with disabilities are so badly failed? There is no indication from the Government that it is serious at all about complying with the law. Today, the combined Opposition comes together and demands that the Government comply with the law. Our motion tonight lays out the clear, concrete steps needed if the Government is serious about tackling assessment of needs waiting lists and complying with its legal and moral obligations. Tá an dlí briste ag an Taoiseach arís is arís eile. Tá teip shuntasach á déanamh ar leanaí faoi mhíchumas atá fágtha idir dhá cheann na meá ag fanacht ar mheasúnaithe ar riachtanais ar a bhfuil siad i dteideal. Inniu, tháinig an Freasúra go léir le chéile chun iarraidh ar an Rialtas cloí leis an ndlí.

Can the Taoiseach tell parents clearly what the target date is by which the Government will comply with the law? Can he set out the emergency action he will take and the resources he will make available to Cara's fund to clear the current backlog? What about workforce planning, because in some parts of the State, 60% of positions within the children's disability network teams, CDNTs, are currently vacant?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: At the outset, I appreciate the work Cara Darmody has been doing and her campaigning work with her father, Mark. She has been campaigning for quite some time. She initially began to do so in terms of advocacy for her family and now does so nationally in respect of disability rights more generally.

When I was appointed Taoiseach earlier in the year, I committed that this would be a Government that would make a step change, comprehensively and across all areas of government, in provision for people with special needs or with disabilities, and with a particular focus on young people. The issue of disability is represented at the Cabinet table by a full Minister, and I am in the process of establishing the first ever disability unit within the Department of An Taoiseach to troubleshoot and co-ordinate across all Departments the provision of services for people with disabilities.

To go through the various areas, first, the need is increasing all the time. The 2022 census is indicative of that in terms of the increase in the numbers of people identifying with a special need. Fundamentally, in education, there has been an exponential increase in investment. There has been a major increase in resources in terms of special needs assistants, with approximately 23,400 of them now. There are 20,800 special education teachers. The expenditure on SNAs alone is approximately €1 billion per year and that is the way it should be. Enrolment in special classes has doubled in five years, with nearly 19,000 students being supported in 3,335 classes, and more than 2,700 new placements are planned for 2025-26.

A new national therapy service in education, beginning in special schools, has been agreed upon by Cabinet and work is under way to get that in place, partially in the next school year, 2025-26, and fully thereafter.

In terms of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, 39 new therapist posts have been approved. That recruitment is well under way and has been quite successful and effective.

In regard to income supports, the Minister for Social Protection is working on specific budget provisions for children in particular, and people more generally, with disabilities.

On transport, we have specifically asked the Minister for Transport to work on the mobility

issues. We are working with the Department of Finance to put the disabled tax scheme back on a proper footing, and on a better footing than was the case beforehand.

In respect of the assessment of need, quite fundamentally, we need to change the legislation. The High Court decision necessitates, in my view, a change in legislation to ensure therapists are directed and streamlined to provide services to children more quickly than is currently the case. We currently have a finite number of therapists in the country. The real objective has to be to use those therapists optimally in providing services to children. I say that very clearly because I am looking for solutions here and that is one nettle we have to grasp.

It will be challenging, but we still have a Cabinet subcommittee on disability and it has asked the Minister for children and the Department of children to come back with legislative proposals in respect of the assessment of need area. Recruiting and retaining therapists is very important, as is the mutual recognition of qualifications across Europe and with the United Kingdom to enable us to bring in more therapists from overseas in addition to those we will produce through our colleges. Tá gach aon iarracht á dhéanamh ag an Rialtas chun déileáil leis an bhfadhb seo. Tá an-chuid áiseanna ann ach an rud is tábhachtaí ná go bhfuil gá ann an córas a athrú go tapa.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What the High Court found is that the State is breaking the law.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What the High Court demanded is that the State be in compliance with the law.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is what the ruling means. It does not mean change the law. The Taoiseach's message to us today is that rather than working to be in compliance with the law to ensure that children get the assessments of need to which they are legally entitled within the statutory framework of six months, his idea is to change the law and remove that provision. There is a common view, certainly across those who work within the disability sector and with families, that the problem is not the law. It is actually a very good law. It is a good idea that a rigorous and thorough assessment of need is given to every child and person who needs it within a six-month timeframe. The issue here is Government inaction and Government failure.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I put it to the Taoiseach again that rather than suggesting he simply changes the law, he should comply with the law and tell us how-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----he is going to make it possible that those 15,000 children, who wait and wait, will get their assessments of need and consequently the services and supports to which they are entitled.

An Ceann Comhairle: Maybe the Deputy could stay within her own time.

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The Taoiseach: The Deputy has offered no solution. She has offered rhetoric, and that is all.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, no.

Deputy Mark Ward: We are being denied.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is this. We will do everything we simply can to deal with the existing waiting lists and so forth. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of assessments that have actually taken place - a 30% increase on 2023 - but that in itself will not deal with the current situation. We have to have a multifaceted response. We need more therapists in third level colleges.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes.

The Taoiseach: We will be providing more private funding to procure assessments. All of that, however, will not, in my view, redirect the work of therapists most appropriately, which is to provide services to children.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You need an assessment of needs before you decide on a child's therapist.

The Taoiseach: I am making a point. Under the current system, the *status quo* is simply not tenable. The Deputy must know that deep down, so there has to be change in respect of that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government is robbing the children of their assessments.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There has to be a change.

The Taoiseach: In my view, we have to explore every avenue we can to increase the number of therapists and to recruit more therapists. The money is there in many instances-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Taoiseach has failed those children.

The Taoiseach: -----and the HSE has not been able to recruit 100% of its CDNT teams.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is utterly shameful.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Today, as the Taoiseach knows and as we all know, marks the beginning of the 50-hour protest by young Cara Darmody. Like others, I welcome Cara and her father Mark to the Gallery. Cara is an incredible campaigner for the rights of children with additional needs, and she is only 14 years old. She is staging this protest, as the Taoiseach knows, to raise awareness of what is an emergency, the Government's failure to comply with the Disability Act. The Taoiseach has just said in response that the *status quo* is "not tenable". Of course the *status quo* is not tenable. It is not tenable for children like Cara's brothers or for the many thousands of children, 15,000 children nationally, who are now languishing on waiting lists awaiting an assessment of need, in breach of the Government's own law.

When the HSE receives an application, it is set out in law that the assessment of need must be carried out within six months. My colleague Deputy Alan Kelly has received responses to parliamentary questions which reveal that in the first quarter of this year, that legally binding six-month deadline was missed in a shocking 93% of cases, which is an extraordinarily high rate of failure. It is a desperate embarrassment, and it is an ongoing problem that the Taoiseach

has inherited from his own outgoing Government, the previous Government. There can be no passing of the buck. The Taoiseach said there would be a step change; he used that language again just now.

The Taoiseach: There will be.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: That is not what we have seen.

It is two years to the week this week since we in Labour brought a Dáil motion, with the great support and encouragement of Cara Darmody, setting out a constructive plan to take on and address these waiting lists and to treat the chronic delay in diagnoses like the national emergency it is. Many of us will recall that on that day in this House, the then Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte, made a powerful speech acknowledging responsibility for failure and the profound impact on children and families. Anne Rabbitte made a commitment that if capacity did not improve, she would adopt our Labour Party proposal to reimburse parents for private assessments as an emergency and as a constructive way of addressing this appalling shortfall. We all took that significant announcement as a sign that the Taoiseach and his Government would place a greater focus on resolving this. However, the stories and accounts we are hearing from parents and families throughout the country and the waiting list figures really say otherwise. We understand the Government will not oppose tonight's cross-party motion. That is welcome, but non-opposition is not enough. The Government did not oppose our Labour Party motion two years ago on this very topic. It made all the right noises then, but the problem has grown worse since then.

The responses to Deputy Kelly's parliamentary questions show that in the first quarter of this year, just 1,412 assessments were carried out. That is a tiny number, a fraction of the need, when we see that more than 15,000 children are overdue an assessment. This number is expected to grow to 25,000 by the end of this year. I am asking the Taoiseach, as Cara Darmody asks, when this will be treated as the national emergency it is. When will we see those waiting lists properly and effectively addressed?

The Taoiseach: One of the reasons this Government quickly established the need for a therapy-in-school service, which we have now commenced and taken the decision to do, was the inadequacy of the response within the health service itself. Many CDNT teams are experiencing challenges in recruiting and retaining therapists, as well as wider general issues. The issue is actually not one of resources; it is one of capacity. Private funding was provided last year and quite a number of private therapists have been procured. The standard operating procedure model that the HSE adopted was struck down by the courts. The rationale behind it was to prioritise establishing the needs of children, rather than providing the diagnosis immediately, in order to ensure a quicker route to intervention services.

I have been informed by the HSE that it is estimated that up to 30% of assessments result in children being identified as not having a disability. It is about how to allocate resources more effectively and in a targeted way to the children who require those services as quickly as possible. That is the objective we have to focus on. What will enable us to do that in the short term more effectively than currently is the case? At the moment, the timeframe for an assessment of need could be between 37 and 90 hours. There is finite capacity in terms of therapists out there, whether in the private sector or the public sector.

Yes, we have to create more third level places. We have done that and we are going to do

more of it. We have to facilitate more recruitment of therapists from overseas. CORU, the regulatory body, needs to be flexible in that regard. Mutual recognition of qualifications is a general problem because we need to supplement our own development of graduates through our third level system with graduates from overseas to get a higher number assessing and, crucially, providing services to children.

In education a line of sight is visible in terms of allocating the resources and getting visibility over the provision of services. We are not quite there yet. I have acknowledged that in Dublin we have issues with some school places. I will not be happy until 100% of children are looked after in terms of a school place for September. However, there is and has been an issue with therapists. That is why we have moved to an education model to commence with special schools, to expand beyond that and then to support the community teams as well.

In the short term, there are choices we can take to enable therapists to get to children more quickly and to be used more optimally than currently is the case for children. That is the case I am making for why I think we need legislative change along with a range of other measures. It is not to take away rights, but to provide services to children.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I listened carefully when the Taoiseach said the issue is not one of resources but one of capacity. Then he threw out a number of hypothetical ways in which capacity could be addressed. However, the Government has not done anything to address capacity. I sat yesterday in my own constituency with two desperate mothers who are desperate to get school places for their children. The Taoiseach spoke about school places. The failure of the Government on school places for children with additional needs is shameful. The two mothers asked me, “Why does the Government not upskill us?” Why do we not use the resource of all those parents who have fought so hard for so long and had to struggle so hard to get places, therapies and assessment of needs in the first place for their children. Let us look at a programme of upskilling. That is what they are telling me. Otherwise, the Government will continue to fail.

I am looking at the letter Deputy Kelly got. It said 7% of assessment of needs were carried out within the timeframe. That is a 93% failure rate. That is shocking. Will the Taoiseach meet Cara Darmody today? Will he hear from her the constructive proposals she has based on her own lived experience in her own family on what his Government can constructively do to address that capacity shortfall?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy mentioned special education. Special class enrolment has doubled in five years. We have gone from about 9,000 to 19,000. What is that saying? It is revealing the exponential growth in the number of children requiring special needs provision and services and resources have expanded accordingly, in terms of the number of classes, SNAs and special teachers and funding for extra classrooms and so on in the special needs area. Any objective person assessing what has been happening in special education, while not saying we are there yet, would have to acknowledge the very significant growth and expansion and rightly so. I am absolutely committed to this and I want to get this sorted but that will mean taking decisions which I anticipate will run into opposition here, as is the nature of politics and that is fair enough.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will you meet Cara?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Will you meet Cara?

The Taoiseach: Sorry, I have already organised that. There has been engagement and we

will meet.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Good.

The Taoiseach: I have met Cara before and Deputies-----

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Successive Governments have let children with autism and intellectual disabilities down in the worst possible way. Permanent damage is being caused to thousands and thousands of children. The fact this is happening is a national disgrace. Those are not my words but those of Cara Darmody, who joins us in the Gallery, who has begun a 50-hour protest over disability services outside the Dáil. Cara did not utter those words today but last year when Cara held a weekly protest outside Leinster House and Government Buildings.

Cara has been highlighting the crisis in the assessment of needs and disability services since she was just 11. No child should have to spend years campaigning and protesting for basic services. Cara should be in school today like other kids her age but she is not. She is here in the Gallery, and will be outside the building during the day, to highlight that services are getting worse not better. She has watched her two younger brothers, Neil and John, who have additional needs, being repeatedly failed and she has made it very clear that she is undertaking her protest for every child in the country that is being left behind.

There are now more than 15,000 children all over the country who are overdue an assessment of needs. The HSE is warning that by the end of the year the figure could be 25,000. That would be 25,000 children left waiting for an assessment of needs beyond the legal time limit; 25,000 children with additional needs being failed by this Government; 25,000 children just like Neil and John. This is utterly unacceptable.

When the Taoiseach is asked about this he blames court judgements, the law and growing need. He fails to take responsibility. Families have had enough of Government excuses. Opposition parties are putting down a joint motion calling for immediate action. Children with additional needs deserve more than just broken promises. They need quality services to be available when they need them. We all know childhood is fleeting and at the moment too many children are being left behind. Consistent Government failures mean children are being denied the opportunity to reach their full potential. We cannot and we will not tolerate that.

The Dáil motion that the Social Democrats and other parties have tabled is not asking for bells and whistles. It is asking for the Government to comply with the law. It should not take a 50-hour protest outside the Dáil by Cara, just 14 years old, to shame this Government into action to provide assessment of needs within the legal time limit of six months. Will the Taoiseach stop breaking this law?

The Taoiseach: From day one, the Government has identified the entire area of disability and special needs as a key priority, along with housing and, as I said earlier, child poverty. That will be reflected in the forthcoming budget and has already been reflected in Government initiatives. Decisions have been taken at recent meetings of the Cabinet subcommittee in respect of this. Going back, when the party the Deputy was in at the time was in government, the CDNT progressing disability initiative was taken. I am not blaming anybody, but I do not think that worked. I said at the time it would not work and have said so consistently. Quite frankly, that is why a new national therapy-in-school service is being established. The CDNTs have had huge difficulty in recruiting a sufficiency of therapists. There is a 21% vacancy rate in CDNTs throughout the country. That model has not worked for a variety of reasons.

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I am not blaming High Court decisions but the HSE's standard operating procedure model was proving to be effective and impactful for many children because it was getting therapy services to children more quickly. The legislation needs to be changed without removing any rights. To be fair, when the courts rule, it is then up to legislators to deal with that ruling by amending the Act and so on-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Or combine with the law.

The Taoiseach: -----given the finite number of therapists we have. We can pass all the motions we like but we have to deal in a very pragmatic, solution-based approach right now. We have to deal with this in a multifaceted way but, right now, we need to make sure that the therapists we have are focused on providing services to children as quickly as we possibly can, consistent with the needs of those children.

We have made a lot of progress in education. We want to make more progress on mobility and transport. We have made progress on increasing various payments but we want to do a lot more regarding income-related supports for children and families where there is disability. Right across the board, we want to make good-quality improvements for people with disabilities. We are determined to do that and to build on progress that has been made in most areas, bar the health area. I acknowledge that the issue of providing therapists to children has not worked at all. I am absolutely determined that this Government will do everything in its power to deal with this issue. At present, as an interim measure, we are providing finance and funding for procuring private capacity but, again, it is very often within the overall framework of finite capacity. There are so only so many therapists in the country at any one time.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach talks about progress and step-change but the HSE is saying that the shocking figure of more than 15,000 children overdue an assessment of need this year will be 25,000 by the end of this year. That is what is happening. He knows that early intervention is crucial for children. It makes a world of difference. It can mean the difference between children with the proper supports learning to talk, participate and make friends or, if they do not get that, getting left behind and left out. It makes all the difference. Where is the emergency action the Government is planning to address this? What will it do today to start fixing this? Will the Government start, as Cara is asking, complying with the law? When will it comply with the law?

The Taoiseach: Early intervention is the key. I could not agree more. We need to expand early childcare services for children with additional needs, particularly early childhood education provision for those children. We are doing that and will continue to expand services there. The HSE is not in a position to fulfil the law right now. The Deputy knows that and I know that. We have to respond to enable us to get therapy services to children as effectively and optimally as we can. Our agenda is to use the resources we have for children who need services. I refer to existing resources and how we add to those resources through recruitment, retention and increasing the number of therapy places in our third level colleges for those who wish to work in therapy assistance, including more and greater provision in that regard. However, as a society we have to work smarter to utilise existing therapist resources for the benefit of children.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to the Independent and Parties Technical Group. I call Deputy Brian Stanley.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order, could I get clarification on whether the Tao-

iseach just informed the Dáil that the Government intends to continue to break the law on this issue?

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no point of order at this stage.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I think it is really-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have never heard a Government in all my time declare it intends to continue to break the law.

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy, please.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I, too, welcome Cara and Mark to the Public Gallery today. I will be speaking about the issue that concerns them later in the day. It is a scandal that Cara has to be here again to protest on the issue.

The issue I want to raise with the Taoiseach is the absence of primary care. It is over eight years since the Sláintecare plan was agreed for a public health system by all parties in this House. It was due to be fully up and running by the end of this year, by 31 December, but, of course, we are so far from the full implementation of its recommendations and what was set out in it. Nowhere is this more starkly seen than in the area of primary care.

Primary care is sparse right throughout the State, particularly in County Laois. Despite the best efforts of GPs and staff working in the sector across the State, we are not within a country mile of having a properly resourced and fully functioning primary care system. The effects of this are many. There is a lack of timely intervention and minor health issues are becoming chronic, finishing up in hospitals. We have emergency departments clogged up with people who cannot afford to go to a GP because they do not have a medical card. In some cases, they cannot even get a GP even when they have a medical card or are going privately. On occasion, people who come to me state they cannot access a GP even though they are paying privately.

Treatments that should be available in primary care centres and local health centres are simply not available. Therefore, it is up to the hospital, which is where people are going. Basically, we have to have health centres and GPs to staff them, in addition to ancillary staff, whom we do not have in this country, to manage and man them and ensure the services are available.

In County Laois, we are short of the basics on both counts. We have no primary care centre in Portlaoise, a town with a population that exceeds that of Kilkenny. It now has a population in the region of 30,000. We have health centres in Mountrath, Borris-in-Ossory, Rathdowney and Graiguecullen that need to be replaced or upgraded. In the case of Portlaoise, the design is done but the project requires capital funding to move it on. It is located on a perfect site. The centre in Mountrath is too small and is outdated. It is being talked about but the project needs to be moved on. It is the same for the centre in Rathdowney, which is totally unsuitable. A new centre needs to be put in place there. We are moving at a snail's pace. The centre in Borris-in-Ossory needs to be replaced, and there is now an opportunity to locate it within the old courthouse, which is being refurbished by the county council. In Graiguecullen, the position is the same. There is talk of making it the health centre for the south-east corner of Laois, taking in Swan, Newtown, Crettyard, Killeslin and Arless. However, this cannot happen because, as things stand, we cannot even cater for the population of Graiguecullen.

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An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach to respond. Deputy Stanley will have a chance to come back in.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Will the Government start resourcing primary care in County Laois and other counties?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy very much for raising the issue of the crucial importance of primary care provision. When I was Minister for Health and Children in 2001, we made primary care the cornerstone of the then health strategy, Quality and Fairness. It took some time. In the modern area, we have progressed fairly significantly in terms of the provision of primary care centres. There are now about 179 of them across the country, 50 of which have been opened since 2020.

Overall, the Government is delivering record levels of investment in health services. A record €25 billion has been made available for 2025, and that represents an increase in health funding since 2019 of over 70%. In parallel with primary care, it supports very important initiatives like enhanced community care, and it also supports oral health and palliative, cardiovascular and cancer care. Sometimes people say health absorbs an awful lot of expenditure and ask if we are pouring all the money into a black hole. We are not, actually. Outcomes are improving all the time, and that needs to be acknowledged as well. Life expectancy is now above 82. We are in a small group of seven EU member states where that is the case. Our mortality rate fell by 11% over the years 2014-22. The mortality rate for all circulatory system diseases fell by 20% in that period, with heart disease and stroke falling by 28% and 37%, respectively. A lot of that was due to the work on primary care in terms of cardiac initiatives in particular. The mortality rate for all cancers in that period dropped by 15%, with cancer of the trachea, bronchus and lung and breast cancer dropping by 21% and 22%, respectively. The mortality rate for all respiratory system diseases has fallen by 15%, with chronic lower respiratory diseases and pneumonia falling by 9% and 41%, respectively.

We are making progress in terms of investment in health and, critically, health outcomes. There are other aspects of that - healthy lifestyles, nutrition and so on - but primary care is central to it. As regards chronic disease and chronic disease management, for example, primary care is where it is at. Some 95% of GPs are now signed up to the chronic disease management programme, with over 645,000 patient reviews by GPs in 2024 alone. Some 92% of patients with chronic disease are now fully managed routinely in primary care and not attending hospital for the management of their conditions.

From what the Deputy has said, I would say progress is happening in his constituency. I think he said that in Portlaoise the design stage is complete for the primary care centre and he has said it is an excellent site. I anticipate progress in that regard. I will check with the Minister-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: Money.

The Taoiseach: -----and the HSE in respect of the capital requirements for that. I hear the Deputy loud and clear. This is an important centre of population that requires a primary care centre.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply, but we also need GPs. Mike O'Callaghan of the Irish College of General Practitioners said that we clearly have a deficit in our GP numbers and he listed out a number of counties, including Laois. The last time I

checked, we were way below what is required. Primary care centres and health centres in other countries include a whole range of services - physiotherapy, occupational therapy, dental, chiropody, mental health services, etc. - but we are miles away from that comprehensive primary care model. We have neither the staff nor the facilities. I agree with the Taoiseach that primary care is the cornerstone. He said 79 primary care centres have been funded.

The Taoiseach: I said 179.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Will his Government commit to the capital funding needed to construct a new primary care centre in Portlaoise? The site and the design are there. Will the Government provide the funding for new health centres for Mountrath and Rathdowney and upgrades in Borris-in-Ossory and Graiguecullen? Will the Government increase the number of GPs per county? There is a commitment in the programme for Government to explore the recruitment of HSE-employed GPs. We need to go further than exploring it; we need to do it. The programme for Government states, "Explore the recruitment of HSE-employed GPs." We need to start employing a cohort of those also.

The Taoiseach: I said there are 179 primary care centres now in place. Of those, 50 have opened since 2020. I take the Deputy's point that we still need more GPs. The outgoing Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, had approved, with the outgoing Minister for higher education, now Tánaiste, additional places in all third level colleges in respect of medicine and also, in terms of nursing and so on, in Northern Ireland. In terms of the specifics, we also have programmes to attract people into rural Ireland and to provide greater cover in rural Ireland in terms of rural GP programmes. We fully accept the challenges that are out there and I will inquire about Rathdowney and other locations in County Laois and, critically, the status of the Portlaoise project. We are committed to primary care and we will continue to expand primary care.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Carbon Budget Programme (to be taken without debate)
- Motion re Presentation and Circulation of Revised and Further Revised Estimates 2025 (any division demanded shall be taken immediately)
- Statements on Assessment of Need (not to exceed 3 hrs and 32 mins)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Assessment of Needs, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Membership of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight (to be taken without debate)
- Statements on Gaza (not to exceed 3 hrs and 32 mins)

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- Statements to Mark Biodiversity Week (not to exceed 2 hrs and 25 mins)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025 (to be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m. and to conclude within 60 mins)
- Motions for Revised Estimates for Public Services 2025 [Votes 25 and 40] (to be moved together and decided by one question, and to conclude within 60 minutes)
- Motion for Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2025 [Vote 24] (to conclude within 60 minutes)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Fair and Sustainable Funding for Carers, Home Support and Nursing Homes Support, selected by the Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be Statements on Delivering a world class education system, which breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve their full potential (not to exceed 2 hrs 25 mins).

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Broadcasting (Oversight of RTÉ Accounts) (Amendment) Bill 2024, sponsored by Deputy Joanna Byrne.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.;

(b) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for private members' business, which may be taken later than 6.12 p.m.; and

(c) private members' time shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on Assessment of Need, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and topical issues;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Carbon Budget Programme shall be taken without debate;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Presentation and Circulation of Revised and Further Revised Estimates 2025 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

4. the Statements on Assessment of Need shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be

read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	Lab	Gov	SF
Mins	35	25	15	15	5
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	15	15	5	12	15
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	NP/G
Mins	5	12	15	5	8

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as set out in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time;

(b) the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) shall be taken immediately following the Statements on Gaza, which shall be taken at the time when the SOS would normally be taken; and

(c) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the weekly division time, which may be taken later than 8.45 p.m. and which shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Motion for Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2025 [Vote 24];

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Membership of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight shall be taken without debate;

3. the Statements on Gaza shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	Lab	Gov	SF
Mins	35	25	15	15	5
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	15	15	5	12	15

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	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	NP/G
Mins	5	12	15	5	8

4. the Statements to Mark Biodiversity Week shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	Lab	Gov	SF
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	NP/G
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

5. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025 shall be taken either at 6.30 p.m. or on the conclusion of the Statements to Mark Biodiversity Week, whichever is the later, and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time;

6. the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the proceedings on the Motions for Revised Estimates for Public Services 2025 [Votes 25 and 40]:

(a) the motions shall be moved together and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

(b) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(c) members may share time; and

7. the proceedings on the Motion for Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2025 [Vote 24] shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 39 may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on Delivering a world class education system, which breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve their full potential; and

(b) the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Broadcasting (Oversight of RTÉ Accounts) (Amendment) Bill 2024 may be taken earlier than 8.24 p.m., and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of topical issues, with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on Delivering a world class education system, which breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve their full potential shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>SD</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>IPTG</i>	<i>Gov</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
	<i>SF</i>	<i>ITG</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>NP/G</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>5</i>

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not agreed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We read with interest the comments of the Taoiseach's Government's kingmaker, Michael Lowry, in *The Sunday Times*, where he boasted about the rota of Ministers who come before his group. He chairs those meetings. Is it not about time the Government published the deal it did with Michael Lowry's group for the programme for Government and took statements and questions and full accountability about the deal it did with Michael Lowry?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Duncan Smith: There is an unbelievable lack of legislation from the Government, which is a huge problem. Will the Taoiseach state when we will see the occupied territories Bill and the timeline to enact it? Is it the Government's intention to have it enacted before the summer recess?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The average rent is now more than €2,000 a month. Rents are rising faster than ever. It is a nightmare for renters and it is getting worse. The Minister for housing is speaking to the media, saying there has to be a change in the rent pressure zones. Extra fear is being felt by these renters that a landlords' government will allow landlords to hike their rents even faster. It is happening in the media; it is not happening here. Every week over the past month or so, I have been asking for statements on housing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. It is 30 seconds.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister needs to come into the House, outline his plans and allow them to be debated.

Deputy Michael Collins: Communities throughout Ireland are in huge fear as they await flood relief schemes. Many of these communities just need simple river cleaning before their houses are flooded again. The bottom line is that we need a debate. I have been promised it might happen soon but I have been looking for a debate for the past number of weeks. We need an urgent debate. We never know when a flood will strike. The sun is shining right now but it might not continue. People are in living in terror that their homes will be flooded again.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Under Standing Order 35(3), I would like to propose an amendment to the Order of Business that the Minister for housing come into the House and take questions

on the housing emergency. It can no longer be called a crisis; it is an absolute disaster. Commencements of residential units have collapsed to a ten-year low. The Government's plan is failing disastrously. Does the Minister have any-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Deputy. Which section do you propose to amend?

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----ideas to turn this around? He needs to come into this House and tell us his plans.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Similarly, under Standing Order 35(3), I wish to move an amendment to the Order of Business-----

An Ceann Comhairle: To which section?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----to ensure that at the end of Thursday's business we have statements on the Government's deal with Michael Lowry and that the Taoiseach and Tánaiste make statements and take questions and give full-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. We will come back-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----clarity and transparency. What is the relationship with Cabinet?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you have made your point.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is this rota of Ministers? What deal was struck?

Deputy Mary Butler: On the questions that dealt specifically with the Order of Business for this week, I inform Deputy Collins that I have been in talks regarding statements on flood relief.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Michael Lowry.

Deputy Mary Butler: I will update him at the Business Committee meeting on Thursday.

On legislation, next week we will have Second Stage of the Employees (Employers' Insolvency) (Amendment) Bill 2024 from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. We will also have Order for Report, Report and Final Stages of the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Bill 2024. I remind all Deputies that any Opposition Deputy is entitled to bring forward legislation if they so wish.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about Michael Lowry?

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The question was asked.

Deputy Rory Hearne: My question also asked about the Minister for housing.

Deputy Mary Butler: It is the Ceann Comhairle who puts the question to me, not the

Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the question has not been answered, that is-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I asked a legitimate question about the Order of Business-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: -----as did the Members who raised Standing Order 35(3). They are totally within their rights to do that. Those questions have not been answered. Four different questions were not answered.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has the right to dissent in his vote, if he calls a vote.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I asked a question specifically about the Minister for housing.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has the right to bring it up at the next meeting.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Rory Hearne: Is there not an obligation to respond?

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Chief Whip wish to respond?

Deputy Mary Butler: The Minister for housing was in the House twice last week answering questions about housing. If anybody looks at the agenda, they can see that he has been in the House almost every week since the Dáil formed 16 weeks ago.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: As he should be. There is a housing crisis.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Chief Whip wish to respond to the other questions?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about Michael Lowry, the Chief Whip's colleague?

Deputy Mary Butler: The programme for Government is open and transparent.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not agreed.

Question put: "That the amendment to the Order of Business is hereby negatived and the proposed arrangements for the week's business are hereby agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 90; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	

<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter ‘Chap’.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O’Callaghan, Cian.</i>	

<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</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'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</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>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</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, Charles.</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'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>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>		

Ward, Barry.		
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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Cian O’Callaghan.

Question declared carried.

3 o’clock

An Ceann Comhairle: We will move on to Questions on Policy or Legislation. We had 74 applicants out of which 15 have been chosen. I doubt very much we will get through the 15 which means some may be left out.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Children are on the brink of starvation in Gaza as a consequence of Israel’s blocking of humanitarian aid. It is blocking food, water and medicines. More than 500 people have been slaughtered in Gaza in recent days alone. What people might not know is that the Irish Government has made Ireland complicit in funding this genocide. The Irish Central Bank oversees the sale of Israeli war bonds. These are directly used to fund the genocide in Palestine. Tomorrow, Deputy Pearse Doherty and I will introduce legislation which will end the sale of Israeli war bonds through the Irish Central Bank. We ask the Taoiseach to work with us.

Israel acts with impunity because it can and because the world refuses to act. Ireland cannot be complicit any longer in genocide. Ireland cannot facilitate the funding of this genocide.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: What is happening in Gaza is absolutely appalling. I noted a quote earlier from a Dr. Potokar in Gaza who said that “if Cambodia was the killing fields, then Gaza now is the slaughterhouse.” What is happening to innocent civilians in Gaza is beyond any moral compass, particularly the children who are being slaughtered and the children who are starving. It needs to come to an end.

The weaponisation of aid is a war crime and I said that. It is very regrettable that the Deputy says the Irish Government is funding genocide. I cannot really comprehend why the Deputy says things like that. I argue the Deputy does it for politics but it smacks of that only. It lacks sincerity.

The Central Bank operates under European regulations. It does not have the authority to do what the Deputy says it should do. It is fundamentally wrong to take the tactics the Deputy is taking.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has asked for direction from the Government.

The Taoiseach: I find it morally repulsive as well.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has asked for direction from the Government.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The news from Gaza is getting worse and worse each day and as famine takes hold, we all fear that Israel’s announcement that it will allow aid into Gaza is as illusory as it was the last time. Gaza needs 600 trucks every day and just five were let through. Meanwhile, more and more children are being killed and maimed with surgeons speaking about

the horrors of having to amputate the limbs of tiny children. Whole families have been killed under this brutal, genocidal bombardment.

The human suffering in Gaza requires us to do all we can in our power. My colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, asked a very clear question earlier about a timeline for the passage of the occupied territories Bill - a Bill behind which we can all unite. I ask again whether the Taoiseach can give us that timeline and whether he can say what his Government is doing at United Nations' level to bring about more pressure on Israel to ensure we see a ceasefire and a lasting peace.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, at UN level we have been doing quite a lot working with other like-minded countries, particularly co-sponsoring the motion that led to the ICJ's advisory opinion in respect of the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. We intend to continue to work with like-minded states. There is a conference coming up in June in New York, organised by a number of countries - France, in particular - and Ireland will be there to support the initiatives that will be taken at that particular conference. We have been involved in the International Court of Justice. The Attorney General, on behalf of the Government, made a submission to the court in respect of that advisory opinion. We have also co-sponsored a resolution, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 December, seeking to implement the court's advisory opinion. The Minister for foreign affairs is progressing the occupied territories Bill and has made comments in respect of the timelines for that some weeks ago.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Taoiseach probably saw the figures yesterday that showed that the average rent in this country is now over €2,000. My question is simple and straightforward. The Taoiseach and his Government accept that the housing crisis is no longer just a crisis. It is an emergency. How, in that context, can he agree with the Minister for housing, who said, as quoted in the *Irish Examiner* yesterday, that the Government will be making changes to the rent pressure zones? How can the Government agree to lifting rent caps in the middle of a housing emergency? Renters need to know. Given what is going on, there should be a commitment to keep the rent caps and the rent pressure zones in place for a minimum of three years to give renters some security. Regardless of the questions of institutional investors and supply, renters need that.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said he supported the Housing Commission's report, and the Housing Commission report recommended changes to the rent pressure zones. I do not know why he is condemning the Government for even considering the recommendation of the Housing Commission in respect of that issue.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Because we also said there needed to be a period of time.

The Taoiseach: Regarding real investment in dwellings, the Irish economy registered the fourth largest increase across the 27 EU countries between 2020 and 2024. The House may be interested to know that a recent Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, publication in 2024 comparing housing supply across Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales found that Ireland and Northern Ireland had the highest rate of housebuilding per capita and that Ireland and Scotland had the highest rate of publicly built housing. There is significant investment but it simply is not enough. That is why we need the private sector investment. I know the Deputy is against pension funds and institutional funds, but I do not see how we can get to the €20 billion investment required if we do not bring in substantial private sector investment to supplement record levels of public expenditure on housing, the likes of which we have not

seen since the 1980s.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The rent caps. That is what I raised.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Residents in Applewood in Swords are facing eviction by their corporate landlord, LRC. There is no good reason for these evictions. These are no-fault evictions. LRC is refusing to offer further Part 4 tenancies, through a legal loophole which allows landlords to evict tenants without reason at the end of a tenancy if it was created before 11 June 2022. This is a tried and tested tactic by LRC. It issued 100 notices of termination on these grounds between October 2022 and April 2024. The impact on the tenants is horrific. One said, “The stress is constant. I have had a double hip replacement. I am not in a position to move. It feels hopeless.” Tenants are being abandoned by this Government. Will the Government introduce emergency legislation to close the loophole and stop evictions for no reason?

The Taoiseach: Renters are not being ignored by this Government. That is just a false statement. Over the last number of years, we have brought in a series of protections, regulatory and otherwise, to protect tenants and give greater security. We have also continued to keep protecting renters as a high priority of Government. I cannot commit to emergency legislation on the blind. If the Deputy sends me the details of the particular case and estate, I will engage with the Minister for housing about it and see what action can be taken to help the tenants in that situation.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I raise with the Taoiseach a reply to a parliamentary question I received from the Minister for Health. In the last year and a half, since January 2024, just five paramedics and 12 emergency medical technicians, EMTs, have been hired by the National Ambulance Service. This is despite the fact that a recent report states that there are 1,000 staff shortages. There is a major crisis in the National Ambulance Service. There are qualified people sitting on panels in Mayo and right across the country and they are trained to save lives. Instead of saving lives, they are pouring pints in local pubs. This is totally wrong. We need to address this issue. We need to recruit these qualified personnel, take them off panels and recruit them to address the staff shortages in the National Ambulance Service.

The Taoiseach: We keep bandying words about the place, but the expansion of health services in recent years has been exponential. We need to get a sense of perspective in how we describe things. I am not saying there is not challenges but the bottom line is €25 billion is being spent on our health services. The HSE has significant resources. I was involved in setting up the PHECC and so on 20-odd years ago.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There have been no paramedics hired this year.

The Taoiseach: What I am saying is that an additional €8 million was provided in 2025 for new service development in terms of an additional 180 posts. The total staff numbers have risen to 2,407 up to the end of 2024. That is an increase of 25% or 476 extra-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: Front-line paramedics and EMTs.

The Taoiseach: -----since the start of 2020. Therefore, we have had close to 500 extra staff over the last number of years. That does not mean we do not need more; we probably do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, your time is up.

The Taoiseach: Let us not pretend-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: Front-line paramedics and EMTs. The numbers are there in the reply to the parliamentary question. I can give them to the Taoiseach.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: In my constituency, in the last two weeks, we have seen an injury involving an e-scooter on a cycle lane because the user of the e-scooter broke a red light and severely injured a ten-year-old boy. We saw a fatality involving a scrambler bike in the Citywest-Saggart area three weeks ago. Time and time again, I am getting complaints and representations from people across my constituency about the use of e-scooters and scrambler bikes. Certainly, while e-scooters in particular are a welcome addition to the active travel agenda, they need to be accompanied by assurances that the users of those e-scooters obey the rules of the road effectively, that they are correctly lit up and that they have respect for other road users. Equally, with regard to the scramblers that terrorise many housing estates across Dublin Mid-West on a near daily basis, while we welcome the Road Traffic and Roads Act 2023 introduced by the last Government, there is an enforcement question that we need to see addressed. We need to see a more consistent approach to enforcement in terms of seizing illegally held scramblers but also encouraging their sensible and careful use. Will the Taoiseach work with the Government and An Garda Síochána to increase enforcement but also to increase educational awareness about the safe use of e-scooters and scrambler bikes?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. Although regulations were introduced in 2024 to allow for the legal use of e-scooters on Irish roads, I believe they need to be kept under constant review because there are clear dangers and vulnerabilities in regard to their use. Those regulations extended the rules of the road already in place for pedal cycles to include e-scooters, provide for technical standards and conditions for safe use and set a minimum age of 16 and a speed limit of 20 km/h. Also An Garda Síochána can issue a fixed-charge notice of €50 to e-scooter users. As the Deputy knows, the 2023 Act which he referenced deals with dangerous driving and antisocial use of scramblers and quad bikes via three key measures. Dangerous driving has become an offence everywhere. Gardai have powers of seizure. Under section 11(b) of that Act there is a new power to provide in regulations for the prohibition or restriction of the uses of classes of vehicles in particular places. These regulations are currently being prepared by the Department of Transport. I will follow that up with the Minister and alert him to the Deputy's interest in this.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I am deeply proud of my home town of Clonmel. It has a great history, a great location, strong levels of employment and extraordinary community spirit. However, our town centre - the historic core of Clonmel - continues to suffer from high vacancy rates and, more worryingly, increased dereliction. We have a shovel-ready plan to transform the prime retail area and reimagine the public realm. We have set aside the matching funding that is required. It is crucial that, as a town, we can access the URDF or the newly proposed town and cities infrastructure and investment fund as promised in the programme for Government at the earliest opportunity. Can the Taoiseach give any indication of when the Government proposes to launch these funds?

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, the Minister, Deputy Browne, is committed to establishing a new towns and cities infrastructure and investment fund to replace the urban regeneration and development fund. Hopefully, we can make it a bit more flexible for some towns that may not have qualified for the URDF. The detailed arrangements for the implementation of these funding streams will be clarified further following completion of the national development plan review. That will enable a clear line of sight as to the level of additional capital funding for infrastructural investment. We believe that review will be completed in line with

the summer 2025 timeline set out in the programme for Government.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise with the Taoiseach the issue of Grange Post-Primary School in north Sligo. I visited the school last September I think - certainly it was before the general election - with other public representatives and we were given a tour of the school and the very cramped situation they are in. There are overcrowded classrooms and problems with toilet facilities are particularly a problem. Children are queuing up during lunch break to go to the toilet and sometimes fail to do so. The principal and the chair of the parents' association have written to me and to other public representatives on this. The minimum need they have is to get toilet facilities put in place before the next school term. There are only a number of weeks left in the school term, as we know. The school also has a long-promised extension which is badly needed. Children in the area who live quite close to the school are having to travel to other schools because there is no space there. Really this is an issue that needs urgent attention to make sure the toilet facilities are put in place and the long-promised extension is expedited as soon as possible.

The Taoiseach: I will pursue the matter. I do not know whether an application has gone in under the summer works scheme. Is it too big for that?

Deputy Martin Kenny: It can be.

The Taoiseach: Yes. I will alert the Minister for education to the specifics and ask if she could respond to the school authorities and to the Deputy.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: County Kildare has the lowest rate of community-based childcare facilities, with three in total and only two of those in Kildare North, one of which is Maynooth University Crèche. To give a sense of how long it has been there, I attended it myself. This is in spite of 48% of childcare services having waiting lists in Kildare. I have raised multiple parliamentary questions about this. However, in the programme for Government there is a commitment for capital investment to build or purchase State-owned childcare facilities where demand exceeds supply. It is very clear that Kildare has a huge demand. I ask that consideration is given to prioritise Kildare when it comes to State-led childcare facilities.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil. Obviously, the quality of Maynooth University Crèche must have been of a very high standard given the manner in which the Deputy has come through ever since, right into Dáil Éireann.

An Ceann Comhairle: See what happens, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I have just been informed that building blocks have now been suggested. In any event, I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Foley, and to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, about Kildare and its needs. It is probably one of the fastest growing counties in the country and clearly it is no surprise to me that the demand is quite high there.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Yesterday, expectant mothers in Kildare received word with very little notice that the community midwife service at Athy primary care centre had been cancelled. This service has provided crucial prenatal care to women in Athy, Castledermot and surrounding areas. This care was local, consistent and accessible. The sudden withdrawal of this service now means that women will have to travel to Portlaoise for similar care. Public transport options are limited and many will need to pay out of pocket for taxis to the hospital. For women who are already at their most vulnerable, including those with other children at

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home, no car or limited support, this adds significant stress. To date, the HSE has not provided a timeline for the restoration of the service. What immediate steps will be taken to ensure expectant mothers in south Kildare can continue to access the care they need close to home and without unnecessary barriers?

The Taoiseach: Again, I will talk to the Minister involved. Has the Deputy spoken to the HSE authorities locally or regionally there about why the service was suddenly stopped? There is normally a background to these issues. Certainly, we will enquire with the HSE and with the Minister.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Staffing issues.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy gets the background information, we will see what we can do.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: At the weekend, Mark Tighe reported in the *Sunday Independent* on the apparent toxic workplace environment and irreparable damage happening at the Corporate Enforcement Agency. In his piece, Mr. Tighe referenced the disintegration of the CEA's leadership team and the gaps in experienced police investigators. Many of those posts are vacant or were never filled at Garda sergeant and inspector ranks. According to the piece, soon just three of 16 gardaí that can be employed will remain. The memorandum of understanding between the Garda Commissioner and the Corporate Enforcement Agency, CEA, appears not to be worth the piece of paper it was written on in terms of the allocation of resources and secondments. Is it the Government's intention to review the memorandum of understanding and will the Minister direct that the CEA immediately initiate an organisational capability review to run in parallel with the workplace culture audit given the very important caseload before the CEA, for example, the case of the FAI?

The Taoiseach: Part of me would say these agencies, the Garda and so on need to get this sorted out. The Government cannot be intervening left, right and centre in every organisation it establishes that has statutory duties and functions. We need to create a culture in this regard. I fully appreciate the Deputy raising this issue and I will talk to both Ministers in respect of this issue. These organisations have been established by law and there is an obligation on the leadership of both organisations to ensure issues are ironed out and that these arrangements and memorandums of understanding operate properly, efficiently and effectively. That would be my initial response to this. There should be no personality issues involved here and the organisations should work properly in the interests of the citizens and the country. I will raise this issue with the two Ministers.

Deputy George Lawlor: I listened with interest last week as the Taoiseach scolded local authorities for their inaction or delays in returning void houses back into use. However, as someone who served on Wexford County Council for 20 years, one of the things that caused some of the greatest headaches were large-scale derelict buildings that created dangerous places for young people and children, in particular, to venture into. I think of the old Wexford General Hospital lying dangerously derelict for 33 years. I think of Hookless Village resort in Hook Head in Wexford lying dangerously derelict for 18 years. In the Taoiseach's constituency St. Kevin's Hospital has been closed since 2002. I think I am correct in suggesting that.

Hookless Village resort is vested in the ownership of the Minister for public expenditure. When a building or a company goes into receivership it becomes vested in the ownership of the Minister for public expenditure and the HSE own the rest.

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

Deputy George Lawlor: Is there anything we can do to resolve these issues?

The Taoiseach: There are two things. First, many local authorities do a lot of good work in terms of voids. The Deputy has sat on a council. I think all of us have complained over the years where a house, which has been vacated due to tenants leaving for whatever reason, has remained unoccupied for an inordinate length of time. That system has to change. That house should be very quickly reallocated to other tenants on the housing list. In the housing crisis we are in, there is no excuse for not doing that. That is my view.

Second, local authorities have powers under the Derelict Sites Act and I often-----

Deputy George Lawlor: It is too slow.

The Taoiseach: There is a lack of application.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Absolutely.

The Taoiseach: There is a lack of resource application and a lack of desire, in that it is said it is too cumbersome and too difficult. It is there for a reason. The law is complex but you need to be tenacious and you need to persevere. Third, the Deputy will be glad to know that St. Kevin's Hospital in Cork has been taken over by the LDA-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and a very good housing scheme is now being developed there.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Deputy Michael Collins is next.

The Taoiseach: Finally, the Deputy is right in one respect and that is why we asked the LDA to acquire some more of these properties from the HSE and others, that is, to get them used for housing.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is 23 weeks and four days since the general election took place and almost four months since junior Ministers were appointed to their positions. However, powers have yet to be delegated to more than 50% of junior Ministers by this Government. The Taoiseach knows well the major housing crisis we have and the major challenges faced by small businesses, by communities that do not have flood relief schemes and by young people waiting for close to 13 months for their driving tests. Powers have not yet been delegated to the junior Ministers who are meant to deal with these issues and to make changes. Will the Taoiseach tell the people why a process to delegate powers to junior Ministers, which took just two to three weeks after the formation of previous Governments, is now taking four months?

The Taoiseach: The Government was formed on 22 January. The general election was at the end of November. A number of Opposition people habitually equate the general election date with the formation of Government date. It is a clever ploy but it is not the truth. The Government has only been in office since 22 January. It is a very short while. It might seem like longer to the Deputy but that is how short it has been. In many instances, during the previous Government, the junior Ministers were not all sorted within two to three weeks. By any yardstick, it took much longer. There were some fundamental changes in Departments, with tour-

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ism going to enterprise. That led to a broader change. Quite a number of the junior Ministers have delegated powers. Not every Minister of State gets a delegated legal authority. A mistake is often made that one requires legal delegations in order to perform certain duties. That is not the case.

For example, the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs historically has never had delegated authority-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----but everyone understands their role, function and purpose. It has been a very effective one. Deputy Thomas Byrne has performed excellently in the role as have his predecessors.

The Taoiseach: -----but everyone understands the role, function and purpose of the Minister of State with responsibility for European Affairs.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. We are out of time.

The Taoiseach: Likewise, with regard to the Third World, the Minister of State with responsibility for Irish Aid has very clearly delineated functions, policies and initiatives-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We have one Deputy left to speak. I call Deputy Brian Brennan.

The Taoiseach: -----without requiring a dedicated Department.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Brian Brennan be as brief as possible as we are out of time?

Deputy Brian Brennan: In regard to the hip dysplasia report due in the coming days, as previously stated in this House I was a parent who sat in front of the surgeon being investigated, with my wife and my child. I was a lucky parent. I did not proceed with the recommended procedure. When the report is published, among the many recommendations, I hope there is one where parents are very much involved in the process. Every child who ever underwent a medical procedure under these surgeons in question must be re-examined. Procedures must be put in place and I welcome the Minister's action on this point. If media sources are correct, we could be dealing with one of the largest medical malpractices in the history of our State. Our response will be defining.

When the report is issued, I appeal for a calm, measured and sober debate with a firm and structured response.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue in the manner he has done so. I understand fully, as he eloquently articulated in the House some weeks ago, his personal experience of this entire situation in respect of his own child. That is a valuable input into the debate on this issue. I anticipate and expect a report to be published at the end of the week. It is important it is published and that in parallel with the publication of the report, it is accompanied by a very robust and comprehensive response from the entire health system. That is what is required here in the interests of the parents and children affected. We have to put the children and families at the centre of our response and at the centre of how we deal with this.

An Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (An Aois Vótála a Laghdú go Sé Bliana Déag), 2025: An Chéad Chéim

**Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years)
Bill 2025: First Stage**

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Tairgim:

Go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille dá ngairtear Acht chun an Bunreacht a leasú.

I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Constitution.

This Bill is the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025. I take the opportunity to thank the OPLA and the Bills Office for their support in preparing this Bill for introduction. I commend the work of Senator Lynn Ruane, former Senator Fintan Warfield, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, Deputy Erin McGreehan, Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, and most recently, former Deputy Thomas Pringle who have brought similar Bills forward.

This is the first piece of legislation I have laid before the Oireachtas as a TD and one of inherent importance to me as a father, a youth worker and a citizen of Ireland. I will take the opportunity to thank those who came from the National Youth Council of Ireland today to speak in support of the Bill. Notably, I pay tribute to Ms Mary Cunningham, who has in her role as CEO, been a leader in promoting young people's voices, rights and participation for many years. She retires later this year.

