



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	605
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	606
Mental Health Services	606
Bus Services	609
Public Transport	612
Schools Building Projects.	615
Water Services.	618
Fair and Sustainable Funding for Carers, Home Support and Nursing Homes Support Schemes: Motion [Private Members]	621
Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil	650
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.	650
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltáí Eile - Other Members' Questions	661
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	663
Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025: First Stage.	672
Planning and Development (Exempted Development – External Wall Insulation) Bill 2025: First Stage.	674
Restricted Financial Measures (State of Israel) Bill 2025: First Stage	676
Membership of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight: Motion	677
Gaza: Statements	678
Biodiversity Week: Statements	727
Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025: Motion	754
Estimates for Public Services 2025	766
Information on Repairability of Certain Products Bill 2024: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members].	783
Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025: Motion (Resumed)	785

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 21 Bealtaine 2025

Wednesday, 21 May 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

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

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): 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 Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss the closure of the Gorey and Courtown meals on wheels .

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss substandard water and wastewater connections at Ellen's Court, County Dublin.

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

Deputy John Brady - To discuss the future of the Greystones Media Campus.

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

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the impact the bus changes are having on Inchicore.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the growing demand for a secondary school in Newcastle.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss accessibility on public transport.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss organised crime in Limerick city.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss ongoing matters in respect of the reopening of Castle-town House.

Deputy David Cullinane - To discuss funding for a youth mental health services centre for

Waterford.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss extending the increase in the cap for the defective block grant scheme to all homeowners.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the tenant *in situ* scheme.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the long waiting period for many social welfare appeals.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the current shortage of school places, particularly for children with additional needs.

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

Deputy Brendan Smith - To discuss the proposed building project at a school (details supplied).

Deputy Catherine Connolly, Deputy Mairéad Farrell and Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the safety issues arising for a number of schools on the R336 in Galway.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss funding for a youth mental health services centre for Waterford.

The matters raised by Deputies David Cullinane and Conor McGuinness, Jen Cummins, Naoise Ó Muirí, Brendan Smith and Robert O'Donoghue have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Mental Health Services

Deputy David Cullinane: A number of weeks ago, I met representatives of Comhairle na nÓg who had travelled from Waterford to submit a petition they had carried out. They met the Minister of State the same day. I know she is aware of this issue. Waterford is the only city that does not have a Jigsaw service. I know the Minister of State would join me in supporting Jigsaw as an organisation for the wonderful work it does. It is really important that young people who have a mental health difficulty get every opportunity to get supports. Very often, the focus is on the acute side and the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, which is obviously very important. However, if we can prevent a person developing an acute mental health illness and provide the full range of supports young people need, it would be best for everybody, particularly for the young people themselves. Comhairle na nÓg initiated its petition at the west Waterford food festival. It received more than 1,100 signatures. The group was blown away by the interest in this issue. I have met Jigsaw a number of times and I know that an application for funding and a detailed business case have to be made. It is my understanding that this has happened. Those are with the Minister of State. I assume there is also an issue with premises. That will also have to be sorted.

As I have said, Deputy Conor McGuinness and I met the representatives from Comhairle na

nÓg. We are very happy to work with the Minister of State, with Jigsaw and with anybody else to get this over the line. I am hopeful that we can. It would be a fantastic addition to mental health services in Waterford, particularly for young people. I am hopeful that the Minister of State's response today will be a positive one that will support the application. If she is supportive, what timelines are we looking at to get the service operational and up and running in Waterford?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister of State will agree it is unacceptable that Waterford is the only city, and the south-east region is the only part of the State, that does not have a Jigsaw youth mental health service. These services are not only physically based in premises but also offer outreach services. People I am dealing with right across Waterford city and county and also those in parts of south Tipperary, south Kilkenny and Wexford would be able to avail of this. There would be outreach services in towns like Dungarvan, Tallow, Kilmacthomas, New Ross and Clonmel. As Deputy Cullinane has mentioned, we very recently met Comhairle na nÓg. I know the group went on to meet the Minister of State afterwards. They presented to Deputy Cullinane and me, to the Minister of State herself and perhaps to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, a petition calling for this service to be initiated in Waterford. It is not just Comhairle na nÓg, although it has been driving this campaign. Parents are also saying it to us day in and day out. Practitioners in the mental health space and advocates across the city and county are calling for this and have been for many years. As Deputy Cullinane has said, early intervention is key. We know of the issues in CAMHS, which primarily revolve around recruitment and retention and the inability of children in need to get a foot in the door and that first appointment. Community-based early intervention is really important.