In deciding the appropriate age to vote, it is an issue of fairness not competence; of equality not maturity. At 16 years of age one can work 40 hours per week and pay associated taxes. One can hold a dog licence to keep a dog, one can consent to medical treatment and at 17 years of age one can legally drive an eight-seater car. People aged 16 and 17 are as civically informed as their peers aged 18-plus but are unjustly restricted when it comes to democratic participation. If one can work full-time and pay taxes, it is only fair to afford that person with the formal opportunity to influence how these taxes are spent locally and nationally.

Like 35% to 40% of people aged 18-plus who choose not to vote, many aged 16 and 17, if afforded the opportunity, will also choose not to. Instead, I am asking us today to focus on who will - the many thousands who care about their communities and their society and who are as passionate about politics, public administration and civic duty as their peers aged 18-plus.

Other countries like Austria, Argentina, some states in Germany, Brazil, Scotland, Wales and Greece have all lowered their voting age from 18. Just recently, the British Prime Minister Keir Starmer restated his Government's ambition to legislate for 16 and 17 year olds to be able to vote. In Ireland, we know that one of the recommendations from the Convention on the Constitution back in 2014 recommended lowering the voting age to 16.

As a youth worker, I have run many mock elections over the years encouraging young people to participate informally when they could not do so formally. Whether it was a referendum

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or a local or general election, the vote was nearly always mirrored in their local ballot box or nationally.

Today is a landmark day that provides us, the Thirty-fourth Dáil, with an opportunity to start the process of achieving something momentous. The reduction of voting age to 16 years Bill 2025 is an opportunity to tell the 16 and 17 year olds of Ireland that we value them and their voice, that we trust them and their power, and that we need them and their participation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed. I congratulate Deputy Farrelly on bringing his first piece of legislation to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well done, Deputy.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Tairgim: "Go dtógfá an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

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

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Carbon Budget: Referral to Joint Committee

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann hereby refers the carbon budget prepared pursuant to section 6A of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 19th May, 2025, to fulfil the requirements of section 6B(1) (a) of the Act, to the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, which shall report its recommendations to both Houses of the Oireachtas by 6th October, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Presentation and Circulation of Revised Estimates: Motion

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

That, notwithstanding Standing Order 222 of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business or the Resolution of the Dáil of 1st April, 2025, the following Revised Estimates and Further Revised Estimate for Public Services for the year ending 31st December, 2025, be presented to the Dáil and circulated to members on 20th May, 2025, being a date later than that prescribed for the presentation of Estimates:

Dáil Éireann

- Vote 1 — President's Establishment (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 2 — Department of the Taoiseach (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 3 — Office of the Attorney General (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 4 — Central Statistics Office (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 5 — Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 6 — Office of the Chief State Solicitor (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 7 — Office of the Minister for Finance (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 8 — Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 9 — Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 10 — Tax Appeals Commission (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 20 — Garda Síochána (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 21 — Prisons (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 22 — Courts Service (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 24 — Justice (Further Revised Estimate).
- Vote 25 — Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 31 — Transport (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 35 — Army Pensions (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 36 — Defence (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 37 — Social Protection (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 38 — Health (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 40 — Children, Disability and Equality (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 44 — Data Protection Commission (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 45 — Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Revised Estimate).

provided that the following Revised Estimates and Further Revised Estimate shall not stand referred to the relevant Select or Standing Committee, as the case may be, pursuant to Standing Orders 103(1)(a) and 222(2):

- Vote 24 — Justice (Further Revised Estimate).
- Vote 25 — Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Revised Estimate).
- Vote 40 — Children, Disability and Equality (Revised Estimate).

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [16803/25]

2. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will next meet. [18693/25]

3. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [18746/25]

4. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will next meet. [20899/25]

5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [22208/25]

6. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [22378/25]

7. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will next meet. [22404/25]

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will next meet. [22477/25]

9. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will next meet. [22485/25]

10. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [25524/25]

11. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [25530/25]

12. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will meet next. [25743/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 12, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs will oversee the implementation of programme for Government commitments that regard matters under these headings. It was established in February 2025 following the appointment of the new Government in January.

The Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs had its first meeting on 10

April and it is expected the next meeting will take place in July. The Cabinet committee will cover a range of policy areas, including domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, policing and justice reform, and initiatives tackling local area disadvantage. Among other items, it will also oversee the development and delivery of whole-of-government responses to migration and integration, including through a national migration and integration strategy.

In addition to meetings of the Cabinet committee, I have regular engagements with Ministers at Cabinet and individually to discuss issues relating to their Departments.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are 12 questions from Deputies. We will take them in order. Question No. 1 is from Deputy Tom Brabazon.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Like Deputy Shane Moynihan who spoke earlier, I have serious concerns about e-bikes, e-scooters, e-scooters and ordinary scramblers, which are the scourge of people's lives across the city. Aside from the dangers these modes of transport create on our roads and footpaths and across our open spaces and parks, we often see users not wearing any helmets being "ballied up" - for want of a better phrase - and not carrying or using lights in the dark evenings, having removed the speed governors from their vehicles. Many of them are unfortunately being used in criminal enterprises for, in particular, muling and carrying illicit produce for the drug trade.

These bikes, scramblers and scooters, when used as part of a criminal enterprise, are usually operated by minors. They are, despite being underage, acting in an adult way but are not facing the rigours of the criminal system. On top of that, notwithstanding anything the Garda Commissioner might say, these drug mules are not being pursued and prosecuted when they are on those vehicles.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have a minute each. I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I wish to ask about Government policy on accommodation and international protection. On Friday, we saw the Government confirm it would not proceed with opening an IPAS centre in Coolock on the former Crown Paints site. We are all aware there has been a very violent and nasty campaign against the opening of an IPAS centre there. There were local public representatives who bravely stood in support of integration and with a welcome for those who come here fleeing persecution and war, and who seek refuge here. Many in my own constituency have established welcome groups but we have seen two recent instances in Dublin 4 and 8 where a decision has been made not to proceed with opening IPAS centres. The reason, we are told, is a move to State-owned and State-run facilities, and we very much welcome what we hope will be a more co-ordinated and concerted Government approach to accommodation. What we are not getting, however, are any clear answers from the Government about the approach that is going to be taken to accommodation and international protection and about whether backing down may embolden the far right. There is a real concern in some instances that the far right is claiming a win where a centre does not open, and Government needs to address that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: An issue I raised in the past was the reconfiguration of Garda divisions a number of years ago under the Commissioner, Mr. Drew Harris. I believe that the structures that were made and put in place were wrong. Traditionally, since the foundation of the State, Cavan-Monaghan was one Garda division. Now we are in with County Louth. You have a Garda division stretching from outside Dublin to the far end of west Cavan, which is

quite near Sligo, Bundoran and Donegal. It has a very long land border with a neighbouring jurisdiction.

We are all well aware that borders do not deter criminality. Unfortunately, we have cross-Border criminality. The chief superintendent for the Louth-Cavan-Monaghan Garda division is based in Drogheda, which is outside Dublin. I do not believe that the further ends of that Garda division will get the attention, personnel or resources they deserve. Over the years, an issue I have kept putting on the agenda is the need to ensure that the unique policing demands of a Border area are always resourced adequately.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree. Louth-Cavan-Monaghan does not work as a sensible divisional decision, and I get that the Taoiseach's answer is going to be that that remains for the Commissioner. It is, however, an issue that needs to be looked at. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, said here that the community safety partnerships are going to happen quickly. That needs to happen post-haste because we know there has been a failure to have JPC meetings, and we need that engagement. There are questions to be asked.

While we all accept that migration is an absolute necessity and we have to look after those fleeing war and persecution, there is a question - and there has been for a long time - with regard to processing times. The time we were told for somebody on appeal was that it would take up to 15 months. That was coming from a safe country. Then we are talking about a time of something like two years and eight months for those coming from other places. There are also fast-processing lists. Obviously, a huge amount needs to be done on that, so what are the proposals with regard to improving it?

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply, and I commend the Garda. I have noticed more gardaí on the streets in Offaly and across the country recently. That visibility has a real and positive impact. It helps people feel safer, builds community trust and serves as a strong deterrent to crime. With that in mind, I ask the Cabinet Committee on Justice, Migration and Social Affairs to consider the specific needs of smaller rural towns like Banagher, Daingean, Clara and other towns across Offaly and the country. While these towns are assigned gardaí, in practice officers are often drawn away to larger population centres, leaving little or no regular presence locally. More consistent Garda presence in these smaller towns would significantly improve community confidence and security.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Last week, South Dublin County Council passed a People Before Profit motion to allocate long-term housing to victims of gender-based violence leaving short-term refugees. Official figures show that 32 households fleeing domestic violence were forced into emergency accommodation from January to March. However, according to service providers this massively understates the problem. The housing crisis means women either cannot leave abusive relationships or are forced to return to them once their time in a refuge is up.

I spoke to a woman a few weeks ago whose time in the short-term refuge was over. She was in an absolute panic because moving into emergency accommodation meant moving outside of her support networks. Both Housing for All and the zero tolerance strategy on gender-based violence focus on short-term refuges but nothing is being done to provide long-term secure social housing for victims of domestic violence. Does the Taoiseach accept that additional long-term social housing needs to be provided?

Deputy Emer Currie: The Minister for Justice has assured this House that his Department

is finalising the regulations necessary for the local community safety partnerships to function. We really need to get them up and running as soon as possible.

Dublin West is a big place. Key to the effectiveness of the local community safety partnerships is that they are indeed local. The problems facing Clonsilla are very different from those facing Corduff. Local communities have to be able to identify and solve those problems. I urge the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice to ensure there is flexibility to set up subgroups for specific local villages like Ongar, Tyrellstown, Clonsilla, Carpenterstown and so on.

There is a budget behind this work. The community safety fund is a brilliant initiative putting the proceeds from crime back into communities. However, it is only €4 million. Not all solutions are going to fall neatly under existing funding streams. I ask the Taoiseach to confirm that the new regulations will take that into account?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: As the Taoiseach is aware, there is overcrowding in every prison in the State at present. That has consequences for the prisoners but also for the prison officers. While punishment has to be part of the prison experience, it is also essential that we address rehabilitation and deter recidivism. We have only two open prisons in the State. Shelton Abbey in Arklow is one of them. It works with Tosú on some excellent programmes in educating, training and rehabilitating a number of prisoners, working with local employers and often providing role models. Some of those prisoners go back into communities to talk about the dangers of going into a life of crime.

I would like to see a commitment on the part of the Government toward the possibility of opening a female open prison because there is not one in the State, and of looking at more opportunities for schemes such as those run by Tosú about being able, after the punishment has been served, to rehabilitate those prisoners and prevent recidivism.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Government's new policy on justice and migration is to increase the number of deportations, particularly by using chartered flights. The Minister goes on social media to announce that a charter flight has taken place. Is this not virtue signalling to the increased racism that there is in society and to the far right? We have already seen this week the backing down from a migration centre in Coolock. Is it any wonder when the Government is sending a message out to the public that refugees and asylum seekers are to be feared and are a drain? The Minister stated, "Stepping up enforcement and securing our borders is a central commitment". Our borders are not in danger from people who come here seeking refuge. Why is that language being used? How much are these flights costing for the virtue signalling that the Government is doing?

Deputy Paul Lawless: The cost of accommodating asylum seekers has ballooned in recent years. It is now ten times the figure in 2019. It cost the State €1.2 billion this year. This is an extortionate cost to the taxpayer. Essentially, the State is paying hotel or accommodation owners a hotel occupancy rate. It has cost the State €4 billion since 2019. The average cost of renting a three-bedroom house is €20,000, yet the average cost of housing an asylum seeker is €33,000 a year.

Wealthy accommodation providers are earning huge sums of money. The Government is making millionaires out of accommodation providers. The Carnbeg Hotel, which is now an IPAS centre, has earned more than €23 million since 2023. When is the Government going to address this issue? There is a huge issue here of value for money for the taxpayer.

Deputy John Connolly: The Taoiseach mentioned the Cabinet committee's role in the area of local area disadvantage. Earlier this afternoon the Taoiseach spoke about the positive health statistics in the country. It is important to recognise that they are not universal. There are minority groups and some disadvantaged communities where those health figures are not as good. Yesterday we also saw that there is a greater impact on disadvantaged communities in regard to the challenge of school attendance.

The programme for Government commits us to launching an urban communities initiative to revitalise disadvantaged city areas. I believe there has been a deficiency in this area since the end of the revitalising areas by planning, investment and development, RAPID, programme which used to fund programmes and infrastructure in disadvantaged urban areas. It funded such programmes as childcare facilities, back-to-work employment schemes and also infrastructure such as libraries and sports facilities. I would like the Government to look at reinvesting in the RAPID programme.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach, who has five minutes to respond to approximately 12 Deputies.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their contributions. Deputy Brabazon has consistently raised in the House the issue of how the regulations are currently operating in respect of e-scooters and scrambler bikes. He referenced how some of these new vehicles are being utilised as part of criminal enterprises, particularly the utilisation of young minors in the distribution of drugs. This is a very serious issue which demands a review of the entire regulatory framework governing scramblers and e-scooters. There are positives too, particularly for the elderly population in terms of people getting access and go up hills and so on. However, it merits a review because many negative aspects have happened as a result of their deployment.

Deputy Bacik raised the issue of the IPAS site in Coolock. The Minister made a decision in that regard. In my view it made sense in the overall context. We need to move to State-owned and State-controlled facilities. That is the direction of travel from here onwards.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I understand the issues the Deputy and her colleagues have raised in respect of it. It was a shocking situation overall.

Deputy Smith raised the issue of reconfiguration of Garda districts. I will talk to the Minister for Justice in respect of the point about the unique policing demands of Border areas requiring specific resourcing.

Deputy Ó Murchú supported that. As for community safety partnerships, these are important and the Minister is moving with regard to implementation. On migration processing times, the first phase is now being processed relatively quickly. The appeal stage needs significant attention and the Minister is working on that and has specific proposals to speed up the second phase.

I appreciate the comments Deputy McCormack made on the increased visibility of gardaí on our streets but also the need for greater Garda presence in smaller towns in the county of Offaly. He mentioned Banagher and a few other towns. I have asked the Minister, in the context of more and more people coming through Templemore, that we look at proper deployment throughout the country, particularly in rural Ireland and the smaller towns because it has an

impact.

On the matter raised by Deputy Paul Murphy, I have no issue at all with making sure we have long-term social housing provision for those fleeing domestic violence. We need more permanent structures as well and more secure units. They are all at varying degrees of progress but we need to accelerate that also.

Deputy Currie raised the issue of safety partnerships. I will talk to the Minister. Obviously, the Deputy has specific ideas in respect of the area she represents. I am sure if she discusses it with the Minister he will respond with flexibility on how the groups and subgroups are set up and so on.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne is correct. There is overcrowding in our prison system. It is, again, a feature of a growing population. Rehabilitation is very important. Education provision is very important in our prisons and that opportunities are given to people, as well as follow-on services. We help to reintegrate back into society through work, placements and so on. We often do not hear of the success stories where it does work. That reintegration is to the benefit of the individual and to society as a whole. I will check with the Minister about capacity on the female side to which the Deputy referred.

Deputy Coppinger raised the issue of deportations. They are in respect of people whose asylum application has failed. They are not eligible for asylum, having gone through the process, and, therefore, they should not be in the country. We must always have security in our borders. What we mean by that is that not everybody can simply come into the country. We have work permits for people who wish to work legally in the country and we have various visas and legal frameworks that facilitate the flow and egress. That is not just Ireland; it is every country in the world. It is not virtue signalling to racism or the far right when we say that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Chartered flights.

The Taoiseach: It is not, really. It is also sending a signal that we have asylum laws for people who genuinely need asylum, not for everyone who comes in. A lot of economic migrants come in who should be applying for work permits. That is the point.

Deputy Lawless followed up on the costs ballooning. We have obligations. There has been a significant inflationary cycle but we are reducing the numbers in hotels quite significantly and moving towards a State-owned model.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Taoiseach. Deputy Connolly.

The Taoiseach: Apologies. Deputy Connolly raised the issue of local area disadvantage. I accept his point that health figures are not as good, by definition, in areas of disadvantage. It is extremely important, both on the education and health fronts. In education, we have a successful DEIS programme. We are now looking at DEIS plus. The Minister was at the Cabinet today signalling a move to DEIS plus for areas of profound socioeconomic disadvantage, with different types of supports being available to the small number of schools that would gain access to such a DEIS plus programme. Health probably needs to do better, or run in parallel with the pace that education has moved over the years, in respect of specific health initiatives in areas of economic disadvantage. In 2002 I established the Niche project on the northside of Cork, in Knocknaheeny, and it had a profound impact. It dealt with issues such as lifestyle, access to gyms and was pioneered by the local health board at the time. We need more of that from the

health side. They are getting better at it and there is more of it happening but, compared with what is happening in education, we could be doing better in health.

Ukraine War

13. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Zelenskyy. [16742/25]

14. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Zelenskyy. [16804/25]

15. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. [20900/25]

16. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Zelenskyy. [22405/25]

17. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Zelenskyy. [22406/25]

18. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Zelenskyy. [22478/25]

19. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent discussions with President Zelenskyy. [22661/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take questions Nos. 13 to 19, inclusive, together.

On Thursday, 27 February I met President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Shannon Airport during a scheduled stopover on his way to Washington. We had a warm and substantial meeting. We discussed the most recent developments with regard to the situation in Ukraine.

I reiterated Ireland's steadfast support for Ukraine and its people as they continue to defend themselves against Russia's ongoing illegal and brutal aggression. I reaffirmed Ireland's readiness to offer practical humanitarian and financial support to Ukraine, both bilaterally and with our EU partners.

We discussed how, together with the EU, we can advance a just, sustainable and durable peace in Ukraine. This was a key focus of the discussions among EU leaders at both the special meeting of the European Council on 6 March and the European Council meeting on 20 and 21 March. I also took the opportunity to offer my support for the acceleration of Ukraine's membership of the EU. This will be an important part of broader security guarantees for Ukraine.

I also had an opportunity to meet President Zelenskyy with other leaders at the conference in Paris on peace and security for Ukraine, hosted by President Macron on 27 March. There we agreed that this war, and the threat posed by Russia, is not only an existential issue for Ukraine, but also a major challenge to the security of Europe. European Union leaders agreed that a ceasefire can only take place as part of the process leading to a comprehensive peace agreement and that any such agreement needs to be accompanied by robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine that contribute to deterring future Russian aggression. Ireland will continue to engage with partners on ongoing efforts towards a meaningful ceasefire, how we can support

that ceasefire if and when it comes and how we can contribute to bringing about a just and lasting peace that respects Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

It is more important than ever that we remain steadfast in our support so that Ukraine can negotiate from a position of strength. The EU has provided substantial military support to Ukraine to enable it to defend itself and, in doing so, to defend the values we all hold dear. Ireland is playing its part. Our support to date has focused on humanitarian and stabilisation assistance, alongside non-lethal military support, both through the European peace facility and bilaterally, and strong political support, including for Ukraine's European perspective.

In March, the Government approved a significant €100 million package of military support for Ukraine, including non-lethal elements of air defence, anti-drone devices and demining.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for the briefing. First, I wish to express my own deep solidarity and that of the Labour Party with the people of Ukraine as they face what the Taoiseach has rightly described as an existential threat to their country and, indeed, to European democracy as a result of Russia's brutal war and bombardment. I want to ask about three specific ways that we can show solidarity in a practical sense from Ireland. The first is on pressing further for EU membership for Ukraine, which the Taoiseach said came up at the meeting of EU leaders. The second is on ensuring that we can continue to supply non-lethal supports to Ukraine. The Taoiseach said a new package has been agreed, and that is welcome. The third is supports for those who have come here seeking refuge from the war in Ukraine. It is very positive to see how well we have supported Ukrainian refugees over the last few years. However, I am concerned about the cuts the Government and some in opposition are proposing to accommodation recognition payments and the winding down of organisations such as Helping Irish Hosts which have been supplying really important supports to Ukrainian refugees and families who have come here.

The European Parliament on 8 May passed a resolution noting Russia's genocidal strategy in abducting and deporting Ukrainian children. We need to do more to highlight that appalling and barbaric practice.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have all stood here many times before and spoken of the disgraceful attack by Russia on Ukraine and its continued policy which is just *nouveau* imperialism. It is no different from what has happened many times before in Russian history and the history of many other states beyond that, unfortunately, as we know too well.

We need to stand with Ukraine and against Russia but at some time there has to be peace. There has been some element of engagement. It is very difficult to talk about America's engagements at this time in any positive way when we see what is happening in Gaza. We have seen the Overton window that Donald Trump has facilitated on some level around the Riviera and the freedom zones, which has allowed a scenario where Israel has moved into something which is genocide hunger, with minimal aid, and beyond that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Byrne.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In the context of engagement and what President Zelenskyy has said, how can we engage in facilitating peace, both as a state and as part of the wider European Union?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the Taoiseach's continued engagement with President

Zelenskyy, our continued strong support for the people of Ukraine and our condemnation of Russian aggression. I am sure the Taoiseach agrees with me that under no circumstances should Russia ever have a veto on Irish foreign security or defence policy.

On practical examples of action that could be taken, in 1990, when Charles Haughey was Taoiseach, Ireland led when it came to German reunification and a united Germany's membership of the European Union. That was followed in 2004 by the accession of ten central and eastern European countries during our EU Presidency. I hope that during the 2026 Presidency priority will be given to aiding, as far as possible, Ukraine's membership of the European Union.

4 o'clock

With that in mind, I hope the Taoiseach will also give an assurance, in the context of the multi-annual funding framework and the agreement of the EU budget, that when we have a fully funded CAP, it would not just be to meet current needs but would also look at the needs of an expanded European Union, including Ukraine, especially with regard to Pillar 2 of CAP. Will the Taoiseach give indications with regard to the EU Presidency in that respect?

Deputy Paul Murphy: From the outset of Putin's criminal invasion of Ukraine, we pointed out that US involvement there was not driven by any concern for self-determination and the interests of ordinary Ukrainian people but was instead driven by its own strategic interests. That has become undeniably clear under Trump. It is clear the US is only interested in Ukraine insofar as the people of Ukraine can be used to weaken Russia, and Ukraine can then be carved up for its own aims. The blackmail deal done by Trump is to steal minerals from the Ukrainian people while agreeing to Russia taking much of the land. The term "ReArm Europe" is a joke because military expenditure has gone up year on year for the past decade and is being used to suspend fiscal rules, not to build homes, to tackle healthcare crises across Europe or to help people crippled by the cost-of-living crisis but to give more money to the arms companies fuelled by debt and destruction. It is why people came together two weeks ago, at a powerful meeting, to defend neutrality and the triple lock. They will be on the streets on Saturday, 14 June at 2 p.m. Will the Taoiseach outline the timing of the Government's plans to dismantle the triple lock?

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I might begin by stating how proud I am of us as a nation and of the people of Ireland for what we have done over the past three years or so in providing jobs, employment and, most importantly, safe accommodation for people from Ukraine who have fled this unjust war. I will ask the Taoiseach some specific questions. Will he speak to us on where fast-tracking EU membership for Ukraine is at or provide some kind of roadmap or timeline for how we are likely to expedite that? My second question is on the financial support promised by this country for the European Peace Facility. Initially, Hungary tried its best to frustrate that provision of funding. Will the Taoiseach give us an update on where the peace fund via the EU lies, in light of Hungary's deliberate attempts to disrupt it in the past, and where are we at with it?

The Taoiseach: I again thank all the Deputies who contributed. Deputy Bacik spoke about the European Union membership of Ukraine. We were one of the steadfast early supporters of Ukraine's membership of the European Union, believing it would end a vacuum geopolitically, create its own implicit security for Ukraine and also enable it to be a full participant in the economic benefits and basic liberties that go with being a member of the European Union. The European Union is probably one of the safest places in which to live in the world today. It

is where we have the protection of basic fundamental rights of freedom of academic autonomy, freedom of speech, a free media and so on. It is interesting that the European Union gets attacked in the House a lot but actually, jurisdiction-wise, and if we look at different parts of the world, it is probably one of the better places in which to live for most citizens. That is why it is so attractive to so many people who want to come to live in Europe. They come from all over the world, migrating from autocracies and authoritarian regimes. The Deputy is correct in saying we need to highlight more clearly the abduction of Ukrainian children by Russia. That is a very shocking war crime. The repatriation of those children and reuniting them with their families has to be a core objective.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised the issue of the peace process. The US initiatives are welcome in respect of trying to engineer a peace pathway, faltering as it has been to date, between Ukraine and Russia. The UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, and the French President, Emmanuel Macron, have been particularly active in endeavouring to move the situation on while supporting and protecting Ukraine in this entire process. I appreciate the Deputy's condemnation of Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne raised the issue of Russia having a veto over whether we join or participate in peace missions. I could not agree with him more. Russia should not have a veto over a sovereign decision that Ireland should be able to take to participate in peacekeeping missions around the world, or in civil protection mechanisms. That is something the Government will deal with legislatively, which makes absolute sense given the performance of the Security Council in recent times in respect of a whole range of appalling conflicts.

On 2026, the multifinancial framework and the Common Agricultural Policy, protecting the Common Agricultural Policy by having a separate line allocation and budget for it will be key. We are awaiting proposals from the Commission. We also want to accelerate, and Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan also raised this issue, the accession of Ukraine to the European Union. Hungary is holding that up. It has paralysed many issues, including the European Peace Facility. We have had to move bilaterally to provide financial support to Ukraine. That is financial support which would ordinarily have gone through the European Peace Facility but was not facilitated by Hungary because of its obstructionist tactics in respect of that facility and the beginning of the process of facilitating a pathway to European Union membership. There are real challenges within the European Union regarding Hungary's behaviour to date on quite a number of these issues. It is something that needs to be resolved as quickly as possible involving all member states.

Deputy Murphy raised the issue of Russia's criminal enterprise in its invasion of Ukraine and then moved quickly to the US. The US did not invade Ukraine and did not start this war. The US has supported Ukraine quite extensively - more than anybody else. Without US support, it is quite clear that Russia's criminal enterprise would, to all intents and purposes, have worked. Russia would be in control of the entirety of Ukraine by now if it was not for US intervention and the support of other European countries, such as France, the United Kingdom and others, for example Denmark, which have made very significant contributions to the Ukrainian military enterprise. The Deputy also made the point, and I think used the phrase, that Europe was deliberately using military expenditure to suspend fiscal rules. That is not a correct definition or characterisation of what has occurred. Many member states on the eastern flank, particularly the Baltics, feel an existential threat from Russia. Financially and fiscally, they are not as strong as others. They feel they need supports and cannot defend themselves, or strengthen their military and defensive capability, without having military expenditure by those countries

taken out of the fiscal rule framework. That is the motivation. It is a realistic-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am just saying what is happening.

The Taoiseach: It is not.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not happening for housing. It is not happening for healthcare.

The Taoiseach: For people who live in Estonia, Poland, Lithuania or Latvia, the daily fear and number one overriding consideration is whether they continue to exist as a sovereign country, and how they protect their territorial integrity, because of what history has taught them, what they have experienced historically and what they fear. The Deputy cannot tell them what they should be afraid of, no more than I can, but I can tell him that is what they are afraid of above and beyond everything else. That is why they are spending far higher percentages of GDP on defence than we are or ever will.

Cabinet Committees

20. **Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will meet. [18744/25]

21. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [20901/25]

22. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will meet. [22479/25]

23. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will meet. [22486/25]

24. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [22656/25]

25. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [22657/25]

26. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [22658/25]

27. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [22659/25]

28. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [22660/25]

29. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will meet. [25316/25]

30. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with rural affairs and community development will next meet. [25531/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 20 to 30, inclusive, together.

The Government has established Cabinet committees across a range of policy areas: economy, trade and competitiveness; housing; infrastructure; climate action and energy; disability; health; EU and international affairs; justice, migration and social affairs; water quality; Northern Ireland; and children and education. Issues relating to rural affairs and community development can be discussed, as required, at any of these Cabinet committees, given their relevance to multiple policy areas. As with all policy areas, rural and community development issues are also regularly discussed at full Government meetings, and these are where all formal decisions are made.

The Government continues to invest heavily in rural communities, and support for rural Ireland is a priority across government. The Department of Rural and Community Development's rural development investment programme is providing unprecedented funding for rural Ireland. In budget 2025, the Government committed a total of €472 million to the Department of Rural and Community Development, the largest allocation since its establishment. This is a clear demonstration of the Government's continuing commitment to supporting and developing our rural towns, villages and communities right across the country. The range of schemes available support projects in communities all across rural Ireland in areas such as town regeneration, the development of community facilities and the enhancement of our outdoor recreation facilities.

The Government's policy for sustainable rural development in Ireland is called Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021–2025. Our Rural Future has been in place for almost five years and has provided vital investment and supports, strengthened local economies and improved the lives of many people across rural Ireland. The scale of this investment ranges from projects with a value of up to €65,000 under schemes such as CLÁR to larger multi-million euro projects under the rural regeneration and development fund. The new programme for Government includes a commitment to publish and implement a new Our Rural Future policy from 2026.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: It was a great weekend for my constituency. Both Carlow intermediate and Kilkenny senior camogie teams went on to win the Leinster finals, which was a massive achievement. I am very much involved with both counties and teams, so I wish all of them very well. Commiserations to the Taoiseach on Cork's harrowing defeat, but I am sure they will bounce back.

Everyone has a right to feel safe in their own home, particularly in rural constituencies. I welcome the significant increase in gardaí on the beat on Dublin streets. I have noticed this myself. While it is very noticeable, we need to see this filter down to rural communities, towns and villages right around the country, including in places like Callan, Castlecomer, Graigue-namanagh, Thomastown and Bagenalstown. We need to see an increased Garda presence in rural towns and villages right around the country.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: After that, I should commend the Louth ladies and the under-20s, who are through to the all-Ireland final. It was unfortunate that our minors could not do it in a really great game against Offaly.

Rural housing is a major issue. Last summer, we were told that the draft guidelines on one-off rural housing were with the Attorney General for legal review. Given that we will be considering reviews of all the development plans at the end of the year, it would make sense for us to deal with the issue, publish the guidelines and have a proper conversation here on what constitutes sustainable living in rural areas. We have to facilitate those from rural areas to live

in them so that we can sustain the GAA clubs we have just spoken about and, even beyond those, schools and all the other necessities related to living in Ireland today.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is a chronic shortage of public health nurses in Tallaght and across the South Dublin County Council area. Babies are going without routine developmental checks, which are vital to spotting issues early and referral to appropriate services. Home-based catheterisation is another essential service that has been removed, forcing very ill patients to travel to clinics to access it. The HSE has said it is trying to recruit more public health nurses but there are not enough applicants to fill the vacancies. Once again, the housing crisis is at the root of the problem. Thousands of nurses emigrate every year because they cannot afford to rent and cannot access social or affordable housing. This is on top of the low pay and poor working conditions for nurses, also caused by understaffing and driving qualified nurses to leave the country. What action is the Taoiseach going to take to ensure we deal with the vacancies in public health nursing?

Deputy Emer Currie: I fear Dublin's urban and suburban villages are getting left behind. As I raised with the Taoiseach previously, out of 150 new gardaí in March, just four came to the K district. The vast majority went to the city centre. The K district is one of the busiest policing districts in the country. Our Dublin West villages are too small for the Town Centre First policy and too big for the town and village renewal scheme, which is funded by the rural regeneration and development fund, yet places like Castleknock and Blanchardstown have just as much of a sense of place as Balbriggan and Celbridge. They are just as deserving when it comes to tackling vacancy and dereliction and ensuring the vibrancy of our main streets, and just as worthy when it comes to promoting heritage assets. Can the Taoiseach advise me whether the programme for Government commitment to review these schemes will bring urban villages under the criteria for community-led regeneration and renewal?

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome the commendable year-on-year investment by the Government in rural towns and villages, both under the CLÁR scheme, as the Taoiseach pointed out, and the RRDF scheme. One of the challenges that remains is that we need to retain our people in our villages. Some 30 or 40 years ago, people were emigrating because of a lack of employment. Now young people want to come back to our villages to live in them but there is a problem with the inconsistency regarding planning and infrastructure such as wastewater treatment plants to allow small towns and villages to grow. I welcome the investment by Uisce Éireann in a new wastewater treatment plant in Ballygar, my town, but there are many small towns and villages that just cannot grow because they do not have serviced sites and because of an inconsistency among the authorities with regard to planning. In this regard, I specifically mention Roscommon–Galway.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Like my fellow Deputies, I congratulate the Offaly minor football team on its great performance last night. Commiserations to Louth. It has had a fantastic year and it is not over yet. Best wishes to the team in the all-Ireland. There was a fantastic finish to the game and it was a fantastic game of football.

I thank the Taoiseach for his response. As he knows, many rural communities, particularly in counties such as Offaly, are ageing rapidly. This is no longer a distant trend but a reality now shaping local needs and priorities. We need to ensure that ageing in rural Ireland is matched with proper supports, accessible healthcare, rural transport, housing and community services that allow people to age with dignity and connection. I know we have made a lot of progress in these areas recently but I ask that the issue of rural ageing be placed firmly on the Cabinet

committee agenda going forward.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I intend to raise the issue of development levies later tonight as a Topical Issue but wish to say now that, since the development levy waiver was taken away, many young people in my constituency, Galway East, feel like they are being scammed. I realise that sounds harsh, but what I mean is that a young person in east Galway today building a one-off home can pay the local council up to €5,000 or €10,000 between connection fees and development contributions. Understandably, people are happy to pay their electricity and water connections and they see the value in these, but when it comes to development contributions to the council, they are incredibly frustrated. The money goes into the abyss and in rural areas, we do not see lighting or footpaths. It is a major source of frustration. Maybe there is now time to restructure how the money is being spent or ensure it is ring-fenced within councils for allocation for local infrastructure. I would appreciate the Taoiseach's thoughts on this.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Is iad na bóithre ceann de na deacrachtaí is mó do phobal na tuaithe, go háirithe an píosa bóthair ag deireadh an chórais. Is é sin an chéad phíosa den bhóthar a dtiomáineann siad air ar maidin agus an píosa ar deireadh. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbeadh an t-airgead cuí á chur ar fáil do na bóithre sin.

One of the greatest frustrations in rural communities is the local road network, particularly the first stretches of road on which people drive in the morning and the very last ones on which they drive in the evening. The local improvement scheme is a very useful tool for funding and making improvements but it needs an additional push and to be properly resourced.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Community development is also important in large suburbs and urban areas. As the Taoiseach knows, there has been massive development in Dublin West, in many cases without the necessary transport and schools. We have large populations but now we have no transport links between many of the suburbs. Could the Taoiseach look into a situation? There are 11 families in Tyrrelstown who cannot get into their local school, Le Chéile Secondary School, so they all have to go to Ongar, which is 9 km away. They have been told they are not eligible for school transport because the school in Ongar is not their nearest school. Also, there is no bus route supplied at all in the area. I have written to Go-Ahead Ireland to see if it can extend a bus service it has and Bus Éireann has again rejected its application. What are these 11 parents meant to do? Fly to the school? Some of them are single-income households that do not have cars so they have been trying to organise carpooling for the last year. They are being pushed back by the State at every single turn. Many of them are extremely hard workers who came to this country 20 years ago. Surely they are entitled to school transport. I ask the Taoiseach to look into the situation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have gone past our time on these questions, so I ask Deputy Cahill to be as quick as possible and the Taoiseach then to respond.

Deputy Michael Cahill: There is a need to accelerate all of our regeneration schemes that have commenced and to expedite and accelerate town centre first schemes. They are a way of tackling dereliction. I would like to see the €100,000 over-shop grant introduced ASAP because it is another way of tackling dereliction and providing badly needed houses in rural towns and villages. There are two schemes ongoing in Kerry, the Killorglin and Cahersiveen regeneration schemes. I would like to see them accelerated. I refer also to the Kenmare and Castleisland town centre first schemes along with Dingle and others.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who contributed.

I congratulate Deputy Cleere and join him in his comments on the camogie teams from Kilkenny and Carlow. I note his heartfelt concern about Cork's defeat on Sunday and the sincerity of how he expressed it. The season is young yet.

There is a theme all around the House of the need to deploy as many gardaí as possible in rural Ireland as well as the big cities. It would be fair to say the majority of redeployment of new gardaí went to Dublin initially over recent years. That has had a manifest impact. Now, as more and more gardaí come through Templemore, we need to see that they are redeployed and spread more evenly across the country. We have to be patient in terms of roll-out, but I take the point Deputy Cleere made about rural towns and villages.

Deputy Ó Murchú was not to be outdone in congratulating the Louth ladies. Louth and Offaly are doing exceptionally well these days. We often use "*per capita*" as a phrase. *Per capita*, the sporting prowess of both Louth and Offaly is fantastic.

The rural housing guidelines are important in terms of sustainable living and rural communities. I will ask the Minister for housing about where we are on that. I know he is working on it.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised the chronic shortage of public health nurses. He said our nurses are leaving the country and so on, but the bottom line is that 28,567 extra staff have been recruited into our health service since the beginning of 2020. That is a 24% increase over the last four and a half years. About 10,000 of them are nurses and midwives. According to the OECD, Ireland has the second highest number of practising nurses *per capita* of any country in the European Union. I acknowledge there is a specific issue as regards public health nursing. The HSE is working in terms of recruitment of public health nurses, who provide a vital link in terms of identification of issues particularly among newborns and children in their earliest months and years. That is particularly important. We should not forget that the bottom line is that we have recruited more nurses than anybody in Europe or within the OECD in recent times and continue to do so.

Deputy Currie raised the same issue Deputy Cleere raised in respect of garda numbers, but in her case she was referring to urban villages. Again, we need as even a spread as possible. I note Deputy Currie's reference to Castleknock and other locations. Perhaps she should talk to the Minister for public expenditure. He might be able to find something in his treasure trove to facilitate the local area. I have no doubt that with all of them working together, they can pull something out of the hat.

Deputy Martin Daly raised a very important point about development within rural towns and villages, particularly the planning issue. The planning commission will be established shortly, as per the new Act. Wastewater treatment plants are critical. I have discussed this with Irish Water. My understanding is that new protocols have been developed to facilitate agreements between Irish Water and local developers or builders such that if they are building a new housing scheme, they would have permission to build a wastewater treatment plant in accordance with specifications laid down by Irish Water while facilitating regular inspection of same. I think that would unlock the problem for many rural villages and towns. With the best will in the world, Irish Water will not get around to every rural village and town in Ireland, but this could unlock a lot of housing potential cumulatively across the country. We will continue

to focus on that. The Minister for housing is working on this with Irish Water.

In response to Deputy McCormack, well done to the Offaly minor team. As regards rural communities, he raised a very good point about the issue of ageing in rural Ireland. There are lots of vulnerabilities and insecurity around ageing in rural Ireland and we need specific policies on that. I will talk to the Minister for rural development, Dara Calleary, about that. In fairness to the outgoing Government and the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, and others, the rural transport link has been a very significant advance and has not got the recognition, perhaps, that it deserves. I hear very good feedback and reports in terms of its impact on rural Ireland. That helps our older people as well - housing adaptation, security issues, neighbourhood watches and all that - but we have to give greater supports for ageing. It is a theme the Deputy should continue to press on, as should we collectively as a House.

As regards Galway East, I hear Deputy Dolan. I think he is not the first Deputy to have raised the development levy waiver in respect of one-off housing, in particular. I will talk to the Minister for housing about that. I agree that there should be greater ringfencing of some of the revenues from development levies to specific locations where, perhaps, a significant revenue generation occurs. It could be a housing estate or a new area at the edge of a town that does not have the footpaths or the lighting. There is merit in that proposal.

Aontaím le Deputy Ó Muineacháin go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach ar fad níos mó airgid, infheistíochta agus áiseanna a chur ar fáil do na bóithríní beaga ar fud na tíre, go háirithe i dtosach an turais agus i ndeireadh an tráthnóna. Admhaím - beidh mé ag caint leis an Aire - gur cóir níos mó airgid a chur ar fáil do na local improvement schemes. They need a push but they need consistent resourcing as well. There is a significant amount of work to be done in respect of this issue. The local improvement scheme is a valuable scheme.

Deputy Coppinger raised the issue of community development in Dublin West and the links between the suburbs. I do not understand fully why the 11 families could not get into the local school. Was it just capacity?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes.

The Taoiseach: One often wonders whether local solutions in terms of accommodation could have been resolved. I do not know but I will talk to the Minister for education about the school and what the issue is there. Is it school transport we are primarily talking about here?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes.

The Taoiseach: They have been hit twice in that respect, both in not getting a place in the first place and then not getting transport.

I hear Deputy Cahill loud and clear in terms of the need to accelerate the regeneration schemes in a variety of villages in Kerry. I think he referred to Killorglin and Dingle, and there are many more. I want to say publicly that I note his recent correspondence to me as well. It was comprehensive and covered a range of initiatives in south Kerry in particular.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes Taoiseach's Questions. I think we will make a recommendation to the Business Committee to meet early on Tuesday mornings for all those who want to pool the weekend results and compliment their local teams. It might save a bit of time during the debates.

20 May 2025

The Taoiseach: It does not work the same way.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We could appoint Deputy Cleere as chairperson.

Assessment of Need: Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand the Minister is sharing her time. Deputy McGuinness spoke to me just before I came in and he is not available. I see he is listed to share the Minister's time. He is speaking later on though.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I will fire away.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: He is very unreliable.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes, very unreliable.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality Deputy Norma Foley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle as ucht an t-am agus an deis seo a thabhairt dom. Cara Darmody, a 14-year-old child, will be outside Leinster House for 50 hours starting today, highlighting the deficiencies in the assessment of need system and the impact it has on families. I have met and engaged with Cara and her father Mark on three occasions, including last week. I have been impressed by her intelligence, passion and enormous commitment. She is a strong and vocal advocate for her own family and other families across the State affected by assessment of need delays. Cara is highlighting the impact that delays in access to an assessment of need can have on children who need them and their families. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and I are firmly committed to addressing these delays and ensuring the assessment of need process is effective and efficient.

This Government remains committed to delivering real and tangible solutions to enhance services to better support children with disabilities. This is clearly reflected in the programme for Government, as is our commitment to address the challenge of growing waiting lists for assessment of need. I am under no illusion about the issues facing the assessment of need system. They are complex and a multifaceted approach is required to address them. These issues are not just a priority for my Department but require a cross-governmental and cross-departmental response. It is important to note that children do not require an assessment of need to access health services, including primary care, children's disability network teams, CDNTs, or mental health services. Children with complex needs may require supports from their local CDNT. More than 43,000 children are currently supported by these teams with or without an assessment of need. Children whose needs are more moderate are supported through their primary care team. I know these systems face their own challenges.

People are pursuing assessments of need because they feel they need to due to issues in the wider system. I know from speaking to parents that this system is not working as it should for their children, many of whom are on long waiting lists for those services. Indeed, some children may be on multiple waiting lists. It is within this broader system that the assessment of need process sits. I understand that a significant source of concern and frustration for parents is a lack of clarity about where they should go, in particular where they are seeking an autism assessment or diagnosis for their child. Data on the disability category identified in completed assessment of need reports show that the "autism spectrum disorder" category increased from

18% of all completed assessment reports in 2013 to 36% of all completed assessment reports in 2023. The HSE has been developing an autism assessment and intervention protocol. I look forward, as a priority, to its introduction and incorporation into the existing health and education systems. Once in place, I believe this will help to alleviate the confusion and stress experienced by a lot of children and their parents.

More generally, I believe that parents would like more clarity about the path to take within the healthcare system when they feel their child may have a disability or additional needs. The HSE is working on a single point of access to disability services to ensure children are directed to the correct service provider and receive the necessary services as soon as possible. It is an area in which we need to see more progress in the coming months. Delays in service provision in other parts of the system mean that parents look at all options, including assessment of need, to get early access to services and supports for their child. However, parents find that having waited to get the assessment, they may then face another long wait to access the services their child needs. This understandably causes frustration and stress for families. It is not acceptable. We need to look not only at the assessment of need process but also at the wider system to identify the barriers and delays and remove them. I would like to see a process that ensures a child receives an assessment that is appropriate to their needs because every child is different, with his or her own unique abilities and needs.

HSE data shows there has been significant growth in the number of applications for assessment of need in recent years. Applications increased from 8,400 in 2023 to more than 10,600 in 2024, a 26% increase. HSE figures for the first quarter of this year indicate that there has been a 20% increase in the number of applications compared to the same period last year. At the end of March, almost 15,300 assessment of need applications were overdue for completion nationwide, an 8% increase on the number overdue at the end of December 2024. These figures are worrying and demonstrate the nature and extent of the challenge we face. Behind these numbers are children and families facing their own challenges every day, relying on the State to help and support them. Although these numbers are growing, initiatives are already under way to address this increasing volume. In 2024, more than 4,100 assessments were completed, an increase of 30% over the previous year. Recent HSE data shows that this upward trend is continuing with more than 1,400 assessments completed in the first three months of this year, a 65% increase compared to this time last year.

While this is welcome progress, it is clear that much more needs to be done. It is essential that we maintain this momentum and accelerate it even further. The fact that demand continues to outpace the capacity of the system was recognised in May last year when the Government introduced the targeted waiting list initiative. This provides funding for the procurement of assessments from approved private providers for families who have been waiting the longest. Between June and December last year, it resulted in more than 2,470 assessments being commissioned from private providers at a cost of €8.23 million. The Government has allocated €10 million this year to deliver approximately 2,850 assessments of need as well as to provide for additional capacity within the public system. I am confident this initiative will continue to support and deliver for children and families who have been waiting longest for assessments. I am also determined that funding will not stand in the way of doing what is necessary and effective to respond to these challenges. Although there is a limit to the capacity of the system to provide private assessments, if there is the capacity to do more, the Government is giving the commitment that we will not let financial resources be a barrier. However, I am acutely aware that this measure in isolation is not sufficient to support the capacity of the healthcare system to

deliver assessment of need. We cannot rely on the private sector indefinitely; we must ensure that the public system can meet the clearly growing demand. As part of the efforts to support the efficient delivery of assessment of need within the public system, regional assessment hubs are being rolled out by the HSE, aligned with the six new HSE health regions. This will help in some way to streamline the assessment of need process while preserving the time of clinical staff to provide therapy interventions for children and their families.

Another, more significant factor is addressing workforce issues. I am conscious of the challenges and strains facing the health and social care sector when it comes to the recruitment and retention of staff, not to mention the impact this has on the delivery of therapeutic services to children with disabilities and on the delivery of assessments of need. It is a key focus for the Department to fill vacancies within the 93 CDNTs. Clear progress has been made in this regard in recent times with the workforce increasing by 17% from 2023 to 2024. This represents significant growth of an additional 272 whole-time equivalent staff working across CDNTs. We will build on this progress with funding of €2.84 million provided by the Department this year for 75 additional posts. The Department and the HSE are also looking at staffing levels for the assessment of need process. This requires both assessment officers, who are responsible for the production of assessment reports, and liaison officers, who produce service statements on foot of assessment reports. We must ensure that the assessment of need system is adequately staffed to meet demand, with the necessary administrative supports in place to ensure that the assessment and liaison officers can focus on the core aspects of their roles - the production of assessment reports and service statements for children.

We also need to look at the bigger picture of how disability services are staffed. In this regard, a dedicated disability workforce strategy is being developed to meet growing service demands and address recruitment and retention challenges across specialist disability services. This will include identification of barriers to increasing the disability workforce both within the HSE and funded agencies as well as factors that influence staff to remain in practice in the area of disabilities. The HSE continues to drive intensive domestic and international recruitment efforts and to undertake a portfolio of workforce initiatives to support sustained growth of CDNTs and the wider disability service. I am not naive about the scale of the challenge or the impact on children and parents should we fail to meet that challenge. I also know there is so much more to be done. I have tasked officials within the Department to delve deeper in identifying issues within the assessment of need system that are causing delays and larger system-wide factors such that parents feel their only option is to seek an assessment of need for their child. Intensive analysis is under way at present by officials in my Department, working with HSE senior management and experienced clinicians, with the intention of bringing forward such changes as might be required as quickly as possible. I emphasise that this process is to support effectiveness and efficiency within the assessment of need process. It will not affect the statutory right of any individual to access an assessment of need.

The Department is also looking at whether there is misinformation or misunderstanding about what an assessment of need is for, particularly where there may be a belief that the assessment will bolster or enhance applications for other Government services and supports. This will require some Departments to review their schemes and programmes to ensure they are not inadvertently encouraging people to seek an assessment of need where one is not warranted. It should not be the case that a person feels they need an assessment of need to access a service or support to which they may already be entitled. For example, people may think they need an assessment of need to get their domiciliary care allowance. I have spoken to the Minister for

Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, in this regard. There will now be no requirement for an assessment of need report when a person is applying for the domiciliary care allowance for their child. This is a positive development.

Any work addressing the assessment of need challenges must also note the continued work of the education system to develop an inclusive education system for all children to reach their fullest potential. The commencement of a national therapy service in education is a commitment under the programme for Government. It is intended that the national therapy service will commence work on a phased basis initially in special schools and subsequently extend to special classes and mainstream classes at a later stage in the 2025-26 school year. This service will be delivered by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. Officials in the Department of Education and Youth have begun engagement with my Department and other relevant Departments and agencies on the design, timelines, alignment, integrated working and costings involved to deliver this ambitious programme of work.

The national therapy service will provide occupational therapy and speech and language therapy supports directly to children in schools. This will be in addition to, and aligned with, existing services. While the national therapy service will not have a direct role in the assessment of need process, it is expected that a more effective and direct system of therapeutic support delivery can only help alleviate the pressures felt in the assessment of need system. A co-ordinated approach is required to deliver this range of activities, with Ministers and their Departments working closely and collaboratively to deliver the results that children and their families need. I assure the House that this issue has the highest priority for the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the other Members of the Cabinet committee on disability, who are closely following all activity in this area.

At departmental level, a cross-departmental steering group has been established. I expect this group to identify and address any blockages or barriers across the system that may be affecting the delivery of assessments of need. The Department is working closely with HSE colleagues and clinicians to ensure that any changes introduced will have a positive and noticeable impact for children and families who are applying for an assessment of need. Ensuring that necessary changes are introduced and implemented correctly and promptly requires the delivery of a range of actions. The Department will manage this process, monitor delivery and report regularly on progress to me, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Cabinet committee on disability.

Returning to the critical issue of information and communication, what I hear from parents most frequently is their sense of frustration and confusion. They do not know where they should go for support or who to ask. This is an area ripe for immediate improvement. We need to be better at explaining to parents what is available, whether an application for an assessment of need is actually required and who is the best person a parent can talk to for advice about the service their child needs. We need to look at how best to make this information available and ensure it is up to date and accurate as well as helpful and useful. This is the very least we can do. It is what families need and deserve.

As I said earlier, I will not understate or sugarcoat the scale or nature of the challenge we face in addressing the growing backlog of assessments of need. However, this is an issue the Government is taking extremely seriously and according to it the highest priority. As Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, it is one of my highest priorities because I find the current situation both unacceptable and, indeed, untenable. There are a range of activities currently

under way or being developed that will help to address this complex and multifaceted problem. It will not be a quick fix, however. While we cannot click our fingers and make it go away, we will work every single day to do better. We need a system that works and can be sustained over time. In order to do this, my Government colleagues and I will work intensively, persistently and collaboratively to put in place an effective and efficient assessment of need system to deliver the service that children and their families deserve.

Deputy James Geoghegan: First, I recognise Cara Darmody. I met her when I was the Lord Mayor of Dublin. I brought her into the Mansion House as part of our initiative to make Dublin the world's first autism-friendly capital city. Cara is a determined and brave person. I absolutely lament the fact she feels she has to sleep outside the Dáil for the next 50 hours in order to highlight one of the biggest challenges we have in this State when it comes to the delivery of disability services, that is, the assessment of need process.

It is important to highlight the areas in which the State has delivered improvements when it comes to supporting children with needs. For children in a preschool setting, there is an access and inclusion model, AIM, programme. It supports staff to identify need and then be supported by that AIM programme in order to ensure that, where a need is identified, the appropriate services are provided. In primary school settings, we have tooled up our schools with SNAs, increased the number of autism-friendly and special classes in schools and also increased the number of special schools. There is so much more to do to ensure every child of every need, irrespective of whether they have an assessment of need, is getting the type of education they require. There is so much more to do. Significant changes have also been made in the access to, and delivery of, third level education.

The law as it relates to assessment of need simply is not working. It is a law that is being broken 94% of the time, based on figures the HSE has produced. That is not good for anyone. The Minister highlighted an important factor in her statement before this House, namely, the importance of parents knowing what services are available to them, with or without an assessment of need. That does not dilute, however, the absolute need to get this right as a State to ensure every child's pathway is an appropriate one and that we have identified the level of need every child requires.

Equally, in the context of the systems and the moments when children interact with the State, such as with their public health nurse in their developmental checks, for example, how can we improve the pathways direct from that check into the supports that child needs? How can we improve the pathways of services for a child who has been identified with a need in a preschool setting? How can we support primary schools and secondary schools where needs have been identified? I refer to the initiative of the Minister, Deputy Helen McEntee, of prioritising therapeutic services with a direct delivery in schools. Programmes the NCSE already delivers in schools are making a big difference. One of the big differences that delivering direct therapeutic services in schools can make is it can reduce the pressure on SNAs and teaching staff because children get the services they need to support them through their education pathways. Similar approaches need to be adopted, not just in special schools, where projects are being piloted, and in the programme for Government where we have made clear commitments, but also in mainstream schools. We do not wish to arrive at a situation where, in order to get services, parents are trying to, perhaps, find a setting for their child that may not be the appropriate one but where they know they will get the necessary supports.

As a State, we must support all of those parent support groups that every one of us deal

with both inside and outside of this House as constituency TDs. They support children in their locality. Groups in my constituency, such as Involve Autism in Dublin 6 west, Neurodiversity Ireland and Neurodiversity Irishtown, Ringsend and Pearse Street, do extraordinary work on their own. Perhaps there are better ways in which the State can support them in the work they do to support children.

I absolutely support Cara Darmody and what she is doing. She is a determined young lady who has already done too much in terms of what she should be doing as a child. So many parents of children with needs are similarly out there campaigning all the time. We need to deliver the services to which every child in this State has an entitlement. The Minister is committed to improving how we deliver the assessment of need process. I welcome the announcement she has made with regard to the domiciliary care allowance. I ask that increased flexibility be afforded to the whole method by which the domiciliary care allowance is awarded because we all deal with parents who have been refused that domiciliary care allowance on the first point of entry and are subsequently awarded it on a later appeal. However, the bills have been mounting due to spending money on private SLTs and OTs.

Recruitment is going to be absolutely key here. Replies given to me about how many OTs and SLTs we have recruited from abroad, which are based on employment permits issued, indicate the figures are extremely low. That is an area in which we could do an awful lot better. Of course we must invest in the long term in delivering more OTs from our college and third level system, but in the short term, similar to what we have done in maternity services, there must be a better way in which the State can try to recruit a larger number of OTs and SLTs to deliver direct therapeutic services in schools and support all the needs of children.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister for her statement. As Fianna Fáil spokesperson on disability, I attended a fairly powerful workshop held by the Independent Living Movement Ireland and the Dublin City Council public participation network. There were adults with all ranges of impairment. That was the word they used. They spoke about three things, namely, their freedom to make decisions, choice and labels and being defined by a label. Each of them is a person who has lived experience of disability. Interestingly, when they spoke about freedom, they also spoke about the freedom to fail and their own freedom to make mistakes that anybody has. The difference is that with many of these people, we are talking about adults but with the assessments of needs, we are talking about children, meaning all of those decisions fall on the carers of those children which in most cases are the parents.

“Disability” is such a broad term and often has become focused very much on the space of neurodiversity. If somebody had a congenital physical defect, then the parents know from the first moments that they have challenges, that they need to have a treatment plan and that there needs to be a diagnosis and the health services put in place measures to do that. The difficulty is that for some children their disability is not as obvious. It often comes about as part of development checks or suspicions or concerns of parents. Then there is a referral to CAMHS in some cases or through the schools, where teachers reinforce the concerns of parents. One of the huge difficulties with the current model is parents are just fighting for an intervention. What they want is not any technical document but a treatment pathway for their children who they know have needs.

Often, acknowledging the need in the first place is the first step. A parent told me the best and worst day they ever had was when their child received their diagnosis, because at the very least they knew the scale of the challenge ahead and they knew the mountain they were climb-

ing. Part of the debate on the assessment of needs is the desire of the parents to crystalise the diagnosis and the needs. I reference the Taoiseach's comments earlier on perhaps changing legislation and so on. We need to get back to a place where the diagnosis and the treatment pathway is the priority, rather than a technical document. I say that with some experience, although without the permission to define anybody in my family publicly here. One of the issues we have to deal with is that when people receive a diagnosis there are often different levels of literacy. We talk about digital literacy, but there are different levels of health literacy and sometimes parents are given a diagnosis in the coldest and most clinical of language and they have no real understanding of how they progress it. There is not a continuum of care from the moment concerns are raised to when we diagnose a condition to making an intervention to putting in place the support at preschool and primary school, despite there being lots of interventions available. Part of the difficulty we have and one of the challenges for the Minister is the putting in place of a pathway parents can easily understand so they do not feel they must advocate at every level. Parents only advocate at every level when the services are not readily available and they only advocate at every level when they do not feel they are being listened to.

I have lots of comments around the assessment of needs. One of the most startling things was that a third of therapists' time last year was taken up by assessment of needs. As somebody who would like to see, and very directly like to see, more treatment, therapies and interventions I have to ask myself what the Department's priority is. I ask if we can have that better pathway. If we provide a better line of sight for parents, listen to parents more and provide diagnoses we will be able to provide that better pathway and a better experience for the people who have the disability.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I thank the Minister, Deputy Foley, for her words and her hard work driving reform with a sharper focus on the delivery of therapies for children. I also thank the Minister for taking the time to hear my voice as a representative of families who are facing unacceptable and heartbreaking realities. In my constituency of Meath West I have, first as a councillor and now as a TD, dealt with a number of parents in really difficult situations who are fighting daily to get the supports needed for their families. We do not agree on a lot in this Chamber but on this we certainly do. Children with special needs are waiting far too long for the supports and services they require. These are children who need early intervention, therapies, educational support and timely diagnoses to ensure they get the best start in life, yet they are caught in a system that asks them and their families to wait, sometimes indefinitely.

One of the reasons I got into politics is I am a caregiver and a mother and I understand the challenges families are facing to access the support, the services and the recognition our children all deserve. I believe in the purpose of committees that advocate for children and that we can turn the stories we hear every day into action and make changes effective. At almost every door I knocked on during the recent general election I was told a tale of a child – a niece, nephew, neighbour or a friend's child – unable to access the support so badly needed. We will and must do better for these children. The areas of housing and disability are the two main focuses of this Government, as well they should be. I want to return to those doors having enriched the lives of families living daily with the most difficult of circumstances. The rise in population, the backlog during Covid, the lack of therapists and therapies not being completed in the school setting have no doubt contributed to our longer waiting lists and all our issues that need addressing. I implore the Minister to carry on her work in this area and progress the commitments we have made in the programme for Government, which I have no doubt will positively reform the area of assessment of needs.

Since 2020, the need for assessments has increased by more than double. The waiting lists initiative is tackling the families longest awaiting assessment of needs and additional funding is in place for therapists in our CDNTs. Over €2 billion has been added to the disability spend in that same timeframe. These are all positive moves and steps forward, but unfortunately little comfort to the families awaiting assessment today. Urgent and radical actions need to be taken. It would be remiss of me not to mention, as many Deputies will, the brave and exceptional Cara Darmody who first advocated so strongly for her brothers and now does so for children across our country. So too do organisations like AsIAM, which play vital roles in advocating for some of the most vulnerable in our society and raise awareness and promote acceptance for those with special needs and disabilities. I am proud to have been part of the founding team of the Trim Autism Friendly Town committee, which is one of a number of neurodivergent committees in Meath West representing our most vulnerable people. The work of Cara, AsIAM, Trim Autism Friendly Town, Enfield Autism Friendly Town and Neurodivergent Navan has all contributed to parents, children and those with special needs and disabilities feeling embraced, feeling seen and feeling heard. We now need to catch up with those therapies.

Every day is a struggle for these families, even when they have the right supports in place and it is the least we can do to provide them. I was glad to hear the Minister say two things today, namely, her absolute understanding of the stress these situations cause families and also that finance will not be a barrier. However, we know staffing is a major across the health service.

5 o'clock

In Trim, last week alone, a new GP opened, with hundreds of patients clamouring to join her list. We are the mothers, we are the caregivers and those who shoulder the majority of the responsibility for the children of Ireland, and we must resolve this for our families. As the Fianna Fáil spokesperson on children and a member of the Oireachtas committees on education and youth and on children and equality, I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister to solve this major issue for our families.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister for her acknowledgement and honest assessment of the challenge facing many families whose children are waiting for an assessment of need. The issue of disability has activated many of us in this Chamber to become politicians. We have seen An Tánaiste and the likes of Cara Darmody all activated on the issue of disabilities. It is a key reason we are here today. Dublin Fingal West is home to one of the youngest populations in the country. Balbriggan is the youngest large town, as I may have mentioned before, and it is rapidly growing, yet the children in my area of north Dublin face an extraordinarily long waiting time for assessments of need. Almost 2,000 children in the north Dublin health area alone are awaiting an assessment of need. If there are 15,000 children on the waiting list nationally, my area, staggeringly, accounts for approximately 12% of the entire country. Given the length of time we all spend in this Chamber talking about this issue, as it is one of the top five queries we all receive, I think the Minister knows the system is broken. Because my area makes up 12% of the waiting list, she can imagine the number of queries I receive. Children living in Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush, Lusk and surrounding villages are not waiting months but years. The process simply is not working. This backlog is a combination of administrative failures, cumbersome assessment processes, a lack of resources and outdated legislation.

We need to remove the bureaucratic barriers, and I welcome the Minister's comments on better communication with parents. The assessment process is confusing and filled with ad-

ministrative obstacles. To fix this, we need a simplified online application system; a clear roadmap outlining the process, timelines and next steps; a reduction in unnecessary paperwork; and a streamlining of internal processes. We also need to communicate clearly with families. We need a tracking system that communicates with them. I have lost count of the number of parents who have contacted me about accessing assessments of need or therapies. We need a real-time tracking system to assure these families that their request is progressing and so that they receive regular updates, instead of feeling ghosted by the system and chasing politicians for answers who are equally frustrated and ghosted.

Assessment delays also stem from staff shortages, particularly in specialties such as speech and language therapy, psychology and occupational therapy. We have to do more to grow the expertise we need in Ireland, as well as attracting the right people from abroad. The increase in therapy college places announced last year is welcome and the programme for Government commitment to double the places even more so. Will this doubling occur in September 2026 or will it be graduated over the lifetime of the Government? Is it enough? Has the Department run the numbers and projected the number of therapists needed to meet future demand? Will doubling the places satisfy this demand? Can the Minister assure us that this assessment has been carried out by the Department and that the doubling of the numbers will be enough?

We also need to make sure resources are prioritised and allocated based on demand and demographics. North Dublin, Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush, Lusk and the surrounding villages of Garristown, Naul, Ballyboughal, Oldtown and Rolestown, because of their demographics, constitute 12% of the national waiting list. It needs to be prioritised. We need to have the resources allocated to deal with the severe backlog of children waiting for an assessment of need and waiting for therapies. Please end the postcode lottery. These delays represent lost developmental opportunities for our children, frustrated families and children missing vital early interventions that really could help shape better futures for them. Please ensure that the children of Dublin Fingal West have ease of access to a fit-for-purpose, streamlined assessment of need process allied with receiving the appropriate therapies. This should not be a privilege dictated by geography.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Listening to the contributions made on the Government side of the House, most of them sound like commentators. The waiting list for assessments of need did not increase overnight. This has been an issue for many years and the demand for an assessment of need or for disability services has been rising consistently. This is absolutely nothing new. I pay tribute to Cara Darmody and her dad, Mark. At 14 years of age, she has made a really valuable contribution to the debate around assessment of need and highlighted the difficulties in accessing autism and disability services. She has been a real voice for children and parents and she is due a great deal of credit. The best way we can honour Cara's advocacy is to turn the tide on this issue once and for all.

Last week, the HSE provided me with the latest waiting list figures for assessments of need. There are 15,296 children, a record number. These are children who have not had their legal requirement met as they should have received their assessment of need within six months. This impacts on every aspect of their lives, particularly in school. We often hear from parents that schools are totally hamstrung in providing the supports and services children need. In the case of services and supports for these children, every day counts. The Government is failing these children and, again, this is not a new issue. The actions taken by the Government - there have not been many but I am thinking of Cara's fund in particular, which was welcome - have not been enough. No matter how many achievements are lauded by the Government in terms of

the number of special classes or the money put into private capacity for those waiting for an assessment of need, it has not been enough.

Sometimes waiting list numbers are just seen as numbers and are almost normalised. Nobody is surprised any more as they continue to go up and up, but we have to remember all the time that these are children. They are children who require additional supports to meet their potential but the Government is not doing enough. Parents are at the end of their tether. We need to see private capacity bulked up and Cara's fund adequately funded. We also need to see the workforce plan to provide the number of therapists needed. The top and bottom of this issue is that we do not have the people to do the job they need to do.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: To follow on from that point, in respect of my county, Meath, and the lack of capacity in the system, in CDNT 2 covering the Kells area, and CDNT 5 covering the Navan and Slane area, one in four posts is vacant. Those are the best figures. In CDNT 4, covering the Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin area, one in three posts is vacant. In CDNT 6, covering the Trim area, which Deputy Dempsey represents, almost two in three positions are vacant, or 62%. That is not unique across the State. It has a profound impact. Other Deputies will be familiar with responses such as this example:

Currently there is one psychologist for a service of over 800 plus children. While the team will make every effort that this assessment is completed on time, we cannot guarantee this given the significant demand on limited psychology resources.

It is the same in respect of primary care for those children with less complex needs. In the Ashbourne area, since April 2022, more than three years ago, "1.5 whole-time equivalent paediatric occupational therapist posts based in Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin are vacant." That means there is no occupational therapist in that primary care service. Again, this is replicated across the State. Finally, when we meet parents who actually have a service, support or therapy for their child but where that therapy is being withdrawn, it is clear that the benefit of these therapies for children is absolutely profound and to deny them of it is absolutely cruel.

It has to change.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Kildare has the highest number of overdue AONs, second only to Dublin, with 1,700 children on waiting lists. I want to take this moment to speak about Isaac. He is 14 years old and has four siblings. He first got onto the AON waiting list eight years ago and has yet to receive a written diagnosis. Back in 2017, Isaac was first seen for an occupational therapy, OT, assessment and was diagnosed with developmental co-ordination disorder, DCD, despite his parents, Vivienne and John, suspecting something more was going on. They were told to come back in two years. When they did, there was no record of Isaac's file - the HSE had lost it - and he had to go back to the bottom of the waiting list.

When he began school, his mammy, Vivienne, fought for a National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, assessment but was told Isaac's condition was not severe enough. All the while, he was struggling emotionally, socially and academically. On the advice of the school, his parents forked out €2,000 for ADHD and dyslexia assessments. In 2023, Isaac was finally taken back into primary care, where a psychologist confirmed his previous diagnosis and flagged autism as a required assessment, saying it should have been picked up seven years earlier. After yet another year of waiting, Isaac finally had a CAMHS appointment but it did not have the authority to conduct an autism assessment. Only in March of this year did Isaac get his

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assessment. He went eight years without the proper support and has been set back enormously by this. All along, it was an easy diagnosis.

Then there are Ruby and Luna McGarry, who are nine and four years old. Their parents submitted AON applications in February 2024. By law, assessments, as we know, should have been done by August 2024. We are now in May 2025 and there is still nothing. The HSE is blaming a backlog due to a High Court ruling but their mammy, Orla, notes that her third child was seen as part of that backlog two years ago, but only after paying privately. Orla and Andrew cannot afford to go down the private route this time. The McGarrys, like so many, are being strung along by a system that is breaking the law and breaking families in the process.

Those are just two stories from Kildare; there are thousands more out there.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: In 2025, just 7% of assessments have been completed within the legal timeframe set out in the Disability Act 2005. To say that some children are being failed is an understatement; 93% of children requiring an assessment of need are being failed. Experts in the field advise that early intervention is critical. It allows for a family to plan the supports that a child with an autism diagnosis will need and to arrange the provision of any additional supports the child may need when entering the education system.

The inclusion in the Disability Act 2005 of a legal requirement for children to be assessed within six months of referral demonstrates how important this is, yet 15,296 children are on assessment of need waiting lists. This list looks set to only grow, with an estimate of 24,000 children being on the list come the end of 2025. On average, children are waiting 32 months, more than five times longer than the Disability Act allows for. This is what parents are facing. This is the level of failure when it comes to children with disabilities. I was contacted by a family whose son was referred for an autism assessment in September 2022, when he was four years old. They are loving parents and they want a good quality of life for their child, like the parents of any other child in this State. To date, however, he has not had that assessment. If he waits 32 months for the assessment, the young lad who was four years old when the referral went in will be seven years old when he is fully assessed. That is just not good enough.

With these wait times, children and their families are being failed. We know that early assessment is crucial to ensure children and parents get the supports needed so that children on the autism spectrum can live fully and have happy childhoods. When the wait time for an assessment of need is 32 months, however, early intervention is impossible. These assessments are needed early so that these children can avail of specialist school support to help them learn. Without the assessment, they will not be added to a specialist class or a hub but on this element, too, the Government is failing. The failure to implement the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 has meant the education system is struggling to deliver for children in the school environment.

At every hurdle, the Government parties have stumbled on this issue. Waiting lists are rising, schools do not have the resources and 93% of children in 2025 are not being assessed as promptly as the Disability Act recommends.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: As well as being a TD, I am the mother of four amazing children, two of whom have autism. The assessment of need road is very familiar to me. I cannot say I have walked it, because you do not walk this road but endure it. You climb, you fall and you pick yourself up repeatedly. The Government's ongoing inability to uphold the legal require-

ment to complete AONs within six months is unjustifiable. This is not just a missed deadline; it is a breach of legal duty. More important, it is a betrayal of vulnerable children and their families.

The assessment of need is not a bureaucratic formality. It is a key element to identifying and providing proper supports that children rely on to thrive. Delaying assessment means delaying therapies, supports and a chance of a more equal and dignified life for those children. Families are left in a cruel limbo. Parents watch as their children struggle, knowing that early intervention, proven to make a real difference, is being withheld because of inaction and indifference and because the system that is supposed to help is in fact failing them.

Delays are not a glitch. They are systemic, persistent and unjust and that deepens inequality. They punish those who are already carrying more than their fair share of the burden. A legal obligation is not optional, and every day that passes without emergency action is another day lost for a child who cannot afford to wait. To hear the Taoiseach say this afternoon that he thinks the problem here is the law itself is absolutely mind-boggling. The Government cannot comply with the law, so it will simply change the law. What message does that send to the 14-year-old girl at the gates of Leinster House this evening? What message does it send to those parents who are waiting in absolute turmoil?

Deputy Pat Buckley: More than 15,000 children are overdue their assessment of needs. Approximately 1,000 of these are in my county, Cork. To make matters worse, parents in Cork are waiting up to 30 months for these assessments for their children. This is a far cry from the six months' waiting time required by law. In fact, more than 90% of assessments of need are completed outside of the legal time limit. It is absolutely bonkers.

These delays are not just numbers. They represent real children who are missing out on critical early intervention, which could significantly damage their development and their quality of life. The assessment of need scandal sits within the broader context of extensive and abject policy failure across our disabilities sector, which is causing so many families immense suffering. In a country as rich as this one, it is shameful that so many children have been failed so consistently and so comprehensively. When a child finally does complete an assessment of need, families are often faced with a further abyss of prolonged waiting to access therapies. At one point, waiting lists in Cork and Kerry primary care psychology exceeded 6,000 and waiting times were close to six years for some children.

The current situation is certainly untenable. We cannot in good conscience allow the children of this country to languish on waiting lists while their developmental needs go unmet. We must ensure the voices of affected families are heard and that their experiences inform the policy decisions. Every child deserves timely access to the assessments and services they need to thrive, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure no child is left behind. I plead with the Government to please commit this time to taking the necessary actions to rectify this situation and uphold the rights and dignity of all the children in this country.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: More than 15,000 children are now overdue their assessment of need. That is 15,296 children who could be left with a decline in their quality of life. It is 15,296 children whose development and learning will be potentially impacted, who could be missing out on opportunities for support, who could be missing out on therapy and other services that could help them reach their full potential, and whose parents or guardians are experiencing significant stress and frustration.

This week, I am glad to see the combined Opposition coming together to bring forward a joint motion on this, but I am extremely angry it has come to this and that we have to stand here and demand that the Government provide children with an assessment of need within six months, as required by the law. I am in awe of a 14-year-old disability rights campaigner, Cara Darmody, who is staging a 50-hour sleepover but angered that she feels she has to do this to be heard. The Government's failure to implement the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 has meant the education system and the National Council for Special Education are not capable of delivery for children in school settings, which is directing additional pressure to overburdened specialist services. I visited two schools in Clare with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, St. Anne's in Ennis and St. Conaire's in Shannon, and witnessed this. The HSE anticipates that this will only get worse and there could be as many as 24,796 left waiting by the end of 2025. This needs emergency action to make funding available to Cara's Fund to clear the backlog and to get a specific target date by which the Minister aims to comply with her legal obligation.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: As someone who was in my 35th year of primary teaching when I finished up in December, having taught in the area of special education for most of the past decade, it is an area that I am quite familiar with. A shockingly high figure is that of 2,314 children still waiting for an assessment of need in the Wicklow-Kildare HSE area, which is the highest number outside of Dublin. A smaller but significant number are languishing on waiting lists in County Wexford, awaiting an assessment.

Like other Deputies, I could mention numerous case studies, but have just two minutes, so I will briefly mention two cases. One is a Gorey parent, Kellie Nolan, who contacted me, stating that her ten-year-old son, Finn, has been waiting for seven years for an assessment of need and supports, so basically has had no supports since preschool, which is mindboggling. He had a private ASD assessment and has been waiting for years for a communication device, as it is the only way for him to communicate with his parents. This is shocking. I could speak of equally shocking stories from County Wicklow, where a Carnew mother fears for the mental health of her son, who is staying in his room due to a very frustrated younger brother, who is lashing out at him, harming him and harming himself, so much that she has had to send the older brother to their grandparents, who are over an hour's drive away. This is heartbreaking for the parents concerned.

Under the Disability Act 2005, children are entitled to an assessment of need within six months. However, 15,296 children are overdue their assessment of need. Worryingly, the HSE anticipates that this will only get worse and expects that by the end of this year, there could be as many as 24,796 assessments of need due for completion. This is not good enough. The Government is failing to implement the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, and is therefore breaking the law. We in Sinn Féin will continue to fight until it is sorted and children get the services and supports that they are legally entitled to access and deserve. I call on the Government to support Sinn Féin's motion this evening.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I presume when the Deputy mentions families, the names of family members and so on that he has the permission of the family to do so.

Deputy Ann Graves: This Government has once again failed the most vulnerable. A total of 15,296 children are overdue for an assessment of need. It is nothing short of a scandal. It is a priority for Sinn Féin. We and the combined Opposition have come together to table a motion during Sinn Féin's Private Members' time, demanding that the Government moves urgently

on this matter. Children are entitled to an assessment of need within six months under the Disability Act. The reality is different, however, and the Government is breaking the law. A young four-year-old from Swords, identified as having speech and language difficulties, had a check-up as a two-year-old. He was referred to Swords Health Centre. Eighteen months later, he received an appointment, for 1 February 2025, only to be told that he was number 26 on the list to see a therapist. He will be six years old before he sees a speech and language therapist. That is four years.

James contacted my office in Fingal East. His son has been waiting for 18 months for an appointment for an assessment. I tabled a parliamentary question in an attempt to draw attention to this serious matter. The response from the Department confirmed that his son will not get an appointment until October 2025. I met a woman during the general election campaign who is a mother of twins, one of whom has additional needs and is waiting for a psychological assessment. He is non-verbal and awaiting a speech and language assessment. They both start school in September. The mother just wants the best and most equal chance for both her children. I met her again in my office yesterday and nothing has changed. It is anticipated that by the end of 2025, there could be almost 25,000 children whose assessments of need are due to be completed.

The solution lies with the Government. The Minister must take emergency action and make funding available to clear the backlog and provide these children with assessments, which they are legally entitled to. Longer-term, the Government needs to deliver a sustainable solution, including an urgent workforce plan to recruit, train and retrain enough staff to finally end this serious breach of children's rights.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: In my constituency of Dublin North-West, there are a great number of children and young people with autism and other special needs and disabilities who have been waiting for assessment and support services for a long time. I have had many parents come into my constituency office who are frustrated at the long waiting times for their children and who cannot progress or get the service they require without first having this assessment carried out.

It is important that children are assessed at an early age so that they can get the supports they need, which are crucial for them as they grow into young adults. In CHO 9 alone, which covers my constituency of Dublin North-West, more than 2,400 children have been waiting for over a year for an initial contact from the children's disability network. This is contrary to the terms of the Disability Act 2005, which states that children are legally entitled to an assessment of need within six months of applying. In reality, only a tiny percentage of those who have applied for an assessment have received one. This demand for assessments in CHO 9 is growing. According to the Department of Health's figures, in CHO 9, the demand for assessments of need increased by approximately 14% from 2022 to 2024.

These delays mean that children are being left behind at a crucial time in their development, which negatively impacts both the children and their families, particularly those who need urgent access to specialised services. We are now at a point where we have a 14-year-old school-girl, inspired by her own family experiences, protesting outside the Dáil for urgent action on the growing waiting lists for disability assessments for children. The assessment of need process in Ireland is crucial for identifying and addressing the needs of children and young people with disabilities.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The failure that is happening here is profound for par-

ents and most importantly for their children, but also for the professionals working in the field. It feels as if the system is shuddering to a halt and is completely choking up, and the situation continues to get worse and worse. More than 15,000 children are waiting for an assessment of need. There are more than 2,000 in my county, Cork. Many of them have been waiting for over a year, of which many have been waiting for over 30 months. It is a scandalous situation.

A few weeks ago, I attended a number of protests organised by parents, Nicole Hosford, Karen McGrath and people like that, who have been here and have met officials from the Departments. The focus at that point was on special school places but they never lost sight of the fact that it is not isolated and that does not solve everything by any means. If a child gets a seat in a classroom, it does not solve all the issues and does not ensure that child reach their full potential. Sometimes, in this place, we get so used to a particular phrase for a policy, such as assessment of need, that it loses meaning. If we think about what it actually is and what it means for a parent, an assessment of need identifies what that child needs from the health system, education, therapies, meeting the child, understanding the child, and seeing how you can meet the child's best potential. How frustrating is it for that child and the child's parents to know that there is not even the basis for a plan for them to proceed? Tá mé ag impí ar an Aire maoiniú a thabhairt do Cara's Fund. I am urging the Minister to support the motion later and to fund Cara's Fund.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are all here and having this discussion because 14-year-old Cara Darmody and her dad Mark are outside on a 50-hour sleepout. It is nothing short of scandalous. Obviously she is doing this on behalf of her brothers, Neil and John, and all the other Neils and Johns.

The figures were spoken about earlier. At this point, we are talking about 15,296 children who have been failed. That failure is to deliver on an assessment of need within six months. We could be looking at a figure by the end of the year of 24,796. As was said earlier, we are talking about a profound failure. It is all well and good to say that parents and their children can get therapies. We know that the assessment of need is required for parts of the wider system, whether it is school and whether you will be in mainstream or you need to be in a particular unit. It is required for payments, which are necessary for the added costs of disability. We have all spoken for a long time about the single point of access. There are a number of things in this that are good. However, there is also an abject failure to have delivered upon what should have been done. During my time on the autism committee, we met with the Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland, the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists and the Psychological Society of Ireland. Nobody had a discussion with them on the best means of not only carrying out these assessments but also delivering therapies. We have spoken before about this. We really have to get to the point of offering the therapies where the need is - that is, in the school setting - while being able to deliver some sort of service within the CDNTs. We have nothing but absolute gaps in them. We know from the figures for the end of last year that there were still 529 whole-time equivalent positions missed. We have abject failure, we have breaking of the law and we need to see delivery. It is absolutely scandalous that we are reliant on the actions of a 14-year-old girl to embarrass us into looking at this properly.

Deputy Mark Wall: Not a single day goes by on which this Government does not break the law regarding the statutory timeline under the Disability Act for an assessment of need. In a previous Commencement matter with the then Minister of State, she described it as "Groundhog Day" and "as bad as it can get". Unfortunately, it has got worse since then. Now over 15,000 children are waiting on an assessment in my own area of Kildare, where we have the

second highest number of children who are overdue an assessment. Nearly 1,700 children are overdue an assessment in Kildare and Wicklow. Even if a child receives an assessment, they are likely to languish on another waiting list with many other children. Waiting lists are in the tens of thousands for essential therapies with over 20,000 children waiting on psychology and occupational therapy, 19,000 waiting on speech and language therapy and nearly 10,000 are waiting on physiotherapy.

Every expert agrees that early intervention is key. We are all aware of this and many Ministers are on record acknowledging this fact. Yet the average wait time for the CDNT in Kildare is more than three years. The Government is missing the critical point for early intervention for these children. It is simply failing them. The Government needs to provide transparency and accountability on this issue. It should be publishing monthly waiting lists for assessment of need and therapies. We need to know that these figures are going in the right direction. Parents need to see some light at the end of what can be a very dark tunnel for their children who need help. We need to train more therapists and specialists. We need to see them on the ground working in schools but there seems to be no strategy for this from the Government. We know there is no quick fix but there are many ways in which the Government can provide immediate relief to those children and their families. Short- and medium-term measures need to be considered by the Government, such as the Labour Party proposal to outsource diagnostic assessments for children waiting the longest. Another proposal is to utilise the National Treatment Purchase Fund to reimburse parents who have already paid huge amounts for private therapies. In the programme for Government there is a mention of grant funding for children's therapies. I ask again for clarity on this fund as I have done before. It may go some way towards addressing the long wait times if parents can access private therapies through a temporary Government grant.

Not for the first time, I raise the issue of the national child development centre to be operated by Sensational Kids. I am aware that the organisation will submit its proposal to the HSE for capital funding in the coming weeks. It is sad to see this potential state-of-the-art treatment centre lying block-high and unfinished in Kildare town. It would have the capacity to see 300 children per week, taking them from the waiting lists I have spoken about in my earlier contribution, but it would also importantly offer much-needed clinical placements and mentoring for the therapists, OTs and other specialists, clinicians and consultants we need in this country. We need to offer them the opportunity to get the placements so many of them are struggling with at the moment. I ask the Minister to urge all in government to get behind this much-needed development in the State. Later this evening we will have the opportunity to discuss this matter further and mention Cara Darmody and her Dad, Mark. I look forward to that. I look forward to mentioning what Cara has done in the battle for her two brothers and also going into some detail of cases I am currently dealing with in my own area of Kildare South.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The vast majority of the statements here today reflect the absolute anger we all feel about the shambles in the assessment of needs. I refer to the shambles of the 529.77 whole-time equivalent unfilled posts in the CDNTs, the failure to retain staff in both primary care and the CDNTs, the reliance on private assessments because the State cannot get its act together and the devastation for parents as they watch their children regress because they cannot access the services they need. I wish to reflect on what comes after a child eventually gets their assessment of need. In many cases they are waiting three or four years, particularly in my area in the northside of Dublin, for that to happen. Then, of course, they wait another three to four years for those therapies. I recall a time when the CDNTs in my area would say to me that they could not assess until they were ready to provide treatment of therapies to the child. I

did not like the answer at the time but they were right. However, even now, those children who have got the assessment of need are waiting another three to four years and that is wrong. The distress and upset out there is absolutely enormous. Families who have been left waiting for so long are now having their hopes dashed and replaced with a seething frustration. They have a document to say which therapies the child needs and yet they have no idea when they are going to get them. This is the abject failure of the State to provide for some of our most vulnerable children.

When we look at the waiting times for those children who have been assessed, it is really astounding. In just three years, there has been a 199% increase in the number of children waiting over one year for their initial assessment for speech and language therapy. For psychology, the number of those waiting over a year has jumped 170% in just three years. There are 11,552 vulnerable children out there deemed to need psychology supports who have been left waiting for over a year. It is absolutely heartbreaking. What damage is this State doing to those children by failing to provide those supports? The horrible reality is that the number of staff who have been recruited in that time has been a tiny fraction of the twofold increase. It is a reflection of a system that is truly broken and desperately failing these children. We are all aware of the crucial need for timely intervention for children. Now the Government needs to seriously rethink the progressing disability services strategy and the Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026. We need to have a fundamental rethink of how, where and when these services are provided to children because the current system is not working. When I say that, I do not mean they should be getting anything less than they deserve or any diminution of the service to which they are entitled but we need to have a rethink of how things are being done.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I begin by paying tribute, as others have done, to Cara Darmody. A 14-year-old obviously should not need to be such an ardent campaigner for autism supports and services but she is an incredible one and it was a pleasure to meet her and give her my support outside the gates of Leinster House this morning. Nearly everyday, like everyone here, I am contacted by parents in my constituency who either cannot get an assessment of needs for their child or, if they have got one, cannot get the necessary therapeutic supports. As we have spoken about, there are now over 15,000 children waiting for an assessment of needs in Ireland. Some 10% of those are in my own constituency of Dublin South-West. That is over 1,500 children; the third highest number in the country. Too many of the parents I speak to have had to fork out hundreds of euros for private assessments because they cannot wait any longer. They are the lucky ones. Many other parents just cannot afford to go private. This is not a new problem, but it is getting worse. Two years ago my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, brought forward a motion calling for reimbursement for families forced to go private for assessment and therapies. The then Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte, said at the time that she had made a proposal to the HSE where she wanted a minimum of six regional assessment units stood up and that if that was not done by 1 August that year - two years ago - she would take to budget what the Labour Party had suggested which was to fund the families. Those assessment units still have not been rolled out and the Minister reneged on the commitment to take our Labour Party proposals to budget. Since then the issue, the backlog and the wait times have only got worse.

The victims of this Government inaction ultimately are vulnerable children in need of support. It is nowhere near good enough. The same can be said in terms of the actual supports available. Speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physios are all virtually absent in Dublin South-West and in many other parts of the country. I recently visited the Ballyboden primary healthcare centre in my constituency that previously had five speech and lan-

guage therapists in 2022. It now only has one working part time and is having huge difficulties in hiring due to the pay and numbers strategy. We are seeing significant issues in our special schools as well. The Libermann Spiritan School in Templeogue, for example, is opening two new classes in September which is certainly welcome. However, the much-needed therapeutic supports available in the school will remain the same which means the actual services being provided to the students in that school are being diluted. St. Kevin's Girls' School in Kilnamanagh is facing another issue. Enrolment in the school has dropped by just five students for next year, so they are losing a teacher from their allocation and being forced to merge two classes. This will result in a single class of almost 35 students, including children with autism. What will that do to the development of these children from a social and educational perspective and in terms of the management of the SNA resources? Teachers and SNAs are already at breaking point. This cannot be allowed to go ahead. The school should have its teacher allocation restored and I will ask the Minister for education to intervene here.

We are all aware of the importance of early intervention, and it has been mentioned repeatedly today, in giving children with autism or other complex needs the best chance to live fulfilling and dignified lives and independent lives insofar as possible. That opportunity is being withheld from so many children in my constituency and all over the country. We want fewer promises from the Government and more action.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I know the Minister for children is a very decent person. There are tens of thousands of families affected by what we are talking about, my own included. I deal with this issue every day. In my clinic recently, nine out of 17 appointments concerned issues experienced by people with autism.

I have probably been involved the longest with Cara Darmody and with her father and mother in fighting for their two sons. I brought them here two and a half years ago. I know how determined Cara is and how determined the family are.

I will say quite openly that I am so uncomfortable about the fact that it has gotten to the stage where a 14-year-old is sleeping outside tonight and tomorrow night. That needs Government intervention tonight. We, as a country, cannot have a scenario where a 14-year-old who has been fighting - in fairness, this is not today or yesterday - for two and a half years is sleeping outside the national Parliament because we are in a crisis and she, and many of the rest of us, cannot see a way out. It is a national scandal. We cannot allow it to happen. The Minister is a very decent person, I absolutely know that, but someone from the Government - the Taoiseach or somebody - has to go out there. It will be a stain on all of us if something is not done. A 14-year-old has to sleep outside the national Parliament in order for us to put in place crisis measures to deal with this issue.

I received figures from the HSE in relation to this issue. I just want to say this out straight. I often ask questions of the HSE and it is not always so forthright. This is a cry for help from the HSE. The HSE admits the list will go to 25,000 within another eight months. This is not sustainable for all the families out there who are fighting. The HSE also tells us it cannot provide the figures on how much longer than six months families have been waiting. All of us in this House know that it goes on for years. Not alone does it go on for years and years but then afterwards when one gets a service statement, it will take another number of years. It takes years to get an AON, it takes years to get a statement of service and then it takes years to get occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and everything else. It takes a block of years to get the AON, a block of years to get the service statement, and a block of years, if at all, to

get the therapies. That is reality. Also, for families who move in and out of the system to the private system, having the best of intentions, and try to jump back into the public system, there are complications there.

I have a situation where somebody who is well known to many of us in this House has verified something which I have always thought, where when one's child seeks to be dealt with by CAMHS, it often looks for an assessment of need to rule out autism. I am beginning to wonder if that is just to keep the numbers down in CAMHS. I am fairly convinced it is a real issue.

Many people speak about this issue but do not actually come into this House to look at solutions when they are in opposition. I will change that and talk about where we have to go as regards solutions. We all know we need more people working in this area. That is the ultimate issue. We all know the former Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte, stood in this House two years ago responding to a Labour Party Private Members' motion and made commitments that, no disrespect to her, have not been honoured. We need to bring in more people who are working in the private sector. We also need to upskill a large number of people who are in other disciplines in order that they are able to cross-work in this area. That is the quickest way in which we will deal with this issue. We also need to bring in more people from outside this jurisdiction in order to deal with this.

We need to ensure we are not only training more people but that we are dealing with pay parity issues. Many people are working in other organisations, privately, etc., because of the pay parity issues with working in the HSE. I know people who want to work in the HSE and who want to work in this sector but they have mouths to feed. The pay parity issue, which has gone on for years, is a real one. They are the four different components which I believe will go a long way to helping with this issue.

I will conclude by repeating that I am not comfortable that we, as a State or as a Parliament, are allowing a 14-year-old child, who I totally and utterly respect and whose family I have worked with for many years and who I brought here initially a number of years ago, to sleep outside our Parliament tonight because she is so desperate to see this issue dealt with. It is the lowest thing I have seen in my 17 to 18 years in these buildings.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I acknowledge the extraordinary Cara Darmody. She is such an amazing campaigner and advocate for her brothers, Neil and John, but also in particular for all young children awaiting an assessment of need across the country. I also mention Cara's dad Mark and her mum Noelle. They are both amazing parents and carers to Neil and John.

Living so close to Cara and the Darmody family, I have engaged with her, especially over the past four years. I have been so impressed with her passion, commitment, intelligence and steadfast determination to effect meaningful change. Cara is such a positive force. She is very clear. The political system needs to urgently apply itself to finding solutions to the assessment of need emergency. It is time all of us across the political divide started listening to Cara and that we all work together in a solution-focused manner.

This is an emergency. Our primary focus must be on the assessment of need process and this may require legislative change. However, such change must not in any way dilute the crucial need to identify the exact therapies a child would benefit from in order to reach the maximum of his or her ability. I fully support allocating more resources to significantly increase Cara's fund in the short term and indeed in the medium term so that those who are longest on the waiting

list can be referred to private providers. To date, this fund has helped more than 3,600 children on the waiting list. It is so important we better resource this initiative in order to continue to support and deliver for those families and children who have been waiting the longest.

We need a real focus on recruitment and retention. While the workforce across the 93 CDNT teams increased by 17% between 2023 and 2024, there are still too many vacancies. I appeal to the Cabinet subcommittee on disability to establish a task force around recruitment. For example, notwithstanding the existing pathways in education to qualify as a therapist, how can we better recruit more therapists from abroad? While the HSE maintains a panel of external suppliers to support recruitment of therapists internationally, this procurement model is not working and I can point to many examples to support that view. We need to engage with CORU because the process by which international therapists must, in the first instance, have their professional qualifications recognised by the regulator to be considered for registration needs to be reviewed.

There is no doubt that addressing the problems with the assessment of need process is a real challenge. As Cara wants, let us all work together. We owe it to the children of Ireland. As a new TD, this is a key priority for me.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the Minister. When I worked for 19 years with the neurodiverse community, I was often the first point of contact after a parent acknowledged a concern for their child, or was potentially nudged by a relative, a childminder or a preschool teacher to talk to their GP or public health nurse. It takes real courage for a parent to do this when they notice that milestones are being missed or when they start to see struggles in areas like speech and language, difficulties with motor planning, behavioural struggles, social challenges or learning difficulties. It takes real courage to take that first step to seek answers, a diagnosis and a roadmap.

Why do parents do that? They know the assessment of need process is objective. They want and crave that statement of need in their hand because it tells them the list of services and supports that should be provided to their child. I commend Cara Darmody who is outside protesting for 50 hours, but I am uncomfortable because it is terrible that she has to do that, and it is terrible that we have over 15,000 children on our waiting list. There are almost 200 children in my own constituency of Mayo waiting for an assessment of need. We must do better. We must continue to increase resources. We have to use the private sector and continue to do so where needed, and we have to address recruitment and retention issues.

I welcome the 65% increase in completed assessments of need in the first three months of this year. I welcome the regional hubs that have been set up to target the backlog, and I also welcome Cara's fund. However, we must recognise why there has been such an increase in the demand for assessments of need. Parents know that services are stretched. They know CAMHS services are stretched, as are primary care services and the CDNTs. There are almost 700 children in CHO 2, which comprises my area of Mayo, Galway and Roscommon, waiting for CDNT appointments. These parents feel that they need the diagnosis and they need to get that statement in their hand. They need the diagnosis if they want to access home tuition or if they want to access a special school or an autism class.

Without the assessment of need, providers like NEPS psychologists or therapists like speech and language therapists are often working off anecdotal information, school data or their own observations. NEPS psychologists and therapists have said that they want that detailed knowl-

edge and diagnosis because the assessment notes are really key for them to work off. We also have to acknowledge that sometimes parents feel the assessment of need is their only route to services, but actually they can access CDNTs, primary care, SET and SNA hours in school and NEPS psychologists. I welcome that they can now access the domiciliary care grant without the assessment of need being completed but we also have to acknowledge that these services are really stretched.

I welcome the roll-out of therapists within schools. This is going to be one of the step changes we have discussed, and it is really welcome. We need to continue fighting and working as hard as we possibly can. This debate in the Dáil is really helpful because we keep talking about how disability is at the forefront of all of our minds. There is cross-party agreement that we have to do better and that this issue and the issue of housing are going to be the measure of our Government. They are our two biggest challenges. I look forward to working collaboratively with my colleagues on the disability matters committee. When we are working together and bringing solutions from across the House, we can make inroads in disability.

We have to continue to expand services, and address recruitment and retention issues. There is a 21% vacancy rate on CDNT teams across the country. I have been guilty of not signing up to HSE jobs when I had the option. I chose instead to go and work privately for myself, where I could manage my caseload and see my clients on a regular basis. I knew that early intervention and regular appointments were where the difference was going to be made, and that is where we see a lot of struggles for therapists who are pulling away now. So many of our therapists are caught trying to catch up on the assessment of need backlogs and are maybe not providing the therapies where they want to. We know that the CDNTs are really struggling, so we have to increase our staff and train more therapists.

We also have to continue our investment in disability services. I know it is at record levels but we must continue to do more. Really and truly, we have to completely clear the backlog with the assessment of need process so that therapists can get back to providing therapies, and Cara can get back to school.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: At the outset, I welcome this debate and thank colleagues across the House for their contributions. It is clear we are united by a common concern for children with additional needs and their families, who deserve timely assessments and tailored supports. Far too many people are waiting far too long. No one here today can ignore the facts. There are over 15,290 overdue assessments, a figure that represents children, families and futures being left in limbo. Applications have more than doubled since 2020, rising to over 10,600 last year. These delays are unacceptable and must be addressed head-on.

It is also important to be honest with the public about the complexity of the challenges and the work that is already under way. I note the Opposition has tabled a motion on this issue this evening, which the Government is not opposing. In fact, we all share many of its objectives. They are shared priorities but real, lasting solutions require more than emergency funding; they require structural reform, workforce expansion and smarter delivery.

I welcome the Government's allocation of an additional €10 million this year to deliver nearly 3,000 additional assessments and to expand our capacity with new specialist teams, including senior therapists, health and social care assistants, as well as clinical trainees. We are already seeing progress on that front. Last year, we saw a 30% increase in the number of completed assessments, thanks in part to the targeted waiting list initiative. Over 2,400 assess-

ments were procured through private providers, targeting families who have waited the longest.

That said, it is clear that it is not enough. No family should be forced to seek legal redress to access a right they are entitled to under the Disability Act 2005. It is deeply concerning that €7.9 million has been spent on litigation since 2021, money that should have gone to services, not to lawyers. The reality is that too much of our current system is still shaped by bureaucracy, not by the best interests of children. We have therapists spending a third of their time conducting lengthy assessments instead of delivering therapies. This needs to change.

We need a model that responds quickly to identified needs, whether that is speech and language therapy, occupational therapy or mental health supports, without unnecessary delays. Where legislation needs to change to support that, I know the Minister, Deputy Foley, will act. The Minister prioritised special education in her time with the Department of Education with regard to the SENs. I acknowledge the leadership of the Taoiseach, who from his first days in office ensured that disability had a full voice at Cabinet and created the first disability unit in the Department of the Taoiseach. The Cabinet Committee on Disability, which he chairs, continues to drive co-ordinated action across Departments.

As with her progress on the SENs, I want to highlight the work of the Minister, Deputy Foley, in placing a sharper focus on delivering therapies directly in our schools, starting with special schools and ultimately extending across the system. The funding for disability services in 2025 stands at over €3.2 billion, up €1.2 billion since 2020, but I and families know that funding alone is not enough. It is about access, delivery and outcomes, and that is where our focus must stay. We are also investing in school places and specialist support. Budget 2025 provided for up to 2,700 new special education placements and nearly 400 new special classes. We are on track to deliver five new special schools and to expand existing ones too.