We are told that the HSE is important. As the Minister of State will know, I have submitted a parliamentary question on this every month since being elected. We know the HSE is broadly supportive. I know from the press that the Minister of State received an application at the start of May. The response I got from the HSE just last week did not mention that. It did not seem to be aware of it. Is there a breakdown in communication?

The other issue that is really important to raise and discuss here is the issue of a premises. What work has been done to engage with the local authority, HSE estates and other agencies or bodies that might have access to property in Waterford to find a home for a Jigsaw service?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank both Deputies for raising this really important issue today. I recently met Comhairle na nÓg to update the group on my efforts to establish a new youth mental health service for Waterford and the south east. I will give a big shout-out to Theo Hannigan, Mollie Mernagh and Eve Meleady, the three amazing young people who presented me with a petition with a lot of signatures. They are great young people and great ambassadors for their three schools: St. Paul's Community College, the Friary in Dungarvan and my own alma mater, St. Declan's Community College in Kilmacthomas.

Improving access to a range of youth mental health services is a priority for me, for the Department of Health and for the HSE. In recent weeks, I received a formal proposal from Jigsaw to establish a youth mental health service for Waterford and the south east. It is important to point out that Jigsaw changed its model of care in 2022, during the Covid pandemic. Its services to support young people now have 73% coverage across the country but 100% is covered online. I meet Dr. Joseph Duffy and his team regularly. Last year, we discussed moving back towards more physical structures but they are costly.

I have also invited proposals from other relevant national organisations that might be interested in developing youth mental health services. For example, there is a fantastic service under Mental Health Ireland called Mindspace Mayo that provides very similar supports. Work to secure a suitable premises for this service has begun with the chief executive of Waterford City and County Council, whom I thank for his interactions with me. I have discussed the need for the service with the local HSE integrated health area manager, who is very supportive. I am evaluating all the options available to me as Minister of State as to how best to provide a youth mental health service in Waterford and other identified areas of the country where a service has yet to be established, such as Kildare, Clare, Cavan and Monaghan. I intend to secure funding for this new early intervention youth mental health service in the Estimates process for budget 2026.

While CAMHS provides specialist supports for children, I am acutely aware that counselling supports are very important for young people, who deal with a lot of different issues including exam stress, anxiety, bullying and social media. The list is endless for many young people, especially for those young people in the LGBT+ community. Supports are vital. Young trans people can feel very isolated, alone and misunderstood. They face a great many challenges because they walk a different pathway in life. Counselling supports are vital. I want to compliment the great work of BeLonG To and ChillOUT, which are based at the Manor Youth Café in Waterford city every Sunday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. The programme for Government commits to ensuring a transgender healthcare service that is based on clinical evidence, respect, inclusiveness and compassion. I was happy to write that into the programme. I know the trans community very well. I am very proud to be the mother of a young trans man. I hope and pray that all Deputies can support this. I do not think it is too much to ask.

Foróige also has to be commended on the fantastic supports it provides to young people based in Ferrybank, Tramore, Portlaoise and Carrick-on-Suir, all of which enhance the life chances of ten- to 18-year-olds. They are all really important supports. I will come back in with regard to other funding I am providing this year.

Deputy David Cullinane: I agree with all of the points the Minister of State has made. As the father of a son who is doing the leaving certificate at the moment, I know about the stress that many young people face. I also agree with the Minister of State's comments regarding the LGBTI community, the trans community in particular, and the work being done by the various groups in Waterford. Obviously, people need mental health supports for a whole range of reasons. There is no family or young person who does not have a mental health difficulty at some point. The most important thing is that the supports are there at the earliest opportunity. As somebody who has visited centres run by Jigsaw and has worked with Jigsaw on other issues, I found it incredible when I first met them that they were not operating in Waterford. I welcome that we are now moving in that direction. I also welcome that there is engagement with the local council on a premises. Hopefully, if the Minister of State secures the funding in the Estimates, this is something we can get up and running quickly in Waterford. It will be a fantastic addition for young people.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I agree that young people in particular are under huge stresses in this day and age. There is of course a need to constantly improve our acute mental health services, particularly for young people - children and adolescents. As I said, there is a need for early intervention and that wellness piece. There are great organisations working on the ground across Waterford and I met Pride of the Déise recently with Deputy Cullinane and understand the needs of the LGBTQI community. That is important. There is also Waterford