In conclusion, the scale of this crisis is acknowledged. The focus must be on investing in services and reforming and restructuring services to deliver a better, faster and more equitable system, which meets the needs of every child not just in law but also in practice.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Today, the combined Opposition will put a motion forward in solidarity with Cara Darmody.

6 o'clock

Today, the Government does not cherish the children of our nation. It is in breach of the law because it has denied children their rights. This Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the so-called Independents has denied children their rights. This has a real impact on the lives of parents and children. Assessments of need are needed, otherwise parents are out of pocket because they have to pay privately. The outcomes for their children are not optimal and the situation is getting worse. In September 2020, 5,083 children were on a list. In June 2024, there were 11,131 children on a list for AON. In September 2024, there were 12,722 children on a list. Today it is embarrassing for this Government. I do not know how Government Members can stand up and make statements in this House when more than 15,000 children are waiting for assessments of need and, by year end, there will be a projected 25,000 children waiting for assessments of need.

A task lies ahead for the Government. The united Opposition has brought a motion to this House asking the Government to clear the backlog, comply with the legal obligations and provide all children with an assessment of need within six months. What the Government must do

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is take emergency action and make funding available to Cara's fund; set a specific target date by which the Government aims to comply with its legal obligations; deliver a longer term, sustainable solution including an urgent workforce plan to recruit, train and retain enough staff; fund special needs services, including speech and language, physio, occupational and behavioural therapies; and provide appropriate school places for children with special needs.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Bennett and call Deputy Ward.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In Monaghan we recently got a new special school but more needs to happen for every child.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bennett is taking her colleague's time.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: They need to get more day services and the Government needs to plan for every child's future.

Deputy Mark Ward: At this moment more than 15,000 children are waiting for an assessment of need. An assessment of need is an assessment carried out by the HSE of children with disabilities. The assessment identifies the child's needs and what services are needed to meet them. This sounds like a simple procedure, but Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have made a right hames of it. They have scandalously left children waiting for the treatment that will allow them to reach their developmental milestones. Only 7% of assessments were completed within the six-month timeframe required by law. In 2023, the State spent €1.2 million defending itself against parents of children with disabilities because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael broke the law. How messed up is that? It gets worse. The HSE is now recommending that parents take the HSE to court because assessments of need are not being delivered on time. One parent applied for an assessment of need for her son. The assessment was not provided within the six-month statutory time-frame. She made a complaint to the HSE using the correct procedure. The HSE again failed to provide the assessment on the new date it gave after the complaint. She asked the HSE what options were open to her at that stage and got a reply stating that the only escalation available to her at that point was for her to go to the Circuit Court. The system is so broken that the providers of the assessments are telling the parents to sue them. You could not make this up. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have turned their backs on our children.

When a child eventually receives an assessment of need, parents have to fight again to get the treatment that the assessment recommends. There is nothing worse than a parent receiving a letter to say they will be waiting years for an appointment for occupational therapy, speech and language therapy or psychology. In my own area, there is no psychology team or physiotherapy team for those who live in Palmerstown. There is a 183-week wait list for occupational therapy. There is no greater crime in this State than denying children the right to reach their full potential but that is exactly what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are doing to our children.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister for her statement. Cara Darmody, a remarkable 14-year-old disability activist from Ardfinnan in County Tipperary, today began a 50-hour sleep-out on Kildare Street in front of Leinster House. Cara is taking this action to highlight the more than 15,000 young people in this country who are overdue an assessment of need. We hear from the HSE that this figure could reach 25,000 by the end of the year.

Despite all the talk about prioritising disability in the lead-up to the general election it is almost as if the Government has given up. Almost the only strong message it has expressed so far in this regard is the intention to abbreviate assessments of need by changing disability

legislation. This is something of which we need to be very careful. We have been here before. In 2020, a previous attempt to shorten AONs led to High Court action as the assessment in question was clinically inadequate. That led to further escalation in waiting lists for AONs afterwards because so many children had to be reassessed. An autism assessment and intervention protocol has been going through consultation in recent times with associations of the interested clinicians, speech and language therapists, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists. I know from feedback from that consultation that those professionals are raising very similar concerns. We need to be wary of how we change course in this regard or how we might consider it.

Despite her youth, Cara Darmody has been highlighting the issues with AONs for several years. She was moved to campaign on behalf of children with additional needs after witnessing the lack of services available to her two young brothers, who are autistic and have intellectual disabilities. There are many other families like Cara's who have watched their children being failed and felt compelled to become activists and campaigners, all to secure basic services and supports which children with additional needs are entitled to as a right. In a country as wealthy as ours it is shameful that so many children have been failed so consistently and comprehensively.

The assessment of need waiting list crisis sits within a broader context of pervasive and abject policy failure across our disability sector, failure that is causing immense suffering to so many families. Since the general election in November disability issues have had a political focus like never before but we have yet to see political change stemming from this Government. A disability unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to add weight, urgency and focus to the crisis was announced in January. It will be important to see soon what work, if any, the unit has undertaken. The Taoiseach mentioned on Leaders' Questions earlier today that he is in the process of setting up the disability unit in his Department. However, we are now five months on from the formation of Government. Has the unit actually met? Is it still only being formed? Where is the sense of urgency in action that was so vivid in pre-election rhetoric?

My party colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, speaking on Leaders' Questions called on the Government to comply with the Disability Act and to complete AONs within the statutory timeframe. The Taoiseach responded with a frustrated tone, as if the question was unreasonable. He stated, "The HSE is not in a position to fulfil the law right now. The Deputy knows that and I know that." The Taoiseach reacted as if he was being needled by a question posed in bad faith for political purposes, yet his response raises a further question as to why the HSE is not able to comply with the law in respect of AONs. This is mainly because services, in particular primary care, have been stymied from carrying out clinical work, both assessment and intervention, not just by the official HSE recruitment embargo that took place between October 2023 and July 2024 or the unofficial embargo that has followed since in the form of the pay and numbers strategy, but also by years of severe under-resourcing prior to all of that by successive Governments which the Micheál Martin either was directly part of or supported through confidence and supply. That is the answer.

How do we get out of it? Should we be led to believe that the crises, and there are multiple crises across the disability sector, are extremely complex and will take many years to resolve? If we keep privatising and fragmenting services, these problems will be more intractable. However, the Government can take one straightforward and basic step now and that is to overturn the recruitment restrictions imposed on primary care services by the pay and numbers strategy, commence a comprehensive recruitment drive and provide the staffing to carry out assessment

and intervention for young people with mild to moderate difficulties. It will not solve everything but it could be transformative. Many families are getting stuck in the AON pathway because primary care is not available to them. They believe the only way they can access support is through the AON process. It is vital that the Minister, Deputy Foley, and her colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, engage with CDNT ground-level staff who have left those services to establish what exactly is causing the retention crisis in CDNTs. Change in disability services and resolving the AON crisis can happen but not by robbing Peter to pay Paul or expecting services to function without adequate workforce planning or staffing.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: A total of 15,296 children. I know the Minister has heard that figure a lot today but each one of them is a child that is being failed by this State and the Minister's Government. Each is a child that cannot reach his or her full potential because of that failure; a child who is living a life where they are uncertain, do not know what is happening and do not know their place in the world, where they face huge challenges integrating, making connections with other people and being seen for their own potential and what they can bring, and the value they bring to their communities. It is not only those children but also their brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents who are being impacted by all of this. Tonight, we see Cara Darmody out in the rain, protesting in order to support not only her two brothers but all children and families who have been left in this awful situation by the Minister's Government.

The promise of something like early intervention must feel like an impossibility for most of these families. They see their children suffering. They know that were they to get the right supports, their futures would be so much brighter than what they will have now but, because this Government and previous Governments have failed to provide the necessary supports and services, those children are left in a very difficult and precarious situation.

What I am hearing a lot today - something that really frustrates me and must make those families feel invisible - is a Government that is describing a problem and keeps saying, "Yes, we know it is really bad. We know we are letting children down. We must do better." Well, do better. This is not the Minister's first rodeo. She was in office in the previous term. The Tánaiste said today that this is a top priority of his. Fine Gael has been in government since 2011. How many more terms are needed in order to get this right? It is not fair on these children and it is not fair on their families. We hear people continually repeating the accolades we are hearing for Cara Darmody. What she is doing is incredible but no child should be put into that situation where they have to put their own lives at a standstill to fight for things that are her brothers' rights. It is their rights that are not being met and it is the same for children around the country. In my constituency, there are 854 children on the east coast of Wicklow and 1,692 between Kildare and west Wicklow whose rights are not being met. For any Government to come in here and say it is not in a position to meet the law when it comes to these children is completely unacceptable. It is also completely unacceptable for the Government to pretend this is something that has just happened and that it has not been in government for the past 14 years, or the past ten in the case of Fianna Fáil. I ask the Minister to see today's motion and the sacrifice that Cara and her family, and families across the country, have made and just start getting this right. The solutions have been put forward. The Government knows what they are. Just put the focus on it because I do not want to have this conversation again five years from now.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I welcome the opportunity for statements on assessments of need. We often talk about demand and need and solutions. The Government today has made reaffirmations. The Tánaiste reiterated his commitment to address this issue after 14 years of Fine Gael in government. We must also give voice to many people who are now teenagers or adults

who have been left behind because of the failures of successive Governments and the structures of this State which did not meet their needs.

The Opposition is often told we misconstrue arguments and offer no solutions but the evidence of failures and the facts speak for themselves. No spin can change the reality of countless families in Ireland who are suffering and have suffered due to the lack of the most basic care by the State in education appropriate to their need with the therapeutic supports necessary to make their situation comfortable. It is well past time for the Government to finally act on the assessment of need crisis. What is happening in our health and disability services is not a minor administrative delay. It is a systematic failure and a breach of legal obligations. It is a betrayal of the children and families impacted.

Under the Disability Act 2005 every child is legally entitled to have their assessment of need completed within six months of their application. That is not a target; it is the law. The Taoiseach should be reminded that this is not a law that we change because it does not suit the narrative of the day. It is a law we must strive to uphold. However, in the first quarter of this year only 7% of assessments were completed in that timeframe. That is an outrageous figure. It tells us plainly that the law is being ignored and that, for thousands of families, the promise of early intervention is nothing more than a broken commitment. Early intervention is to meet a child's most basic needs. We know how critical those early years are and that timely support can change the entire trajectory of a child's life but, instead, the families are left waiting. Months turn into years. Promises from Ministers go on and children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are left to fall behind. Governments have been making the same assurances on this issue for years and in that time waiting lists have not improved but, rather, got worse. Workers are still waiting for pay parity and that contributes to the crisis in staffing in the sector. Families are tired and advocates are burned out. Today, Cara Darmody sits outside the Dáil doing her homework in preparation for an exam next week. That is a failure of a republic. I have watched parents who have had to come and sleep outside the Department of education or Dáil Éireann, assemble on WhatsApp groups and develop their own support networks. Who are we? We talk about being a successful economy but what is the purpose of it if it is not meeting those basic needs?

Deputy Jen Cummins: It is nothing short of a national scandal that over 15,000 children are still waiting for an assessment of need. I know these numbers have been read out several times today but I want to keep saying it because it is an absolute scandal that we are saying there are 15,000 children waiting for an assessment of need and that over 90% of those assessments are not being completed within the legally mandated six-month timeframe.

In Dublin South Central at the end of 2024 there were 1,652 children waiting over three months for an assessment of need. From speaking to parents in my constituency, I know the level of frustration, heartbreak and need there. What are we doing as a country if we cannot get an assessment of need for a child when they most need it? When a child receives an assessment of need, where are the services thereafter? The Disability Act 2005 clearly sets out that children should have an assessment of need starting within three months of application and concluding within six, yet, with this Government in its second term, it is still not working. There are still missed targets, persistent failure and no meaningful accountability. Why is it necessary for a child to sit outside this Dáil for 50 hours to bring shame on what is happening here? No family should have to fight the fight they are fighting. They have enough to deal with in their own daily lives. They should be getting their basic rights.

The Government is pointing to funding and pilot schemes. I do not know about anyone else here but I am sick of hearing about pilot schemes. We should know what we are doing at this stage. We are not a fledgling. We did not just come about yesterday. We have been a State for so long. Why can we not get this right? This number of children is not a surprise. They were born. They have needs. They do not just magic down from the clouds and land here and have assessments of need that must be done. We need forward planning. We need staff who are trained. For the third time in the Chamber I make the point that we have heard so often that we will have more college places next year for therapists but I have not heard that it is definitely happening and I really want to know if it is. If these children get an assessment of need and they get the therapies, we still do not have enough therapists. Will I get an answer next week on whether there are enough people training in third-level institutions?

I commend all the families throughout the country who are bringing the attention of politicians to this issue. Everyone in the Dáil and Seanad hears about this all the time. Let us keep fighting on their behalf. It is just not good enough.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: The situation is unacceptable. Like the Minister, I spent 15 years in a classroom and delivered hours as a special education teacher from time to time. In that 15 years, I have seen things improve in terms of resources and overall funding but in what is being experienced on the ground, particularly in the area of assessments of need, things are definitely regressing. We need to put that on the record from the outset. That is generally agreed by all parties here.

I fully understand the frustration of parents. Not a week goes by in our clinics when we are not dealing with parents where there is some difficulty in accessing therapies, assessments of need or some type of service, be it from the HSE or a charitable provider. That said, it also needs to be acknowledged that we are facing an unprecedented level of demand. I will not repeat the statistics the Minister outlined, but there is a clear surge in the number of assessments of need applications that are coming through every year. We need to be grown up about the conversation that needs to be had. As a State, what we have done over the past while clearly has not worked. We now need to look to the future to see what we can do and what we can change to ensure children get the diagnosis they need and deserve and, following on from that, that we can deliver the therapies they deserve.

There is something I have never understood in my six years in national politics. How is it I can attend a service such as the Rainbow Club in Cork, which can advertise for a physiotherapist, an SNA or a speech and language therapist, and get genuine competition for the job it is advertising, but that is not the case for the HSE? I am not sure of the latest figure in my region of Cork but the HSE is in the fiftieth or sixtieth percentile as regards vacancies for roles. I can never marry in my own head why a service such as the Rainbow Club, which is a very well-run charity run by Karen and Jon O’Mahony, can succeed but the HSE consistently struggles to hire these staff. I will spend a minute talking about the Rainbow Club as an alternative to the way we do things. I happen to have been a director of the Rainbow Club for the past 12 months, where I have seen that more than 1,300 children can avail of a service every week. They do not require a diagnosis. If a child presents with a need of any description, or if a parent or school-teacher has concerns, they can refer that child to the Rainbow Club in Mahon. There is no compulsion to have a diagnosis. We need to look at a model where a diagnosis is not required and not the clinical model we seem to have been focused on for far too long. The priority now needs to be on delivering therapies.

As I said, 1,300 children - statistics are done every week and the number is growing - can be catered for in an environment that they are very comfortable with. Some of those children have left school places but thrive when they come to the Rainbow Club. In the coming months, we hope that a new home can be built for the Rainbow Club under the HSE capital plan. That is something all Deputies in Cork who have involvement with the charity will be pushing for, when that moment arrives. Thankfully, it has secured its site. We need to look at the Rainbow Club as the model for how to deliver therapies because the HSE clearly cannot provide that for us.

I will make one last point on the assessments to be provided. The Minister mentioned an additional €10 million in funding will be provided under the current budget. I implore her to look at children who were previously assessed by a private therapist, which was paid for by the State. I ask for that to be done as an interim arrangement. I am not saying that is the optimum situation to be in but it needs to be done urgently, if it can be done again. I will add only more to that. I came across two families in my area that have had that publicly funded, private assessment and diagnosis of their child. They had to then go back to the CDNT or SENO, who stated that because it was a private diagnosis, it is not recognised, even though it was a publicly-funded assessment. That situation is not an isolated one. I have come across it on a few occasions. That needs to be clarified. There is no point in us publicly funding assessments in the private sector only for them not to be recognised subsequently.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Like others, I acknowledge an incredibly brave and courageous young person at the gates of Leinster House when it is lashing rain - Cara Darmody. She is protesting outside not for herself but for her brothers and thousands of children throughout the country who are being denied timely assessments of supports. Cara's strength is extraordinary. Her message is one that we in this House must listen to. That message is that we are in an emergency. I also acknowledge my colleague, Councillor Donna Phelan, who, like so many parents, has been fighting for years just to get an assessment for her children. Donna's story is not unique. It is shared by too many families in Kildare North and throughout Ireland. We owe them more than sympathy. We owe them action.

During the general election and since, the issue of assessments has probably been the one that comes most frequently to my office, as it did when I was campaigning. Under the Disability Act 2005, every child is entitled to an assessment of need within six months, yet throughout the country more than 14,000 children are waiting beyond that legal limit. In Kildare North, families are waiting 18 months or more on average and the children's disability network team is operating with a 41% vacancy rate, which is a statistic that tells its own story. I appreciate that efforts are being made to open up more places at university and third level and to hire more people in this space. Early intervention is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Delay leads to more complex needs, more stress on families and more pressure on our system down the line. Indeed, the HSE is telling families to go to court to try to find a resolution to this. It is putting too much pressure on families.

I will offer two solutions that could work. I am looking at solutions rather than complaining about issues all the time. One solution is to establish a dedicated assessment hub or assessment hubs. We need specialised centres staffed by multidisciplinary teams with a singular focus on clearing the backlog and providing timely, high-quality assessments. This model has been piloted successfully in Scotland, particularly in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, where dedicated hubs help to reduce assessment waiting times for children with developmental needs by more than 50%. It is targeted, measurable and replicable. We could begin by piloting this in

Kildare or another county where needs are demonstrably high. A second solution is to provide interim therapeutic access to those awaiting assessment. My colleague, Deputy O'Sullivan, mentioned something similar in Cork. Too many children are being denied any supports until the full process is complete but in the UK and parts of Australia, families can access early interventions, including speech and language therapy, OT or behavioural support, based on flagged preliminary needs. Let us not let bureaucracy get in the way of a child's development. Interim access would ease family pressure and reduce long-term need. When a GP sees a child with clear speech and language difficulties, we should be getting speech and language therapists for these children straight away and not wait for an assessment of need.

The Minister is new to her brief. She has taken to it and has worked diligently and extremely hard. This is an extremely difficult situation to be in. I commend the Minister on her action on this. I appreciate her co-operation with some of the suggestions that I will bring forward. I also acknowledge the investment made in recent years and the sincere efforts of this Minister, the previous Minister and HSE staff, who are under immense strain. However, good intentions are not enough. We now need structural changes that are fast, fair and family centred.

What we need to do more than anything is listen to families, parents and, more importantly, the children who are being impacted, some of whom are non-verbal. It is clear that we need to treat this as an emergency. It needs to be solutions based, for example, on the solutions I brought forward, but other groups and Deputies will bring solutions forward as well. By working in a collegial manner, trying not to politicise this for political gain and working with the Minister to the best of our abilities, we will be able to work not just on the backlog but ensure we are forward planning for children coming through the system in times to come.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. I wish the Minister very well in her role. Having listened to everyone who contributed, I believe there is not one Member across these Houses who is not inundated with queries and concerns over children's therapies, waiting lists and assessment of need. So many of us are supporting parents and families to get services for their children.

The difficulty with the assessment of need process, the waiting lists and vacancy rates is that they are all leaving the children's families in limbo. The services are failing the families. It is a matter of absolute urgency and it directly affects the well-being and future of our most vulnerable population, our children. It is nothing short of a stain on our health service and society. It is a disgrace that over 15,000 children are waiting for an assessment of need, and also that thousands upon thousands of children are not receiving care and the therapies they need. So many times, I had in my constituency office in Dundalk people who told me their children had aged out of the system and had not received one appointment in their lives. This proves the system is entirely broken. It is safe to say that we must shake it up completely.

Before I go on, I must pay tribute to the staff in the services. They have very important jobs caring for our children and trying to give them the tools to thrive. They do so within a system that ties their arms behind their backs. We have to be cognisant of the staff. They are overworked and, in most cases, on a team with a vacancy rate of 50%. We are not giving these professionals the space in which to provide the services to the children who most need them. It is incumbent on us to ensure the HSE looks after the staff in question, gives them the supports they need and fills the teams as soon as possible. We need to attract more staff. We want them to enjoy the incredibly valuable work they do. The recruitment and retention of therapists are so important.

We must consider the mutual recognition of qualifications across Europe, including the UK, to enable us to attract more therapists from overseas. In addition, as other Members have stated today, we must consider how we can train people and put them through our colleges. We hear about apprenticeships. In this regard, we must consider how we can train people to ensure they are working in our health services.

As the Minister well knows from her constituency office, families are struggling to survive, to be heard and to get the help they need for their children. We need assessments of need to identify and address the specific requirements of the children who need therapies, educational supports and other services if they are to reach their full potential. However, the current system is riddled with inefficiencies, delays and obstacles that prevent our children from receiving timely assessments of need. We need to act fast. However, the system is anything but fast. Respectfully, we need to be able to change it, be it through legislation or otherwise. I am not sure whether it is a question of legislation but it cannot be a matter of diminishing the right of children to get an assessment. We must ensure we enhance their rights and that practitioners can look after children, determine what they need and support them from a very early stage. We need to examine the legislation to determine how we can change it for the better. We must ensure we direct the therapists and streamline the services. We must ensure the services are in place to assist children more quickly than at present.

This is all going to be very challenging politically. I was glad to hear the Taoiseach speak today about how the Minister and her Department have been asked to come back with proposals for changes. We need to make sure that we hire from within the public sector. If we outsource constantly, we will only encourage the private sector to grow. We must ensure the private sector is not the one winning out, that staff in our public sector are encouraged to stay in it and that the State provides the required service in the most efficient way.

As everyone in this House, including the Minister, has said, the waiting lists are unacceptably long. Early intervention is critical given how children develop so rapidly at an early age. Every month and week is important. We need to ensure people with developmental delays and special needs are seen quickly.

Our system is not working for anybody, including staff, children and families, and it is not working for the State. In this House, we have identified endless problems and also some solutions. We must be unapologetic in pointing out problems. There will be feathers ruffled but we need to make a change.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Over 15,000 children are currently awaiting an assessment of need. By the end of this year, that number is expected to soar to over 24,000. The law set out in the Disability Act clearly states children must be assessed within six months, but only 7% of children are assessed within that timeframe. Day after day, the Government is breaking the law and, in doing so, failing vulnerable children.

After more than a decade of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael running the Department, the neglect of children reached limits that none of us thought possible. To leave children waiting years for crucial interventions is nothing short of systemic child neglect. Every week and month, without proper supports in schools and communities, this inflicts untold damage on the children's development. This crisis disproportionately targets ordinary working families. It is they who have been hit the hardest. Parents are forced to watch on as their children suffer and are denied the correct supports in school. The whole family bears the mental and emotional strain. An

affected family is left with only two options: sit patiently for years as all the pressures build on it and their children suffer or pay thousands of euro for a private assessment.

With all the Government's failures, there are people in the private sector profiting on the back of this. An autism assessment costs €2,000, an ADHD assessment costs €1,500, and a speech and language assessment costs €600, with follow-up sessions costing €90 each. What will the Government say in ten or 15 years' time to the children failed under its watch? Children have been waiting years for an assessment and for proper supports. Right now, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independents are carving out an utterly shameful legacy of neglect of tens of thousands of children across the State.

I cannot not name for the Minister all the families who come to my door, because there are too many, but what I can tell her is that they are struggling. Some are on second mortgages and some have lost their house. Families have torn apart by the cost and stress. Enough is enough; it is time to act now.

Deputy Pa Daly: Any parent will say that if they discover or suspect their child has developmental difficulties, the first thing they will want to do is find out what the problem is. Second, they will want fix it. Here again, we have another crisis, which is on a long list of crises under the current Government.

As Members will have heard earlier, the number of children languishing on a waiting list is now more than 15,000, and it is anticipated, according to the speaking note received from the Minister, that it will be 25,000 by the end of the year. Many parents and children are becoming increasingly desperate. Some parents, if they can afford it and because their children have been waiting so long, fork out the €2,500 or a sum to that effect to have a private assessment, but what about the people who cannot afford or who do not have access to those kinds of funds? They are pleading with anyone who will listen for some sort of reprieve.

I pay tribute to Cara Darmody and members of her campaign team, including Mr. Thomas Ryan, who is in the Gallery. We should not have circumstances in which Cara and campaigners in support of her must come from Clonmel and Ardfinnan and stand in the rain outside Leinster House. Under the 2005 Disability Act, children are entitled to an assessment of their educational health needs within six months, but only 7% of assessments were completed within the timeframe set out in the Act. I am not surprised, however, because dozens of people come to my office in this regard. The issue is probably next in line to that of housing, which see people come to my office daily.

Just this week, we heard from Maria, whose son has been on a waiting list for a staggering 22 months. He has many sensory issues and is often overwhelmed by sensory overload and has to leave the classroom setting. Again, Maria is a worried mother anxious about what is wrong with her child. She needs to find out what exactly it is so it can be fixed. Without this essential support, her son is forced to miss out on a proper education and time with his peers. An autism unit is due to open at the school in Ardfert next September, but without the assessment this boy will be locked out. Maria's son is desperately worried that September will roll around and this will remain exactly where it is.

The Government must take emergency action and implement a Cara's fund, including a workforce plan to deal with this issue.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion and

commend the campaign team and Cara and Mark Darmody. They should not have to be here. This should have been sorted because people have been raising it for over two decades. The waiting times are scandalous. Under the Disability Act 2005, the waiting time is supposed to be a maximum of six months, so the law is clearly being broken here. A total of 15,296 children are overdue their assessments of special needs. Only 4,162 were carried out by the HSE in 2024, according to its figures. Only a measly 7% are being done within the legal timeframe of six months. This is clearly a failure on every count. The Government is failing in its legal obligations and, according to the Minister, the number waiting for these assessments of need could run to 25,000 by year end.

In Laois, the waiting times to get an assessment of need are absolutely shocking. Aileen, a mother, is just one of many people who have contacted me on this. She waited for years to get her son an assessment of need and then had to go private for it. They had to pay and they had to have the assessment of need and then a multidisciplinary assessment, which in total cost €2,000. This family are on a modest income. For the past six years, Aileen has been paying privately for therapies. Her son got just four short sessions in the six years. She paid for all the other sessions. Her second child, a daughter, has been on a waiting list since 19 September 2023 and has not yet been called for an assessment of need. Aileen cannot get a reply by either telephone or email as to when she may get one. This is part of what parents are up against. They are left in the dark. There are just no answers. Sandra is another parent I have dealt with. Her first daughter was on a waiting list for a year and a half before getting an assessment of need. Her other daughter was put on a waiting list on 12 August last year and Sandra has not received any information whatsoever since then as to when she may be called or whether she will be called.

Assessment of need appointments, of course, are only the start of it. Once the assessment of need is done, the assessor has to do a report, they have to pass it on to a liaison officer, a service plan has to be drawn up and the liaison officer is then supposed to arrange the delivery of services. This is where it really gets difficult because next you have to do battle to try to get these sessions. I can tell the Minister of State that it is a battle in Laois because they hardly exist. I will quote to her the figures for the multidisciplinary teams in the CDNTs in Laois. The level of staffing for occupational therapy is at only 33%. These are HSE figures, not mine. Speech and language therapy is at 46%. Physiotherapy is at 50%. Therapy assistance is at zero. Dietetics is at zero. Behavioural therapists - this is incredible as this is one of the most important positions on the team - are at zero. They are not there. The service just does not exist. What is happening in County Laois, therefore, is that parents are being offered group sessions where parents are brought in. That is fine and dandy, and group sessions may have a role. That is being offered in nearly all cases, from what I can find out, but there are no services for the child - none whatsoever. Laois Offaly Families for Autism and other voluntary groups are filling the gaps as best they can. They pay 50% of the cost of the therapies and the parents pay 50%. It is a stopgap solution. LOFFA tells me it spent €38,000 last year on matching funding to try to do this. This is not acceptable.

I am trying to impress on the Minister of State as best I can the need for the Government to comply with its legal obligations, take emergency action, make the funding available and set specific target dates by which the Government can comply with its legal obligation and deliver long-term solutions. As the Minister of State knows as well as I do, that needs workforce planning. We need to start training and recruiting people and we need to retain them. One area that has been mentioned in the past for some of those disciplines is apprenticeships. That may

be appropriate. I know they are not appropriate for some other disciplines. The Government really needs to be imaginative about this and push it on. We need to fund the special needs services and provide this and provide appropriate school places. I know that work is being done on this, but there are still many children without places who will need them in September, and that work needs to be progressed quickly.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Cara Darmody for forcing this issue onto the Dáil agenda. Her bravery in protesting outside the Dáil for 50 hours has forced the Government to sit up and pay attention. However, I want to make a very obvious point: that it is a disgrace that Cara and other disability campaigners, including the parents of children with additional needs, are having to resort to sleep-outs outside the Dáil to try to enforce their legal rights. What sort of society are we living in where children have a constitutional right to an education and a clear right to an appropriate education in their community under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where in law you have the right to an assessment of needs within six months, where we have these rights enshrined, we have had these debates, we have passed these laws, in some cases we have a Constitution and we have a UN convention, yet people have to sleep out outside the gates of the national Parliament to try to enforce what are already their legal rights? Even a basic republic is not meant to act in that fashion. You are meant to have a democratic discussion, you pass laws and the laws are meant to be implemented. It is reminiscent of what you read about tsarist Russia, of people petitioning the tsar for their rights to be met. It is obscene that having to sleep outside our national Parliament urging for one's rights to be met is becoming a regular feature of disability justice campaigners.

Then there is the smaller scale. I am sure other Members are in the same position. What Deputy Stanley spoke about is exactly the same as the situation in Dublin South-West. The issue of parents of children with additional needs is now definitely the second issue after housing that comes to me. I now have a close relationship with solicitors whom I immediately put parents in touch with, saying, "You can take the State to court for that." That is incredible. The State is breaking its own laws and then we, correctly, have to encourage people to take the State to court just to get the State to move - because it works. People know that if you take the State to court, you will get your assessment of need eventually. Similarly, by the way, you can take the State to court for not meeting your educational needs. Again, it is obscene that we have a law and that the State, the Government, is breaking its own law and then 25 families a month have to take the State to court at significant expense, not to them but to the State, in order for this to happen. The parents are absolutely right to do it - they are fighting for what they can for their kids - but it creates another inequity. It does not cost any money, to be clear; many solicitors will do it for nothing and then they will win the case and the State will pay. However, those parents who know that this exists as an avenue and so on are the ones who end up getting the assessments of need not on time but more on time than those who do not know that this is a route they can take. It is outrageous.

The pattern for the Government has been one of tea and sympathy on these issues but no real action where it counts. The motion will be passed tonight - that is welcome - but then will the Government act? The problem for the Government is that the roots of this crisis run deep and are all of its own making. Fifteen years ago, 1,000 children were waiting on assessments of need; now there are more than 15,000. The HSE projects that to rise to 25,000 by the end of this year. The Minister spoke about welcome progress with the increase in the number of assessments but in the context of the increased need overwhelming the system, it is difficult to talk about progress. The reason for this is that the Government has consistently failed to plan

for needs it knows exist. Not only that, it has actively ignored those needs by ensuring the assessments of individual needs are delayed. It should be emphasised, as mentioned, that this is just the start of a journey of long waiting lists, of being let down and disappointed and of parents being offered group sessions when they want their kids to get the necessary therapies and supports they need. The average waiting time for an assessment of need is now more than two years, during which a child cannot access the therapies they need in the public system. It is a way of rationing resources, forcing those who can afford it to go private and saving money for the Government regardless of the human cost.

When faced with determined campaigners like Cara Darmody and the Equality in Education campaigners, the Government may regret its extreme rationing of resources, which created the current crisis, but there is an attempt to find other systems to blame. The Taoiseach's remarks earlier that effectively blamed the model of CDNTs miss the point. I welcome the decision to have therapists go into schools. It makes sense, but it does not deal with the fundamental problem of the high level of vacancy. Situating therapists in schools versus in CDNTs will not deal with the fundamental issue of resources, and nor will changing the law. Every time I hear that suggestion, I hear that the Government is breaching the law and that instead of stopping to breach the law, it wants to change the law so that it will not be breaching it, without dealing with providing assessments of need in time.

The fundamental issues include the years of restricting the number of college places for therapists. There are between 25 and 40 in most specialties, when there should be more than 100 a year. Other issues include the years of austerity cuts and the underfunding of the health service, the pay and numbers strategy, and the years of enabling the housing crisis to get worse so that rents and property prices rise. There is an alternative. There are plenty of actions the Government could take such as bonuses, speeding up recognition and improving training. I could go on and on.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I would like to start by recognising the young Tipperary school-girl outside the gates of Leinster House this evening in the pouring rain. We are discussing this incredibly important issue because of her. Cara Darmody is an inspiration for the work she has done. She is not doing it for praise or recognition but rather for the love she bears for her brothers and family and the empathy and understanding she has for thousands of children and families waiting on lists for far too long for an assessment of need.

I am mindful not to repeat what many of the speakers who went before me said and who spoke passionately about this issue. Many quoted the statistics. It is completely unacceptable that so many families and children are waiting so long for the services, supports and treatments they deserve, but behind every statistic is a human being. I acknowledge the work the Minister has done to date and the mammoth task in front of her in her new position as Minister for disability, along with the Minister of State. During the general election campaign, this issue arose time and again on the doors in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny, as it did in every village, town, city and rural road. My experience of meeting families affected by the waiting times for assessments of need and the services their children need was that it was first parents themselves raising this issue, then grandparents and other family members and then neighbours. By the end of the general election campaign, it was regularly raised on the doors even by people who did not have a close connection to this issue but who felt a sense of urgency and concern for the young people the system is currently failing.

I appreciate that this issue has been given priority by this Government. Deputy Foley sits

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at Cabinet as a senior Minister with responsibility for this issue for the first time. The area of disability as a whole is intertwined throughout the programme for Government. This will be a defining issue for the Government, that is, whether it can deliver on this issue and provide the assessments of need and services as a matter of urgency for those on waiting lists for years. My constituency, spanning north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny, covers two HSE areas. A small part of north Tipperary is in the south Tipperary HSE area. The postcode lottery is real and scary. It is frustrating and angering to speak to parents who live in a boundary area and to see it myself. That the place where a person comes from determines whether they get a service more quickly than others, although still in an untimely manner, is completely unacceptable. We need to look at private funding to get these assessment of need waiting lists cleared as a matter of urgency. More than 15,000 was the number quoted today. That is 15,000 children, families and parents who sit in front of us in constituency offices as we try to figure out what we can do to help them in their particular circumstances.

Over the course of this debate, we have met so many parents, who are ferocious advocates on behalf of their children. They know the system inside out and live the frustrations every day, but they should not have to be advocates for their children to get these services, whether an assessment of need or all the services that should automatically come to their children thereafter. They are supposed to be there to love, protect and support their children, not to be their voice on this issue. The system should be that child's voice. Parents should not have to do it. The voice I want to be heard today in particular is that of children waiting on lists who cannot access services and do not have parents who can be that advocate or that voice to shout and roar for their children and fight for them if they have to - those children who are going unheard. It scares me that there are children whose parent, for whatever reason, is not able to be that advocate. We have to be that voice. They have to be heard. Cara Darmody is that voice today in the pouring rain. She deserves the recognition. I do not think for a second that she wants it, but we have to stand up and fight as legislators, as she is doing for her brothers and every one of those 15,000 children who are waiting.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Families are exhausted, battling not for something extraordinary but for something fundamental, an assessment of need. It is supposed to be a gateway to support. In practice, it is a locked door. Without it, children cannot access home tuition, school places, the domiciliary care allowance or, most critical, any therapy. The message that families receive is simple: no assessment, no services. More than 15,000 children have been waiting for more than six months for an assessment of need, and the HSE predicts that could rise to 25,000 before the year is out.

That is not a waiting list; it is a crisis. Even when an assessment is secured, it does not guarantee help. Families are offered group webinars, leaflets or parenting courses, often scheduled during working hours. That is not meaningful support but window-dressing. Some families, like my own, are forced to go private. We paid for our son's assessment over two years ago. Even that report is now out of date. Finding a provider was not easy. We were lucky to be in a position to pay; most families are not.

Families do not seek assessments for the sake of paperwork. They do it because they want to help their child and they know, as we all do, that early intervention works. The sooner you start, the better the outcome, yet our system delays at every step. It frustrates and withholds and in doing so lets children fall behind, sometimes permanently. I acknowledge my good friend Cara Darmody, an amazing autism advocate, who has begun her 50-hour sit-out outside Leinster House today with her father Mark. Cara has done more to shine a light on these failings

than many adults in public life. She is a teenager and is already showing extraordinary courage and leadership.

One development I welcome is the pilot programme placing therapists back into a small number of schools. It is a step in the right direction but we must go further. I understand 39 placements were on offer and the number of therapists who sought a place was overwhelming. It shows where therapists want to work. We need therapists to be restored to all special schools and special classes in mainstream schools.

7 o'clock

That is where children are and where the support should be. The progressing disability model removed therapists from schools, fragmented the system and made it harder for children to receive the care where they learn. This resulted in families feeling exhausted, staff demoralised and national vacancy rates in CDNTs of more than 22%, with higher rates in areas such as CHO 7 in Dublin South Central. We have built a system in which even therapists no longer want to work. That tells you everything you need to know. We need action. We need: access to assessments that do not require people going private; a statutory right to therapy following a diagnosis; therapists based in schools and special schools; a full review of the progressing disability model; and a real workforce plan to recruit and retain skilled professionals.

I heard Ministers and the Taoiseach suggest that legislative reform may be needed to improve how assessments of need are delivered and used. If that is true, we need detail and we need it now. How will this legislation work in practice? Will it simply reframe the process or will it guarantee that identified needs are actually met? How will need be recorded, tracked and enforced? Will these written pathways have legal standing? Will they include timelines and entitlements to therapy or will they become yet another document that families cannot rely on? We cannot let this be another policy promise that sounds good on the plinth but falls flat on the ground. Families need certainty. They need follow-through and, most of all, they need the State to stand with them rather than against them. We are not seeking gold-plated care; we are asking for fairness, respect and for a child's right to be supported in reaching their potential. Cara should not have to sit out in the cold to get that message across to us. While she does, however, we should listen and act.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Disability is something that touches most of our lives. We all know someone who is living with a disability or is caring for someone with a disability, be that a seen or unseen disability. This lived experience should be what directs policy. It is people living with disabilities, or those who care for them, who know best what we need to change and how we can improve. I call on the Government to expand and invest in services. It is imperative we invest in disabilities at the same time as reforming how disability services are delivered.

As a former SNA, I stress how important it is to continue the roll-out of therapists in special schools and, furthermore, to expand it to mainstream schools also. This is perhaps the number-one ask from parents who have been in contact with my office. I call on the Government to remain fully focused on delivering on the commitments made in the programme for Government. As a backbench TD, I must continue to push for these measures as a priority for the constituents of Carlow-Kilkenny.

We urgently need to make much-needed reforms to the current assessment of need process. Children and families are waiting far too long, which is having knock-on consequences for

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their well-being and family life. Simply continuing to do the same thing and hoping to get a different result is not an acceptable option for me, nor should it be for the Government. The primary focus must be on identifying the delays and blockages which are causing these growing waiting lists for assessment of need. We need to find the most effective solution to these blockages. While that will take time, we must ensure any changes introduced are effective and can be sustained over time. This means that whenever an application for an assessment of need is submitted, it is dealt with promptly and within the statutory timeframes.

Every week I hear from far too many constituents across Carlow and Kilkenny who are waiting for an assessment of need. One parent in my community has been in touch with the CDNT in Carlow seeking support for her young daughter. She contacted the CDNT initially in September 2024. After waiting for five months, she received a response informing her that although her daughter needs an assessment of need, due to staff shortages, she would be waiting for four years for that assessment to happen. This is wholly unacceptable. We need to address our staffing issues. While I am conscious of the challenges and strains facing the health and social care sector when it comes to recruitment and retention, we must ensure our disability services are appropriately and adequately resourced and staffed to meet the needs of people with disabilities in Ireland.

I look forward to the development of the dedicated disability workforce strategy that has been referenced to meet the growing service demands and address recruitment and retention challenges across the specialist disability services. Even the increased capacity and enhanced service delivery in the disability service will not be possible, however, unless we ensure there are proper resources in place to service these ambitions. I welcome the €3.2 billion which has been allocated for the HSE disability services this year, which marks an 11.5% increase in funding on last year and an overall increase of €1.2 billion since 2020. While it is a significant increase in funding, there are nonetheless significant pressures facing the sector which need to be examined, understood and rectified. I would like to see collaborative efforts across the Departments for that to happen.

I welcome the news that the Department of disability will work closely with the Department of Health on resourcing disability; with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on expanding the pipeline for further therapists; and with the Department of Education and Youth on the development of the national therapy service in education. Having said all that, we also need to continue our focus on recruitment and retention strategies.

There is no doubt that addressing the problems within the assessment of need process is a challenging piece of work. It requires a well thought out and comprehensive plan to ensure all aspects of the system are examined and, where necessary, improved and fixed. We owe it to the children of Ireland and their families. They are relying on us to put in place a sustainable assessment of need system that works. I will be working for the constituents of Carlow-Kilkenny to ensure the commitments made in the programme for Government are fulfilled. We need to do better for parents and for our children.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I listened to the Taoiseach today. I am always gobsmacked at how the Taoiseach can sound like he has only walked into the building and suddenly found himself in the position he is in. It is the same when I hear Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs who have actually been in power. Some Fine Gael TDs have been in power for 14 years. That is 14 years of increasing waiting lists. I heard the shocking news today that the waiting list is potentially

going to go up to more than 24,000 children.

Among those children is Cameron, who is four and a half and on a 72-month waiting list. He will finish primary school before he has access to any therapeutic interventions. Jaden, who is due to start school in September, needs a cognitive assessment before starting. While forms were submitted in December 2023, he is still waiting. His mother is getting really worried that he will not be able to start school. Similarly, two-year old Evie is on a waiting list. Her mother is dead right when she wrote that the Government's lack of support is shaping her daughter's future and that of thousands of other children. Nathan has no school place again this year. His parents have applied to 11 schools and are desperately trying to get him a school place. The irony is that if they refuse to send him to school, the education welfare officer has the legislation and the law behind him or her to bring them to court to either fine or jail them. What are the consequences for the Government? These are just a sample of the dozens of cases in my office. Each parent is desperately trying to get a service for their child.

This really should be enough to bring a Government down. It should be enough to call an emergency. When I spoke to Mark and Cara earlier today, I said that during the economic crash, Fianna Fáil spent, over a weekend, €72 billion of our money, and our children and grandchildren's money, on the bondholders and bankers. In the Covid crisis, mountains were moved in an instant. Things were changed within weeks and days. What is the difference here? We have potentially 24,000 children whose lives will be, possibly, irreparably damaged because of a lack of access to the services they are entitled to. The law says they are entitled to them. This Government is breaking that law. I want the Government to call an emergency because that is what we are looking at in this regard. Call an emergency and take extraordinary measures to ensure each child has a service, a school place and therapeutic intervention when they need it. They are not big asks.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Children are entitled to an assessment of their health and educational needs within six months under the Disability Act. There are more than 15,000 children waiting right now. That number is expected to rise by more than 9,000 by the end of the year. To put those numbers in context, just 4,000 assessments were completed last year. In CHO 7, which incorporates Dublin South-West, some of the CDNTs are woefully understaffed. CDNT 8, which is based in Chamber House in Tallaght, had a 53% staff vacancy rate at the start of April. CDNT 3 is based in a neighbouring constituency in Crumlin but it had a 68% vacancy rate. The CDNT in Ballyboden, which is part of my constituency, has pulled all speech and language therapy and there is no restoration in sight. There is no offer of alternative arrangements for the children, just a letter to say services have been ceased. What are the families to do? It is entirely unsustainable to run any branch of the health service when more than half of the posts are vacant. We are running healthcare professionals ragged trying to cover not only their duties but also those of another worker or maybe even two other workers. This leads to poor morale, poor working conditions and inevitable burnout, leading to the loss of yet another critical staff member.

For the sake of the tens of thousands of children, this Government must comply with its legal obligations to provide assessments within six months. We have to throw out the HSE pay and numbers strategy and deliver a long-term, sustainable solution that includes an urgent workforce plan to recruit, train and retain enough staff to finally end this breach of children's rights once and for all. I agree with Deputy Ardagh on therapists in school. That is the model used in other countries. Children should have access to them in special schools. Unfortunately, in the special school in my constituency the children do not have access to therapists. It is about

assessments, but it is also about those supports and they are not coming through. We all need to step up. I listened to everyone and we collectively agree on this issue, so let us see action coming from the Minister of State and her Department.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Services for people with disabilities are in disarray. There is an ongoing battle for disability services to be provided where needs have been assessed. The National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, which represents a mixture of voluntary public services organisations and voluntary grant-aided bodies, has gone on record recently to state their ability to deliver existing services and meet the needs in their communities is seriously under threat. These organisations provide a lot more services than the HSE does directly.

The biggest issue relates to recruitment of staff, including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and other front-line and support staff. The Government is not making it easy to recruit and retain skilled professionals in this area. I have referred to how difficult it is to get a master's, to the fact that people have to go abroad and to the lack of a Dublin allowance for many jobs that are so valuable and needed. While healthcare is often a vocation, we will only encourage people to train here and stay here if they have a career pathway and adequate remuneration. Record amounts of money have been spent in this area, but we are only running to stand still because costs are rising, wages are rising, and funding is being delayed and not provided in a planned and consistent multiannual way, meaning providers are constantly firefighting. The Minister of State acknowledged that of the €333 million in additional funding provided in 2025, €290 million was allocated to maintain existing levels of service for people with disabilities, so where is the substantive funding for improvement?

In the context of all the pressure to make services available, we are faced with another crisis we are discussing now, namely, the delays in getting assessed in the first place, and in this respect the list keeps getting longer and longer. Under the Disability Act 2005, as everyone has referred to, assessments of need should be carried out within six months of the referral to the HSE. At the end of December 2024 there were 14,200 outstanding assessments of need and now we are past 15,000 with just over 4,000 assessments being carried out each year. It is likely to rise further. I read today that it could be 25,000 by the end of the year according to the HSE's estimates. This is shocking stuff. The Government is outrageously in breach of its legal obligations, as every Deputy has referenced, and as of now I do not see evidence of a pathway being carved to sort out this mess. Why then has this not been declared an emergency for children, as campaigners like Cara Darmody have called for, and why has a time-limited task force not been set up? We acted during Covid, we responded to Brexit, we supported thousands of Ukrainians and we are mobilising a response to US tariffs – or at least we are in terms of what Ministers have said – so why can this not be declared an emergency and a target set to redress the balance? I acknowledge that even with the best will in the world and all the resources at our disposal being thrown at the problem, filling the vacancies, identifying additional needs and reversing growing assessment of needs waiting lists has a lead time, but does this Government have a six-month target, a 12-month target or a three-year target that can be realistically reached? Is there any way we can outsource assessments in the short term, a bit like the National Treatment Purchase Fund, to utilise the resources of other countries for a specific period or is this going to be tied up in the wider organisational mess that is the HSE?

We are a wealthy country. We do not have unlimited pools of money and there is a need to spend funding wisely in a targeted way, but even if the revenues continue to come in at current windfall levels we should never be talking about tax cuts when we are putting additional costs on families in other ways. We are not looking for miracle workers but a systemic, incremental,

recordable progress to ensure the assessments and supports are available for those who need them.

Deputy Michael Collins: Our children with additional needs deserve our unwavering support and immediate action. Over 15,000 children are currently waiting for an assessment of needs, which is a crucial step in identifying their health and educational requirements as outlined in the Disability Act 2005. Our system is failing these children and their families. The HSE projects that without additional funding and resources this waiting list could swell to over 25,000 by the end of the year. This is unacceptable. I highlight the incredible efforts of Cara Darmody, a 14-year-old campaigner who has taken a stand for her brothers Neil and John and all children with disabilities. Cara has bravely initiated a 50-hour protest outside the Dáil and has been joined by Opposition leaders to demand that the Government fulfil its obligations.

The HSE is legally bound to complete a full assessment within six months of receiving an application but only 7% of these assessments are completed on time. This delay is not just a bureaucratic failure but a breach of trust and a violation of our commitment to these children. In west Cork the waiting time is over 27 months once assessed. Children then have to wait for services and this can take four to six months. The child is losing nearly three years between waiting for assessment and getting services. This is generally 25% to 50% of their lives spent waiting for vital services. That has a severe knock-on effect on the life of that child.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, has acknowledged the broken state of our system and called for an all-of-government approach to streamline the process. This includes a recruitment drive for psychologists and elimination of unnecessary red tape. We must ensure every Department stops recommending an assessment of needs is required to access services. Cara and her father Mark have rightly called for this situation to be treated as a national emergency. They remind us that laws are being systematically broken and it is our duty to rectify this. How can we expect our youth to respect the law when we as leaders fail to uphold it? We must act now. We must provide the necessary funding and resources to ensure every child receives the support they need.

While I am speaking about waiting times, according to research mental illness accounts for 45% of the overall burden of disease in individuals between the ages of ten and 24. The research also found that the need for mental health support in this age bracket had risen by 50% in the last 20 years. I was recently contacted by a west Cork mother whose 14-year-old daughter had been referred to CAMHS in August 2024. She did not receive any help and this led to serious consequences, including multiple suicide attempts and escalating intervention from emergency services. The lack of early intervention by CAMHS led to higher costs and worse outcomes for this child and the case is typical of the vast majority of young adolescents needing mental health support. In this case the costs of early intervention CAMHS assessment, therapy, etc., is over €4,901 over four to six months. This includes occupational therapy, speech therapy and psychotherapy. Each intervention is proven to be effective and helps to prevent escalation. When CAMHS is not available, the costs skyrocket. In this specific case there were six accident and emergency visits costing €4,800, three Garda interventions costing €1,350, a child and adolescent regional eating disorder services appointment costing €1,000, and inpatient care costing between €112,500 to €180,000 for a stay of 90 to 120 days in the Éist Linn CAMHS inpatient unit. The total for crisis care was between €122,750 and €190,000. This is up to 25 times more expensive than early intervention. If we look at the bigger picture, nationally over 4,200 children are currently on CAMHS waiting lists. In west Cork, 40% of the children on waiting lists have been waiting for over a year. If 10% of these children are escalated to crisis

care, we are looking at an additional cost of between €49 million and €80 million annually, as opposed to just €2 million to €3 million for early intervention. I ask the Minister of State to intervene. Cara has been outside the door for 50 hours. It would be good to go out and talk to her and show her the respect she deserves.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome these statements. Aontú will be supporting the Opposition's motion later this evening. I met Cara Darmody today. What struck me most was how young she is. As I looked at her chocolate, her buns and her homework, it struck me just how young she is, yet she is forced into this campaign which is three years in the making. I commend Cara. I also commend the thousands of families and parents who like Cara are struggling immensely with a difficult situation at home and are forced also to be campaigners. It is one of the biggest issues in my constituency clinics.

I believe the Minister of State wants to solve this issue and hope she will listen to some of the suggestions. It is difficult to believe Cara has been outside for 50 hours and we have thousands of people waiting on assessments of need, yet we have trained so many psychologists who are abroad and cannot come back into the system. It is an incredible situation. Because of the lack of assistant psychologist places in Ireland, we are forcing people abroad who want to qualify into this profession and whom we so desperately need. When they go abroad, we tell them to stay abroad. There is no pathway for a psychologist to return to Ireland. It is absolutely shocking. I know of a number of senior psychologists who did their undergraduate studies in Ireland and went away to highly regarded universities in the UK and other places, and who have been waiting years in bureaucracy to get back and work in the HSE. This is a crisis and it is time the Government dealt with it. There are solutions to this crisis but we need a proactive Government to take the necessary steps to introduce simple, common-sense measures. I ask the Minister of State to deal with this issue of the lack of a pathway for psychologists coming back from the UK.

I also want to raise the lack of spaces available. In order to have continuity and a healthy sector with psychologists coming through, we need to address the lack of places for junior and assistant psychologists. I am told that for every junior or assistant psychologist in this country, there are 20 others waiting to get onto the panel. There are forums online which the Minister of State can see if she wishes. People attend my clinics as I am sure they attend hers who actually want to become assistant psychologists but cannot do so. They go abroad and then we tell them to stay away. They cannot come back and work in the HSE because we are going to flood them with bureaucracy. This is one simple measure we could address. The Minister of State needs to take a proactive, solution-focused approach to this issue.

Deputy John McGuinness: No one wants to see Cara Darmody outside of this House. I join with Deputy Alan Kelly when he said that the last thing we would expect in a democracy like ours, with an economy that is doing well, is a 14-year-old outside Leinster House campaigning not just for her own family members but to highlight what is going on right around the country. It is not right. The Minister or some senior official should be outside talking to her, to bring about a resolution not just to her family's problem but to the overall issues.

I believe in the goodwill of the Minister. I know everyone in this House wants to do the right thing by those who are disabled, marginalised or in this system looking for an assessment of need for their child who may have autism or other issues. Do not tell me the management of the HSE did not see this coming. It is shocking that they actually ignored it for years. I would point to 2010 and 2011 as the years when the numbers began to increase rapidly in terms of

those who could not access services for their children who may have had autism, whether an assessment or therapies. The numbers grew from that time. We do not need a consultant's report to look at what went on. All we need do is look at the parliamentary questions that were being asked during that period and right up to today regarding those who cannot get assessments or the professional supports they need so urgently. Oral questions here in the House over that period show us the same trend.

The Governments from 2011 up to now have absolutely failed. We should start the debate by acknowledging our failure and acknowledging that in spite of the money being put into the system, the services are not being delivered. We have to ask why that is the case. Where is the system failing? I think we will find it is failing in terms of management, which should see the problem and recruit to deal with it. We have a complete collapse of that system and it is extremely unfair and damaging to the young children who are affected by this. We need a rapid response, lots of money and lots of personnel within the HSE who are qualified. We need to be searching abroad to bring them home if that is necessary. We certainly need to do a lot more to reduce the lists and employ OTs, speech and language therapists, psychologists and physiotherapists.

We need to engage with the parents. The recent changes in the HSE have seen professionals within the system instructing parents as to how they should deal with their child, or how they should cope with the child. Assessments are needed to deal with the issue. The local authority will always ask for an assessment if the family wants to get a particular type of accommodation. All of that has to be fast-tracked and dealt with. The waiting times are extraordinary. I do not know how much money or time it is going to take to resolve it. The problems for these families are here and now. The Minister should really bring in the senior managers in the HSE to determine how they are going to deal with it, how they are going to spend the extra money the Minister says will be available to them, how they are going to focus on all the appointments that are needed, and how they are going to fix a really broken system. That is the question. The parents are looking for answers today because they are affected every single day. When this debate is over, we will probably talk about something else. That probably should not be allowed to happen either.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for facilitating this debate, which we badly need to have. I do not want to repeat everything that has been said. The position is stark with 15,000 children waiting for assessments and very poor figures for those who get assessments within the six months. The overwhelming majority do not get assessments within the six months, which is a requirement under the 2005 Act. As we all know as constituency TDs, families have to fight for everything. We are talking about assessments of need in the House this evening. The same debate could be had about supports and services following assessments, school places and, of course, school transport and so on. It is a broken system at present and it needs radical change to bring about the kind of improvements that are necessary in the system.

Within that broken system, however, there are positives. What organisations like Rainbow Club Cork - I know the Minister of State is very familiar with that organisation - do in providing services is absolutely astounding. That is an organisation that grew from the voluntary sector through the outstanding work Karen O'Mahony and her team are doing there. We have to look at that model in the context of the assessments and see how we can learn from it because they are doing Trojan work in providing the actual services and supports that are required.

In the Dáil earlier today, the Taoiseach stated that 30% of those assessments result in no

actual diagnosis. That is a very high figure and we need to drill down into it because the system clearly does not have the capacity to deal with assessments that are not necessarily required in the first place. It is also unfair on children to go through those assessments. Of course, there will always be a percentage that result in no diagnosis and that is right and proper but 30% is a very high figure. We need to investigate that properly to see what is behind the figure. As I said, the system simply cannot cater for those numbers of assessments.

There are things to welcome from the Government. I know there is a real commitment to this area. There is a significant increase in funding, which is very welcome, and the Minister recently announced an assessment will no longer be required to access the domiciliary care allowance and so on. That is positive. We need to look at social housing and the interaction between assessments and social housing. There are families out there whose social housing application is stalled while they are waiting for an assessment, and that is not fair. The whole interaction between assessments and access to services from other State agencies is something that needs to be looked at very carefully as well.

The introduction of therapists in schools is very welcome and something that should have happened a long time ago, so there are positives. Of course, we now have a Minister at the Cabinet table who will work alongside the Minister of State to try to drive change in this area. That is welcome.

The Taoiseach also mentioned in the Dáil today that there is a finite number of therapists and professionals out there. We all know that. That is the bottom line here. For me, this is not necessarily a resource issue. Rather, it is a capacity issue. It is a challenge for the system to provide the assessments that are necessary but we need to do everything that is necessary to bring about the number of professionals we need to get through the assessments that are in the system. It is a catastrophic failure on the part of the HSE that it was not able to plan in a greater way for the workforce that is required to provide these assessments and services. That is undoubted. This should have been foreseen. There were plenty of flags along the way to show there would be a very high number of assessments. Of course, we hear that figure could grow by the end of the year but let us deal with the facts before us. We have 15,000 who are awaiting assessments and that figure itself is very sizeable.

We need to do what is required to bring about a change in the number of professionals working within the system. Obviously, we have to look at bringing back those who have left these shores to work abroad. We have to urgently bring them back to work within the system, provide the resources and provide the imagination and the changes that are required to bring them back. They can then get stuck in to what is required here in terms of getting through the backlog of assessments so that families can see some light at the end of the tunnel for this major problem.

Deputy Peter Roche: It is a remarkably decent and generous thing that Cara Darmody has done for this island in terms of bringing this to a level where nothing else has been discussed today, and rightly so. When I was campaigning in my municipal authority of Tuam in the run-up to the local elections last year there were lots of issues discussed, such as housing, homelessness, migration and childcare, and, of course, early years intervention was one of the priorities. Then at the back end of last year when we had the general election campaign the same issues were raised, only this time it was within the constituency of Galway East. I found it staggering when I spoke to the many parents who were desperate to get answers and find a pathway for their child who badly needed that intervention. To be brutally honest, I found it very distressing. Obviously, every parent wants the best for their child.

In turn, I wanted to bring what I believed to be the priorities of the people of east Galway to my own parliamentary party. Hand on heart and to be fair about it, it certainly has been and continues to be one of our priorities. I am heartened by our leader and the emphasis he has put on that sector, notwithstanding some of the commentary I have heard about how there would be very little talk about this if not for the events of today.

That is not to say the issues out there are not chronic. In my own constituency of Galway East I encountered a young chap in sixth class who was granted assistive technology to support him with speech and language. Of course, that fell into the special education section within the Department of education. That happened a year ago. You can imagine the frustration and the deep desperation felt by that family because all of a sudden, he will be out of national school and that is a deficit that is not right for him.

Any delay to a child getting an assessment is a real disadvantage. Families are then forced to take the private route but that sector, too, is exhausted. The importance of early years intervention is always outlined to parents and the parents want the best but they suddenly find that the support and intervention services to match that are not really there. The assessment of need process will only function as intended when the people delivering that service are supported, trained and, of course, valued.

There is huge focus on children with autism regarding supports for schools and services but we must not forget for one second those children with Down's syndrome. That community also requires the same level of supports. Of course, it is only right and fair to think that anyone who falls into any of the categories deserves the best there is in society. The urgency for both should be the exact same. We owe it to the families and we owe it to the professionals who serve them. We need to act in a sustainable and ethical way to bring about the necessary change.

Of course, all of the commentary that has been uttered here today is absolutely right. I would not like anyone on the Opposition benches to think for one second that we are not on the same page as them. We are all in this together. There was an acknowledgement today by the Taoiseach and there is always an acknowledgement from the Tánaiste that this is an area where greater investment and greater focus are needed. The relevant Ministers are dealing with it and I have no doubt that their empathy, compassion and support will improve things going forward. That is what I wish for and, of course, if that is not the case I, like others, will continue to be a champion for a better service and for better supports.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I commence tonight by mentioning and paying tribute to 14-year-old disability rights campaigner Cara Darmody, who began her 50 hour sleep-out protest outside Leinster House this morning. She is here to battle for her two brothers who have autism and profound intellectual disabilities and for the thousands more children like them whom this Government is failing. Despite its denials, it is failing them. It is an indictment of this Government that a 14-year-old who should be studying for her exams and looking forward to her summer break from school should have to engage in such a protest.

The failure to assess autistic children within six months in 93% of cases means the Disability Act is being systematically broken by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Parents and guardians have contacted my constituency office in Louth in their droves, asking for help, as their children are on the ever-growing waiting list for an assessment of need. In mid-2025, Louth assessments of need, AON, service is currently only processing applications from late 2023. The statutory timeframes are not being met due to limited staff resources and an unprecedented increase in

applications and workload, which has significantly affected wait times. There are limited staff resources when this Government is flagging a budget surplus this year. Currently, the Louth AON service is outsourcing the vast majority of assessments to HSE-approved private providers, as primary care does not carry out assessments for Louth. Two out of three CDNTs covering north and south Louth, north Meath and Ardee are at capacity for carrying out assessments of need.

Instead of properly resourcing the HSE, this Government is again privatising aspects of our health system and it is not working because the waiting lists are getting longer. Even with this privatisation, Louth's assessment of need service has stated to us that it cannot guarantee statutory timeframes of when assessments of need will be met. Louth has a total of 902 children waiting for assessments of need to be processed. A total of 245 of these children have been waiting for over 12 months, 350 have been waiting for between six and 12 months, and 155 of these children have been waiting for between three and six months. Government ideologies are clearly failing the children of this nation and I urge the Government to put its politics aside and work with the combined Opposition's proposal set out before it later tonight to uphold children's rights and deliver the support that Cara and the 15,296 affected children like her are crying out for.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I am regularly contacted by parents in my constituency expressing their frustration and despair at the assessments of need process, the lengthy delays and the fact that parents have to fight every step of the way to get an appropriate assessment for their child. One mother told me how her daughter waited nearly three years for an assessment and received no supports in the meantime. She would have paid for one privately but the HSE would not tell her which providers were approved and she could not afford to waste €800 if the assessment was not accepted. The assessment was eventually outsourced and, had she known that the provider that her child was eventually sent to was an approved provider, she would have gone to it two years previously. She said that the whole experience of diagnosis was chaotic and disjointed, and she would not wish it on any family. Another mother told me that she had been forced to fund all of her child's assessments and therapies. She said, "Had I waited publicly, my child would never be in the correct educational setting." Another parent told me of how it took years of battles to be told her child was eligible for an assessment, even though she knew her child was autistic. As a result, they missed out on years of supports and not having any accommodations at school, and had to pay the additional costs for private services, with no domiciliary care allowance, no carer's leave, and battles to get parental leave at work. She said the emotional cost was huge.

These cases illustrate a system that is categorically failing children and their families. While the children in these cases have now received their assessments, Cara Darmody's 50-hour protest at the gates outside reminds us of the more than 15,000 children whose assessment is overdue. While Government will not oppose tonight's Opposition motion, it must not ignore it and we must see action. It is time to treat this crisis like the emergency it is and make funding available to Cara's Fund to clear the backlog and to set a specific target date by which the Government will comply with the established legal obligations, as well as developing an urgent workforce plan to train, recruit and retain enough staff. We also know that the assessment of need is only the start of yet another battle for supports and services. Many parents in my constituency are in touch with me about supports from the CDNT being almost non-existent. There are issues with special needs assistant, SNA, allocations for children with additional needs, which I have raised here previously. Many children continue to be failed even after receiving a diagnosis.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Raising a child with additional needs is both challenging and rewarding. It is demanding and fulfilling. For parents, it becomes a labour of love in almost every possible sense. They want what is best for their son or daughter. They want their child to have the best possible start in life. They aim to set the best foundation possible to support their child throughout their life. Services for families dealing with autism and other additional needs are totally inadequate. This problem is years in the making. It is a problem that has been in full view and not addressed. As a result, children are being neglected and left undiagnosed for far too long. Even after assessment and diagnosis, very little support is available for parents. Successive Governments and Ministers have paid lip service to their needs.

Every other day, I meet parents who are encountering a broken system. Their feelings range from frustration to disillusionment, from anger to despair. Parents have to endure sustained mental anguish. The immense daily pressure is intolerable. The educational and political system has failed them. Parents have reached the limit of their endurance. For years, they have faced a heartbreaking battle for services for their children. They have come to believe, with good reason, that seeking what their children urgently need through the established channels is a fruitless exercise. They have been there and done that. In fact, most have done it many times without results. For years, there have been calls to reform and resource all areas of the additional needs sector. There have been some improvements, which are acknowledged. However, the reality is that we are merely touching the edge of an issue that is impacting vulnerable young people in our society. Parents' demands for assessment and diagnosis for their children is what every child in the country deserves. They are pleading for timely assessments for their children. This is the first hurdle on the journey for their child. This is what will guide future decisions. The reality is that this is the hardest, most painstaking and difficult hurdle to cross.

The most recent statistics make for sombre reading. They show that an alarming number of children across the country are waiting for assessments. This is a critical first step for early intervention. The outcome is crucial to establish the level and extent of support required. It is a sad reflection on Government, on Ireland as a country and on all of us as human beings that we are continuing to let down these children and their families. This is a legacy and current issue that should unite this Dáil into urgent, purposeful and meaningful action to address what is now a national crisis. During negotiations on the programme for Government, our Regional Independent Group made this issue a top priority. We will continue to press for fundamental change and action to ensure that the needs of these children are met in a timely manner.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The crisis surrounding the assessment of needs process for children with disabilities sees it not just under severe strain. It is a system in breach of its legal obligations, leaving thousands of children without access to vital supports which they are entitled to by law. This should be a national emergency. What we are doing to young children and families is criminal. The HSE has been allowed to breach the law for years with no repercussions. Under the Disability Act 2005, children are supposed to receive an assessment of needs within six months of application, yet we know this is not happening. Families wait for years, during which time their children miss vital windows for intervention, development and care. This is not just a delay. It is a denial of rights, of equal opportunity and of childhood in many cases. Parents are exhausted. They are forced to become full-time advocates, legal experts and indeed campaigners just to get their children what they are entitled to and what is owed to them.

In Tipperary, the situation is particularly dire. As of March this year, there were 233 children and young people awaiting an autism assessment, while the wait time for assessments for a new referral is currently 48 months. That is four years. It is shocking. On top of this stress, the

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Government has spent €8 million on legal proceedings against parents seeking assessments for their children. This is a misallocation of resources that could have been better spent on providing the necessary assessments and supports. We have had report after report and commitment after commitment, yet the situation continues to deteriorate.

I commend Cara Darmody and her father and mother. She is a young girl from Ardfinnan, just beside me, in Tipperary, who has spoken with so many and has started a sleepover outside Leinster House. She was given commitments, as were countless other families, but promises mean nothing without delivery. It is time for the Government to act decisively and establish a mandatory fund as proposed in the joint Opposition motion to clear the existing backlog. It should set a definite timeline for compliance with legal obligations under the Disability Act. It should invest in sustainable solutions, including the recruitment and training of additional staff to meet current and future needs. Indeed, we owe it to these children and their families to uphold their rights and provide the support they need. These rights are enshrined in the Constitution. We need urgent reform, we need accountability and above all we need to put our children and not bureaucracy at the centre of this system.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I begin my brief remarks by commending the parents and the disability advocates who are highlighting this issue. I also commend and applaud all of those therapists who are demoralised, forced to work in a system that is just not fit for purpose and against a level of demand that is simply unprecedented. There seems to be very little point in standing up here yet again and simply repeating that the assessment of needs system is broken. We all know that. We all know there are thousands of children and families whose entire lives are put on hold because of it. What we need to focus on is pragmatic solutions and one such solution is to hire private therapists to clear the backlog. There is a serious backlog in many areas. CHO 8 Laois-Offaly in particular is very bad and has been for many years. That is where the focus needs to be. We need to bring in the private therapists and continue with the recruitment. In my constituency there are 530 children waiting on an assessment of need. If the two CDNTs that cover Offaly and north Laois, east Offaly is included, the figure is 530. Why is it that emergencies like this go on for so long? Why is it that there is a lack of urgency and that the HSE cannot hire therapists? What is it about the culture of the HSE and indeed the political culture that seems almost immune to effective action? There is something profoundly wrong at a fundamental level that goes way beyond the organisational and the structural. We have the will but despite all the apparent best efforts of Government the crisis goes on and on and so many children are failed and left behind. Why are so many of our children in need of complex disability interventions? What has happened to generate this level of demand? We must listen to therapists working in the field. We must respect them and support them. We must trust their judgment as to what it will take to deliver real change. There can be no more top-down approaches to this crisis. We need a revolution in our understanding of service-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Thank you, Deputy. You are out of time.

Deputy Carol Nolan: -----delivery if we are to have any chance of-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Deputy, you are out of time.

Deputy Carol Nolan: -----honouring the rights of children to timely assessments of need.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): You are now 20 seconds over

time.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am finishing a sentence.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): You are now 20 seconds over time.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Calm down Chair, I am finishing a sentence.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Do not tell me to calm down. Please, Deputy.

Deputy Carol Nolan: You do need to calm down.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Have a small bit of respect. I appreciate you do not have any respect for me but have respect for the Chair.

Deputy Carol Nolan: You are the one blowing it out of proportion. There is no need for the drama.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): Have respect for the Chair. Everybody prepares and makes their speech in the time they are allotted.

Deputy Carol Nolan: You are creating too much drama.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ken O'Flynn): You have been a Member of this House long enough to know those rules.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Gaiety is around the corner. We do not need the drama.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The challenges and problems associated with the assessment of need process and the provision of services for disabled children, adults and their families have been illustrated in stark detail in this Chamber today. It is not acceptable that vulnerable people clearly in need of State support are left wanting. It is not acceptable that families are stressed and frustrated, and despair that the State appears to have ignored their pleas for help. It is not acceptable that any person feels they must stage a public protest to draw attention to this issue.

As Minister of State with responsibility for disability, I believe there are three fundamental issues which Government must address to deliver the step change in disability services as promised in the programme for Government. The first is tackling the long and growing waiting lists for assessments of needs. Our primary focus must be on the assessment of need process, identifying the delays and blockages which are causing the growing waiting list. We then need to find the most effective solution to these blockages. This may require legislative change, while being clear that no one will lose his or her statutory right to an assessment of need. It will likely involve operational changes, increased staffing resources, better IT systems or outsourcing to the private sector where appropriate. It will also involve ensuring nobody is asked to undergo an assessment of needs to access State services unnecessarily. This work is already under way with officials from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality working intensively with the HSE to deliver existing actions, including those set out in the roadmap for service improvement, and to develop new ones.

The second fundamental issue which must be addressed is providing speech and language

therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapist, psychology and other supports to everyone who needs them. That involves providing more places at third level, more work placements and upskilling. It means continuing with the recruitment drives which have helped deliver an additional 272 staff in our CDNT network last year alone. It also involves measures being put in place to retain existing staff in the system and attracting new entrants. This is of particular importance for the children's disability network teams which provide specialised community-based services for children with complex needs and that do not yet have the full staff complement they need to deliver their services.

The third fundamental reform that I, my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Foley, and Government is committed to introducing is providing clarity to families and individuals on how to navigate our overly-bureaucratic health system in order to secure the services they need. That involves making sure there is no wrong door, that a child is directed to the appropriate service regardless of how they enter the system, whether through the primary care system, CDNTs, CAMHS or any other avenue.

This is an emotive topic, one that affects many children and families right across the country, causing anxiety and stress for parents who are seeking the supports their children need. The State needs to communicate better. It needs to map out a pathway through services and deliver those services in a timely manner. The challenges associated with the assessment of need process and the wider system are significant and they require a proportionate response from Government. Since taking office, both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have consistently highlighted that disability services, in particular disability services for children, are a key priority for this Government. The priority is reflected in the fact that both the Minister, Deputy Foley, and I sit at the Cabinet table where disability matters are in sharp focus. A Cabinet committee with a specific focus on disability has also been created to ensure there is a whole-of-government response to issues affecting children with disabilities, whether through fixing the broken assessment of needs process, providing appropriate education supports and, crucially, access to therapy services. A dedicated unit in the Department of the Taoiseach is also being created to drive change and hold Departments and State agencies to account.

Specifically around the assessment of needs process, the Minister, Deputy Foley, has been very clear about the stark nature of this challenge. There are almost 15,300 assessment of need applications overdue for completion. In 2021, the figure stood at 3,500. Over 10,600 new applications were received last year with some 4,100 completed assessments in 2024. Those numbers do not work for anyone and it is clear that demand is greatly outstripping the capacity of the system to meet it. The introduction of the targeted waiting list by Government last May is without doubt helping, with over 3,600 assessments commissioned from private providers between June 2024 and the end of March this year. I am also encouraged by the 30% increase in assessments completed last year compared to 2023 and the 65% increase in completed assessments in the first three months of this year compared to the same period last year. These figures show we are moving in the right direction but we need to do much more, much faster. However, it is not enough to clear the current backlog and think that the job is done. We need to ensure another backlog does not grow to take its place. This will not be a quick fix. The problem is complex. Parents rightfully want access to services and supports for their children. In many cases, when they seek that support from primary care, CAMHS or children's disability network teams, they are told that they have been added to a long waiting list. This leads many people to apply for an assessment of need, a statutory right set out in the Disability Act. They may believe that this will give them early or accelerated access to services only to find that,

even if they are provided with an assessment report, it leads only to another waiting list. Some parents feel they have no option but to turn to the legal system to ensure their statutory rights enshrined in the Act are met.

8 o'clock

The Minister, Deputy Foley, called this situation “untenable” and I agree. We can and should do better.

We must ensure that any changes introduced are effective and can be sustained over time. This will mean that whenever an application for an assessment of need is submitted, it is dealt with promptly and within the statutory timeframes. While this work is under way, we need to look at the wider system to identify the blockages that are resulting in long waiting lists for children who need to access HSE services and supports, whether these are in primary care, CAMHS or the children’s disability network teams. We are all aware of the many demands on our healthcare system, but we must ensure that our disability services are appropriately and adequately resourced and staffed to meet the needs of people with disabilities in Ireland.

In this regard, I look forward to the development of a dedicated disability workforce strategy this year, to meet growing service demands and address recruitment and retention challenges across the specialist disability services. However, it is important to emphasise that increased capacity and enhanced service delivery in the disability sector will not be possible unless we, as a Government, ensure there are proper resources in place to service this ambition. A total of €3.2 billion has been allocated for HSE disability services this year. That is an 11.5% increase in funding on last year and an overall increase of €1.2 billion since 2020. This is a significant increase in funding, but I appreciate that significant pressures are facing the sector.

Collaborative working across Departments will be vital over the coming period. For example, we will work closely with the Department of Health on the resourcing of disability services, with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on expanding the pipeline of future therapists, and with the Department of Education and Youth on the development of the national therapy service in education.

There is no doubt that addressing the problems with the assessment of need process is a challenging piece of work. It requires a well thought-out, comprehensive plan to ensure all aspects of the system are examined and, where necessary, improved or fixed. It is a priority for the Government. We owe it to the children of Ireland and their families who are relying on the State to put in place a sustainable assessment of need system that works.

Assessment of Need: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— children are legally entitled to an assessment of their health and education needs under the Disability Act 2005, and that the assessment must take place within six months; and

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— the law is being broken with respect to the 15,296 children whose Assessment of Need is overdue, and with just 4,162 assessments conducted last year the number of children being failed is rising; and

calls on the Government to:

— comply with its legal obligations to provide assessments within six months;

— take emergency action and make funding available to “Cara’s Fund”, to clear the backlog and provide these children with the assessments to which they are legally entitled to;

— set a specific target date by which the Government aims to comply with the legal entitlement to an Assessment of Need under the Disability Act 2005;

— deliver a longer term sustainable solution, including an urgent workforce plan to recruit, train and retain enough staff to finally end this breach of children’s rights once and for all;

— fund special needs services, including speech and language, physio, and occupational and behavioural therapies; and

— provide appropriate school places for children with special needs.

Tonight, the combined Opposition has come together to call out the Government’s failure to comply with the law and ensure children with disabilities get an assessment of need within six months. This is not an arbitrary issue or timeframe. It is very widely understood that the earlier children are assessed and given the supports and therapies they need the better the chance there is for them to thrive and flourish.

The Government will not oppose our motion this evening yet its response to this issue over the course of today has been nothing short of shocking. Instead of setting out how it intends to comply with the law, the Government has now set out a clear intention to change the law. It has attempted to suggest this has been to streamline the delivery of services, to use capacity better and to ensure the children get the services they are entitled to but the sad reality is that if the Government removes or waters down the right to an assessment of need within six months there will be serious and enduring consequences for vulnerable children. Removing the onus on the State to deliver comprehensive assessment of need within a six month statutory timeline will only benefit a State and a Government that is failing in its duties. It will reward State failure.

Last week, the Families of Autistic and Additional Needs Children Together, a group from the north east inner city of Dublin, came to the Dáil to brief TDs on their experience and on their peer-led research. I would recommend that the Minister and the Taoiseach meet these parents and listen very carefully to what they have to say. They told us that parents, carers and family members of children with autism and-or additional needs are being failed by inadequate systems of support and that public services are often insufficient, unavailable and difficult to access forcing many families, especially those on low incomes, into an impossible position. While some families are able to turn to private services, this is not a viable option for many, reinforcing systemic inequality and denying children and their families the right to equitable care and support.

One family summed it this way when they said:

As a parent through our journey with my son, I can accept his diagnosis and what is required of me to care for him and I will gladly do that as his mother but experiences I have had with the HSE and services they fund to provide services has been hell even when they are trying to do what's right they can't deliver. No one understands how bad things are unless you have been through the disability services.

Over the course of recent days other parents locally talked about their experiences. Hayleigh said her son Parker was on the waiting list for an assessment of need for five years and because Parker waited for five years for his assessment he never received the early intervention that is key for children with autism and this has impacted directly on his development. Crystal said her son has been waiting for two years for therapy. He still has not received any. Instead she, like many mothers, is sent to courses and workshops so that she can act as his OT and speech and language therapist. Another mother spoke of her experience of having to take the HSE to court to force it to do an assessment of need and said the aftermath was actually worse with zero services provided. She said that the whole system is broken. The solution for these families is not to remove or undermine their rights to assessment of need but it is to provide the services they so desperately need in a timely fashion. Early intervention matters.

This is a community already under pressure and like in many other parts of the State, the north inner city CDNT is down five staff with capacity stretched beyond limit. This means it is even more difficult for families to access services and no therapy is being offered. The pressure continues when it comes to getting a suitable school place. With such a lack of SNAs in classrooms, I am dealing with it right across my constituency, in St. Catherine's in Cabra, Broombridge Educate Together National School and many others. What we need is a step change from the Government.

In my remaining time I would like to use the words of Cara Dermody who joins us again in the Visitors Gallery. You have some stamina, Cara, and we are delighted you are here with us again along with your father Mark. Here are some words Cara sent to me this week. She sets this out really well and hits the nail on the head. Here is what she had to say:

My name is Cara Dermody. I think it's fair to say that you're well aware of who I am and the reasons why I felt absolutely compelled to start an unprecedented protest at the gates of Leinster House today.

Put simply, the Government through the HSE is systematically breaking the law as there are now over 15,000 children waiting on an Assessment of Needs. But here's the shocker - the HSE have admitted through their own projections that the figure will reach almost 25,000 by Christmas.

I have met most of the Cabinet at this point, including a very kind meeting with Minister Norma Foley last Friday. On a personal level, I have enjoyed her company on every single occasion and never once have I uttered an offensive comment towards any Government politician. [Then she says the following to the Government] But it is your ideology that is wrong here. You continue to act like this is a normal problem that can be solved in time. It won't be. Permanent damage is being caused to children every day because of your failure to act with urgency and emergency.

Those are the words of Cara Dermody. I ask the Minister to heed them, please. It is now time to act with urgency and emergency. Comply with the law and ensure that no child is left

behind.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I begin by also paying tribute to Cara Darmody, who is here in the Public Gallery with her dad Mark. At 14 years of age, she has made a really valuable contribution to the debate around assessment of need and to the reality of the difficulties that individuals and families face when it comes to accessing autism and disability supports. She has been a voice for children and for parents, and I want to take this opportunity to say “thank you” to Cara.

Last week, the HSE provided me with the latest waiting list figures for assessments of need. It has now hit a record 15,296 children, and this figure is only going in one direction. In fact, the HSE itself says it anticipates that it will reach almost 25,000 children by the end of this year, only a short number of months away. These children have not had their legal entitlement met, and they should have had their assessment of need within six months. Of course, we all know the impact this has on a child, particularly when it comes to accessing supports at school, and we all hear from parents who are put in an impossible situation where schools are almost hamstrung when it comes to providing the supports and services that child will need. When you are a child, every day counts.

I sat here for most of the almost three hours when we had statements, and I listened to Government TD after Government TD. You would be blown away by some of the statements made with respect to how awful and terrible the situation is. The waiting list has been more or less growing since 2010, and when you look back at the record of the Dáil, issues have been raised consistently since then in terms of alarm and concern for the waiting list as it continued to grow. Fine Gael has been in government for 14 years; Fianna Fáil has either been supporting or in government for ten. This is not an issue that has arisen overnight. It has continued consistently. With regard to every single action taken by Government, and there have not been many, bar Cara’s fund, which I would give credit for, none of the actions taken to date have worked. They have not had an impact on the waiting list, and the figures are there and show that. No matter how many times the Government lauds the number of special classes, the private capacity going in, the money and the investment, it is not having the impact we need to see. Parents are very much at the end of their tether.

The bottom line on this issue is we do not have the people to do the job. We do not have the people to do the assessments of need and we do not have the people when it comes to the therapies. I heard from one young person in my constituency in March. She did her degree in Galway and then tried to get a place on the master’s course to become a speech and language therapist. She applied to the University of Limerick. There is a HPAT exam, which costs €160 a pop, with an approximate intake of 30 students, but she was unsuccessful twice due to the competitive nature that is there. She went to Scotland and has been home for ten months. She is a fully qualified speech and language therapist and she is waiting on CORU registration. In her own words, she said:

It is now the case that I am home almost ten months willing and ready to work yet I cannot obtain employment as a speech and language therapist due to the length of the recognition process. My application is only in stage one and I am told it will take at least four months.

She understands that a quicker process has been put in place for occupational therapy, but it has not been for speech and language therapy. We are crying out for therapists. Her master's was done in Scotland, not in Mozambique, yet she is sitting at home and cannot take up a job as a therapist that we so desperately need. Then we wonder why people are not coming home, or are not able to come home or take up a position here. They are going abroad instead, and it is people abroad who are getting the benefit of them.

I might highlight two points the Minister made in her earlier remarks. One was in regard to the €10 million in funding that has been delivered by the Government this year, which the Minister says will deliver 2,850 assessments of need, and she is confident this initiative will continue to support and deliver for these children. We are looking at almost 25,000 children by the end of the year. I would say 2,850 assessments of need is a drop in the ocean. We need to look at that level of funding. The €10 million sum is nowhere near enough, looking at 2,850 assessments of need.

The Minister went on to say we cannot rely on the private sector indefinitely, and of course we cannot. We would not be relying on it at all if capacity had been put in to the public sector, but it has not been. That is the Government's failure, and that is why it now needs to look at increased funding to ensure that all of those 15,296 children and rising get the assessments of need they deserve, are entitled to and are legally required to receive within six months. I would say we are not over-reliant in any way, shape or form on the private sector. We need more of it. It is a pity that we do, but that is the position the Government has brought us to. That is the situation we are in.

Cara Darmody's ask is very clear. Fund Cara's fund, make the money available, and ensure that every one of those children gets the assessment of need they deserve to meet their potential, for them, their parents and their families.

Deputy David Cullinane: I also welcome Cara and her father Mark to the Public Gallery. I have met both of them a number of times over recent years and am always struck by the dedication Cara has to this issue. She started out campaigning for her siblings but is now campaigning for every child waiting for an assessment of need. She deserves tremendous credit.

As others have said, assessments of need for 15,000 children are overdue. A previous Fianna Fáil Government put in place the Health Act 2005. At the time, it was welcomed by campaigners and families of children with disabilities because for the first time, it enshrined in law a right for children. It did not enshrine in law a right to access services but it did provide for a legal right to an assessment of need, which had to be carried out within a six-month period.

The logic of the 2005 Act was that the assessment would be a comprehensive one, that it would be carried out for each and every child in a timely fashion and that it would look at the health and educational needs of each and every child, which makes perfect sense. The same Act also provided for an aggregate report to be published and furnished to the Minister. For years, those reports were never furnished because the assessments did not happen. The logic of that was that the Minister of the day could see what the aggregate need was with respect to health and education services, be it therapies or access to schools. What has happened since 2005 is that the waiting list have gone up and up. Children were taking court cases almost daily through their families to get assessments of need but they were not worth the paper they were written on because the Government simply did not put the services and resources in place. This meant the backlog got bigger.

In a deeply cynical move, what did the Government do? It did not train more professionals or make sure we had more therapists who could carry out the assessments. It came up with what it calls the new standard operating procedure, a yellow-pack preliminary team assessment, and it would have pawned that off as an assessment of need only for parents and me and Deputy Mary Lou McDonald. I met a large number of them and ultimately they took a court case, and we dealt with legal people ourselves at that time, in 2022. That court case was a challenge to the Government's preliminary team assessments because it was breaking the law. Rather than actually delivering for the children and accepting its failure, whereby it had failed over that long period since 2005 to get to grips with this issue, put the services in, train the professionals that were needed and ensure that children would have access to assessment of need but also to services, the Government decided that no, it would break the law. It would just pawn them off with a couple of hours of an assessment and call it a preliminary team assessment. Then the Minister stood up in the Dáil Chamber every month and said that waiting lists were coming down as if she was trying to claim credit for something that was actually an insult to families. Of course, the High Court said the Government had broken the law and it was called out.

In an even more deeply cynical move, we heard from the Taoiseach today, and I have heard the same from the Taoiseach over recent months, that the Government now wants to bring in legislation that will remove the need for an assessment of need. This will be dressed up. The Taoiseach said today it is going to mean more access to services and direct access to services, with no need to worry about assessments of need, but that is an absolute insult to families. The whole logic of an assessment of need, as comprehensive as it needs to be, is to look at each individual child's health needs and educational needs. If that does not happen, the child will not get the services. When they are told not to worry and that the services will be there, when the very same families cannot get a special school place, a speech and language therapist or occupational therapist for their child, they simply do not believe the Government. They see it as cynical, as I do, because that is what it is. The entire Opposition needs to fight this Government really hard to ensure that if it has the brass neck to come in here and try to remove one of the few rights that children with disabilities have, that needs to be resisted and called out for what it is.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Hear, hear.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is an absolute, utter disgrace and a deeply cynical move by this Government.

I also want to raise a separate and very serious issue. Because of the failure on the Minister's part and that of the Government, parents are desperate and have to go for private assessments, but that is an unregulated environment. Psychologists carrying out assessments in this space are not regulated. CORU was established in 2007 with the commencement of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and has had the power to regulate psychologists since then. Twenty years on, this has not happened. The Psychologists Registration Board was established in 2017, nearly eight years ago.

This scandal was highlighted on an "RTÉ Investigates" programme in 2023, which shone a spotlight on what was described as a wild west of an unregulated space. Many parents are being forced to go private in a space which is not regulated. At the time of the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, CORU gave a response to RTÉ stating that by the first quarter of 2025, the new regulations would be in place and the registry would be open. That is not now going to be happen. It is going to be October before it happens, and even then not all psychologists will be included.

The Government has let families down every step of the way. The State has not provided the service, the Government has broken the law, and people and children are waiting longer for assessments of need and access to services. The Government is gaslighting them, telling them the law will be changed because it is in their interest. The only reason for changing the law is in the Government's interests because Ministers do not want to come in here week in, week out and have to answer for the fact that children are waiting for assessments that they should get. Please do not take people and their families for fools. That is what the Government is doing. From our perspective in Sinn Féin, we will fight this all the way because it will be a disgrace if the Government gaslights those children and their families and takes away one of the few rights they have.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Hear, hear.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I am not opposing the motion and I welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue. Like previous speakers and as I did earlier, I acknowledge Cara and her dad, Mark. In respect of Cara in particular, I acknowledge her absolute determination and her compassion to advocate not just for her own family but for all children in a similar position. It has been really worthwhile to have the opportunity to meet with her on a number of occasions. I acknowledge the work she does.

The Government recognises and shares the concerns expressed through the motion that there are unacceptable delays in access to assessments of need. We accept there is a need to increase the availability of and access to appropriate services for children with disabilities. As reflected in the programme for Government, we are committed to delivering real and tangible solutions to enhance services to better support children with disabilities and address the challenge of growing waiting lists for assessments of need. We are also committed to ensuring that children receive an education appropriate to their needs.

I note that the component parts of the motion may have merit. However, the underlying issues and the ultimate solution to address them are multifaceted and more complex than presented here. In order to have meaningful effect, any solution proposed must form part of wider strategic reforms. I understand that, like me, Members of the House have, as I said earlier, been moved by Cara Darmody's ongoing campaign to have deficiencies in the assessment of need system addressed.

As I outlined, I have met Cara, both in my previous role as Minister for Education and in my current role. As Cara is advocating here in respect of the assessment of need, we need to make progress here and give it the priority it demands. However, it is also important to note that children do not require an assessment of need to access health services including primary care, children's disability network teams or mental health services. Children with complex needs may require supports from their local children's disability network team. More than 43,000 children are being supported by these teams with or without an assessment of need. Children whose needs are more moderate are supported through the primary care system.

These systems, however, face their own challenges. People are pursuing assessments of need because they feel they need to, due to issues in the wider system. From speaking to parents, I know this system is not working as it should for their children, many of whom are on long waiting lists for those services. Indeed, some children may be on multiple waiting lists. It is within the broader system that the assessment of need process sits.

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I understand that a significant source of concern and frustration for parents is a lack of clarity about where they should go, in particular when they are seeking an autism assessment or diagnosis for their child. I am aware that the HSE has been developing an autism assessment and intervention protocol and I look forward to its introduction and incorporation into the existing health and education systems. Once in place, I hope this will help to alleviate the confusion and stress experienced by so many children and their parents.

More generally, I believe that parents would like more clarity about the path to take within the healthcare system when they feel their child may have a disability or additional needs. Work has been under way in this area to ensure that children are referred to the most appropriate service, building on existing HSE policies and joint working protocols. It is an area where we need to see more progress in the coming months.

Delays in service provision in other parts of the system mean that parents look at all options, including assessment of need, to get early access to services and supports for their child. However, parents find that having waited to get the assessment, they then may face another long wait to access the services their child needs. This, understandably, causes frustration and stress for families and it is absolutely not acceptable. We need to look at not only the assessment of need process but also the wider system to identify the barriers and delays and remove them. We need to see a process that ensures a child receives an assessment that is appropriate to their needs because every child is different, with their own unique abilities and needs.

HSE data shows that there has been a significant growth in the number of applications for assessments of need. Applications increased from 8,400 in 2023 to more than 10,600 in 2020, a 26% increase. HSE figures for the first quarter of this year indicate there has been a 20% increase in the number of applications, compared with the same period last year. At the end of March, there were almost 15,300 assessment of need applications overdue for completion nationwide, an 8% increase on the number overdue at the end of December. These figures are worrying and absolutely demonstrate the nature and extent of the challenge we face. Behind these numbers are children and families facing their own challenges every day and relying on the State to support and help them.

Although these numbers are growing, initiatives are under way to address the increasing volume. In 2024, more than 4,100 assessments were completed, an increase of 30% over the previous year. This is a considerable achievement, reflecting the effort and investment of the Department and the HSE to address the waiting list. Recent HSE data shows that this upward trend is continuing, with over 1,400 assessments completed in the first three months of this year, a 65% increase compared with the same period last year.

While this is welcome progress, it is abundantly clear that much more needs to be done. It is essential that we maintain this momentum and indeed accelerate it. The fact that demand continues to outpace the capacity of the system to meet it was recognised in May of last year, when the Government introduced the targeted waiting list initiative. This provides funding for the procurement of assessments from approved private providers for those families who have been waiting the longest. Between June and December of last year, this resulted in more than 2,470 assessments commissioned from private providers at a cost of over €8 million.

This Government has allocated €10 million in funding this year to deliver approximately 2,850 assessments of need. The additional funding is already showing results and an increase was reported at the start of this year. I am confident the initiative will continue to support and

deliver for children and families who have been waiting longest for assessments, but I am determined that funding will not stand in the way of doing what is necessary and effective to respond to the challenges. Although there is a limit to the capacity of the system to provide private assessments, if there is any additional capacity in the private system to do more, the Government is giving the commitment that money will not be a barrier. However, I am acutely aware that private assessment in isolation is not sufficient to support the capacity of the healthcare system to deliver assessments of need. We cannot rely on the private sector indefinitely so we must ensure that the public system can meet the clearly growing demand. As part of efforts to support the efficient delivery of assessment of need within the public system, regional assessment hubs are being rolled-out by the HSE, aligned with the six new HSE regions.

Another and more significant factor is addressing workforce issues. I am conscious of the challenges and strains facing the health and social care sector when it comes to the recruitment and retention of staff, not to mention the impact that this has on the delivery of therapeutic services to children with disabilities and on the delivery of assessments of need. It is a key focus for my Department to fill vacancies within the 93 children's development network teams. Some progress is being made in this regard. We must ensure that the assessment of need system is adequately staffed to meet demand, with the necessary administrative supports in place to ensure that the assessment and liaison officers can focus on the core aspects of their roles: the production of assessment reports and service statements for children. We also need to look at the bigger picture of how disability services are staffed. In this regard a dedicated disability workforce strategy is being developed in 2025 to meet growing service demands.

I fully recognise there are many challenges here. I want to underline and emphasise again that the Government is absolutely determined to improve the process to ensure that children have the maximum opportunity at the earliest opportunity to receive the therapies they need and deserve. There is cross-departmental co-operation between Ministers. Significant work is being done by the Cabinet subcommittee and additional resources are being put in place where they are required.

I want to refer briefly to the significant State investment in the provision of special education which is now at €2.9 billion. That is a 48% increase since 2020. It has seen the doubling of special classes, an additional 16 new special schools established and we have more than 40,000 professionals working in this area. Much more needs to be done and is being done.

The scale of the challenge we face is clear. We are committed to delivering real and tangible solutions to enhance services to better support children with disabilities in Ireland and address the challenge of growing waiting lists for assessments of need. However, this is an issue the Government is taking extremely seriously and according it the highest priority. As Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, it is one of my highest priorities. I am committed to working across the Government and with the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, to ensure we have a better outcome for all the children who are in our care.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to welcome Cara Darmody and her dad, Mark, to the Gallery. It is unfortunate they are here. I would draw their attention to the fact that the Government has circulated its response to this debate already so no matter what is said here on the floor of the Dáil, its script is already written. It has already decided what it is going to say. It has made it very clear it has no intention of listening to what the combined Opposition has to say. It has made its mind up. It has its script written and will deliver it there at the end. In fact, I will bring a copy up to the Gallery and they can have a read of it if they would like to.

I want to pay tribute to Cara and her dad. Cara should not be here this evening. She should be at home. She should not have to protest outside the Dáil for basic services for her brothers but let us be honest - she is here because they have been left with no choice. Like any campaigner who has been around, she will not be fooled by all the Government's chat about committees and how well it is doing and all the backslapping that it is doing to itself this evening. It does not fool Cara; it does not fool us, not even for a moment. The Government has created this crisis. That is why we are here. It is not Cara's fault or ours – the blame rests with the Government. The buck stops with the people on the big bucks. Action is what is needed, not more fine words. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, told us the Government is moving in the right direction. How dare she say that when the figures obtained by my colleague, an Teachta Kerrane, show that 10,000 more children will join the list by the end of this year? I want to recognise the work done by advocates like FUSS Balbriggan and parents like Jodie Reid who have been forced onto the streets to campaign for services for their kids. In my constituency, kids wait the longest. We have been utterly failed by the Government so when the junior Minister, Deputy Naughton tells us that it cannot be fixed overnight, the Minister will forgive me for reminding her that Fine Gael has been in government for 14 years. That is almost 6,000 overnights. I do not know how many more overnights the Government wants to be afforded. We understand that it is complicated but we also understand that the people who caused the crisis will in no way be the ones who will fix it.

I had every right to be angry when I heard the Government representative from my own constituency read out her script, commentating on the length of time the kids in my area have been left by her Government. Shame on her. She quotes the shameful record of her Government. She quotes the statistics but she fails to recognise the humanity behind it. Take one family with a two-year-old son awaiting an assessment of need for over a year. They are desperate to try to speed up the process so he receives the help he needs. They are privately paying for speech and occupational therapy: €190 a week; €95 a session; €10,000 a year. They have to earn €16,000 a year to pay that. Another family with a boy who is two, and on the waiting list for the CDNT in Balbriggan, has been told by a healthcare professional that the wait for an assessment could be between four and six years. The family has been told it is really important he gets speech and language therapy and occupational therapy now but he cannot get it until he has been assessed. Shame on this Government.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Before the Minister leaves, I want to say to her that the fact she delivered a copy-and-paste speech is an insult to the 15,000 children who she is failing legally in their entitlement. She read out nearly word for word the speech that was delivered earlier. At least she should have had the decency to put it into her own words and pay a bit more respect to this debate tonight. The Taoiseach told us earlier that the Government will continue to break the law. It is simply unacceptable. We live in a State with a surplus of €8.5 billion but we have a 14-year-old girl who is protesting outside the gates of Leinster House for 50 hours because she is standing up for her brothers and for every other child across the State who the Government is breaking the law in relation to. It is a disgrace that this is happening. There is €8.5 billion of a surplus yet we have 15,296 children who are being failed their legal entitlement to have an assessment of need. That is the reality. That is the type of country we live in.

Why has this come about? It has not happened overnight. We have told the Government the solutions over and over again, but it will not listen. It will not resource the system. As Cara rightly pointed out, it is about ideology. I am so impressed by the amazing campaign Cara Darmody has fought - every single person on the Opposition benches can talk about it - but a

14-year-old child should not be fighting a campaign like this. Every person in this State should have the right to have an assessment carried out in relation to the needs they have and then the services should flow after. That we are in this situation is a shame on the Government, as is the fact that the Government's response is not to fix the problem but to take away the right that was fought for and won 20 years ago in the Disability Act. I refer to the right of someone with a disability - the only right they have - that within six months the State will carry out an assessment of what their needs are. The Government has failed over and over, and because it has no solution to fix the system it is taking away that right. Shame on the Government. We will fight it tooth and nail on this. We do not need to take away rights but to deliver on those rights. Assessments of need must be delivered within six months. The Government can do that by funding the Cara fund, by proper workforce management and by treating this as the emergency it is. Then it needs to make sure all the services and treatments follow, including school places, speech and language and all of the rest.