and South Tipperary Community Service and Foróige, which the Minister of State mentioned. They are all making the case for additional youth mental health services, both in the community and on the acute side. There is a fantastic organisation called Laochas on the ground in Waterford promoting emotional and mental well-being among young children. Those need to be supported, but this is about equality as well. Waterford and the south east is the only region in the State without access to Jigsaw services. We all know, particularly after Covid, the need for face to face, physical services to be available. I ask the Minister of State to make the commitment that we will drive this on.

Deputy Mary Butler: I certainly will drive it on, and it is an area that has been identified as needing youth mental health supports. However, all areas of the county need youth mental health supports. Some 2% of young people will need the support of CAMHS but 98% of young people - about a third of them - will need counselling and low-level supports so they can deal with anxiety, depression and the challenges they have with body image and social media challenges. All of that is huge. There are a lot of parents in the Dáil who will understand how difficult it can be, having young teenagers and young adults as children. Approximately €110 million of the mental health budget this year is being provided to various community-based mental health organisations and NGOs, including Jigsaw. Jigsaw already receives more than €14 million from the HSE under a service level agreement to provide youth mental health services. I have reached out to other organisations as well, because I have to provide supports in a good few communities and I have to try to get value for money. It does not matter to me who delivers the service once we have a good service, fit for purpose, and where the clinical governance is in place. I have identified four areas, which are Waterford and the south east, the Clare area, the Kildare area and the Cavan-Monaghan area, which is really important.

It is important that we acknowledge some of the supports that have come into the areas. As Minister of State, I introduced the model of care for our crisis resolution services. We now have a crisis resolution team operating in Waterford. It is currently working 9 to 5. I hope we will soon be moving to 3 to 11, Thursday to Monday, which is the model of care for crisis resolution teams. The most important thing with a crisis resolution team is that it is operational when other services are not there. We will also have a solace café opening very shortly in the city. That will be operated by Aware. It was previously known as a crisis cafe, but we changed the name. We know the café in Galway has reduced by 18% the number of people presenting to accident and emergency with mental health difficulties. I am fully committed to delivering this service for Waterford and I am happy to work with the Deputies.

Bus Services

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity to bring forward this matter. It is of deep concern to the people of Inchicore, a number of groups in fact. One of the groups I have been working with is a called Connecting Communities, which has been working on this issue and is looking to have the Minister of State's support. As a resident of that constituency and a community advocate, there is a serious impact from the proposed changes under the BusConnects programme, specifically the rerouting of the 57 bus. There were two buses that used to go from Bluebell and Inchicore, down Tyrconnell Road and turn into Thomas Street. I have raised this in the Dáil before and we are not getting any further with the NTA, so I am asking the Minister of State for his support on this. Some 40% of the people who live in that area do not have a car, so they rely on public transport. The people I am meeting with are

a generation of people who live in Bluebell and Inchicore and rely on Thomas Street for their shopping, services, hospital and churches and the social aspects of their lives.

I am sure the Minister of State does not know Inchicore as well I do, given that he is not from Dublin South-Central. However, the bus will go along the Conyngham Road at the side of the Phoenix Park, which is miles away from Thomas Street. That then means those people have no access to it. Carrying your shopping and having to take two buses is not suitable for a young person, a middle-aged person and certainly not an older person. The NTA has said it has consulted with people, but people do not feel consulted with. They do not feel they have been listened to. They are out marching. They were out last weekend and will be out again. Public representatives are sponsoring posters so this community group can demonstrate how difficult this move is for them. We have written to the NTA. We are not getting an answer and I am asking for some intervention. It is not that the group or anybody in Inchicore does not want BusConnects to go ahead because it is great to have a bus service that will be there. Unfortunately, when you are trying to rationalise how a bus service is going to go for the whole of Dublin, bearing in mind that route will go out to Kildare and other commuter areas, what happens is that the small details are lost. This is an example of the small details being lost. Those people who are reliant on an old part of Dublin will be disconnected. I suppose that is why they have called their group Connecting Communities.