Do I have any confidence that this Government will deliver? Absolutely not. Shame on this Government that in a country that is rich with resources, a 14-year-old girl has to sleep outside Leinster House to draw attention to its failures.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I pay tribute to Cara, her family and the thousands of families throughout the country who are in the same position. We all meet them in our constituencies. There are 15,296 people waiting for assessments of need. This wait-time can vary depending on their location and creates inequity across the system. Some children are better served than others based purely on geography. We saw this recently in Sligo-Leitrim where there is very high staff turnover, no clinical lead and waiting lists are rising daily. Many parents soon realise they are only starting the first battle in what seems a long and arduous war to try to obtain some sort of service for their children. The assessment of need is the first major hurdle in what they will soon come to discover is wait-list after wait-list. Many are forced into the private sector to get assessed at huge and ever-rising costs of anything from €1,200 to €2,200. Some of these assessments may not even be accepted by the Department because psychology services in Ireland are not fully regulated. This delay in assessments of need has a long and ever-lasting effect on many young people. Adequate services are not put in place soon enough, which has knock-on effects for future development.

The INTO recently voiced concerns regarding the growing involvement of teachers and school principals in assessment of children's needs due to the recent changes under the revised education report mechanism. Teachers are not clinically trained to diagnose complex disabilities leading to concerns about misidentification and incomplete assessments. Even when people get an assessment, and their fight has been hard for that, they wonder what is next. Where is their next battle? If they get through the assessment of need, they can and may be accepted by the children's disability network team. If they get that, they may be on another waiting list for a vital service. Occupational therapists, speech and language services, and psychology, educational and psychiatry services, all have delays and more delays. If the young person does not meet the criteria, he or she will be put onto another waiting list. That young person will be referred to the post-diagnostic team and, before he or she can be accepted, parents have to participate in a five-week course. This is mandatory for parents. They also have to request a one-to-one session with a post-diagnostic team psychologist and then, if it is accepted, the child is on a waiting list, which is currently set at 18 months.

The post-diagnostic team is for those with mild to moderate difficulties. If a child requires services for CAMHS, for moderate to severe difficulties, this is a separate application that must

be filled in by parents in conjunction with doctors. Waiting times are anything from six to 12 months. In the meantime, parents are left to their own devices and told - we come across many of them regularly in our clinics - to bring their child to the emergency department if the child's mental health deteriorates. The impact on families is immense. The cumulative effect of delays, inconsistent practices and unclear responsibilities for services causes stress and frustration for parents who constantly have to fight and advocate for their child's right to support. There is a high turnover of staff who find that they are working in a stressed and understaffed environment to try to maintain services.

The Minister and the Government's response to the rights of children is to remove those rights by amending legislation. It is simply unacceptable.

Deputy Mark Wall: I acknowledge the young lady who has brought the entire Opposition together on this very important motion. I met Cara Darmody for the first time in November 2022, when I was a member of the first all-party autism Oireachtas committee. At just 11 years of age, Cara came in to give her testimony. She was the youngest ever person to give testimony at an Oireachtas committee. On the day, just a small number of us were in that committee room, including two members of a local support group from my hometown of Athy. Cara's testimony was powerful and emotional. She spoke about her two brothers, John and Neil, and the challenges they faced on a daily basis. Almost three years later, Cara and her dad, Mark, who I acknowledge in the Public Gallery, are back on the protest again. I joined them earlier today, as I have done numerous times previously. I want everyone to know that Cara's resolve is unbroken from the 11-year-old I first listened to in 2022.

Cara continues to have my support and the support of the entire Labour Party. I will talk about the national emergency she wants declared. Cara has a simple ask for the Government: stop breaking the assessment of needs law and declare that emergency, but it is an ask that the Government has ignored. Many Government leaders and Ministers have met Cara over the past few years and can attest to her determination in advocating for her brothers. However, meetings are not enough. Maybe the Government thought that Cara would disappear but that is another mistake by the Government. Cara is not going anywhere. Families like hers are not going anywhere. Cara's next step is advocating for her brothers and others like them, as she begins her 50-hour protest at Leinster House today.

In my area of County Kildare, we have the second highest number of children who are overdue an assessment of need at nearly 1,700 children. Tens of thousands of children are languishing on waiting lists for essential therapies. More than 20,000 children are waiting on psychology and OT. Nearly 19,000 children are waiting on speech and language therapy while nearly 10,000 are waiting on physio. We know that early intervention is key, yet the average waiting time for the CDNT in my area is more than three years. The CDNT in Kildare is dealing with a massive caseload. We need to seriously consider having two CDNTs to cover this particular area.

It is always important to give the day-to-day experiences of many of the people I deal with. I am dealing with one family at present whose child continues to beat their head off the floor day in, day out. The response from the HSE is group therapy - that the family should talk about their child's needs with their neighbours and strangers. As the mother said to me today, does anyone realise how demeaning that is to her and her family? It is the same for another child who got an assessment in 2012. That child is still waiting for a follow-up assessment. That child is now an adult and will be 21 years of age in February. That is just two cases out of the many cases I

deal with on a daily basis, as do many of my colleagues on the Opposition benches. I am sure the Minister of State and her colleagues are dealing with cases also, but we are not getting the reaction these families deserve. We are not getting the reaction that Cara, her father, Mark, her brothers and everybody else deserves.

It is time that the Government moved on this. It is time the Government realised that Cara Darmody is not going anywhere. She will continue her protest.

Deputy George Lawlor: The appalling waiting lists for children in Ireland awaiting an assessment of need that we have heard listed out today are nothing short of a national disgrace. It is an indictment of the values of society that we allow vulnerable children to languish in limbo, with their futures hanging in the balance, while bureaucratic inefficiencies and systematic failures continue to plague our health and education systems. This situation is not just a logistical nightmare; it is a moral failing that demands our immediate attention and action.

Every day countless families, such as Cara Darmody's, and I pay tribute to her, find themselves caught in this agonising waiting game, often for years as we all know, as they seek the assessments necessary to secure vital services and supports for their children. These are not just numbers on a list; these are real children, each with unique needs and potential, who deserve better than to be treated as an afterthought. The impact of these waiting lists is profound, not only on the children but also their families, who are left to navigate a maze of uncertainty and frustration. The emotional toll is staggering as parents are forced to watch their children struggle without access to the help they so desperately need.

Of course, the assessments of need waiting times are just the beginning of what can only be described as a list to get on a list. Once the assessment is carried out for those lucky enough to be in the 7% who manage to get an assessment in a relatively timely manner, they then face the prospect of yet another extensive and prolonged wait to access the therapies they have assessed as being in need of. One manager working in the services told me that by the time children access the need they were initially assessed for, that need may well have completely changed, which in turn leads to further and more complex problems for those children and their families.

I appreciate that the reasons behind the lengthy waiting times are multifaceted, ranging from insufficient funding to a shortage of qualified professionals, yet these explanations do little to alleviate the suffering experienced by families. We must demand accountability from this Government and health authorities. How can we justify a system that prioritises red tape over the well-being of our youngest and most vulnerable children? The lack of urgency in addressing this crisis is absolutely infuriating. We are failing an entire generation of children who are being denied timely access to assessments that could and will significantly improve their quality of life and educational outcomes. These waiting lists reflect broader societal issues, such as the stigma surrounding mental health issues and disability. By allowing the children to wait in silence, we are sending a message that their needs are not a priority and that their struggles are not worthy of our immediate attention. This attitude must change. We need to foster a culture that recognises the importance of early intervention and support and values every child's right to a fair shot at success. For too long, parents, advocacy groups and families have had to plead in unison and demand change. It is absolutely incumbent on us as public representatives to hold our Government to account and insist that it prioritise the resources and infrastructure needed to address this crisis. The time for excuses is over; the time for action is now. We need a comprehensive plan that includes increased funding, the recruitment of additional professionals and streamlined processes that eliminate unnecessary delays.

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The waiting list for children in Ireland awaiting an assessment of need is a glaring example of systematic failure that must be addressed. Our children deserve better. They deserve timely assessments and the support they need to thrive. Let us not be complacent in the face of injustice. The future of our society depends on how we treat our most vulnerable members. We cannot afford to fail them any longer.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I commend Cara Darmody and her father, Mark. I was delighted to meet them this morning with my party leader, Deputy Ivana Bacik, at the gates of Leinster House. I commend Cara on the wonderful work she is doing.

I want to read an email I received from a parent:

I am just touching base to see if anything can be done to try and progress an Autism Assessment. I have 3 year old twins who both need Assessment ... (we have only just been accepted by CDNT Mallow), and CDNT have told me that they have since gone back and requested ... [an outsourcing of] the assessment just under a month ago now. They currently attend Mainstream Creche/Pre School 3 days a week but the room leader has mentioned to me that she feels they would really benefit from an Early Intervention Class But to get an Early Intervention Class for them they both need a formal diagnosis and obviously having twins I am going to find it extremely difficult to get a space for them both I [have now considered but] can't afford to go private for assessment for them ...

She states she has enquired about taking out a credit union loan but currently just cannot afford the cost. She adds:

Is there anything I can do to progress their AON Assessment so that I can get a formal diagnosis and hopefully secure an Early Intervention Class for them. Also to note I have been in contact with one School who said they can't ... put them on a waiting list for a space until we have an official formal diagnosis.

This cross-party motion refers to what is a shocking indictment of the failure of the State. We have failed and continue to fail children across the country. There are 15,296 children waiting for an assessment of need, many of whom are in my county, Cork. For far too long, families across the country have had to beg for services and supports. Nobody in this Chamber wants this type of Ireland.

We are told that finance will not be a barrier, but what about personnel? We consistently hear about the lack of services within our system. The HSE itself will tell you that. Earlier, my colleague Deputy Alan Kelly, said he thinks this was a cry for help from the HSE. I do not believe he is wrong.

I want to focus specifically on children in school and the lack of assessments of needs. Having been lucky enough to teach in two fantastic schools, I note that the level of need in a modern classroom is far different from that of 20 years ago. Supports must be put in place. The role of special needs assistants in our schools is pivotal and of course they benefit the children they assist. Schools across the country have to beg for SNAs. I have had constant communication with school principals across Cork North-Central and they have informed me that trying to increase the number of SNAs or keep SNAs is like knocking on a brick wall. It is so difficult and such is the level of need that school management, particularly at mainstream level, find themselves acting as SNAs. Early intervention is essential, particularly regarding school places. All Members of this House are consistently asked for help in securing school places for children.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government for the best part of ten years and the situation is actually getting worse. Planning early intervention, allowing assessments of need to take place, providing the necessary supports and having school places ready for children sound like basic rights but we do not provide these services.

The Labour Party has consistently brought solutions to the Government. They are genuine and very possible but just need Government approval.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I pay tribute to Cara Darmody and her dad, Mark. I acknowledge the leadership Cara has shown in bringing us all here this evening with this collective motion.

Clinical services and educational supports for children with additional needs and disabilities are in a dire state, directly resulting from years of poor planning and under-resourcing. All of this did not come about by chance. These are the results of poor political decision-making over many years. They can be resolved by more progressive political decision-making.

The chronic neglect of disability services in special education by successive Governments has left families at the mercy of a disjointed patchwork of a support system for their children. The Disability Act 2005 provided children with a legal right to an assessment of need within six months of being applied for. In reality, more than 90% of assessments of need are completed outside the legally agreed timeline.

A response to a parliamentary question of mine in March showed that the HSE spent €7.9 million between April 2021 and February 2025 defending legal cases against families trying to access an assessment of need. This legal cost equates to 180 years' worth of salary for a newly qualified occupational therapist. For much of that almost-four-year period, the HSE was implementing a recruitment embargo or similar recruitment restrictions, thereby stymieing its own capacity to carry out assessments of need, not to mention much essential clinical work after an assessment is completed. This is a tragic farce among so many other political failings that are having an enormous impact on the lives of children with disabilities.

After completing an assessment of need, families often face a further abyss of prolonged waiting to access therapies and are forced to seek these privately, if they can afford to. What we therefore need is wholesale investment across services. The purpose of an assessment of need is, after all, to access intervention. Children with mild to moderate developmental issues or disabilities may be referred to primary care services, while children with more complex difficulties come under the remit of children's disability network teams. We see the consequences of the failure to plan most dramatically in the south-west regional health area, Cork-Kerry, where the waiting list for primary care psychology services exceeded 6,000 earlier this year. That was after my colleague Holly Cairns highlighted last year that there were 5,000 children on the list. However, we did not see the recruitment drive that was necessary to address this in the meantime.

In January, one Cork East constituent was given an estimated waiting time of five years and nine months for primary care psychology for her son, who had recently received a diagnosis of autism following an assessment of need. The family has since been told – in recent weeks – that following a file review in primary care, their son should now actually be seen by the CDNT. This will involve being diverted onto another set of waiting lists for therapies, which may not materialise for years or may never materialise. Therefore, the initial service statement of the HSE from January has been overturned by other HSE professionals and the boy has not

been seen by any of the services yet. This is an example of what is called “defensive practice” among clinicians, whereby services that are overstretched bat referrals back in an attempt to sustain a manageable waiting list. For families impacted by these decisions, it is an extremely frustrating experience to be passed from one service to the next. In that context, it is easy to see how families lose faith in the HSE and feel private clinicians are their only option. How many families can afford to even consider a private clinician?

The HSE cites “recruitment difficulties” as the main source of the crisis in primary care, and in Cork–Kerry it has even created a new layer of management to address this. It fails to mention in its briefings and parliamentary question responses that the main difficulty has been its own failure to pursue recruitment for necessary posts over many years and over-reliance on unqualified assistant psychologists. All of this results from Government policy, including the pay and numbers strategy.

9 o'clock Behind all these waiting lists are families languishing through what feels for them like one purgatory after another, waiting and waiting for an assessment before then being on further waiting lists for support, with no end in sight. The main ongoing roadblock to staffing primary care services is the Government’s pay and numbers strategy, which in some cases is proving to be almost as restrictive as the official recruitment embargo that preceded it. It has been roundly criticised by all the main unions as putting a stranglehold on service development. The HSE is increasingly referring assessments of need to private clinicians at an average cost of €3,300 per assessment. What we really need to see is proper workforce planning and a comprehensive recruitment drive to meet the level of need at all stages of service provision. This will provide continuity of care for service users, more integrated services and better morale among existing staff.

The crises in disability services and additional needs education provision are resolvable through reform that is driven by meaningful and sustained engagement with the families and the front-line staff at the epicentre of the crisis. Above all else, we need to see much greater investment by the Government in these essential services for our disabled citizens. We should not have to rely on the remarkable courage and determination of Cara Darmody to see that commitment made.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Cara, you are an inspiration to parents and children up and down this country. You are a citizen in the true meaning of the word. You have taken selfless action to right what is wrong, you have spoken truth to power and, while you see empty Government seats, that does not diminish in the slightest what you have done, your powerful action or the massive impact you are having. We in the Social Democrats and across the Opposition will continue to support you in what is happening. Mark, I am sure you are a very proud father. As a parent, I feel deeply that our State is utterly failing its children, particularly its most vulnerable children. It is failing to deliver their rights and to deliver services to them. The Ministers of State present know that it is the first duty of a republic to look after and protect its most vulnerable. Our Proclamation refers to “cherishing all the children of the nation equally” yet here we are utterly failing our most vulnerable children. It should be our starting point, our priority as a country.

In my constituency of Dublin North-West, I have been working with parents who have been trying to get assessments of need. They have been waiting months and years to get assessments and then further months and years for services. To give the House the figures, in CHO 9, which is an area that includes my constituency, 2,411 children are waiting for an initial contact. They

have been waiting 12 months for an initial contact with a CDNT. These are areas such as Ballymun and Finglas, some of the most disadvantaged areas in our country, where children need intervention and parents cannot afford to pay for services privately. How is it acceptable? It is entrenching deep inequalities. These children have done nothing other than to be born in the wrong area and not be able to have access to services, supports and assessments of need. Many families are going private and breaking themselves to try to cover that cost.

What has happened in this regard is absolutely not acceptable. Different reasons have been given as to why these delays are happening. One of the reasons the Tánaiste gave was that the length of assessments of need was causing significant delays. He said some assessments can take up to 90 hours. I have followed this up with the HSE and it has been unable to provide data which shows that assessments of need are taking 90 hours. Why are the Tánaiste and the Government plucking figures from the air to try to justify reducing services and the number of assessments of need? It is not acceptable.

Cara and Mark, we will continue, as all the Opposition will, to push on this until children get the services they have a right to and need.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Hi, Cara. We have not had a chance to meet yet, but thank you for everything you are doing. I hope to pop out to you tomorrow morning to say hello.

I have met so many people in the disability community and in my work in the rights and equality space who, like Cara, have had to become advocates and experts in rights and equality simply to realise their own rights because the State is failing them so badly and because they are not able to access the appropriate services, the *seirbhísí cuí*, that they should simply have available to them by virtue of the legal status provided for in our Constitution. Time and again, the onus is just put back on citizens to take up the slack where the State is letting them down. One point I do not want to be lost in this debate - there has been an awful lot of discussion about this today - is the fact that when these rights are denied, in so many instances we then see the State fight with all its legal might against those families who are simply trying to realise their rights. That alone is something this Government must look at. I do not know that there is a litigation policy. I have been advised that there is not necessarily a policy that sets in place how the State determines whether or not it will bring such legal might against vulnerable families who are simply trying to realise their rights. Where there is not one there should be one, and it should recognise the power dynamic of the State having a lot more legal power to bring to those battles and what it is doing by fighting tooth and nail against people who are simply trying to realise those rights.

Many of those people are people in my constituency, people who have been in contact with me and my team, who tell us about how they have simply had to put their lives on hold and how they have had to reshape their whole families around the fact that their children cannot access assessments of need or the appropriate services. As we have heard from many speakers today, this is of course simply the first hurdle because assessment of need is only the thing that allows us to get into the queues for the many services that are required for people to participate fully in society. I was really disheartened earlier to hear the Taoiseach's response during Leaders' Questions because it seemed to be simply about numbers. The argument is that the numbers are so overwhelming that the Government and the State cannot respond to this. It just seems to lack such vision and ambition as to what inclusive education should be. This is not special education we are looking for; we are looking for an education system that recognises and meets the needs of everybody within it.

In 1966 Donogh O'Malley announced free education, and a year later it was brought in. He was a Fianna Fáil Minister, it was an unannounced speech and that was transformation that happened like that. This Government is lacking that vision, that ambition and the commitment that is required to transform our education system into one that is inclusive.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I compliment the remarkable courage of Cara Darmody, a 14-year-old disability rights campaigner from my constituency. I welcome her and her dad here this evening. Cara started her campaign in support of her two brothers, who have autism diagnoses, but now she is supporting and campaigning on behalf of all children in the State with disabilities. She has been very successful to date. She extracted €10 million from the current Tánaiste during the general election campaign. This issue, of course, was huge in the election campaign, and we had all sorts of promises and commitments. Housing and disability services were the biggest issues during the campaign and they are supposed to be the Government's highest priorities. "More needs to be done." That is what we have heard time and time again. Sorry, but it does not wash any more. This has been the standard response from successive Ministers for years. I have been raising this issue in this House for over ten years. There was a parliamentary question on 2 February 2017, and on 22 February 2018 I raised the issue during Leaders' Questions with the current Tánaiste, who was Minister for Health at the time. It is always the same answer: "We must do more." He said on that day:

I thank Deputy Healy for raising this very important issue on the assessment of needs for children with disabilities. He is entirely correct; this is an area in which the State needs to do an awful lot more.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have been in government in one form or another for the last 14 years but, far from improving the situation, the provision of assessments of need has disimproved hugely.

Some 15,296 children are on the waiting lists, up 8% from the end of last year. In the first quarter of the year, only 7% were assessed within the time limit. The HSE stated there will be 25,000 children on the list at the end of this year and the average waiting time will be more than two years. These figures are shocking. Children are being failed every hour of every day. The State is breaking the law every hour of every day. The question has to be asked, is there one law for citizens and another for Government Ministers? If a citizen broke the law, they would be prosecuted. I wonder when a Government Minister will be prosecuted. I was shocked at the arrogance of the Taoiseach during Leaders' Questions today. His attitude was "shoot the messenger" and blame the psychologists - we are breaking the law but we will change the law. I warn the Taoiseach there is widespread frustration and anger among the public about this issue. Any attempt to change the six-month legal timeframe will be met with huge pushback that will endanger his Government. I urge the Taoiseach to take emergency action now on this issue before it is too late.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I too pay tribute to Cara and her father and all the campaigners and the people who have already slept outside the Dáil this year, Families Unite for Services and Support, FUSS, Equality in Education, ASD15 and the myriad local groups that have been banging on about this issue for a long time. One thing I have learned about neurodivergent, autistic and disabled people is that they hate social pretence and falsity. There is a lot of pretence going on all night. First, Government TDs pretending they are not in the Government. Second, that they are not part of the problem and it is the fault of the HSE, not Government policy, which obviously determines everything. The other pretence is that a sanctioned school

class for autism is an actual class. That is the pretence we have been hearing about all year. There is another pretence as well - this Government denies there is a chronic crisis and shortage in teacher recruitment and retention and the same for professional therapists. If the Government keeps denying that, this problem will persist. I have spoken to many principals and saw it myself when I went back into teaching. Australia is recruiting teachers hand over fist from Ireland because it provides 20 grand extra in pay. The UK is attracting people to do teacher training there while this Government has done not one thing. It has not brought in a special education allowance, which principals in special schools have been asking for. It has not brought in a city allowance, which is vital if you want to get people to teach and be able to afford to pay rent in Dublin. This problem will persist until the Government does something about it. There is a massive shortage of therapists. Only 7% of assessments of need are done on time. The Government is breaking the law for the other 93%. In Dublin 15, the Blakestown CDNT has a seven and a half year waiting list, while the list in the other CDNT is a bit shorter. This is ruining the development and the lives of many children. I am sick, sore and tired of hearing a Minister say it is not acceptable. You are the Minister. You should resign if it is not acceptable. The other Minister, who is not here now, said the whole system was not fit for purpose. What a disgrace that they are willing to stay in their positions. They have been in government for years.

The other issue is that we carry on regardless and take no action on the huge problem of the shortages in CDNTs. Approximately 530 posts are unfilled because people are leaving the public sector due to the stress and strain. Then, because it is told to do so by the Government, the HSE has to pay those same therapists, when they go to the private sector, to carry out assessments of need that should be done in the public sector, each costing €3,300. Those people could work in the public sector like they always used to if it was an attractive place to work, they could live on the pay, and there was promotion and recognition and enough staff to do their work. Until that happens, this crisis will continue. The Government is willing to spend €100 million on military jets but is not willing to put in the money needed for this issue. It is not complex; it is very simple. Please do not try to pretend it is really complicated. It is about investing money to recruit teachers, therapists, SNAs, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and psychologists and to provide proper buildings to put classes into. For assessments of need, the Government could recruit in the short term for a big project to clear those lists and people would turn up and do the work.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Every single member of the Opposition has put their name to this motion. I welcome Cara and her father. It is an indictment of this Government and previous Governments that Cara Darmody, a young teenager, has had to come back two years after she addressed an Oireachtas joint committee in November 2022. At that time, she said, "I am here to tell you what it is like to live in a family that has severely autistic children in it." She goes on to say that they have been treated disgracefully and she is angry. She is just one of many campaigners on the ground. I say this on a day when the Taoiseach was an absolute disgrace and embarrassment, knowing he is not complying with his legal obligations under an Act passed 20 years ago and, rather than deal with that failure, he said he will change the law. He said he did not blame the High Court for its judgment - that was very nice of him - because it had to comply with the law but he is now going to change the law because he does not have to comply with it. That Act was passed in 2005 after much hardship and hard work and myriad case law. When the legislation came in, the guide stated the Act sets out to make significant improvements in the everyday lives of people with disabilities in relation to buildings, employment and assessments of need. It was not radical enough to say there is an obligation to provide services but there was an obligation to carry out an assessment of need and to lay out a service

plan for the services required. Two years later, we signed up to the UN protocol. It took us another 11 years to ratify it. I have looked at all of the reports in my time in the Dáil, including the capacity review that told us there was significant unmet need, the cost of disability report that was never brought in and an action plan we failed to comply with. After all of that, a young girl has to sit outside in protest to alert us to what is going on. She does not need to alert the Opposition, however. For as long as we have been here, there has been motion after motion from Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats - every one of us. We have implored and begged and said the Government has a legal obligation. We know today the Taoiseach does not put any value on a legal obligation; he is just going to change the law.

Private therapy was also discussed. Why are there so many private therapists? What has happened to our recruitment system that nobody wants to go into the public service? What happened to our ability to coax people back into the public service? I worked as a psychologist years ago. I considered it a privilege to give two years back to the old western health board. Has it been tried when we educate people on the public purse that they would give back and we would provide housing? We have any amount of documents. We do not need another change in legislation except to hold accountable the person who has breached the law. That is what we need legislation for, if there is no penalty - I have not had a chance to check it. We know every year from the census the number of vacancies. With 817 vacancies on the 91 teams, how can any service be provided? I have two letters here. Parents are writing to us in desperation. One parent has spent €25,000 on private therapy, but still to no avail. Another parent has begged and implored the disability team just outside Galway, in my constituency, but no services are available, in the 21st century in a Republic.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I welcome Cara and her dad, Mark, to the Public Gallery, as many of my colleagues on these benches have. When Cara walked in to Leinster House today, I noticed that she passed a painting of Countess Markievicz and busts of Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, women who have left indelible marks on this State. Cara's name is up there with those great women who have left an indelible mark on this State. I honestly mean that. I wish that was not the case, however. A 14-year-old child should be at home meeting her friends, watching television, playing video games and going out and living her childhood rather than having to sit or stand outside this House to get what she needs as a child and for her brothers. It is an absolute disgrace that we are here in this House and we have 15,000 children - our sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, godchildren and grandchildren - waiting because of this Nixon-esque Government. When the law does not suit the Government, it changes it. That is what Richard Nixon said. He said that when the President does it, it is not illegal. That is whom the Government is learning from. This Government wants to break the law yet again. I am sorry for getting emotional.

Laws are being broken. More than 4,000 assessments were carried out last year. That is not progress; it is failure. These are not statistics but, rather, children - children with speech delays and children who cannot walk. These are children who are locked out of the supports to meet their needs and allow them to have a full life, a life of dignity. This State is breaking its own law and, in doing so, it is breaking the trust of every family waiting in hope and despair. Many of those families have been in my office, on the phone to me or breaking the hearts of my staff. I spoke on the phone to one mother from Tipperary who told me that she is financing the special needs education unit in the school. She is paying for the training of the teacher because that teacher, who was put in place by this Government, has no training whatsoever when it comes to special needs. She is paying for the language therapy for that school in order that her child

can be helped.

We in Independent Ireland are calling on the Government to act urgently, honestly and effectively. We ask the Government: first, to fund the Cara fund immediately to clear the backlog now rather than in six months or by the next budget; second, to set without delay a national emergency of real public targets to comply and complete within the six-month timeframe the legislation requires; third, to deliver a workforce plan to recruit and retain specialists we are so badly lacking, be they speech therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists or behavioural teams; and finally, to fund the therapies and school places of these children who do not thrive.

This is about more than legislation. It is about justice, decency and whether we are a Republic that stands by those who need us most or a Republic which turns away and uses the excuse of red tape. We cannot call ourselves a country of prosperity if thousands of those children are left behind. We cannot call ourselves a nation of fairness while knowingly delaying our children's future. I ask this House and the Government to please invest in the future and not to leave our children behind. It is the only legacy we have in this House and the legacy going forward. It is with shame I stand here while we have to have this debate in the House.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I agree with most of what people have said tonight. It is a shocking situation. I welcome Cara and her dad. I think of her mam at home as well as her two brothers. It is such an indictment. I know Cara lives in a lovely house in Ardfinnan. Looking out her back window, she can see the Liam Lynch monument, a man who gave his life for our freedom and democracy in this country. What has it come to now? We have the HSE, an organisation set up 25 years ago just to put buffers between the Government and the public who are entitled to services. It is allowed to break the law consistently without any repercussions whatsoever. What have we come to in this State when we can spend three hours making statements on this issue and then debate this motion, but nothing will change? It is getting worse, in fact. The HSE prefers to recruit lines of senior managers and senior executives. I met them at the opening of the Slievenamon wing in Clonmel some weeks ago. I was introduced to several people who I had never seen before. While they have big jobs and titles, they will not look after the basic needs of the people. It is an appalling vista.

Bhí mé thuas san Áiléar Poiblí earlier, and chonaic mé Cara ag foghlaim na Gaeilge. She was doing her homework here tonight. She should be at home with her brothers and with her friends, as has been said, rather than being in this situation where she has to sleep outside the Dáil in this appalling weather. It is unbelievable. She has met four or five taoisigh during her campaign. It was all promises and no empathy. There may have been empathy, but there was no action. We will not have any action after this, either. I am convinced we will not because the HSE is not accountable to anyone. It flouts the Disability Act 2005 and every other Act as well. We bring in these Acts and proclaim how great they are, but they are only for some people. It is an appalling vista that this has to go on.

We all deal with families who are traumatised, impoverished and deflated. The HSE has already spent €8 million fighting parents. Just think about. Some €8 million has been spent fighting parents to deny them the rights to which they are entitled under the Constitution. It is a shocking and depressing situation. I salute Cara, her family and her supporters. This situation is just not good enough or acceptable in this day and age. We will have this debate and rub our hands and it will all go on in its merry way. None of the CAMHS teams and the whole lot of them are properly funded or supported and no one gives a toss.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this most important matter. First, I welcome Cara and her dad here again today. It is very sad that they have to come here again after being here so many times before. This is still a desperate situation where young families and young parents, when they find that their child is somehow not performing to their liking and want to get them assessed, have to wait so long for an assessment, and then to get the therapies they need thereafter. It is so hard, especially in Kerry. We have desperate difficulty in getting these families looked after. Your health is your wealth. We all adore and appreciate the young. For me, that is my grandchildren now. We hope they are and will be fine. That is what we want for them. Every parent wants the best for their child.

While it is one thing to say children must be assessed within six months, therapy and what will be needed after the assessment is another thing. I appeal to this Government to ensure therapists, psychologists or whatever they need are put in place. Funding has to be provided to urgently recruit more therapists to assess these children and young adults presenting with special needs and disabilities. This has to be a top priority for the Minister for Health and she should stamp her foot on it rather than letting the HSE do what it likes.

Waiting times for assessment of need applicants have to be reduced. How can a child or a young person receive the necessary treatment without a diagnosis? Early intervention is critical and paramount. Assessment, like I said, is only the first step and many parents find that having waited to get the assessment they then face another long wait to access the services their child needs. Many parents have no choice but to go down the route of private assessments and they should be reimbursed when they do this. This is putting a huge burden on families. What about the families who cannot afford a private assessment? What happens to their children and young adults? Applications for financial support for domiciliary care for children and disability allowance when they reach 16 years are complicated and take far too long to process.

St. Francis Special School in Beaufort has requested the establishment of adult day and respite services on the grounds of the St. Mary of the Angels centre for adults with intellectual disabilities. This is critical. St. Mary of the Angels, run by St. John of God, is practically being closed down by stealth. As soon as the people who are there die off their bed is closed down and no one else is put into it. My brother Michael knows it and has been pushing the case for this for so long, but we need to ensure St. Mary of the Angels is revamped. It is in the centre of our county and it is central to everyone. We hear of so many cases where it is suggested people go up to County Meath or far away to some place in Tipperary or at the far end of County Cork. That is not fair on people with intellectual disabilities and their parents who are trying to do their best for them.

It is time this Government stood up to the HSE because it is practically doing what it likes. It has done so. I am not blaming the workers, the nurses or the people on the ground but the top officials, the directors, the people we do not see at all who are pushing the pens and the people who are making the laws. It is time our Minister for Health and Ministers of State at the Department of Health stood up to the HSE. There is so much money going in there and I am very dubious about how it is being spent, because it is certainly not reflected on the ground when people become sick. We have the situation where, but for SouthDoc, there is no doctor to be found anywhere in Kerry after 5 p.m. on a Friday evening.

There is more downtime and people have to wait until morning and try to stay alive, if they can, until morning. There are so many things that need to be addressed. I am appealing to the Government not to fudge on this issue. These are people with disabilities. Ask that little girl up

there who is fighting for all our people who need help. We need to do something about this now, make a real attempt to put the funding into it and make sure the HSE delivers on the funding.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Bhí an Teachta Healy-Rae ag caint faoi rud éigint atá thar a bheith fíor. An rud ná nach bhfuil gá ag an Aire ná ag an HSE. Nuair atáim ag cur ceisteanna parlaiminte isteach chuig an HSE nó NTA, tá sé soiléir go bhfuil rud éigint mícheart leis an system atá againn. Níl aon duine responsible. It is ridiculous. I do not understand how we have given the power to these senior civil servants and I wonder who is actually running this country. That is something that really needs to be changed because people in these positions-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Government you support.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: You are.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Listen, I did not disturb you when you spoke so please be quiet. I will get a lot more done than any of you will. I want to highlight the unacceptable surge in waiting lists for autism assessments and broader failings in the assessment of need systems. The regional group negotiated pay parity for section 38 and section 39 workers and I am delighted to see it has been done, but let us be honest about what is happening here, namely, that families are exhausted, children are waiting too long and it is not just for assessment but access to real, life-changing supports. The system is letting them down at multiple stages and the consequences are serious. Developmental windows are being missed, family well-being is deteriorating and trust in the system is evaporating.

Two weeks ago I was in the AV room at the invitation of Deputy McDonald. It was to do with my neighbouring constituency in the north inner city and it was great. I heard life experience from mothers and fathers who fought for this and I really was moved by it, and I saw and heard this on the doorsteps during the election campaign. The HSE has reported a 65% increase in completed assessments in the first quarter of this year and that should be acknowledged, but the cold comfort is 15,000 children are still waiting to receive speech therapy, occupational therapy or behavioural supports. Families are being sent from queue to queue and we call it a system. The Minister, Deputy Foley, has committed to reform and that is welcome, but families need not another working group or consultation but immediate action.

Cara, I met you first as a councillor when you invited me to the monster rally outside Leinster House and I thank you for that. I really want to say thanks from the bottom of my heart and from everyone here. You are doing Trojan work. You are doing our job - the job we should be doing. You are asking for the establishment of a task force and I really hope this Government listens to you, because here is the truth. Despite a 65% increase in assessments this year, there were still over 15,000 overdue in March. While the promised reform and the €10 million that, as I have already said, has been allocated is great, it is not solving the core problem. Families do not want paperwork but consistent professional therapy for their children, especially those who have waited years for diagnosis. We need a system that meets children where they are and not one that makes families chase diagnostician after diagnostician just to be seen. We must stop using assessment as a gatekeeper to care and start delivering care based on need.

I believe this Government is serious about its commitments. I am committed to the programme for Government because a government's role at its core is simply to protect and support those who need it most. I acknowledge the work of my predecessor, Finian McGrath, who did an incredible job as Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities. His leadership and

passion sparked my interest in politics at a young age. He showed me that politics, especially Independent politics, is about putting people first and standing up for those who need it most. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht éisteacht liom.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I acknowledge the contributions of everyone here and assure them this issue of assessment of need is a top priority for me as a Minister of State with responsibility for disability who sits at the Cabinet table and indeed it is a priority for the whole of Government, as is the national disability strategy. As Deputies know there is a disability unit set up within the Department of the Taoiseach. We have also had a number of Cabinet committee meetings on disability and assessment of need is a top priority. I assure Deputies I have heard and listened to all their comments. It is an absolute priority for me to ensure we have action on this. I will certainly be open to working with everyone across the House to ensure children have access to the services they require. In my last Ministry of State, where I had responsibility for special education, I travelled the length and breadth of the country and heard the lived experience of parents and teachers and of the children who do not have access to speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. We have put in place a pilot relating to special schools of putting therapists in schools. We are rolling that out to all special schools and beyond. That is work that is ongoing with Government.

I want to make reference to a number of issues raised throughout the evening. Early intervention is absolutely critical if we are to get this right. We are dealing with the issue of waiting lists for assessments of need but we have to go right back to the start and those early milestones of a child's life to ensure that where they are not meeting them they get access to those therapies at that level. That is what is happening as part of our national disability strategy. This is our all-of-government blueprint that we will be publishing in the coming weeks. It will be the blueprint over the next few years to ensure there is an action plan associated with that strategy as well.

Returning to the Private Members' motion on assessments of need, there is a huge amount of work happening on recruitment and retention at domestic and international levels. CORU is working on recognising qualifications of people who are working abroad and want to come home. These issues were raised in this debate. Again, I assure Deputies we are working hard across government on that. There is the no wrong door approach. This comes back to parents who want access to these services for their children, whether they go into the primary care setting, CDNTs or CAMHS, being signposted in the right direction and getting access to the services they need.

The issue of the length of time for the assessments of need was raised. The average length of an assessment of need is approximately 30 hours and it can be up to 90 hours. We want to ensure that children or adults who are going through an assessment of need have access to the therapies they need at the earliest stage possible along that process. I know that parents are frustrated and angry. I meet them regularly in this brief, as I did in my previous brief. I am determined that we get this right but it is complex, as many Deputies have acknowledged. It is not just a question of reducing the waiting list. It is not just about recruitment and retention. It is also about looking at where an assessment of need is required. It is often not required by some of our Departments. In housing, for example, it is asked for but it is actually not required. One is entitled to get services and housing supports such as domiciliary care allowance. One does not need to provide an assessment of need. It is a smaller part of the jigsaw but these are all the areas we need to be looking at to get this right.

I acknowledge Cara. I have met her previously. I know how she has been advocating not only for her own family but for families across the country. She should not be here today; I concur with colleagues that nobody should have to protest outside the gates of Leinster House or a Department to get access to services that he or she needs.

On the challenges associated with that assessment of need process, we need to consider a system-wide approach. It requires a proportionate response from the Government, one that is real, tangible and clear and provides positive outcomes for parents where they actually know the pathway in getting access to services for their children. We need to spell that out.

The motion highlights some of the aspects of a complex issue, including the need to increase the availability of and access to appropriate services for children with disabilities and the need to ensure that children receive an education appropriate to their needs. The Minister, Helen McEntee, is doing a lot of work in this area. We are increasing the number of special classes and therapies in school and we will continue to do that, and to resource it as well.

There are unacceptable delays in accessing assessments of need. The data has been set out many times this evening in respect of the 15,300 assessment of need applications that are overdue for completion. More than 10,600 new applications were received last year, with 4,100 assessments completed last year, so demand is clearly outstripping capacity within the system. That is something we need to address. The introduction of the targeted waiting list by the Government last May is helping, but we need to do much more. Over 3,600 assessments were commissioned from private providers between June of last year to the end of March. We will continue to provide and fund those private assessments as part of the solution. I am encouraged by the 30% increase in assessments completed last year compared to 2023. There was a 65% increase in completed assessments in the first three months of this year. We are moving in the right direction but we have much more to do.

Parents want early access to services and supports for their children. In many cases, they seek support from primary care, CDNTs, CAMHS and are then told that they are going onto another waiting list. To repeat, that is not acceptable. It leads to many people applying for assessments of need, which is their statutory right as set out in the Disability Act. They may believe this will give them early or accelerated access to services but they often find themselves on a further waiting list after getting their assessments of need. There is also the issue of legal bills when parents feel they have to resort to the legal system to ensure they get their assessments of need. This is not where we want to be. What I want as Minister of State is to ensure that children are getting that early intervention and access to therapies at a much earlier stage, it is signposted and it works within the health service in particular.

This will require us to address the issue from a number of angles. Our primary focus has to be on the assessment of need process and identifying the delays and blockages causing these long waiting lists. Then, we need to find the most effective solution to these blockages. It may require legislative changes while preserving the statutory right to an assessment of need. It will also require operational changes, increased staffing resources, better IT systems, or outsourcing to the private sector where appropriate. That work is already under way with officials from the Department of children and the HSE. That is set out in the roadmap for service improvement. We also have to ensure that any changes introduced are effective and can be sustained over time. There is no point in alleviating the current waiting list only to have another backlog appear. We need to look at the system and ensure we can reform it sustainably.

We are all aware of the many demands within the healthcare system. We also have to ensure that our disability services are appropriately and adequately resourced and staffed to meet the needs of people with disabilities. I look forward to the development of that dedicated disability workforce strategy this year, which will meet the growing service demands and address recruitment and retention challenges across specialist disability services. It is also important to emphasise that increased capacity and enhanced service delivery in the disability sector will not be possible unless we as a Government ensure that we are resourcing it properly and ambitiously. We are spending €3.2 billion on our HSE disability services this year, an 11.5% increase on last year or €1.2 billion since 2020. This is significant funding. I appreciate that there are significant pressures. People have referred to the incidence levels of those saying that they have a disability. People are ageing, we are all living longer and disability will be part of what we in the House have to deal with.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Many people have said that it is particularly sad that Cara Darmody has to carry out a 50-hour sit-out outside Leinster House. Many of us have met her over several years. This is not the first time she has been up here or the first time she has been out protesting alongside her father Mark, on behalf of her brothers John and Neil, who have been abjectly failed by the State, and on behalf of all the other Johns and Neils who have not got the services they require in any way. The only thing there is going to be agreement on across the Chamber is that there has been a failure to deliver and none of this is good enough. The Government has to take responsibility for its failures. We have all dealt with these cases in our constituencies. I am dealing with a number now. Everybody has seen it before. We talk about a single point of access and we know that even those who are lucky enough to get therapies or an assessment still have to make the journey and deal with elected representatives. That is the sign of a system that does not work. I would love to think that we were getting the sorts of answer we would like on behalf of our constituents who are obviously not getting them. There are 902 people on the waiting list in Louth for AON, with 245 waiting over 12 months. That does not sound like much of a success. There are 15,296 children who have been failed. We cannot talk about success when, by the end of the year, we could be talking about 24,796 children not having received an assessment of need within six months. Government is talking about removing one of the few rights that people have. They are going to exercise this right because they are failing to get the service from the State that they absolutely deserve and that is required. When my son, Turlough, was moving from primary care back to the CDNT, my wife said she did not need this as we did not need to put him on a list where he would not get any service. That is not to take away from the great work that is done by many people but if you look at the children's disability network team in north Louth, 53% of occupational therapist posts are vacant, as are 52% of speech and language therapist and 48% of psychologist posts. If you exclude administrative staff, there is a 36% vacancy rate across the board. I could go on but unfortunately, we all keep going on about the same thing. There has been a failure to deliver, we need to see real delivery and this is just not good enough.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This is a bizarre debate full of contradictions and contortions. Essentially, we are discussing a motion endorsed by the combined Opposition that, in its most simple terms, asks the Government to stop breaking the law. The Government states it will not oppose the motion but no, it will not actually stop breaking the law. Anyone who has interacted with disability services in Ireland will understand the contradictions. When it comes to disability in Ireland, it is Ireland at its best and at its worst. A Disability Act that guarantees children with disabilities the right to an assessment of need within six months is Ireland at its best. In the case of Governments that ignore that law, however, which are forced through the courts, found

guilty, still ignore the law and, rather than upholding the right, come up with the ingenious solution to simply get rid of the right altogether, that is Ireland at its worst.

I have dealt with hundreds of families in Cavan and Monaghan where parents are fighting every day for their children with disabilities. I have seen the absolute love they have for their special children and the unquenchable love they get in return. I have seen communities rally around them and their demands for respite centres and a special school. I have seen workers in the sector going beyond the call of duty for those children. That is Ireland at its best. I have also seen, however, the heartache of those families who are literally begging anyone who will listen for the services that their children need. I have seen the teenagers who have not advanced to their full potential for no other reason than they were let down by the Government and were denied the services they needed when they needed them. I have stared at the formulaic, bureaucratic, frankly insulting responses from Monaghan and Cavan CDNTs that blandly state that an OT, speech and language, physiotherapy, psychological treatment or assessment of need that those children require is subject to a waiting list. They say sorry for the long wait but we expect an appointment some time in the next few years. It is Ireland at its worst.

It is Ireland's disability services under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, propped up by the lackey Independents who are all too happy to blame the HSE rather than the Government they support.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Tonight, we are once again treated to all the contradictions and contortions. The message is very clear: for all the rhetoric, the message from the Government is that the families of children with disabilities will have to keep fighting every day. The message back is equally clear: fight they absolutely will and we will stand with them every single step of the way. Disability rights were hard won. They will not be given up regardless of whatever spin is put on them. The message to the Government is clear; stop breaking the law.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: In Waterford, 147 children are waiting for an assessment of need and some have been waiting for nearly two years. That is illegal. That is the Government breaking its own laws. As the Government knows, under the Disability Act children are entitled to an assessment within six months. That is not optional. That is the law. Yet, the Government breaks that law every single day. Across the State, more than 15,000 children are now overdue their assessment. That number could rise to almost 25,000 by the end of next year. Across the State, more than 15,000 children are being denied their rights under the Disability Act and families are being abandoned. They feel abandoned because they are. They are forced to pay privately or in many cases, go without. It is not just failure. It is a systemic denial of care and it has to stop. Not opposing this motion is not enough. The Government needs to take action and it needs to make it stop.

Budget 2025 allocated some extra funding, namely, €4.5 million on top of €5 million in core funding but we have seen no real change. Just 7% of assessments are completed within the legal timeframe. That is not progress; it is collapse. What is worse is that this is not just about assessments. It is part of a litany of Government failures when it comes to children. Children are left in pain for years waiting on scoliosis surgery. There were unsafe and unnecessary operations on vulnerable children and there is still no accountability. There is a crisis in special school and autism class spaces that is left unresolved year after year. CAMHS is in chaos.

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Child homelessness is rising again. School absenteeism is on the rise. In Waterford, there is not a single educational welfare officer in post. Three out of three positions are still vacant. It is not a pattern. It cannot be an accident. It is a systemic failure to plan, fund or deliver for children.

Tá na mílte páiste ar fud na tíre ag fanacht ar mheasúnú riachtanais. Céard atá de dhíth orthu don saol, don oideachas agus don chúram? Tá gníomh ag teastáil anois.

Deputy Máire Devine: I welcome Mark and his family here. The family named her well as her name is Cara, a friend, and she has become a true friend to not just her brothers but to many in this country hoping for change and the delivery of care that the Government has failed to do. It has failed the children in my constituency and across this nation. It is a clear breach of the Disability Act and more than 15,000 children have overdue assessments. The Government has had 20 years to correct this but all we get are phrases like “we look to”, “we endeavour”, “we should” and “we plan” *ad nauseam*. Over 20 years, I am sure it might be a bit tired of saying the same things again but not tired enough to deliver change.

My constituents regularly contact me with frustration and anxiety over severely delayed assessments of need for their children. The HSE and the disability services are under so much pressure that it is impossible to complete assessments within the legally-mandated six month period. It takes more than 12 months before an assessment even gets to the desk of a clinical psychologist in the children’s disability network. There is not enough trained staff on these teams to do the assessment and most assessments of need are outsourced privately at a cost to taxpayers. Tightening the deadlines further will just mean more pressure on staff, more outsourcing, further clogging of courts and no services. This is what is so gravely wrong with assessments of need. There is a law but no resources to implement it and perhaps not the determination.

Disability services need a complete overhaul. We must address the disconnect between CAMHS and disability in all. I want the Government to take Cara’s fund seriously.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Well said.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Fisheries Protection

109. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the need to urgently review the relevant parts of Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 that cover the structure and operation of the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority to ensure a harmonisation of regulation with the rest of the European Union (details supplied). [25830/25]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: This question asks the views of the Minister of State, Deputy Timmy Dooley, on the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006. The Minister of State will know already from his brief the serious concerns of people in the fishing and sea-food industry about the approach of the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, in compari-

son to other regulators across Europe.

10 o'clock I want to have an exchange with the Minister of State at this early stage in his new role. Our committee will do likewise in the next month or so.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. He will be aware of the engagement I have had with the industry in recent weeks and my commitment to continued engagement with him on the issue. I am looking forward to an opportunity for the committee to address various matters that arise, and I intend to work with the Deputy on that. I will put a few facts on the record first.

The fisheries control regulation provides for a Union fisheries control system for ensuring compliance with the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy and establishing a level playing field across the EU on fisheries control. The current control regulation entered into force in January 2024 and updates and amends the previous regulation from 2009. The Department is working with the SFPA and relevant Departments and agencies to introduce the required measures to implement the relevant provisions of the updated control regulation at national level. While this may involve amending existing legislation or introducing new legislation, including in respect of certain enforcement measures, it is not envisioned that there will be a review of the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 in the manner suggested by the Deputy at this time.

On the accountability of the SFPA, section 48 of the 2006 Act provides for the establishment of an SFPA consultative committee for the purposes of consultations and liaison with the sea-fisheries and seafood sectors and other relevant interests on matters relating to the functions of the authority. In addition, section 68 provides for the accountability of the SFPA to committees of the Oireachtas generally. There is an opportunity to exercise this provision. I am conscious that the consultative committee has a number of vacancies. I intend to address that matter relatively shortly and look forward to the committee engaging with us on it.