The other issue BusConnects has is that it will put pressure on parents who are sending their children to school. There are very few secondary schools in Dublin 8 and there is no Gaelcholáiste or multidenominational school, so parents send their children outside that area. A number of parents contacted me recently with regard to some children taking three buses in the morning to get to a Gaelcholáiste in Rathfarnham and some getting two, depending on where they live in Inchicore. That is an extremely long day for a student in secondary school. The other difficulty with that Inchicore BusConnects issue is that the people coming out of the CIÉ works, which is on an estate in that area, will no longer be able to go left, which cuts them off from going to Ballyfermot and the N4. They will have to take a circuitous route, which adds way more time to their day and is totally illogical. They have also said that the NTA has said it has engaged with this community group, but they do not feel engaged. All of these engagements happened over Covid time, which was quite a difficult time to engage people. People were possibly not as engaged, or they missed it. However, the NTA needs to try harder, and we are asking the Minister of State to intervene and help in any way with regard to Inchicore.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Deputy Cummins for her contribution and as a public representative I fully understand the stress that BusConnects is causing. I have the same experience in Cork. In many ways the reply I am going to give her will not be the response she perhaps deserves. She is right that I am not familiar with the geographical area, but going through her constituency on the way in and out of Dublin you can see the importance of BusConnects and the Conyngham Road to Thomas Street geographical imbalance. I am struck by her comments about the 40% who have no car. Am I correct that the Deputy said the 57 bus?

Deputy Jen Cummins: There is a 57, 68 and a Go-Ahead bus there.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will take the Deputy's concerns back to the NTA and I thank her and the people in Connecting Communities. I know my previous colleague, former Senator Seery-Kearney, had been active on behalf of residents.

The first thing is that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport, but the Minister or his officials do not have responsibility for the day to day operation of public transport services. That falls to the NTA, as the Deputy knows. The NTA, on behalf of Government, works with public transport operators to deliver services and has responsibility for day to day operational matters. In the context of BusConnects, the NTA is the group that is in charge of its implementation. I reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and useful sustainable travel options and public transport is an important part of that. BusConnects is critical to that offering. In budget 2025, €658 million of funding for public service obligation, PSO, in my case was obtained through the Department for Local Link services, which represents an increase from the €613 million. However, we have been encouraging young people through the fare reduction, the young adult card on commercial bus services and the 90-minute fare until the end of this year. There is also funding for those aged between five and eight years old. The main point we must both work on is to make sure that BusConnects is transformative for our bus system, providing a better bus service across our cities, particularly in Dublin, for the people who use this service.

The key elements of BusConnects in Dublin include the construction of segregated bus and cycling lanes, or core bus corridors, as well as a redesigned network of services. I am pleased to announce that An Bord Pleanála has now approved all 12 core bus corridor applications, and I expect to see the first of these corridors enter construction later this year. The primary aim of the redesigned bus network in BusConnects Dublin is to improve the existing bus system through enhanced services with high-frequency spines and new local, orbital and radial routes. The bus network changes in Inchicore form part of this city-wide programme. New services are being provided, running with co-ordinated timetables at high-frequency along each of the main radial corridors to and from the city centre. This is combined with new inter-suburban and local routes. Free interchange is available using the 90-minute fare. As the Deputy is well aware, the new BusConnects Dublin network is being implemented in stages. For Inchicore, phase 4 saw the introduction of the G spine routes connecting Ballyfermot, Liffey Valley and the Red Cow to the Docklands via Inchicore. These services are all operated by Dublin Bus on a 24-hour basis. The NTA has advised that there has been a 25% increase in passenger boardings following the introduction of new services provided under phase 4 of the roll-out, compared with equivalent routes operating prior to the launch of this phase.

For Inchicore, the current routes 13, 68 and 69 will be replaced as part of the D spine. Specifically, the overall replacement for route 13 will be the new route D3 running from Clongriffin to Clondalkin via Crumlin, while routes 68 and 69 are being replaced locally by a new route 58. I am informed by the NTA that these changes are planned for the first half of next year. I have been advised that the NTA is aware of the concerns of residents about new route 58 in Inchicore and will write to representatives about this in the near future. Engagement with the Deputy and other public representatives is critical. I will bring her comments back to the NTA.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome his comments and knowledge of the area. We are all very proud in Dublin 8 of Inchicore and the historic part of the city that it is. We absolutely welcome the fare reduction, particularly for young people and students. It is excellent, especially if someone was to take three buses within the two-hour period. It is fantastic and we do welcome that. BusConnects is welcome. It will make people's lives much easier and travelling will be more straight forward, etc.

As I referenced earlier, however, smaller details are being missed out in the wider scheme

and these are important. I acknowledge the work of former TD Joan Collins on this issue. She is still out every week working so hard on this and I am happy to support her and that group. Every public representative of Dublin South-Central and the Ballyfermot-Drimnagh area is there and we are putting pressure on. When those three bus routes, 13, 68 and 69, were first going to go to just one bus twice every hour, the pressure that the group put on the NTA and public representatives to keep representing them has meant that it is now going to be every 15 minutes. When I met the NTA recently, it said there will be a second route which is going to go pretty much the same way, but it is also going to be more frequent, which is great. The missing link is going to Thomas Street. That is really the difficulty. Not missing out on access to that part of the city is what they are looking for, and the frequency of buses is also a concern.

I thank the Minister of State and the NTA. I hope it will engage with us further, so we are able to make the Inchichore BusConnects situation less difficult for everybody.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for again articulating people's genuine concerns. As public representatives, it is important that we highlight that the redesigned bus network for Dublin was finalised following three rounds of extensive public consultations. This culminated in over 72,000 submissions being received. Part of the difficulty that I experience in Cork, and I am sure that Deputies Cummins and Devine are the same in their area, is that there needs to be extensive engagement, active listening and participation by all the residents, us as public representatives and the NTA. BusConnects is about transforming public transport. We all share that. There is no argument there. Passenger numbers are increasing. I have been informed that for residents in Inchichore along the G spine, the wait time between the high-frequency buses has significantly dropped, maybe in part because of the active engagement by residents. Bus reliability has improved as a result of this redesign.

I understand that the changes proposed to the bus services in Inchichore are causing concerns. Some of those can be alleviated and can be addressed. The issue relates to the geography of the bus route, the frequency and the connections. That is part of what the public consultation must be about. The Deputy and residents bring knowledge that engineers, with the best will in the world, do not necessarily have. Having a map and going through a particular area sounds great, looks great and reads great, but it is about the day-to-day practicalities. I am confident that the NTA, which has committed to writing to representatives, can address the matter.

This is about a modernisation and improvement of our overall transport network. It is about increasing capacity, frequency and coverage across Dublin and other cities and ensuring that we do not discommode people. Obviously, everybody will not get what they want but in this case, it is about working to bring a solution that is practical. I again thank Deputy Cummins for raising the matter. I assure her that I will bring her comments back to the NTA.

Public Transport

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I echo the supports for BusConnects. It is a very important project for Dublin in particular. It cannot come soon enough.

I wish to speak about the urgent need for security personnel on public transport services in north Dublin, in particular during evening hours. I thank my local colleague Councillor Supriya Singh, who has raised this matter at many local forums, including Dublin City Council's own north-central area committee. I commend Councillor Singh on her ongoing strong advocacy

for our local communities. Her motion passed unanimously at the north-central area committee. It called for the deployment of An Garda Síochána or security personnel on DART and bus services as part of the community safety programme. It is an issue of growing concern, particularly in areas such as Raheny, Donaghmede, Belmayne and Clongriffin, but the progress on the issue seems to be very slow.