An independent review of the organisational capability of the SFPA was completed in April 2020. I will come back to the Deputy in a supplementary reply.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I shared with the Minister of State my direct eyewitness account of the incredible level of oversight that the SFPA has of the industry. I witnessed in a fish factory in Killybegs CCTV cameras and access to the building at any time. Even that was not enough. I do not know of any industry where there would be cameras literally in the workplace every day, with images going directly from the factory floor to the regulator, and yet that is not enough. We have got to the point where it is out of control. I am reliably informed that this type of approach exists nowhere else in Europe. It impacts on the ability of the industry to attract boats to land and do business. Irish boats are going elsewhere because they do not face the same approach. This has to change. The approach that we have seen is over the top and not justified in any way, shape or form.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The principal objective of the review, which was carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers, was to contribute to the ongoing and future development of the organisation. The areas covered by the review were the organisational capabilities of the SFPA to deliver on its mission for the effective and fair regulation - and I emphasise fair regulation - of the sea-fishing and seafood sectors that fall within its mandate. I have to accept that fishermen,

fisherwomen and processors do not believe that it is fair. That is their view. The Deputy is entitled to express that here. It would be useful for the matter to be discussed at the committee.

The report contained 46 recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the organisation and the process of implementing the review findings has been completed. The implementation of the recommendations has required investment in systems, restructuring and personnel. An independent advisory board nominated by the Department assisted the management of the SFPA in implementing the recommendations. The Department has provided significant additional resources to the authority in recent years to strengthen it and ensure that it delivers to a high standard in the context of its core responsibilities.

I recognise the point the Deputy raised. These matters can be thrashed out by the new committee. I am pleased that there is a new committee and that it will focus, in particular, on fisheries and the marine.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The committee met earlier today. We looked at our work plan. We will be bringing in the fishing representative organisations, the Irish Fishing and Seafood Alliance, the National Inshore Fishermen's Organisation and the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation, which represents the inshore and islands, in order that they can have their say in how this is being implemented. We will look at how it compares with what obtains in other European states. We need to make sure that we harmonise regulation across Europe and that there is a level playing pitch for all fishermen. As the Minister of State knows, their livelihoods are at stake. The law can criminalise fishermen. If one speaks to fishermen, as I know the Minister of State and many of our TDs do, they are fearful to speak out. They are afraid for their livelihoods. They will tell you in quiet whispers what they have experienced. I compare it with An Garda Síochána. We have all seen examples of great policing, but sometimes there is also bad policing. Bad policing undermines the confidence of the people you are dealing with. Good policing does the opposite. We have to get back to universally consistent, good policing in the State when it comes to our fishermen.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy for his intervention. He is raising concerns and issues that have been shared with him and with me. I met the SFPA. The people I met and the various sections of the organisation are fulfilling their mandate to the best of their ability. We have to recognise that the authority's role is prescribed in legislation. We are precluded from involving ourselves directly in any decisions it takes. The Deputy raised points that are relevant and that can be discussed at the committee.

We also have to recognise that there is an important role for the SFPA in ensuring that we meet our commitments at European level regarding our quota management, landings and all of that activity. We need to look to a future that will involve greater use of technology, as the Deputy identified and as was identified for those of us who had an opportunity to visit the ports, and the level of scrutiny that is now available through such technology. That is where we have to go ultimately, because the sense I get is that the fishing industry generally is committed to doing what is right. We need to work with those on all sides to ensure that this happens.

Common Agricultural Policy

110. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Ireland's position on the emerging proposals from the European Commission to allow pay-

ments for compliance with good agricultural and environmental condition, GAEC, 2, requirements under the CAP simplification package; if he will advocate for strong support measures for Irish farmers managing peatlands and wetlands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25745/25]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Will the Minister outline Ireland's stance on the European Commission's new proposals to allow the payment for farmers who meet GAEC 2 requirements under the CAP simplification package? Will he push for strong support measures for Irish farmers who are managing peatlands and wetlands, given the challenges that they face?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter, which is topical after last week's announcements. The proposals for CAP simplification were published on 14 May by Commissioner Hansen. I welcome any proposals that will simplify and reduce the administrative burden for farmers and for national administrations. However, as with any new legislation, we will need to carefully examine the details of the proposals and evaluate the potential impact for Ireland. My Department will analyse the proposals, and will engage with stakeholders through the forum of the CAP strategic plan monitoring committee once the possibilities are well understood.

It is worth emphasising that the draft amending regulation will only take legal effect after it goes through the process of co-decision, with input from the European Parliament and the Council. This will take some time. Any changes proposed can only be introduced after that process has concluded.

On my position on these proposals, my Department provided input to the Commission on options for simplification, some of which are reflected in the Commission's package.

On conditionality, through my Department, I asked for the removal of GAEC 2 from the regulations on the basis of overlap between these requirements and other national and EU legislation. However, the removal of GAEC 2 has not been included in the Commission proposal so GAEC 2 will remain a conditionality requirement and will have to be applied from this year onwards. GAEC 2 is a mandatory condition of the payment of the basic income support for sustainability for farmers, as I know the Deputy is aware. The intention behind it is to protect wetlands and peatlands. EU regulations require all member states to have a standard in place from the start of this year.

The simplification proposal provides that costs arising from GAEC 2 compliance can now be included in the calculation of costs for eco-schemes or agri-environmental schemes. It is important to note two points regarding the possibility of providing specific support measures under the CSP for GAEC 2 requirements. First, Ireland's CAP strategic plan funding is already fully committed under the existing schemes and no new funding is available as part of the simplification proposals. Second, the GAEC 2 standard for Ireland, as recently introduced, is based on existing national legislation and usual farming practices.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: One of the core issues is how land is being mapped. Farmers are reporting that productive land is being wrongly classified as peatland with very little consultation or clarity coming towards them. Once land is labelled under GAEC 2, strict restrictions apply. There can be no drainage, no receding and limited grazing, which can have a major impact on farm income, especially in the midlands and the west. There is also a real worry about the retrospective impact and fears that this could lead to future land designations.

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There has been a lack of clarity from the Department and farmers feel environmental demands are rising without adequate support or compensation. Representative groups are calling for a pause on the implementation until these issues are resolved. That is a fair and reasonable ask.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I have been on the record a number of times on this but I am happy to reassure farmers again that there is nothing to fear in the baseline rationality around GAEC 2. Farmers can continue to do all of their normal farming activity on a day-to-day basis. That is not going to be undermined by this. It is just a baseline requirement for the basic income support process, or what farmers would know as the single farm payment. I know there are a lot of concerns around this. We had to have a minimum controllable area, which we can justify to the Commission that we are able to monitor activity on. That was the land parcel identification system, LPIS. With that, we set a baseline figure using the Hammond Teagasc map from 2009 as the most accurate way of doing that. This was a baseline figure of at least 50% peat in the LPIS for it to come in under GAEC 2. That brought in some mineral soils - about 100,000 ha - but if we did not have that and if there had been any peat in the LPIS, it would have brought in 880,000 ha of mineral soils. I can expand on that further later.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Bogaimid ar aghaidh go dtí an chéad cheist eile. Questions Nos. 111 and 114 are grouped and in ainmneacha na Teachtaí Kenny agus Aird. We will begin with an Teachta Kenny.

Agriculture Supports

111. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has had discussions with his counterparts in the EU on the future of the CAP budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25995/25]

114. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline the strategies he and his Department are taking to ensure a fully funded, designated CAP budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26071/25]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise with the Minister an issue with regard to where Ireland stands on the upcoming CAP negotiations. Farmers envisage a lot of difficulties in the future. While prices are high at the farm gate, farmers will still depend on having an adequate CAP in place to guarantee their future and sustainability. There are serious concerns around this kite that has been flown about changing Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 and maybe amalgamating them with other areas. There are concerns that this funding will not be ring-fenced or available in the future. We would like to get reassurance on what the Minister's proposals will be going forward.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I propose to take Questions Nos. 111 and 114 together.

As Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am working closely with the EU institutions and my counterparts in other member states to try to influence the next Common Agriculture Policy. The CAP is central to the EU's success in ensuring food security, supporting farm incomes and developing rural areas. The CAP also remains critical to the agrifood sector's resilience and competitiveness, as it has since Ireland joined the EU more than 50 years ago.

I recently set out my four key priorities for the next CAP. First, we need a CAP that is

more straightforward for farmers. Second, we need a more flexible and responsive CAP. We need a CAP that has an appropriate balance between all elements of sustainability. Finally, and most importantly perhaps, an adequate and dedicated budget is needed for an effective CAP, as Deputy Kenny outlined and with which I am sure Deputy Aird will concur.

I am determined that the CAP will continue to play a positive role in supporting Irish farmers, our food industry, rural communities and the wider economy into the future. It is a key responsibility of the Government to raise Ireland's concerns with our EU partners and to try to influence EU policy. For my part as Minister, I meet my counterparts in the AGRIFISH Council every month to discuss and shape agriculture and food policy in the EU. I will continue to engage with Christophe Hansen, the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, and my fellow EU ministers on the issues affecting the agrifood sector, including the CAP post-2027, at Council meetings, as well as in bilateral discussions that occur on every occasion. My next meeting of the AGRIFISH Council is next Monday in Brussels and I will travel there on Sunday evening. I will prioritise these engagements at a European level, particularly in preparation for Ireland's Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2026 which will be a pivotal time.

The point Deputy Kenny raised relates to the initial multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and the overall budget, which is obviously a critical part of this. That is why, as one of my top priorities in my role, I have set in train the process of putting the building blocks in place. Ensuring a foundation is in place means my 26 EU colleagues, the other ministers for agriculture, know what our priorities are. They want to tell me what their priorities are before we have the Presidency and before I take the chair as planned in July next year.

I should note that the funding for the CAP forms part of the broader EU budget known as the multi-annual financial framework or MFF. This is ultimately agreed by Heads of State and Government at the European Council. The European Commission is due to set out proposals for the next MFF this July. Commission proposals for CAP post-2027 negotiations are likely to follow shortly after that, with negotiations on both the future MFF and future CAP running in parallel.

Ensuring the CAP remains a priority in the next MFF is essential. While the EU faces rising demands in areas such as defence, security and competitiveness, we must ensure the social cohesion and stability of our rural communities is maintained. Achieving an adequate and dedicated CAP budget and retaining the full toolbox of support measures under Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 will be challenging, given the other pressures on the EU budget and proposals for new MFF funding structures. However, I am working closely with colleagues across the Government and with my counterparts in member states to underline the importance of food security to EU autonomy and security. We should not be talking about defence and security without including food security as part of that conversation. I will also underline the vital role farming and food plays in our rural communities and economies and the important contribution farming and food make to EU competitiveness, innovation and climate and biodiversity ambitions.

As CAP and the MFF negotiations progress, Ireland will continue to advocate for a simplified, well-funded and adaptable CAP framework that supports farm resilience, environmental ambition and rural development. Ireland will play a key role in these negotiations in the run-up to and during our Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2026.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is clear that the multi-annual financial framework is going to be vital going forward and we will get a sense of where it is at. The key issue for farmers

is that there are so many competing interests. The Minister mentioned defence and security which is the one in the headlines at the moment. I concur with him that food security is vital for everyone across the European Union and across the globe. When we have huge problems, such as those we have at the moment where we see great uncertainty from the point of view of conflict and tariffs, all of which can have a huge impact, it is vital in Ireland and across Europe that farmers are made sustainable. It is vital to know we can produce our own food to feed our people and that farmers can do so in a way that gives them an income and keeps them sustainable. That is what we need to do. We need a longer CAP, one which stretches out further so there can be more assurance further into the future. That is vital because the short term nature of CAP so far has been to the detriment of Irish and European farmers.

Deputy William Aird: Recent reports that the European Commission is considering dismantling the ring-fenced CAP budget are very worrying. This move would be a dangerous mistake for Irish agriculture, rural communities and food security across Europe. Agriculture cannot be sacrificed to meet other EU priorities such as defence or security. We cannot take food security for granted. I and farmers like me work tirelessly to produce safe, sustainable and affordable food. Farmers must not be left carrying the financial burden of broader policy shifts.

I know the Minister is aware that what we are facing is potentially the most serious threat to CAP in a generation. The CAP budget must remain strong, separate and, most importantly, increased. Rising costs and inflation have already reduced its value. The CAP budget must be increased to ensure it reflects the real economic challenges facing farmers today.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank both Deputies for their contributions. It is very important when we have questions on agriculture, food and the marine that CAP is at their heart because it really is so important to everything we are doing. To go to some earlier points about CAP and in particular, Deputy Kenny's, to have a longer CAP, a longer budget period would be needed because the budget drives the other.

On the concerns, this night last week I gave an address at the IFA CAP conference held at the Kilashee Hotel in County Kildare. It was very well attended by more than 500 farmers. There was a lot of concern, as Deputy Aird outlined, but I made the point that historically CAP proposals have come after the MFF and that has not always served us particularly well. Some very big decisions can be made during the MFF process on the budget that CAP had to then deal with afterwards.

Commissioner Hansen saying he will come up with proposals in July as well, at the same time as CAP, has concerned some people and farm organisations but it is better if we try to do them concurrently and try to engage. I look forward to meeting the Commissioner again next Monday and when we attend a number of events together in the coming weeks, I will convey those points back to him.

One of my main points is the issued raised by Deputy Aird about taking food security for granted. Before the illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine, we did take some things for granted in Europe. We did not in Ireland. Enda Kenny and previous taoisigh asked other European colleagues to pay more into the overall budget so we could protect the CAP. It should be remembered that after Brexit there was talk about the CAP being decimated by up to 30%. Environmental money was used to supplement it and with that came the conditionality that farmers have stepped up to the plate to achieve. Overall, we cannot have food security taken for granted, the same way energy security has been challenged, and the Ukrainian crisis has

focused minds in that regard. I very much hope it will focus minds in these negotiations as well.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister and recognise all of that. At the core of this, and it is the point our colleague from Laois made, is the issue of Pillars 1 and 2 and the kite being flown regarding where we will be in the future. It is something that really needs to be dealt with because farmers are fearful when change comes in like that that we will see an erosion, particularly of Pillar 1, which is the direct payment they get that they depend so much on throughout the country. It is particularly so along the western seaboard and in the west. Farmers are on more marginal land and are struggling more, and they need that payment and assurance into the future. It would be vital to make sure that happens.

On the budget itself, this point goes back many Governments. Every time we have a CAP we see the budget squeezed down a little bit. It has not kept up with inflation; it has actually reduced systematically for farmers. We need to see a reversal of that if we are to have a future for farming that will be sustainable across the country and across the European Union.

Deputy William Aird: There is significant concern about the Commission's intention to release its vision for the post-2027 CAP at the same time as the EU budget plan. We cannot have this railroaded through. This approach, without consultation, is entirely unacceptable. Major decisions about the future of European agriculture must not be made behind closed doors in Brussels. Farmers must be heard. I urge the Minister to take a clear stance and, first, oppose any attempt to merge or dilute the CAP budget; second, ensure the CAP remains focused on its core goals of farm income for farmers, food security for Europeans and strong, sustainable communities, which is fierce important; and, finally, ensuring proposals under the CAP simplification package must deliver real, practical improvements at farm level and not more red tape.

I wish the Minister well in his CAP negotiations. The expectations of Irish farm families rest on his shoulders. They are trusting him to deliver. He cannot come home without a CAP budget that is ring-fenced for Irish farmers.

Deputy Martin Heydon: No pressure there. Thanks for that. I jest. The Deputy is dead right that it is that serious.

Deputy William Aird: Yes.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It absolutely is. We know how well Irish agriculture has been served down through the years and through successive CAPS and the Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 structure. I have grave concerns around any attempt to change that. Not only do I have concerns for the impact on farming, which is why I will fight so hard to articulate the Irish position very clearly, but I also have concerns about the impact on the Single Market. If we go into national policies where everything is in there together, countries will very much go back to doing what they are doing alone. While there has been a lot of frustration with some elements of the CAP, and some very valid points have been raised here, the CAP has served us well in many other respects in terms of delivery. The point around the broader overall envelope and how much money there is to do this ultimately comes down to the appetite of member states. If there is an increased ambition in defence and other areas, is the appetite there for member states to ask their citizens to pay more to be a part of Europe? It is very difficult to see how all of the additional ambition can be delivered in a meaningful way from a pot that did not have the same level of expenditure on the likes of defence the last time. We hear of a lot of European countries with this level of ambition and this will be the kind of conversation that will have to happen across

member states. They will happen at prime ministerial level as well and at the Council of Europe where they are doing that overall budget.

On Deputy Aird's final point about the focus and simplification of CAP, this really is two parts. The first part is about the budget and I am working with all colleagues across government to make sure we put our best foot forward on that one. The second is when we know the position we are in, we will continue to have that engagement across Europe but use the flexibility open to us to deliver the most focused, simplified CAP that works for our farmers and works for our agrifood industry.

Water Quality

112. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will reconsider the nitrates stocking rate map and make an adjustment to the Timoleague catchment stocking rate (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25786/25]

Deputy Michael Collins: The recent changes made to the nitrates stocking rate map need to be reconsidered. Lowering the stocking rate to 220 kg N/ha in additional areas in west Cork will have minimal, if any, impact on water quality. The Timoleague catchment has demonstrated nitrates concentration in water does not proportionally increase when the stocking rates increase. Will the Minister please reconsider the map and make adjustments? I sent the Minister a more detailed outline of this to which he might have an answer.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I recently met farmers from Timoleague and I visited the area previously when I was a Member of the previous Government. I am well aware of the great work that has happened down there, supported by Teagasc and others, how passionate farmers are and the pressure there is on land availability and how any changes can have an impact.

I am very committed to the objective of improving water quality and ensuring the strongest possible scientific case can be made for a continuation of Ireland's nitrates derogation beyond the 1 January 2026. Those two things are connected.

Ireland implements a robust action programme of measures under our nitrates action plan. As part of the additional measures introduced under the interim review of the fifth nitrates action programme, with effect from this December, the maximum derogation stocking rate reduces to 220 kg organic N/ha in certain areas. The Timoleague catchment is one of the additional areas moving to this lower limit, as the Deputy highlighted. This change is happening in areas where the EPA has identified the need for nitrate reduction measures to improve water quality but that were not considered under the European Commission's criteria for the two-year water quality review.

The measure becomes applicable from 1 December as it had to comply within the timeframe of the current nitrates action programme, which concludes at the end of 2025, so it was the latest point at which it could be brought in to count as a measure under this programme. This was necessary to best prepare for discussions with the Commission regarding Ireland's next nitrates derogation. Within such a limited timeframe, the December date for implementation was selected to allow farmers in the Timoleague area, and indeed other areas affected, maximum time to prepare and manage their cows through the normal spring calving lactation cycle.

In simple terms, derogation farmers in these additional areas will have an effective limit of 247.5 kg N/ha this year, rather than 250 kg N/ha. I will give the rest of the information in my supplementary response.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister. This valuable catchment, which provides important research findings to the rest of the country through the agricultural catchment programme, will be subject to the stocking reduction of 220 kg N/ha from 1 December. This will make it impossible to decouple and quantify the impact of agricultural measures on water quality from a reduction in stocking rates. In fact, critics of the sector will conveniently assume that any improvements in water quality from now on will be a consequence of a reduced stocking rate limit and ignore all the good work farmers have implemented over the years, which is now delivering.

SI 42 of 2025 states clearly that it is within the Minister's gift to determine what areas should be reduced to 220 kg N/ha. Following the interim review of the current and fifth NAP on the grounds of providing valuable scientific research, the Timoleague catchment needs to remain at the stocking rate of 250 kg N/ha. Will the Minister please reconsider the map and make adjustments?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I absolutely recognise the great work happening in the agricultural catchment programme. The most recently published EPA data shows nitrates concentrations nationally have reduced in a representative sample of our rivers last year. It is acknowledged and welcomed that nitrate levels have also reduced in the Timoleague catchment. Nitrates levels recorded in 2024 in Timoleague were at their lowest level since recording began in 2009. However, the nitrates concentrations in the river leaving the Timoleague catchment are still approximately double what they should be to achieve good ecological status in the adjoining estuary. This is why the catchment was identified by the EPA as an area requiring a nitrate reduction measure.

As committed to in the programme for Government, the Government is doing everything in its power to make the case at EU level to secure our next nitrates derogation, given our unique grass-based production system. Access to the derogation is contingent on improving water quality. The agrifood sector is engaging in significant, unprecedented and very welcome actions to reduce its impact on water quality. It is critical this good work continues and that it supports Ireland's case and my case to retain the nitrates derogation post 2025, which is something I am actively working on and is of utmost importance to the Deputy's constituents and derogation farmers throughout the country.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister. I know he said he met the farmers in Timoleague. I think the Taoiseach has met them and the previous Taoiseach met them. The farmers there are doing everything and their utmost, and farmers who pull out all the stops need to be rewarded. It is within the Minister's remit to make changes here and make sure they do not end up in a situation where they are down to 220 kg N/ha on 1 December. It would set a good example to the dairy sector and for farmers who are making such severe efforts to put things right that they are rewarded for doing so. It looks to me as if we are not going to reward these farmers for doing so and we are going to tick the box putting them in the same category as those who did not make an effort.

Will the Minister make sure in the next few months that this stocking rate stays at 250 kg N/ha in the Timoleague catchment area to reward the farmers who have worked hard to put things

right? They will continue to work hard if that reward is given to them, and I would appreciate it if the Minister would announce that here today.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I appreciate the Deputy's articulation of the concerns, the great work of his constituents and the frustration I know there is on the ground with this change. He talked about rewarding his constituents. The best reward I can get his constituents and the farmers in the Timoleague catchment area is to make sure there is a derogation beyond the end of this year, and that is not by any means guaranteed. In a way, I am a little bit concerned that there is complacency coming in around the country where people think we will have to get it. We know how important it is. This is absolutely critical for our rural economy, not just for the 7,000 derogation farmers. For a tillage farmer or some other farmer besides a derogation farmer, the impact on land availability if the derogation is gone or is reduced further will be really significant. We have a very strong story to tell because our farmers are making great efforts to maintain that derogation. That said, I cannot leave any weak spot in our case. It is my top priority in Europe to get a derogation beyond the end of this year. I have to implement all the measures we committed to in the previous action programmes, and this is a key part of that. It has been designed to have a minimal impact on the Deputy's constituents for this year, but the biggest reward I can get them is a derogation beyond the end of this year.

Animal Diseases

113. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine for an update on the TB summit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25996/25]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise the issue of the TB forum, and some of the soundings that have come from it which have concerned many farm organisations and people on the ground. In my part of the world and in many places we have seen increased incidence of TB and huge problems on foot of that, with farmers being locked up and not being able to sell or trade their animals. The efforts that have been made over the decades have not yielded results, and there needs to be acknowledgment of that. The eradication programme has been, shall we call it, a failure. I think it is pretty much close to that at the moment, and I would like to see what exactly we can do to turn that around if at all possible.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important point, and he is not the only Deputy here this evening to raise points about bovine TB. It is a really challenging disease to control and eradicate.

In recent years, bovine TB levels have continued to deteriorate here in Ireland. Herd incidence has increased from 4.31% in 2022 to 6.04% in 2024, resulting in a 36% increase in the number of herds restricted between those two years. As of 11 May 2025, over a 12-month period, we had a herd incidence of 6.3% with more than 42,200 reactors. This disease is having an impact on our farmers and their families, not just financially but also emotionally. It is a hugely traumatic time when this hits, and the Deputy knows that from his constituents, as I know from mine, and I know from lived experience as well.

At the February meeting of the TB forum, it was agreed that all stakeholders would provide proposals on new measures for inclusion in the TB programme aimed at reducing TB levels in cattle against the backdrop of surging disease levels. At the TB forum on 26 March - the following month - all stakeholders were provided the opportunity to present proposals on draft

measures to be incorporated into the TB programme to address the recent increase in disease incidence over the past two years. Following that meeting, the chair of the forum wrote to me in early April outlining discussions at the meetings.

On 8 May 2025, I held a meeting of key stakeholders to address the deteriorating TB disease levels, where discussions were held on the most effective ways to mitigate the impact of bovine TB on farm families and to reduce herd incidence and spread of the disease. At that meeting, I presented 30 potential actions underpinned by five key pillars to address the current rate of bovine TB. Those five pillars were: to support herds free of bovine TB to remain free; reduce the impact of wildlife on the spread of bovine TB; detect and eliminate bovine TB infection as early as possible in herds with a TB breakdown and avoid a future breakdown; help farmers improve all areas of farm biosecurity; and reduce the impact of known high-risk animals in spreading bovine TB.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. It is stark. That 36% increase really brings home the huge difficulty currently. Wildlife control is one of the serious impacts on all of this. We have to get to grips with the reality. In some parts of the country it is deer; in other parts of the country it is badgers. There are issues there that need to be dealt with.

The vaccination programme has also been a failure in respect of that. It simply has not worked. I wonder, particularly in blackspots where we have serious outbreaks, whether we should have a mandatory blood testing of all animals rather than just the skin test that is there at the moment. Is that something that needs to be considered?

The vaccination of animals at birth is something I know has not been rolled out anywhere yet. It is something we seriously need to look at as a method of control, that we can have the BCG vaccine for all calves when they are born and that would control them into the future. I know there will be issues the Minister will raise with regard to traceability, and whether they will have the same test for a positive in that respect as if they have got the TB from wherever else. I think there can be unique tracers put on the animals at the time they are given the vaccination. Everything needs to be considered because what we have done at the moment has simply failed.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I reassure the Deputy that everything that is possible is being considered and everything has been looked at. I have started an engagement with the farm organisations and key stakeholders since I was appointed in January, and since the February meeting of the TB forum I have been back and forth with them looking to get their feedback and submissions, having proposals that have come back through my chief veterinary officer, and then taking on board their reactions to those proposals. I made significant changes ahead of the TB summit I had a couple of weeks ago, and I am going to meet those stakeholders again later this week with a revised set of proposals that has taken on board their points. This has been a very deliberative process, but I have made the point that this process cannot go on forever such is the level of incidence.

I have proposals for very significant increases in investment in the wildlife programme and changes to the approach there. With respect to increases in blood testing, obviously we have the challenge with the skin test that there is only 80% efficacy, but it is very accurate. When it is right, it is right, but with the 20%, there are some that are missed. On the blood test side, that increases efficacy to over 90%. I will come back in a further supplementary.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. He mentioned increased funding. I believe the eradication programme cost about €75 million in 2023. There is a lot of money being spent on this, going back over the decades. We talk about the price of the children's hospital. We are into that kind of money having been spent on trying to eradicate TB in this country, and we are probably worse now than we were many decades ago. It is time to look at this anew. I respect that the Minister said he has taken on the views of many of the farm organisations and people who were at the forum who felt the initial proposals were trying to place the farmers very much in the firing line in relation to this. There has to be a way of dealing with it in a partnership way whereby everybody can work together to try to eradicate this disease. Ultimately, that is what we need to do. We need to build a consensus across the farm organisations, the Department and everybody involved in the food industry to ensure we can continue to produce the high quality beef product in Ireland that we can market all over the world and that we can guarantee we have eradicated this disease once and for all. It will take a Trojan effort and that is why the Minister needs to continue to work with everybody to make that happen.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I absolutely want to do this in partnership. I know the stress and strain of this. It goes beyond the financial but the financial is really significant. I want to provide a clear pathway for those 6,000 herds, their farmers and their families that are restricted and that have reactors. I want to give them a clear pathway to show that there is light at the end of the tunnel and a way out of this. Many of those who have multiple reactors really have a sense of hopelessness. I also want to make sure the 94% of farmers in this country who do not have it do not have to experience this. That is the partnership approach.

On the earlier point around wildlife, in my initial response I highlighted how I have very significant proposals on changing the approach to wildlife management and significant further investment in it. However, let us be really clear here. Any suggestion, and I am not saying it is the Deputy's suggestion but it can be suggested at times, that wildlife is the only problem is factually incorrect. There are three drivers of this disease among bovines. One is wildlife, the second is cattle-to-cattle transmission and the other is residual left where there is a large outbreak in a herd. If we do not tackle all three, we will leave a gap in the fence for this to continue to seep through and I cannot let that happen.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 115 and 116 taken with Written Answers.

Trade Promotion

117. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the number and type of trade promotion events he has participated in since his appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25107/25]

Deputy John Clendennen: Will the Minister give us the details of the number and the type of trade promotion events that he has participated in since his appointment? Will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a really important point

around trade and trade promotion, which has become so pronounced in the lexicon of everybody and much more in the focus of everyone who pays even a cursory glance at what happens in agriculture. When other countries talk about tariffs and changes to our trade flow, it probably brings a focus in this country from people who do not always recognise that we export 90% of the food and drink we produce. It is highly sought after at home and abroad. Any interruptions to that trade have impacts. Given our dependence on the agrifood sector in regard to exports, trade and market diversification, it is a key priority for my Department and myself.

Food Vision 2030, the shared strategy for the agrifood sector, reflects the importance of diversifying and developing new markets and new market segments for Irish food and drink products in the UK, the EU and wider international markets. Food Vision has a goal to increase the value of exports of sustainably produced high quality Irish food and beverages globally. Agrifood export value reached a record €19.26 billion in 2024. Bord Bia, a State body funded by my Department, is dedicated to promoting Ireland's outstanding food, drink and horticulture produce around the world. Its activities include participation in the food exhibitions and trade shows, digital campaigns, retail and restaurant promotions and various other trade promotions and events including campaigns around Saint Patrick's Day global events. Bord Bia also hosts inward buyer visits on an ongoing basis and meetings with key international companies.

In April, I led a visit to the US in collaboration with Bord Bia and Enterprise Ireland. During this visit, which included Washington DC, Kentucky and Chicago, I participated in 11 promotion events as well as key political meetings with senior US political representatives, including my counterpart, Brooke Rollins, the secretary of the US Department of Agriculture. I can also highlight some of my other responses in supplementary.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister. I met with agriculture students and teachers at Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, LOETB, at the Intro to Ag initiative in recent days. I have also met with producers and farmers. It is clear that they are extremely proud of the high regard for Irish produce across the world. However, there is also a level of innovation today within this sector is best in class. It is important that we ensure it remains best in class.

Our success in this sector did not come about by accident. It came about through strategic planning, investment and branding, marketing and promotion. We need to reassure the sector that that will continue long into the future. I recognise the work of Bord Bia in what it has done to make that materialise over a number of years.

I see three strands on which we need to focus. Promoting Irish produce overseas is certainly one of them. We need to see how we can further assist food producers. We also need to encourage Irish supermarkets to stock more Irish produce where possible.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising those points. Trade and trade promotion has many different facets, as the Deputy outlined. In terms of the political meetings I had about trade when abroad, reassuring people about our quality assurance scheme, a nationally backed quality assurance scheme that has our farmers, our food companies all together pulling towards the one set of standards that are independently verified, is hugely appreciated and very much recognised internationally.

Next month I will travel to Japan and South Korea. I will attend the Seoul Foods Expo, which is the fourth largest food exhibition in Asia, as well as World Expo 2025 in Osaka, Ja-

pan. Planning is also under way for a significant trade mission by my Department and myself to China in late autumn. We will have trade receptions in London and Paris as well. On all of those occasions we put the best foot of Ireland forward and tell that story of what our farmers are producing, the traceability, the safety and sustainability credentials. We will continue to tell that story because trade is such a key part and so important for our farmers and their incomes.

Deputy John Clendennen: While other speakers made reference to the threat of TB, there is also the threat of trade tariffs. We need to remove the barriers in our control, one example of which is alcohol labelling.

We need to look at growing our existing markets as well. France and Germany have similar populations, yet we export three times the produce to Germany that we do to France. I have to question why that is the case. What are the barriers or challenges to achieving the same penetration in the French market as in Germany? As the Minister said, there is a huge opportunity in Canada, India and the Far East and we have to look at materialising that further.

I mentioned supermarkets. A register should be introduced to determine the percentage of Irish produce, European produce and rest of world produce on our shelves so that we are ensuring full transparency for Irish produce on supermarket shelves.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): There is another supplementary question.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I support the Deputy on that. At the end of the day we have to get Irish produce into supermarkets. We have to get it exported everywhere around the world. I attended the agrifood regulator inaugural conference today in the Johnstown Court Hotel in County Meath. It was an excellent event and it certainly showed us that we have to look after the farmers and that the primary producer has to get fair play. I know the Minister met the regulator's officials the other evening and I spoke to Joe Healy about that. They need to get proper teeth but they also need big resources. They need to have the people there to be able to do the research to find out what is going on and be able to bring transparency into the system. That is vital.

The other point is that internationally our trade is under threat because of this new tariff regime that is coming in from the US. It is creating huge uncertainty in markets all over the world. We need to recognise that. We will have to have our front foot forward to deal with that.

Deputy Martin Heydon: That front foot forward is exactly what I am doing in leading my Department. It is why I was in the US for a series of political meetings at Capitol Hill over a couple of days and meetings with other key clients and customers across the US. It is why I will travel to Asia next month. I continue to take those opportunities to tell the story of the innovation that Deputy Clendennen referenced in our food system. Deputy Kenny just highlighted the point I was going to make on the domestic market and our supermarkets and retailers. The agrifood regulator is doing important work in that regard in bringing that transparency piece while also making sure that unfair trading practices are not happening. Since we established the office, it has had a lot of success. I am very supportive of that. I am keen to make sure the officials are equipped to do the job they need to do in providing transparency. It is important for the relationship across the supply chain from our primary producers, our farmers through to our processors and the retail element that we have that equilibrium. I work closely with my colleagues, including the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, on expanding elements of the

markets we are in already. They are just as important as new markets and there are sometimes original contacts that make it easier. We continue to work on all those new opportunities, for example, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley's work with Seafood Expo and others.

Livestock Issues

118. Deputy David Maxwell asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine for an update on a proposal to restrict the sale of dairy cows in marts from herds that have had an outbreak of TB in the previous three years. [14097/25]

Deputy David Maxwell: I want to start by thanking the Minister for bringing together all of the parties to work out sensible solutions to eliminate TB on Irish farms.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which I know is of concern to his constituents in Cavan-Monaghan. On 8 May, I held a TB summit with key stakeholders where discussions were held on the most effective ways to mitigate the impact of bovine TB on farm families and reduce herd incidence and spread of the disease. The backdrop to this meeting was the need to address the deteriorating bovine TB disease levels. Herd incidence increased from 4.31% in 2022 to 6.04% in 2024, which was a 36% increase in the number of herds restricted. Over 6,000 farm families were affected by a TB outbreak in 2024.

At the summit, I presented 30 potential actions underpinned by five key pillars to address the current rates of bovine TB: first, to support herds free of bovine TB to remain free; second, to reduce the impact of wildlife on the spread of bovine TB; third, to detect and eliminate bovine TB infection as early as possible in herds with a TB breakdown and avoid a future breakdown; fourth, to help farmers improve all areas of on farm biosecurity; and fifth; to reduce the impact of known high-risk animals in spreading bovine TB.

As part of this engagement, a proposal to restrict the sale of certain cows from breeding herds of greater than 60 cows that have had an outbreak of TB with three or more standard reactors in the previous three years to other breeding herds was discussed. Only cows present as part of the milking group at the time of breakdown would have such a restriction imposed. This would not apply to calves or replacement animals in these herds if there were no reactors in those groups of animals. This proposal is aimed at ensuring residual or undetected infection does not enter into clear herds inadvertently through the sale of these high-risk animals. The risk of these animals having residual infection is highest in the first three years following a clear test, hence the necessity for ensuring these animals do not go on to transmit infection into clear herds. I will expand further in my supplementary response.

Deputy David Maxwell: I thank the Minister. Everyone agrees there is an urgent need to make major changes to the TB programme to try to get this disease back under control. We know that the Department and farmers have put forward plenty of proposals to address all sources of the disease and look at measures to mitigate its spread. Farmers are concerned that the risk-based trading ignores the most fundamental objective of stopping the spread of TB. The Department's proposal does not stop TB spread. It merely compounds the losses for farmers who, through no fault of their own, have had TB outbreaks and are just returning to some normality on their farms and trying to get themselves going well again. They feel this risk-based trading is a hindrance.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The engagement I had on this and all other proposed actions with the stakeholders will feed into the draft proposals to help contribute to a more effective programme that protects farmers and their families from this disease impacting their herds. I will meet the farm organisations again later this week to discuss updated proposals on foot of our discussions. This has been a deliberative process since February and we have been back and forth. I have listened and taken on board many of the points and concerns that the Deputy raised.

I hope to achieve a broad consensus on these proposals but there is an urgency and I intend to move quickly to refine the programme and ensure that the necessary steps are taken to reduce the impact of this disease on farmers and their families because I know how devastating it is. However, I must be clear. The science is very clear: there are three key contributors to the spread and escalation of bovine TB as we have seen in Ireland in recent years. One is wildlife, one is cattle-to-cattle transmission and one is the residual effect in herds that have had a significant breakdown. We must address all three issues in any final solution.

Deputy David Maxwell: Our dairy industry is a critical part of rural Ireland and the production of milk is essential for our economy. In recent years, the number of farmers leaving the sector has risen. If this ban is put in place, it could be the final straw for some farmers to leave the sector where, through no fault of their own, they cannot trade in marts for three years because their herds are restricted. If this happens, who is going to compensate the farmer for the significant loss he or she could suffer?

We all understand that action is needed to tackle the scourge of TB but I ask the Minister to look again at this proposal and not end up putting farmers at the mercy of having to deal with a closed market for three years. It is not just about the financial loss for our farmers but also the emotional loss that can affect a farmer and his or her family when a herd goes down with TB.

Deputy Colm Burke: It is extremely frightening to see a 36% increase in the number of herds restricted over a two-year period and the whole increase over the past five years. It is important that we do everything possible in the shortest time to reduce the numbers as well as the reasons they have increased so dramatically in such a short period. I know officials in the Department, the veterinary profession and farmers are working hard but everything possible must be done to deal with this issue in as short a time as possible. Over the next three to four years - it will take that time to reduce the numbers - everything must be thrown at it to ensure that the restrictions that need to be put in place to stop the spread of TB are put in place and fully complied with.

Deputy William Aird: Before we go on, I would describe it as a drastic move to curb a farmer from selling his or her stock in a mart for up to three years. Does the Minister realise what he is doing to farmers, people like myself who get up every morning and work? There is no guarantee about this. We are talking about something that got worse and worse despite the money that was invested in the scheme. There is no guarantee that taking a draconian step like this would have any effects. This would be a stigma attached to farmers like myself where, at the end of the day, there is no guarantee that anything would change.

I want to know who came up with this idea. What scientific results has that person to prove that something like this will happen? It is like we are saying we will try this and it might work. Something like this would have a devastating effect on Irish farmers.

Deputy Martin Heydon: There are two key priorities for me. I know the emotional turmoil there is with having a reactor – the impact it has on families as well as the financial impact. The two clear priorities I have is to ensure that those farmers and farm families that are currently affected or will be affected in the future by a bovine TB breakdown have a clear pathway out of that and that we ensure that fewer are affected in future. The scale of the challenge at the minute is significant and deteriorating, so it cannot be business as usual. In the whole of 2020, my Department spent €20 million on compensation for farmers who had reactors and breakdowns. We spent €20 million compensating farmers in the first four months of this year. That is the trajectory we are dealing with, so it cannot be business as usual, but I guarantee that any measures adopted are based on the best scientific and veterinary advice. Through strong leadership by all involved in the programme and by working together, we can bring in the necessary measures, as Deputy Burke outlined, that will make a meaningful difference, stop this infection increasing and drive down its spread greatly so that we can get back to credibly talking about eradication again.

Agriculture Schemes

119. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if TAMS 3 is facilitating investment in farms to help make them more resilient in the face of severe storms such as Storm Éowyn; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25109/25]

11 o'clock **Deputy Martin Heydon:** I am delighted the Deputy raised the point regarding the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, particularly as it is such an important support for our farmers and farm families. It is grant aid to farmers to build or improve a specified range of farm buildings and equipment on their holdings, many of which will assist in making farms more resilient in the face of storms.

In acknowledgement of the urgency of support required following Storm Éowyn, I opened a new tranche of TAMS 3 for a three-week period in March to deal specifically with storm-related damage on farms. The specific items in respect of which applications were accepted over this three-week period are as follows: back-up power take-off, PTO, generators; sheep, bovine and equine fencing that was damaged; and wood and biomass chippers and mulchers. Considering the recent power outages arising from storm damage, I reviewed the scope of generators supported by TAMS to include all generators, irrespective of the drive mechanism. The grant is targeted at the generator rather than the drive mechanism. While these generators are included as an investment item under the dairy equipment scheme, the investment is open to all farmers who declare the minimum eligibility requirement of 5 ha under the basic income support for sustainability, BISS, scheme in the year of application or preceding year. There is no requirement to be milking cows to be eligible for back-up generators under the scheme. For example, foresters and farmers with forestry, for which the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, has responsibility, will very much benefit from mulchers and chippers as well.

In addition to these existing investments and to further aid resilience, I recently announced plans to introduce grant aid support under TAMS for replacement of roofs. The application process for this specific investment will be available later this year, when systems are developed. In the meantime, I urge farmers to carry out a structural assessment of their farm buildings. The suite of TAMS schemes, which includes more than 400 investment items, is the best mechanism for ensuring that funding is targeted at the most appropriate enterprises. That is why I made this

particular tranche available to farmers in March.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I wish the Aire the very best with his brief. It is an important and challenging one. The way that window was opened in responding to a storm was very welcome. Storm Éowyn showed how vulnerable rural communities in particular are in the face of extreme weather events. The Minister mentioned the grants to redo roofs. It would be a good time to look at the solar capital investment scheme, SCIS, which is very welcome. It allows farmers to build resilience into energy supply. They can meet their daily energy needs and improve their ability to withstand future storms. I had a reply to a parliamentary question today that showed just over 3,200 applications were received for that scheme and 2,300 approvals were issued. Is the Minister happy that the SCIS is set up and funded sufficiently to get that mass of farmers that will be needed to come across?

Deputy Martin Heydon: We are using TAMS to be as agile as possible. TAMS has seen a highly significant increase in drawdown because farmers see the benefit of it. On that support, and there is also support under TAMS for solar panels, which has seen significant drawdown for those with high energy bills and the ability to do so, the agility of the system has been so important in allowing us to respond in real time to farmers who are affected. I am mindful that many farmers availing of this will be able to draw down and get generators that could well stand to them and can build up resilience ahead of the next storm. It was not just in response to Storm Éowyn. It was also about future-proofing our farmers and recognising the impact a devastating event such as Storm Éowyn can have.

On the Deputy's point on solar, I support farmers' ability to get that alternative income stream. That is why we took away the planning permission requirement for solar panels on the roofs of sheds. That allows farmers to continue to do their farming activity but to bring in alternative and additional farm income as well.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I was reading about the scheme. There is just one little wrinkle, which is that there does not seem to be support for microgeneration. A farmer cannot put panels on the roof and put excess power back into the grid. It seems a little unfair, given that you can in a residence. If there are panels on the roof of a home, excess power can be put back into the grid. That feels like a missed opportunity. Maybe it could be looked at in future.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I assure the Deputy it has been looked at. It is a challenge and a source of great frustration for farmers that have not benefited. The farmers who have mainly benefited from solar panels on the roofs of sheds, and the TAMS support for it, have been those with high energy bills, especially dairy farmers when offsetting those dairy bills. Under state aid rules, using the TAMS mechanism whereby farmers would be able to sell back into the grid, has not been a possibility for us. It comes down to the accounting at EU level. That is a source of frustration. It is something we have looked at. I would love to be able to get it changed at EU level but there is that restriction on it. It is still very important that we have the solar element. I remind the Deputy that the solar element is at the higher rate of 60% under TAMS in recognition of that cost. It is also a separate headline. It is there because we recognise that farmers are drying grain for tillage or whatever have very high energy bills. This is suited to them and the other schemes might be suited to the broader solar panels issue. For that alternative income, it is benefiting farmers who have those high energy costs.

Question No. 120 taken with Written Answers.

Common Agricultural Policy

121. **Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine for an update on negotiations taking place at EU level on the Common Agricultural Policy 2027+. [25604/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The CAP is a key instrument in supporting farmers and rural communities, whether it is food production, protecting the environment, biodiversity, rural development and so much more. There is concern that the CAP will be seen as part of a wider EU budget instead of being ring-fenced, as it appears it is at present. In the context of negotiations that are taking place at EU level, will the Minister give an outline of where things stand on the CAP?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am delighted to have the opportunity to do so. The CAP is absolutely critical. I wish the Deputy well in his role as chairperson of the joint Oireachtas committee on agriculture. I look forward to working with him and his colleagues in the term ahead.

As Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am working closely with EU institutions and my counterparts in other member states to influence negotiations on the next CAP. The CAP is central to the EU’s success in ensuring food security, supporting farm incomes and developing rural areas. The CAP also remains critical to the agrifood sector’s resilience and competitiveness, as it has since Ireland joined the EU more than 50 years ago. I recently set out my four key priorities for the CAP: a CAP that is more straightforward for farmers; a more flexible and responsive CAP; one which has an appropriate balance between all elements of sustainability; and an adequate and dedicated budget that is needed for an effective CAP. I am determined that the CAP will continue to play a positive role in supporting Irish farmers, the food industry, rural communities and the wider economy into the future.

It is a key responsibility of Government to raise Ireland’s concerns with our EU partners and to influence EU policy. For my part as Minister, I meet with my counterparts in the Council of the European Union every month to discuss and shape agriculture and food policy in the EU. I have and will continue to engage with Christophe Hansen, the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, and my fellow EU Ministers on the issues affecting the agrifood sector, including the CAP post 2027, at Council meetings as well as in bilateral discussions. I have my next meeting of the AGRIFISH Council next Monday in Brussels. I will prioritise these engagements at European level, particularly in preparation for Ireland’s Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2026.

Funding for the CAP forms part of the broader EU budget, known as the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which is ultimately agreed by the heads of government and at European Council level. That will obviously hugely shape what comes next in terms of the CAP. We are bringing along the CAP proposals. The Commissioner is proposing to publish them around the same time in July in order that they can all be discussed and debated together.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The AGRIFISH Council is due to meet next Monday, as the Minister mentioned. Will he confirm whether discussions on the CAP will be on the Council’s agenda and what issues will be covered? The Minister said he had been in contact with Commissioner Hansen, who is responsible for agriculture and food. Commissioner Hansen recently published his vision for agriculture and food, which recognises the essential role of farmers in seeking to boost the agrifood sector’s competitiveness and attractiveness. Does the Minister

foresee this vision impacting on the development of the new CAP?

Deputy Martin Heydon: In my engagement with Commissioner Hansen to date, I feel he is someone who gets it, both from his visit to Ireland in January and in his vision for agriculture in the different points he has outlined. He feels like somebody who understands the importance of the CAP for our farmers and food production system. The reason I clearly outlined my core priorities and those of Ireland regarding the CAP is to get them established early. To have them established earlier, I brought a memo to the Cabinet and got approval from my Government colleagues for the approach I want to take. In the second half of 2026, when the finer details of the CAP will be in the melting pot, we will have the Presidency of the EU. At that stage, I could be chairing the EU agriculture Council. Already, agriculture ministers from the other 26 member states are looking for bilateral meetings to engage with me and tell me what their priorities are. I want to clearly articulate to them and Commissioner Hansen what our priorities are for protecting the Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 payments and the separate fund for agriculture that is so important to our sector.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The programme for Government commits to simplifying the schemes and access for farmers. It also commits to reducing the administrative burden and red tape farmers encounter through flexibility in the design of the scheme and also stakeholder input. Commissioner Hansen has announced a draft CAP simplification and also some proposals to change the legal framework. I welcome the announcement. The Department engaged with the Commissioner on efforts to reduce the overall burden on farmers. Given that the Department had direct contact and involvement with Commissioner Hansen on the draft package, can the Minister confirm the package will meet the commitments in the programme for Government to have a more simplified and straightforward system for farmers?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I recently had a meeting with IFA officials, as I stated previously. A line I used before is that the organisation is very good at keeping the Minister's feet to the fire in relation to issues. The officials had recently been at a meeting in Brussels and obviously spoke about their fear of cuts to CAP under Pillar 2. They spoke about the whole conversation as regards ReArm Europe, etc. Obviously, the argument needs to be made.

Another point that was made – the officials were very decent in that they provided me with minutes of the meeting – concerns the idea that in the approximately two-year timeframe for the new CAP, the Government needs to make sure every step is taken to ensure simplification of application. It needs to be possible to apply for all schemes at one time. We need to have clear rules and regulations and ensure the system is streamlined. We have dealt with this before. There are a number of issues with farmers constantly having to provide the same information for different schemes, sometimes to the same Department. It has to be possible to streamline all of this while making sure all the necessary negotiations are engaged in with regard to protecting the CAP.

Deputy Martin Heydon: There are two parts to this. The multi-annual financial framework, or the overall budget for Europe, will determine so much of the second part around the CAP. That is why the Heads of State and Government, including the Taoiseach, will have a key role to play in terms of engagement at this level and at the European Council. The Government has been very fair in articulating its priorities around protecting the CAP structure and the very positive roles played by Pillars 1 and 2. I have highlighted my concerns about rumours circulating that there will somehow be a central pot that member states will pull out of, and also about the impact of this on the Single Market and cohesion.

While the first part is the overall budget, the second involves ensuring a focus on delivering a simplified CAP. The points on simplification are to come this year. Some are administrative and will make a change, but the overall simplification will be in the design of the new CAP. There will be an element of national discretion whereby we this House and the key stakeholders will discuss how I can design a CAP that best suits our agricultural system. First and foremost, it is about protecting the budget and having it ring-fenced to deliver what we need it to do.