Let us be clear: this is not an hypothetical issue. We have had a steady stream of incidents, including violent attacks at both Raheny and Clongriffin DART stations within the past year. These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a pattern of escalating anti-social behaviour that, if we do not address it, will erode public confidence in the safety of our transport system. This affects everyone but particularly women, older people and those travelling alone in the evening time. How can we encourage women to switch to or even use public transport if they do not feel safe? It is a public service and a safety issue. Safety on public transport must be treated as a basic right, not a privilege. We have written to the NTA on this issue seeking an update but to date there appears to be little or no tangible progress. Meanwhile, security personnel were deployed on some southside routes last year. Why the delay on the northside of the city? When will we see a proper security presence on the ground, on buses and on trains in our communities? The travelling public deserve more than assurances. They need real action on safety.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I join the Deputy in thanking Councillor Singh for her advocacy and proactivity on the matter. The Deputy is right: antisocial behaviour on our public transport system needs to be addressed. It has been tolerated for far too long. While the Minister for Transport has no responsibility for policy and funding, as that is a matter for the NTA, the programme for Government has a strong commitment to the creation of a transport security force under the National Transport Authority, which would operate and have similar powers to airport police and customs officers. While recent years have seen significant progress on investment in safety measures, antisocial behaviour on public transport remains a serious issue, and it is those who regularly use and work within the public transport network who are most directly impacted by safety or security incidents on the network. I commend Dermot O'Leary of the NBRU for his advocacy and work. The establishment of a transport security force will play a central role in helping to tackle this important issue.

Work in the Department of Transport is ongoing to identify the necessary legislative proposals to progress the transport security force commitment, in conjunction with the NTA. The work involves making measured and informed decisions regarding the appropriate model for the transport security force, which is in the preliminary stages of the deliberative process. It is important to note that neither the airport police nor customs officers have the powers provided to An Garda Síochána, and the introduction of such a force will require the development of legislation. Nonetheless, the Government commitment to delivering a safe and secure public transport network, and the ongoing interim work on public transport safety, will continue, as will the continued support and funding for operator measures, such as the Dublin Bus Safer Journeys Team pilot scheme.

The Department of Transport engages regularly with the NTA and public transport operators on the safety and security of the network. Throughout these discussions, operators have continuously stressed their strong and close working relationships with An Garda Síochána on these matters. It is important to note that decisions regarding the policing of public transport and the allocation of Garda resources are matters for the Minister of Justice and the Garda Commissioner. The allocation of security staff employed by the various operators, such as

Dublin Bus, Irish Rail and Transdev, are matters for the operators. In the case of Dublin Bus, for example, resources are allocated throughout the day to areas in line with front-line worker feedback, reports received from the public and data on passenger usage.

A great deal of work to tackle antisocial behaviour on public transport has already commenced, including the establishment of a public transport safety working group. The public transport safety working group was established in 2024 to identify measures to improve passenger and staff safety across the public transport network, and includes representatives from across the public transport sector, operating companies, unions, the NTA, An Garda Síochána, the Department of Justice and passenger representative groups. The main focus of the group is to create a public transport safety charter and to progress the NTA safety and security implementation plan.

The Department of Transport continues to work closely with industry stakeholders to identify measures to improve passenger safety across the public transport network. In this regard, communication with stakeholders such as that which takes place at the public transport safety working group will play an important role in the planning and implementation of the Government commitment to create a transport security force.

I give Deputy Ó Muirí a commitment that I will come back to him with the timeline for the northside personnel. I will inform the NTA and the Department of Transport of the issues he raises. Work is ongoing on the commitment to ensure the optimised deployment of resources across the public transport network to meet passenger requirements. I again thank the Deputy for raising the matter this morning.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State for the update. I welcome in particular the public transport safety working group because all the important players are around the table with the aim of ensuring the safety of passengers. The NTA does its own public transport passenger security reports. I understand that it surveys users. Although the general day-to-day experience is very good, almost half of public transport users in 2024 claimed they felt unsafe at least once on public transport. It is just not good enough that 42% of bus users and 44% of DART users feel unsafe in the evening. Those statistics will not put us in a position whereby we can encourage people to change their mode of transport and use public transport.

The Minister of State mentioned the commitment in the programme for Government, which is very welcome. I appreciate that it will take time, but the sooner we can see the legislation coming through the Dáil to establish the force, the better. People will have confidence once they see those measures coming through. The Dublin city task force also made it clear that the visibility of policing and security in the city centre is so important in order to have confidence in Dublin city. Public transport - buses, DART and Luas services - coming in and out of the city safely and securely at all times is a big part of that.

I thank the Minister of State for his response. I look forward to hearing from him about the personnel deployed by the operators on the northside. As he says in his response, it is a matter for the operators, but there is a question mark as to why the southside's services are manned but the northside's services are not.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I again reassure Deputy Ó Muirí that security and the visibility of policing on the public transport system and in city centres is critical. He is correct that there needs to be a commitment from the operators on the northside piece. I reassure him that the

21 May 2025

Minister for Transport, the Department, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, as well as the Government, are acutely aware of how important it is for transport staff and the travelling public to feel safe. We are strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable, realistic and safe sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal.

The NTA and An Garda Síochána work closely with all public transport operators, who take the safety and security of both passengers and staff very seriously, to promote order and safety on board. The Government is satisfied that each of the operators has increased its safety measures and introduced a number of initiatives in recent years to help to combat antisocial behaviour. For example, Irish Rail has contracted a security service provider for security across the network and developed a surge security action plan. It has also developed its relationship with An Garda Síochána to include access to 20 rapid response hubs that were created. The Luas has more than 50 full-time dedicated security staff, employed by Transdev, who work alongside revenue protection officers and customer assurance officers. Dublin Bus has three dedicated mobile security units that are in operation every day of the week, from midday to midnight.

What is important is that there is a commitment and engagement to reinforce the relationship between communities and An Garda Síochána. I reiterate the point about visibility. The Government fully supports this work and the ongoing engagement. We will continue to progress the legislation. I thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising these concerns. I will convey the points he made to the relevant people.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to raise this important subject matter this morning. In November 2021, the then Minister for Education, Deputy Norma Foley, gave the initial project approval for the provision of additional permanent accommodation at Breifne College in Cavan town. This major building project, which will enhance considerably the level of permanent accommodation at the school, is much needed due to increased enrolments at Breifne College in recent years. The level of enrolment continues to grow.

I compliment Cavan-Monaghan Education and Training Board and Breifne College on submitting this successful application. The growth in population in the wider Cavan town area has led to a substantial and consistent increase in enrolments. In November 2021, I warmly welcomed the decision by the Minister, Deputy Foley, to issue the initial project approval, as I had supported Breifne College and Cavan-Monaghan ETB in submitting the application. The project is a major one and is to be welcomed. It will be provided under the additional school accommodation scheme. Among the additional accommodation to be provided are a number of general classrooms, special education teaching rooms, special educational needs classrooms, science laboratories, engineering rooms, technology rooms, graphics rooms, an art room, a textiles room and other ancillary accommodation as well. From my detailed knowledge of the school, this accommodation is much needed and as urgently as possible.

In June 2024 Cavan-Monaghan ETB submitted all documentation for stage 2A, which is detailed design stage. This documentation has been under consideration for almost 12 months by the Department's technical and professional team. It is essential that the Department issues, without further delay, approval for stage 2A. That will enable the ETB to seek planning permis-

sion for this major and much-needed building project.

I cannot emphasise how much Breifne College needs this accommodation. Some years ago we had an extension and upgrading of facilities at Breifne and everyone in the school community is appreciative of that investment and accommodation. Unfortunately, the present level of accommodation is inadequate to meet the school's needs. I have been to the college on many occasions and have seen at first hand how crowded it is. A parent of students attending Breifne said to me recently the school was packed - a very good analysis and description of the inadequate accommodation. That comment was made by a young lady with a detailed knowledge of education and school accommodation requirements. We refer to part of the school accommodation as the 1970s building. To meet the needs of today's schoolgoing population, that building needs to be reconfigured. Breifne College staff over the years have worked extremely hard to cater for all pupils, particularly children with additional needs. They have approval for four ASD classes but have only three suitable classrooms. They are anxious to have proper accommodation for those classes.

Over many years, a feature of Breifne College has been the high proportion of students taking what are often referred to as practical subjects. The teaching of these subjects is enhanced by specialist classroom accommodation. Those subjects include construction engineering, computer studies, technology and technical graphics. Those are all important parts of Breifne College's subject choice for students. Will the Minister of State bring a message back to the Department of Education and Youth on the need to have stage 2a approved without further delay? We know planning permission takes some time and the ETB is anxious to submit the planning application to Cavan County Council as soon as possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Deputy for raising this. I know it is a project he fought hard for. When he sought and got initial approval in 2021, I would say he did not think he would still be here in 2025 seeking stage 2a to be progressed and approved, but here we are. I accept that is a long time and 12 months for the stage 2a process is a long time as well. I will certainly bring that back to the Department.