Agriculture Industry

122. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if any analysis has been carried out to date on potential new markets for agrifood produce, exports of which to the US currently amount to almost €2 billion per annum, should tariffs be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25705/25]

Deputy Joe Neville: Has any analysis been carried out to date on potential new markets for agrifood produce, exports of which to the US currently amount to almost €2 billion per annum, should tariffs be introduced? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter in the context of his visit to the US?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Neville and the other Deputies present for staying up this late at night to raise very important questions. We are on the night shift here.

This matter is very important. There is concern among farmers over the impact of tariffs. It refocuses everyone's mind. We are so busy day to day on our farms that we sometimes forget that we export 90% of the food and drink we produce. When key trading partners make or propose significant policy changes it can quickly have a very big impact at farm-gate level. I am very conscious that the additional tariff rate of 10% on all imports to the US, in place since 9 April, directly impacts the competitiveness of Irish agrifood exports on the US market. It makes Irish food and drink products more expensive for US consumers, who, as I have seen at first hand, really value our premium Irish products. However, the 90-day pause on the US side in relation to the higher tariff rates originally announced on 2 April, along with the EU pausing its countermeasures, have created the conditions for meaningful negotiation.

On the tariffs, Ireland's consistent position remains that we need to get into a calm, measured and comprehensive dialogue with the US to avoid damage to our bilateral trade. This is also the position of the EU. Ireland, as part of the EU, wants to play a constructive role and will continue to be a voice for calm and measured engagement in the time ahead.

The US is the second largest market for Irish agrifood exports after the UK, with exports last year valued at almost €2 billion. My recent trade mission to the US offered me an opportunity to highlight the mutual benefit of our trading relationship with the US and the level of investment by Irish companies in the US market, creating jobs and adding value for local economies.

Meaningful negotiations with the US remain the main focus for both the EU and Ireland. The Commission is fully engaged in discussions with the US and a negotiated solution remains very clearly the goal and our preferred outcome. We continue to work in that regard.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister. I will make sure to bring back to Kildare word that its two Fine Gael Deputies are among the hardest working TDs in the country. I had the

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good fortune of being able to nip back to Leixlip and Kilcock for events earlier this evening. I am slightly closer to Leinster House than the Minister, so I am lucky in that regard.

I will make a couple of comments on the great potential associated with trading partners such as India and China. What discussions have we had with emerging nations? Have we shone an extra light in their way?

In the context of expanding our base internally to make up for circumstances, today I was lucky enough to go to a food trail event in north Kildare. When focusing on Kildare, I was thinking about the micro-economic and micro-business sides working together with the agricultural side. Is there an opportunity to work with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on both agriculture and business to try to put a new face on farming?

Deputy Martin Heydon: There absolutely is. I continue to work with the Minister for enterprise, Deputy Peter Burke, and all colleagues across the Government.

On enterprise, there is considerable pressure on our whiskey distilling sector because 40% of the whiskey we export goes to the US. Changes such as those to tariffs have a direct impact on industries. I am working with the Minister, Deputy Burke, on his plans to develop an action plan on competitiveness and to help us to control the things we control.

We always consider market diversification. I am on record as saying the US tariffs challenge we face feels like Brexit mark 2. A key trading partner of ours is making or proposing a very significant policy shift, which will hurt us, our companies and consumers. It is really going to hurt US customers and companies. The EU has a role, and the EU response has an impact. Therefore, we have to use our position, based on our close bilateral relations with the US, to best articulate what exemplifies our position. It is a case of negotiating from a position of strength from the heart of the EU. That is the only place to be and it is exactly what we did during Brexit and what we will continue to do here. We will also seek to diversify our market opportunities, which is why I will travel to Japan and Korea next month and to China later this year. The Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley and Grealish, will also lead trade missions over the course of the year.

Deputy Joe Neville: In the context of Kildare and given that the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, is seated beside the Minister, we should remember Kerry Group is one of Kildare's major employers and exporters. We are fortunate the company is based in Naas and is a key employer in our county. What discussions has the Minister been able to have with such businesses? What mitigating measures can we put in place ahead of tariffs and what discussions can we have? No more than we have Intel in the north of County Kildare producing semiconductors, we also have a huge food industry. Considering this from that perspective, is there the level of work we can do to mitigate any tariffs that may come in the future, to allay any potential fears and to offer assistance in looking for new and additional markets to help bridge any gap we may find from any tariffs?

Deputy Martin Heydon: As Minister for agriculture, I have a close working relationship with the food industry and businesses. When people think agriculture, they think farmers. That is only right since there are 120,000 Irish farmers in the country who produce that top-quality food. We also have 170,000 people, or close to it, employed in this sector, however, and many of those high-quality jobs are in food processing and in those companies the Deputy mentioned. They all feed into the value of our exports, which last year alone were worth €19.2 billion to

the overall economy, so it is all those jobs together. When I will lead trade missions to Asia next month, as I have to America on many occasions, I will be joined by companies. I will go to the Seoul Food expo in Korea, the fourth largest food exhibition in Asia, and follow that with the World Expo in Osaka, Japan. I will be accompanied by Bord Bia, which, as a semi-State agency, is our direct link with those companies. They tell us where their key opportunities are, we work on market access issues and we work on trade promotion with those companies. What benefits food companies and their exports also benefits farmers and feeds directly down to that balanced regional development and the importance of the rural economy.

Question No. 123 taken with Written Answers.

Agriculture Supports

124. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the supports his Department is providing to help farmers meet national and EU climate targets, particularly regarding emissions reduction, biodiversity enhancement and sustainable land use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25747/25]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: What support is the Minister's Department providing to help farmers meet national and EU climate targets, especially in emissions reduction, biodiversity enhancement and sustainable land use? Will the Department focus in particular on nature-based solutions? I was very lucky to have worked on an integrated constructed wetland and I would love to hear the Department's opinion on the use of such wetlands as a tool not only to reduce our emissions but also to clean our water.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important point. I am delighted to be able to put on the record that I am committed to the long-term viability of the Irish agriculture sector, as the Deputy would obviously expect me, as Minister for agriculture, to say. Included in that are farm families, who are the bedrock of the sector, the agrifood industry and the rural economy. The industry is hugely important in terms of economic activity and employment.

At the same time, Ireland's national and EU ambitions on climate, land use and biodiversity are challenging and will require the application of the best scientific and technological advancements available, coupled with engagement of all stakeholders, if we are to meet both national and international commitments. I reassure the Deputy that this sector is up to the challenge, supported by the Government. It is something I am focusing on and will continue to focus on through collaboration and engagement with all involved.

The EPA published the Ireland's Final Greenhouse Gas Emissions 1990-2023 report in April of this year, which sets out that total greenhouse gas emissions from the agriculture sector in Ireland in 2023 were 20.7 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents. This represents a year-on-year decrease on 2022 of 4.9% of greenhouse gas emissions from the sector. While this decrease represents notable progress, it is important we continue to support Irish farmers and maintain this positive trajectory towards meeting our targets.

Pathways to enable the sector to meet its 2030 climate ambitions in the agriculture and land use sectors are set out in the Climate Action Plan, which is now reviewed and updated annually in accordance with the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021.

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Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy strategic plan is supporting farmers to transition to more sustainable practices while also supporting family farm incomes, with a budget of €9.8 billion. As part of Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy strategic plan, my Department is providing €1.5 billion for the agri-environmental scheme ACRES, increased funding for organic farming, which has increased the area farmed organically in Ireland to 248,000 ha, and €260 million to improve the carbon efficiency of the suckler herd through genetic improvement.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I am delighted to hear that the Minister is committed to our climate targets. I know he might be surprised to hear a north Dublin TD who cares about agriculture, but it is something I have studied in college. He has just mentioned the sustainability aspect. To what extent are the CAP payments now tied to the measurable climate targets and how is the Department ensuring these conditions drive genuine change?

Integrated constructed wetlands, ICWs, are brilliant, especially for farm runoff, using a pig-gery or any alternative to a wastewater treatment plant. They are really low cost and they filter hydrogen and phosphorous naturally. Not only that, a tiered system of integrated constructed wetlands also adds biodiversity to an area and creates a wetland, which is also a natural hold for carbon. I urge the Minister's Department to look into these as an effective, cost-effective and necessary way to solve this.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We have so many supports available for our farmers, who are up for this challenge, as I said earlier. I am accompanied by the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, who has a budget of €1.3 billion underpinning the forestry programme 2023-2027, which is the means by which we are implementing the forestry strategy and supporting farmers and the industry to reduce emissions through carbon capture, which Deputy Heneghan outlined in many different ways. It is really important. My Department supports a range of other climate change mitigation activities, including improvement in bovine genetics, which has a massive potential in terms of the scalability and the cumulative benefit year on year, investments in solar panels on farms, support for multi-species swards, and many other measures.

I have always said farmers cannot go green environmentally if they are in the red financially, but the truth is that the smart business play, not just the right thing to do by our environment, for our farmers is adopting more of these sustainability measures, once we make sure that sustainability stool is equally divided between the economic, the environmental and the societal. We are definitely making great strides in that space and farmers are doing their bit.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I am delighted to hear that, and I thank the Minister for the engagement today. I wish him the best of luck. He has a great brief, and Ireland will definitely be defined and our Government will be defined by how we act in the next four or five years in this regard. I urge the Department to look at integrated constructed wetlands as a cost-effective solution. They store carbon, they boost biodiversity, this week being biodiversity week, they are cost-effective and they have been done very successfully in Sweden and Denmark. The ICW in Grange Castle West is being used as a water runoff treatment, but I was out there recently and it is great to see the native animals now using it as their home. It is great to see a solution to wastewater then benefiting nature. It is killing two birds with one stone, or rather the surviving of two birds with one stone.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I take that on board. What we have always said is that property rights are enshrined in the Constitution and farmers, as owners of the land, have rights there. Where they are supported to do so and the income is there for them to support their farming

activity, they have proven themselves to be very adaptable. Farming is changing. Farming changes. It is very different today from what it was a generation ago, when my parents farmed, and it will be again when my children are farming. It will be a very different scenario and we are adopting all those sustainability credentials, taking on all the opportunities that provides. As I said, I have seen it from the trade perspective. Our pasture-based system here is unique and is a unique selling point for us. As regards the sustainability credentials of what we are doing, farmers can do more than one thing at the one time. We are producing top-quality food that is a very important source of income for them, our country and our rural economy. At the same time, we will be reducing emissions three years in a row, we see an improvement in water quality and an improvement in biodiversity, and farmers continue to work in that regard because they can do more than one thing at the one time.

Animal Diseases

125. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide an update on his Department's recent discussions with the TB forum to address the increase in the incidence of tuberculosis on Irish farms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25612/25]

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Minister give an update on the Department's recent discussions with the TB forum to address the increase in the incidence of tuberculosis on farms, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Burke for raising this very important issue. I know it is a cause of great concern. Even if I had not been engaging with farm organisations, since I got this role, on the area of TB and if I had not been pointing to the fact I need a new approach to the TB programme, which I would like to do through consensus, there is that concern with farmers already. The concern at the rise in the incidence of TB is palpable among farmers. Those who have it on their farms are very stressed and want a clear pathway out of their current restrictions, while those who do not have it do not want to get it and are very much afraid the rising incidence means they will get it.

Bovine TB is a challenging disease to control and eradicate. In recent years, bovine TB levels have continued to deteriorate. Herd incidence has increased from 4.31% in 2022 to 6.04% in 2024, resulting in a 36% increase in the number of herds restricted between those two years. As of 11 May, over a 12-month period we had a herd incidence of 6.3% with more than 42,200 reactors. This disease is having an impact on farmers and their families both financially and emotionally throughout rural Ireland. At the February meeting of the TB forum, it was agreed that all stakeholders would provide proposals on new measures for inclusion in the TB programme aimed at reducing TB levels in cattle against the backdrop of surging disease levels. The TB forum met on 26 March, at which representatives presented their proposals for measures aimed at reducing the high levels of TB. The chair of the TB forum wrote to me following this meeting outlining discussions at the meeting. On 8 May, I held a TB summit to address the deteriorating TB disease levels with key stakeholders at which discussions were held on the most effective ways to mitigate the impact of bovine TB on farm families and to reduce herd incidence and spread of the disease. I have outlined on the record that I have 30 proposed actions across five key pillars. My approach is to try to get consensus. We will meet farm organisations and stakeholders again later this week. We cannot do business as usual, such

are the numbers. We want to work together to ease this burden on farmers and the stress as well as the financial impact on them.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister. As I outlined and as the Minister said, between 2022 and 2024, there was a 36% increase in herds restricted. That is a huge increase. More than 6,000 farmers have lost 40,000 productive animals within a short period. The breakout of TB has a huge effect, especially in my area, a lot of which is urban but is also rural, where there are large dairy farms. When TB hits a dairy farm, the level of restriction that has to be put in place and the economic and emotional effect on a family are horrendous. Recently, I saw figures of farmers losing about €130 million in real terms because of the TB problem. As the Department is putting in more than €100 million, there is a huge loss to both the State and the people directly involved.

Deputy Martin Heydon: There absolutely is. There is also the emotional impact and trauma, which I would not underestimate. I remember when we had a reactor at home on the farm in Kildare in the 1990s when I was still in school and the devastation of seeing that cow and that reactor go. It stayed with me for a long time afterwards. I want to do two things. I want to provide a clear pathway to those directly impacted by this disease where they can see light at the end of the tunnel. Many say to me they do not have that sense; there is a sense of hopelessness right now. That is not a good place for anyone to be in. Second, I want to avoid the 94% of farmers not affected by bovine TB, besides having to do an annual herd test, having to get this. We would greatly reduce the number of farms, farm families and herds impacted and, therefore, the number of reactors. The Deputy highlighted the key numbers. By working together we can do this if we follow the science. There are three causes of that infection. We have to deal with all three elements.

Deputy Colm Burke: The Minister outlined the challenges for families. The big problem is when a large number of stock animals has to be disposed of. Farmers then have the problem of trying to build back up that herd, especially in dairy farming. The time and cost of that are huge. The important issue is how to bring down the numbers affected and how to deal with this in real terms. We have had the TB testing scheme for a long number of years. It is unfortunate we are seeing a rise rather than a reduction. We must give priority to this issue over the next three to four years.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I agree. The Deputy spoke about the investment from my Department. It will take increased investment in the short term to try to get on top of this issue. I am willing to do that in order to prioritise. There are three key drivers of the infection: the role of wildlife, cattle-to-cattle transmission and the residual element left in herds that had a significant breakdown. My five-point plan includes supporting herds free of bovine TB to remain free; reducing the impact of wildlife on the spread of bovine TB; detecting and eliminating bovine TB infection as early as possible in a TB breakdown to avoid future breakdowns; and helping farmers to improve all areas of on-farm biosecurity. There are simple measures that can greatly reduce, statistically, the risk of the spread of infection. The final point is reducing the impact of known high-risk animals in spreading bovine TB. If we follow the science, we can make a significant difference and greatly reduce the number of people directly impacted and the economic impact that is so devastating for our farmers and farm families. I would love to be able to do that with consensus of the key stakeholders I will meet later this week.

Questions Nos. 126 and 127 taken with Written Answers.

Dáil Éireann
Agriculture Schemes

128. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the delay in payments under ACRES; when the issues are expected to be resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25678/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Not a week goes by in which I do not have a farmer in east Galway contacting my office regarding the delays to ACRES payments. What has gone so wrong with ACRES payments? Why has there been such a delay? What lessons will be learned to ensure this does not happen again?

Deputy Martin Heydon: As the Deputy will be aware, ACRES is the flagship environmental scheme provided under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 with €1.5 billion in Exchequer and EU funding allocated over the course of the scheme. Payments in respect of farmers' participation in the ACRES scheme continue to issue on a weekly basis as cases pass all validation checks. Last week, I announced that balancing payments in respect of the 2024 scheme year have commenced with more than €33 million issuing to 42,444 participants. A total of €490 million has issued since ACRES payments commenced at the end of 2023. However, I am acutely aware that others are still awaiting payments. This is a source of great frustration for me. I have been dealing with it since the minute I assumed this role. In the case of the 2023 scheme year, 97% of participants have been paid in full. As regards 2024, 90% of participants have received their advance payments and almost 88% of these have now received a balancing payment. To be clear, my Department is committed to resolving the issues that have been delaying the remaining payments as soon as possible and is making progress in this regard. I know that is cold comfort if you are one of the few who still have not been sorted. We have made significant progress and built momentum, which I continue to do.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I had the fortunate opportunity to study at Mountbellew Agricultural College over the past two years for my level 5 and level 6 qualifications. I met many young farmers who want to get involved in their family farms and to be part of the farming future of Ireland but we have to bring them with us. We have to show them that if they sign up for a scheme that will commit to paying them X amount, they need to be assured of payment on time. In no other profession would people accept delayed payment. I know the Minister is working through it and the Department is making inroads.

Deputy Martin Heydon: When I assumed this role, it was not acceptable to me to meet so many farmers where in many instances, the fault was with the Department. In some instances it was with themselves for various reasons but in the majority of cases, it has been on our side. I have visited Johnstown Castle and have engaged directly with the officials. I have directed additional resources into the units. I have got down into the detail of the different cohorts and how they are affected. One reason it takes time to fix this is that I am not willing to have a quick fix that needs a manual intervention every year. I want to make sure that the resolution here means that this problem does not recur every year. That is why we are getting through this and I stick to the commitments I made previously to resolve this as quickly as possible.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

20 May 2025

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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 Claire Kerrane - To discuss reform of the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the lack of a pension scheme and unequal terms and conditions under which school secretaries work.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the placing of vulnerable elderly sick people in nursing homes distant from their homes. To discuss the need to place people in nursing home care closer to their homes.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the reopening of Castletown House and public access to same.

Deputy John Brady - To discuss the future of the Greystones media campus.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the impact of the development levy waiver on one-off rural homes construction costs.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss amending the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 to expand the scheme.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss financial supports for alternative treatments for children who have undergone surgery for hip dysplasia.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the increasing demand for a secondary school in Newcastle.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss the cuts to patient transport services in County Tipperary.

Deputies David Cullinane, Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss funding for a youth mental health services centre for Waterford.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the tenant in situ scheme.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss long waiting period for many social welfare appeals,

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the Blackpool flood relief scheme.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the current shortage of school places, particularly for children with additional needs.

The matters raised by Deputies Albert Dolan, Pat Buckley, Colm Burke, Mattie McGrath and Erin McGreehan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Housing Policy

Deputy Albert Dolan: The development levy waiver was a powerful initiative introduced by the Government to bolster housing supply and ensure a pipeline of housing delivery. We saw some of our largest commencement numbers ever last year, with more than 60,000 homes commenced, 9% of which were first-time, one-off homes.

I come from and represent a rural constituency. I have a major concern with regard to couples or individuals building homes in rural areas ending up paying a development contribution to their local authorities. I raised this matter earlier with the Taoiseach. While people are quite happy to pay their for water and ESB connections, paying a development contribution to the council when they live in a rural area seems quite counterintuitive because they do not get lighting, sewerage facilities or footpaths in return. While it is understandable that councils cannot service everywhere, people need to know exactly where that money goes. At present, it is going into the council's pot and is used to fund everything else the council does. Ultimately, it does not serve the person who contributes. We need to recognise that there is an unfair burden when it comes to these local contributions, not to mention the fact that people also have to install their own septic tanks and put in place their own infrastructure that they have to maintain and manage, which brings its own costs as well.

In respect of the contribution side of things, that money goes into a pot. It is not seen by the people who build their one-off homes. The people who do that need to be recognised. Multiple constituents have contacted me in the months since the waiver was discontinued because they realise that they now have new bills of somewhere between €5,000 and €10,000 for connection fees and the development contribution. We need to either ring-fence the funding to ensure it goes towards those local facilities or show that it is delivering local amenities as opposed to disappearing into the abyss. People do not feel like it is a fair charge, especially when they have to invest in infrastructure themselves. They do not get the lights or the footpaths.

We need to make it fairer for people who are constructing their own dwelling. While the Government does a good deal of work to put supports in place, such as the first home or help to buy schemes, to ensure that people have a deposit in place, we then take this development contribution on the other side. There is a better way of doing this. It is either a case of ring-fencing the funding or trying to ensure that this charge is not levied against one-off homes, specifically when those who build such homes have to deliver so much infrastructure themselves.

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Deputy. I am happy to take this matter on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. The Deputy made a valid point, and I thank him for raising this matter.

On 25 April 2023, the Government approved additional measures under the Housing for All action plan to incentivise the activation of increased housing supply and to help reduce housing construction costs, including the introduction of temporary time-limited arrangements for the waiving of local authority section 48 development contributions and the refunding of Uisce Éireann water and wastewater connection charges. The Government recognised that further

measures needed to be put in place to help address cost and viability with a view to incentivising the activation of a pipeline of new housing commencements and assisting the delivery of supply as quickly as possible. The waiver scheme applied to all permitted residential development including multi-unit developments, self-build houses and one-off houses, as well as student accommodation and sheltered housing.

The scheme initially applied for one year to all permitted residential development that commenced on site between 25 April 2023, which was the date of the Government decision approving the measure, and 24 April 2024, and that are completed no later than 31 December 2025. On 23 April 2024, the Government approved an extension for the waiving of local authority section 48 development contributions in respect of residential developments commenced not later than 31 December 2024 and the refunding of Uisce Éireann water and wastewater connection charges in respect of residential development commenced not later than 30 September 2024. In April 2024, the final date for the completion of development works on qualifying houses under the schemes was extended from 31 December 2025 to 31 December 2026. There are no plans to extend or reintroduce the waiver scheme.

The waiver of local authority development contributions and the refund of Uisce Éireann connection charges directly reduce the upfront cost of construction. These savings, depending on location, represent a meaningful portion of soft costs in budgets. A total of 69,060 homes were commenced in 2024 as against 26,957 in 2022, representing an increase of 156% in comparison with 2022. This is the highest number of commencements on record since the compilation of data on annual residential commencements began to be recorded in 2015. It is likely that the waiver schemes contributed to the increasing level of housing starts post April 2023 in light of the timing of the introduction of those schemes. A certain proportion of planning permissions for housing development that were not being activated have now largely commenced due to this scheme. The time-limited nature of the waiver scheme provided a clear and urgent incentive for developers to act quickly. As already stated, there are no plans to extend the scheme any further.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I am asking about one-off homes for self-builders who are taking on mortgages to build their homes. Let us call a spade a spade: they are contributing to the ultimate completion figures this Government wants to see. We want more units to be delivered. Self-builders make up almost 10% of those numbers on the basis of the commencement figures from last year.

The development levy waiver was a huge success. There were 69,000 commencements in 2024, which is absolutely incredible. Those are the type of numbers we need every year. I am very conscious, however, that the money from the development contribution goes to the councils and self-builders get nothing in return. They do not get footpaths, lighting or investment in their localities. It is unfair on councillors and local authorities that it goes into a pot and gets spent with the rest of the money as opposed to being ring-fenced for what it is for. Even the development contributions relating to housing estates are not ring-fenced for the delivery of footpaths and lighting in towns and villages. There needs to be a wider conversation in this regard.

If possible, I ask for the Minister of State to bring my request to consider the extension of the development levy waiver for one-off homes back to the Minister, Deputy Browne. This move would facilitate young people who are starting out on their journey of home ownership and who are trying to self-build. It would ensure they could do that without an overburdening cost, particularly when they are contributing to our completion figures.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: One-off housing, particularly in rural areas like Roscommon, no more than my own area, is a really important part of housing output. It is important to the vibrancy of rural communities as well. I understand the argument the Deputy is making in respect of how you tie the contribution people are paying directly to a service that is being delivered in return.

I have outlined the position of the Department and the Minister that there will not be any extension to the waiver. Obviously, that benefited one-off housing and multi-unit developments. I thank Deputy Dolan for raising this matter and for putting the argument forward strongly on behalf of his constituents, particularly those young people who are looking to build and do one-off developments, in the context of the impact that development charges have on them. I will certainly relay the argument the Deputy has made to the Department and the Minister. I will ask them to take on board what he said.

Pension Provisions

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for being here at this ungodly hour. I have recently been in contact with a number of dedicated school secretaries across my constituency of east Cork who are campaigning for their rightful access to public service pensions. Public service pensions are not just a benefit but a vital safeguard for workers' futures and provide security and dignity in later years. Public service status would see secretaries given access to the protections and pensions that come with this status and would end a 45-year injustice. It would see secretaries who work side by side with teachers and special needs assistants, SNAs, having the same rights and pension certainty on retirement, and proper wages. This campaign has been ongoing for decades now. Secretaries deserve better. They are not asking for the earth. All they want is pay equality and the improved working conditions and pensions they are entitled to. Secretaries provide an essential service to their schools, which would simply be unable to function without a secretary. They ensure our schools run smoothly day to day, which is crucial. They are the backbone of our schools. These are hardworking individuals, many of whom have served our schools and communities for decades, and they deserve the recognition and fair treatment of public servants.

Despite recent progress in securing employment on the Department of Education's payroll, school secretaries still face significant inequalities and continue to be treated as second-class public servants. As it stands, a secretary could work 40 years in the same school, retire on the same day as a teacher or SNA and walk out the door with only a bunch of flowers while the teacher or SNA will leave with a work pension. How can we, in good conscience, justify a system where two people working in the same school and contributing equally to daily life at that school retire under vastly different circumstances? This is not just an administrative oversight but a moral failure. We are sending a message that the work of school secretaries is somehow less valuable and that their commitment, often over decades, does not warrant the same respect and security in retirement as that of others in the public sector.

In October 2020, the then Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, gave a commitment in the Dáil that the Government would address the long-standing pay and employment issues secretaries were facing and finally secure pay equality and pension entitlement for school caretakers and secretaries. We have not had sight nor sound of this since.

To the school secretaries and all those involved in this campaign we in Sinn Féin say your

efforts are seen, your voices are heard and your rights are supported. We stand with you in calling for a swift and just resolution to this pension row and will support you all the way. I am calling on this Government to act urgently. These workers have shown remarkable dedication to their job. They have gone above and beyond for schools and deserve fair treatment and the peace of mind that comes with access to proper pension schemes. It is only fair they receive the same recognition and entitlements as their colleagues such as teachers and SNAs. I have been absolutely battered and lobbied about this. I spoke to a lot of secretaries and they feel very underwhelmed. The secretary is the backbone of any committee, cumann or school. There is a massive injustice here. I am anxious to hear the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and allowing me to clarify the current position in relation to pay and conditions for school secretaries. As we know from our engagement with schools in our respective constituencies, the school secretary is very much at the heart of the school and is the key interface between students, parents, school leaders and other staff. Without them, our schools would be unsustainable. In supporting these vital school staff members we also support the school community as a whole.

The majority of primary and voluntary secondary schools traditionally received assistance to provide for secretarial, caretaking and cleaning services under grant schemes. Where a school employed a staff member to support those functions those staff are not public servants but employees of individual schools and responsibility for terms of employment rests with the school. Since September 2023, the Department has been providing a payroll service for former grant-funded school secretaries. I am glad to be able to say that currently 85% of school secretaries have opted for the new package and are on the Department administered payroll. This happened on foot of an agreement reached in 2022 under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission that secretaries would move to a centralised payroll managed by the Department and receive new terms and conditions of employment.

As the Deputy knows, school secretaries now benefit from an alignment with the clerical officer grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a *pro rata* basis. In addition, it was agreed pay increases under future national agreements will be passed on to secretaries and this has happened with each pay increase since the implementation of the agreement. My Department has also improved the conditions for school secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this category of staff. For example, where only 51% of grant-funded secretaries had paid sick leave previously, all those who have onboarded to the Department's payroll now have access to paid sick leave entitlements.

I acknowledge that Fórsa is looking to future improvements to terms and conditions for secretaries and recognise that for them public service status and access to a public service pension is understandably an important objective. The issue of public service status is complex and needs to have regard to the state of the public finances and the repercussive effects of any such proposals for other grant-funded groups of non-public servants. For those reasons, any proposals must be considered in detail by the Department of Education's officials and those in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform as the granting or otherwise of public servant status is not within the scope of the Department of Education alone.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I got the same response, probably word for word, less than two hours ago in a reply to a parliamentary question. I cannot stress enough how much these issues need to be resolved. The last line in the response from the Minister for Education was:

For those reasons, any proposals must be considered in detail by my own officials and those in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform as the granting or otherwise of public servant status is not within the scope of this Department.

I would love to know which Department's scope it is within. It affects so many people. Immediate steps need to be taken by this Government to ensure all school secretaries are recognised as public servants, which they truly are. The granting of access to a fair, secure public service pension is about equality and equality is not a privilege but a right. That has to be addressed. We will not have time to do it now but I would like to find out, perhaps through a parliamentary question, who or which Department is responsible for this. I ask the Government to look at this. Whatever Department is responsible, I ask that it act with fairness and give school secretaries the recognition and the retirement security they have more than earned. I gave the example of the difference between 40 years' service as an SNA or schoolteacher and 40 years' service as a secretary is that one leaves with a pension and the other gets a bunch of flowers and maybe a box of chocolates.

I respect the Minister of State's response. Obviously, I am not happy with it and the people outside will probably not be happy with it, but we will certainly revisit this issue. We have had this issue for more than 45 years. We have recognition for SNAs and disability service workers, who are being discussed in the House this week. This is about giving recognition to those who are supplying that service. That is where governments have failed. It is why this country and our services have been failing. I thank the Minister of State for his response.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter on the floor of the House. I will pass on the argument and case he has made to the Minister for Education. As I said, there have been significant advancements, as I think we would all recognise. I laid them out in my earlier reply as well. The implementation of revised salary and annual leave entitlements for school secretaries in the February 2022 agreement is now fully operational and lessons learned from that process are now playing a key role in the drafting and implementation of a similar deal to be offered to grant-funded school caretakers. The Minister's officials are also continuing to engage with Fórsa and remain committed to the ongoing process.

In the normal course, there are ongoing discussions with the public service unions on any and all matters relating to pay agreements. Any review of changes to the employment of school caretakers or other pay mechanisms can occur only under those processes and any such proposals would need to be considered in detail by the Department of public expenditure, as I said.

The reply also refers to the work being undertaken by the Department of, and Minister for, Social Protection on the development of an auto-enrolment pension scheme, which the Deputy will be aware of.

0 o'clock The substance of the Deputy matter relates to the request for public service status for school secretaries and access to a pension. That is not in place at the moment but there have been significant advances on other matters of importance to school secretaries. The matter on which the Deputy advocates is an outstanding ask on which the Department is engaging. It will be a matter of further engagement with the Department of Education and also across government because of its implications for other similar categories. I thank the Deputy. I will pass on his advocacy in the Dáil this evening on behalf of school secretaries to the Minister.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State.

Flood Relief Schemes

Deputy Colm Burke: I am raising again the Blackpool flood relief scheme. We had three major floods there in 2010, 2012 and 2013. A decision was taken that a flood relief scheme would be put in place to make sure that the buildings in the area would not be adversely affected by a future increase in rainfall. Some 293 properties were previously adversely affected - 206 of them residential and 87 commercial. The announcement was made in 2018 that the scheme would proceed. It went from the OPW to the Department of public expenditure. A decision was taken that the scheme would go ahead in March 2021. There was a judicial review and four years later nothing has been completed. Between 2022 and 2024 an environmental study was produced by the OPW, which went to the Department of public expenditure. Unfortunately, when action was eventually taken on the report, the report was out of date and we were back to the drawing board with a need to do a new report. My understanding is that a new report has been obtained by the OPW, which it has forwarded to the Department of public expenditure. I do not want to have a repeat of what happened between 2022 and 2024 when a report was left on someone's desk with no action being taken.

It is 15 years since the first major flooding and nothing has been done. Where are we with regard to pressing ahead with the flood relief programme for Blackpool? It is an old part of the city where there are huge problems with properties in that banks will not make finance available to purchasers because they are unable to get insurance to protect against flooding. One property owner who has run a business in the Blackpool area for more than 40 years wants to retire. He has put the property up for sale on a number of occasions. On two separate occasions a purchaser had signed contracts and then they run into difficulties getting finance to proceed with the purchase. As a result, the sale of the property collapsed. It appears that anyone who wants to buy a property in Blackpool must be a cash purchaser because the banks will not lend money to people who want to buy and improve the area. This is an old part of the city, which is becoming derelict as a result of the scheme not being put in place. Could the Minister of State outline the timescale for the Department to sign off on the scheme for Blackpool, the time it will take to carry out the public consultation, if that is required and the time required prior to inviting tenders so that these works can proceed? It is one of the longest awaited schemes by the OPW and the Department of public expenditure and I want to see progress on it in 2025.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It is something he has been relentlessly pursuing to ensure it progresses. I confirm that the Department has received supplementary information from the OPW following a request made under section 7B(4) of the European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations 2019. The Department is making arrangements for a public consultation to be held on the supplementary information received to date. Details of this consultation will be made available in due course on the Department's website.

The Deputy will also be aware that ministerial consent for this scheme was provided in early 2021 but was subsequently overturned by a judicial review challenge taken by a local community group. The Department has since sought legal advice and taken measures to ensure the consent process complies with relevant national and EU environment law in order to account for the issues raised during the judicial review process. On foot of legal advice received by the Department and the recommendations of its retained environmental consultants, the Minister sought supplementary information from the Office of Public Works on the environmental impacts of the scheme. This request was made in February 2022, with the OPW supplying this

information to the Minister in October of that year.

Following an examination of the environmental reports and supplementary information provided, and acting on the advice of independent environmental experts, the Minister sought further supplementary information from the OPW in November 2023. The OPW submitted the supplementary information to him on 17 April 2025. All supplementary information received by him will be made available for public consultation and details of this consultation will be made available on the Department's website.

Deputy Colm Burke: I very much appreciate the work being done by officials in both the OPW and the Department of public expenditure, but there is frustration. As someone who comes from a legal background, I fully understand the dangers of rushing any decision and taking short cuts. Therefore, it is important in this case that the t's are crossed and the i's are dotted. I urge that the public consultation process proceeds at the earliest possible date because there are people who are very supportive of this project. I accept that people will challenge it again. It is their constitutional right to do so. We want to get on with the public consultation. The Department has the report. We must have the public consultation at the earliest possible date so that we can then proceed to the next stage when it has taken place.

It is not just about the public consultation but about getting information out on the advantage to the area of carrying out this work and making sure that properties and families are no longer in danger of a major flood occurring in the area. It can be seen in photographs from 2010 that there was up to 1.5 m of water in commercial premises and houses. It is a frightening experience for a business or family to have to deal with and therefore it is important that this scheme proceeds at the earliest possible date. Let us hold the public consultation, get on to the next step and engage with the contractors to get the scheme up and running. The scheme itself will take at least three years to complete. It will cause major disruption so it is important that it is planned very carefully and well by everyone involved.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter again here this evening and for his continued advocacy on progressing the scheme. While the delays in the delivery of the scheme are a source of frustration for the Deputy's constituents and all in Blackpool, as he is aware it is imperative that the consent process progresses in a manner that is compliant with the relevant regulations. In the period since the original consent decision was overturned following the judicial review challenge, the Department has undertaken a number of measures to ensure the process is in compliance with the regulatory environment. This has necessitated the requesting of supplementary information from the OPW in order to ensure that the Minister can reach a reasoned conclusion regarding the anticipated environmental impacts of the proposed scheme. This process has been informed at all stages by expert legal and environmental advice with a view to ensuring the process is sufficiently robust in the event of any future challenges that may be brought. I encourage all those within the locality who have views on the environmental impacts of this scheme to participate in the public consultation process when it is opened by the Department.

I will relay to the Minister and the Department Deputy Burke's call for an urgent move forward in terms of getting to that consultation and beyond. I know the stress that can be associated with past flooding experiences, the dread that comes with what might happen in the future and the sense of urgency in terms of being able to put mitigation measures in place that can protect communities against that. I understand, therefore, the importance of seeing this process expedited and moved on. I will take his views on behalf of his constituents regarding

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the importance of moving on with this process and having a consultation commence as quickly possible and relay them strongly to the Minister and the Department.

Deputy Colm Burke: The Government is getting €14 billion from Apple computers in my constituency. I would like it if some of that were spent in my constituency and not all of it outside of the constituency. The Blackpool flood relief scheme is one of the priorities that I want dealt with.

Patient Transport

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ar an gcéad dul síos, gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue, albeit to be taken after midnight.

There is a concerning issue affecting the lives and health of many vulnerable people across County Tipperary, namely, the unacceptable and short-sighted cuts to hospital patient transport services. For many in rural areas of Tipperary, especially the elderly, the sick and those on low incomes, access to hospital appointments in places such as Clonmel, Limerick, Cork, Waterford and Dublin depends entirely on the patient transport services provided by the HSE or voluntary organisations, such as the Red Cross, Civil Defence and the Order of Malta, which I salute for the work they do. These are not luxury services; they are essential lifelines. I have been contacted by families, carers and community groups who are at breaking point. They are being told that transport is no longer available, services are being rationalised - that lovely word - and, in some cases, patients must find alternative arrangements. What alternatives do they have in rural parishes?

Public transport is limited or non-existent in much of Tipperary. Many of those patients are already frail, wheelchair users or recovering from major surgeries. They cannot drive themselves. Their family members may be working or living abroad. The result is missed appointments, delayed treatments and worsening conditions. Ultimately, this leads to pressure being piled back on our hospitals through avoidable admissions to accident and emergency departments.

In one case, a man waited four years - 48 months - for an appointment. He has no family. His neighbour who used to bring him to his appointments passed away a month ago and he had no one else to transport him to Cork. He was too frail to use public transport, as it was non-existent in the first place. A taxi would have cost him €120; half of his pension would have been gone in one appointment. It is such a shocking situation.

In another case, a woman with a paraplegic daughter required an ambulance transfer. This woman literally had no other option. She could not just get a neighbour to drive her. In the end, she was forced to beg a voluntary organisation to transfer her and her daughter to her daughter's appointment, which did happen thanks to the volunteers and the voluntary ambulance.

This is not a question of convenience. This is about dignity, equality of access and the right to timely medical care regardless of a person's address or income. Who made the decision to unilaterally cut this without any engagement? Why were the cuts made with no public consultation, no Dáil debate and no local agreement or engagement? Where is the assessment of the human cost to this? Will the Minister of State commit to immediately reviewing the criteria for access to patient transport services in Tipperary with a view to restoring full service? How can

faceless bureaucrats decide this?

When I was elected to this House in 2007, the budget for the HSE was approximately €7 billion. Now, it is €24 billion and growing every year. How come it is affecting the most vulnerable? Earlier, the House spent five hours - Cara Darmody was in the Gallery with her dad - debating people's access to assessments of need and how the HSE was breaking the law hourly by not providing those assessments. Why are we allowing this cabal in the HSE to run amok, do what it likes, neglect people and flout the laws?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):

I thank the Deputy. What he raised this evening highlights an issue of concern. I want to give him an update on the patient transport service in County Tipperary.

The patient transport service, which provides non-emergency patient transport for some patients in the south-east region, was set up in 2013. It was set up on a discretionary basis by the HSE for the region. Hospitals there were given a budget to provide limited transport for patients to attend other acute services. The cost of providing the non-emergency patient transport service has increased year on year. The cost for providing this service has grown from more than €88,000 in 2019 to more than €127,000 in 2024. Due to this continued increase, Tipperary University Hospital has had to review the eligibility criteria for patients applying for access to the service. The review of the eligibility criteria is aimed at preserving this valuable service in order that those most in need and vulnerable patients can access it. It is important to clarify that patients travelling for radiation therapy and chemotherapy will not be affected by these changes. There are a number of criteria that need to be taken into consideration by Tipperary University Hospital when assessing a patient's eligibility to access the service, including the patient's exceptional medical need, patient's age - 75 years and older - mobility, appointment and so on.

The Government fully acknowledges the concern and inconvenience for patients and their families that these changes at Tipperary University Hospital have caused. It continues to accommodate the patients most in need of this service in line with the revised eligibility criteria. The hospital robustly assesses patients' eligibility and all patients must meet the revised criteria before being approved for the transport. It is actually done through the HSE. The assessment of a patient's eligibility for the non-emergency patient transport service is determined by the local HSE service, which aims to provide for those most in need of access to this valuable service.

The Government has invested significantly in Tipperary University Hospital and the budget for the hospital has increased from almost €81 million in 2020 to more than €122 million in 2025, representing a significant increase of 51% in that time. Staffing has increased by 25% since 2020 from 968 to 1,212.

The cost of providing this important service has increased year on year and it is aimed at assisting those most in need.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not know. I remember six months ago, when the Minister of State was not in government and, like me, she was crying out about this. It is not a massive increase from €88,000 in 2019 to €127,000 in 2024; it is nothing in the scheme of things. The Minister of State mentioned all the extra staff. How many of them are penpushers and executives in made-up jobs - that is what they are - and not nurses or front-line staff? It is a shocking situation.

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A month ago, I stood in Clonmel in front of St. Joseph's Hospital for the opening of the Slievenamon wing. I met a number of new executives, many of whom were from the Minister of State's area. I mean no disrespect to them, but they had positions that we never had before, namely, executives, directors of this and that and directors of everything, except patient care. We are taking on people - of course we are - in management jobs. Self-serving officials: that is what is wrong in the HSE. We have spineless Ministers who will not challenge them. We have spent five hours tonight talking about it here, all sides of the House condemning what is going on in the HSE. We have these mean, hungry, desperate cuts to vulnerable people. Thankfully, they will get radium injections or other treatment. What about a person who is paraplegic or an amputee? What about the people who have severe diabetes or many other conditions? We are picking and choosing who is sick and vulnerable while we have fat cats getting fatter and we have board members of the HSE, the runaway cost of the children's hospital and the disgraceful, diabolical lack of management and accountability.

Then we make these mean cuts. We talked about the dirty dozen cuts by Charlie McCreevy in the past. This is so mean-spirited and we expect voluntary organisations like the Order of Malta, Civil Defence and Red Cross to burn out their ambulances and staff, who are volunteers, while officials and fat cats go around the conferences and everything else. Bring back the matrons to the hospitals to make the savings and have the hospitals clean, not plethoras of management who are not managing. They were never managers in the first place. Some of them got into those jobs by pull. It is a shocking situation when we treat vulnerable people in our society like this and the Minister of State cannot argue against it.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and giving me the opportunity to update him on transport in County Tipperary. The Deputy mentioned the Red Cross, Order of Malta and Civil Defence, and it is important we pay tribute to the great work they do. They are excellent. It is important the Deputy recognised them and that we all recognise them. I assure the Deputy the HSE and Tipperary University Hospital are committed to providing high-quality service in response to local needs. Tipperary University Hospital has reviewed the eligibility criteria for the non-emergency patient transport service so the most in need and vulnerable patients can still access it.

Non-emergency transport patient calls are planned for patients who require transport in a special converted taxi or minibus to attend pre-arranged medical appointments and who do not require a stretcher-equipped vehicle. The patient transport service was set up in 2013 on a discretionary basis by the HSE and provides non-emergency patient transport in south-east region hospitals. There is a budget there. I understand the Deputy's concerns. I will go back to the HSE and see whether it can be looked at. I understand there are vulnerable people out there. It is important to reiterate this is HSE-led. I thank the Deputy for highlighting the serious concerns he has raised.

Hospital Procedures

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am speaking on behalf of the families whose lives have been turned upside down by the hip dysplasia scandal, particularly those who have sat in my constituency office in Dundalk over the past couple of weeks upset about the care for their little children. How is the Department planning to support those families to get treatment and follow-up care for children who have had surgery for hip dysplasia? These families did everything right.

They brought their children to hospital and trusted the system. They believed the care their children received was necessary and in their best interests. Now the families are in limbo.

The recent audit is welcome, necessary and important, but let us be honest: it has not brought certainty and will not bring trust or confidence in the system. Instead, it has brought fresh fear and confusion. More importantly, an audit will not sort out the issue I raise, which is that the families want and deserve financial supports. They want to be compensated or to be facilitated in getting their children treated elsewhere. Parents no longer know whether their child needed the surgery and no longer trust the hospital, the consultants or the system. Many of them are asking the heartbreaking question: was my child operated on needlessly? If that was the case, it was a grave violation and nothing short of a serious assault on that child. Can we as a Government and society seriously expect the families to return to the same hospital for follow-up care, check-ups and X-rays? Can we ask them to place their children back in the care of the system now they believe they could be harmed by that system? It is not tenable or reasonable. As a mother, I would not let them near my child if I thought there was a hint of a suggestion that surgeries had been done that were not necessary.

Many of these families are scraping together whatever money they can find to seek second opinions, mostly going to Northern Ireland, to ensure their child receives safe and trusted care. That situation should not exist in a functioning healthcare system. It is not acceptable these parents are paying out of pocket for something the State should ensure. Potentially, parents are getting loans to do this.

Let us be very clear. This is not the Government's fault but it is absolutely the Government's responsibility. Responsibility means stepping up with supports the families can trust. Sympathy is not enough; we need action. These families need immediate access to independent care pathways, financial support to access second opinions and trauma-informed services. Most of all, they need to know they are not alone in this. They felt abandoned by the hospitals, they feel abandoned by the doctors and they are desperately worried about their children. What happened is deeply serious. The outcome depends on how the State responds. Supporting the families would send a message to every family in the country that we will treat our children with respect and dignity and that we value accountability, and it would show that our healthcare is worthy of trust.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this very serious issue. I have spoken to families and I see the concern and hurt. It is important this is raised in the House.

A clinical audit has been conducted by an external international expert on surgery for children with developmental dysplasia of the hip across CHI and the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh, NOHC. The clinical audit involved a random anonymised sample of patients aged one to seven years of age who had pelvic osteotomy procedures for development dysplasia, DDH, from 2021 to 2023 in CHI and the NOHC. The purpose of this audit is to assess whether the indications and threshold used to select patients with DDH for pelvic osteotomy procedures were in keeping with international standards of practice. The audit process is at an advanced stage. CHI and NOHC are committed to sharing the findings of the audit once it is completed.

An action plan is currently being drafted in advance of the final audit report. This plan includes identification of groups of patients not included in the audit sample but who may be affected by any findings of the audit. A communications plan is being developed to support the

publication of the final report and further communications to patients and families. As a patient safety precaution, a single cross-site pre-operative decision-making process for any planned DDH surgery in CHI and NOHC has been implemented. All cases are being reviewed before any decision for surgery is made by clinicians from CHI Crumlin, Temple Street and NOHC. This multidisciplinary team, MDT, commenced the first week of March 2025. In addition, CHI is establishing an expert reference group, including international experts, to develop the standards and criteria for the MDT decision-making process for CHI.

An early recommendation from the audit is that, in line with best practice, patients who have DDH surgery should have clinical follow-up at skeletal maturity. This is at about age 14 or 15, when bones have fully grown and developed. Clinical advice is that this follow-up is part of normal post-operative care. Plans are being put in place for patient follow-up in line with good practice and will consider any recommendations on clinical follow-up from the final report. CHI and NOHC have issued letters to all patients and families who have had this procedure since 2010 to provide reassurance and information about the audit and to ensure all potential cases have been included. The total number of letters sent to date is 2,259. The majority, 1,757, have been from CHI, while 502 have been from Cappagh. The number of patients and families involved is subject to ongoing refinements due to clinical review.

The HSE funds certain treatments in other EU member states and, as the Deputy knows, we have a similar scheme for the UK or Switzerland, when this treatment is not available in Ireland. As surgery for children with developmental dysplasia of the hip is available in Ireland, financial supports for treatment outside of the State are not available. However, I assure the Deputy that currently all cases for DDH are being reviewed by a single cross-site pre-operative decision-making process before any decision for surgery is made by clinicians from CHI at Crumlin, CHI at Temple Street and NOHC.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I thank the Minister of State, and I understand she is reading out an answer from the Department and it is not her line responsibility.

I am getting a huge of sense of frustration here. My question was on the financial support. The Minister of State said that certain treatments are available in Ireland and therefore, it is a “No”. I am sorry; this is not a normal situation, where the trust breaks down. I will repeat what I said: if there was even a hint of a suggestion that my children were operated on wrongly or unnecessarily, I would not let anyone in that hospital touch them. Their little bodies are precious. To a point, it is disingenuous of the Department to come back here and tell a parent that the hospital should be trusted with the dignity and integrity of their child’s little body. I am sorry but the Department is going to have to look at this again, listen to parents, reconsider and support parents, whether it is to get a different doctor to come from abroad to look at these files who is not associated with CHI or Temple Street or who has anything to do with them. It is an unprecedented situation and it calls for an unprecedented response. We need to instil trust in these parents and families.

It is hugely disappointing that we are at this point where the Department is right and proper in doing these audits and all the processes. I have nothing to disagree with. However, where a child’s health and physical body is concerned, and their tiny wee bones that could be operated on unnecessarily, they and their families deserve the respect and to be told, “Yes, we will make sure that we will get a doctor that you can trust and believe.”

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: I assure the Deputy that the Minister and the De-

partment are taking this very seriously. This is very serious, and we know that. Nobody wants anyone, particularly those children or their families, to be in this position today. I can guarantee that the Minister is very conscious of the concern that will be felt by all the patients and families affected. The audit process is nearly complete and she has been advised that it will be finalised and completed soon. She will then be in a position to comment further once the audit is published. I assure the Deputy that she is committed to this, as are all of us in the Department of Health.

She is also committed to ensuring reform remains centred around putting children and their families at the very heart of this. I do understand. As I said, I have spoken to families in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny and I have seen the hurt and pain. I assure the Deputy that the Minister is committed to this, as we all are. We will come back to her with more information. I thank her. It is important that we work together on this and make sure that the children and families are to the forefront of this, and they will be.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12.34 a.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 21 Bealtaine 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.34 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 21 May 2025.