It is a very exciting project. It is incredible: four general classrooms, seven SET rooms, three science labs with preparation rooms, two engineering rooms, two technology rooms with preparation rooms, one graphics room, one art room, one textiles room, one economics room, project stores and two classrooms for special educational needs. It is an extraordinary project and I am sure it will serve the people of Cavan and the students incredibly well.

Delivery of this project has been devolved to Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board. A design team has been appointed to design the accommodation and bring the project through to the tender and construction phases. Projects progress from stage to stage in accordance with the project brief and the Department's design guidelines.

Under the ASA scheme, the Department has detailed procedures in place for appraisal, design, tender and construction of all school building projects. Design team procedures define the points in a project's life cycle at which approval must be sought from the Department which aligns with the infrastructure guidelines and capital works management framework. These processes include the stage approval reviews, which challenge all elements of design and specification. These are an essential element of good cost control and support market interest in our school building projects.

21 May 2025

The project in Breifne College, as the Deputy outlined, is at stage 2a, involving the development of the design along with an accurate cost plan which best meets the design agreed at stage 1. In June 2024, almost 12 months ago, the Department received a stage 2a report from Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board for review. Following the submission of this report, the Department has been carrying out an intensive review from the technical and cost perspectives in accordance with the requirements of the public spending code. All projects, including this one, will undergo the necessary due diligence outlined in the public infrastructure guidelines. Managing, timing, scope and cost are crucial to staying within budgetary limits for the overall programme. While the school naturally has ambitious timelines for the delivery of the project, the project forms part of our overall pipeline and each project's progression to the next stage. Once the stage 2a report review is concluded, the Department will be in contact with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board to advise how best to progress this important project.

What this project will do for education provision in Cavan is extraordinary. We have seen these projects rolled out across Ireland in the past four or five years and each town and area has benefited from them. It is high time Breifne College was able to avail of this. These processes take time, as we have seen in the past, but I accept that 12 months in stage 2a is a long period. I will relay that back to the Minister and the Department directly to try to get progress so that at least an opinion can be given to the college as soon as possible and so that the project can continue.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. He is absolutely correct it is an incredible and exciting project for the school community in Breifne College. I commend the acting principal, Breege Reilly, and all her staff on their commitment and hard work in the best interests of their students. That has been a strong tradition over the years in the school. The staff and school community have worked hard to achieve the best possible integration of all students, and that work has been very successful. The school has a varied and important programme of extracurricular activities for students, including various sporting disciplines, drama and art.

I reiterate the importance the school has placed for many years on what are generally referred to as practical subjects. As the Minister of State outlined, the schedule of accommodation provides for many classrooms that need specialist accommodation. All of us in this House and the wider community speak of preparing people with the skills to meet the needs of our economy and society today, be it construction technology or whatever. We want to ensure pupils and teachers have the best possible facilities for teaching and learning, both from the staff and, most important, student point of view. My colleague Senator Wilson and I have worked closely with Breifne College and Cavan and Monaghan ETB over the years. The Senator is a former pupil of the college.

As the Department is well aware, Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board has an excellent record in delivering building projects. The work will be done properly, within the timeframe and on budget. It has carried out projects for primary schools. That is outside its remit but it has done it in the interests of the local community. I am anxious the ETB and Breifne College get the necessary approval to get to planning permission stage. We all know planning permission takes time so it will be some time before students have the benefit of those new classroom facilities, which will be hugely exciting and positive for the school community. We need to see movement as soon as possible.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I did not know Senator Wilson was a former pupil. That is another testament to what a great education centre it is. In all seriousness, I thank the Deputy for bringing this up. I know how hard he fought for the project and that he would love to see it further progressed. I accept 12 months is a long time for the principal, staff, board and parents to be wondering where they stand on this. It will be built and delivered; it is just a matter of getting that information. I suggest in the interim we ask the Department to communicate with the principal and board and give some indication as to when stage 2a will be approved and they can carry on with planning permission. It would be lovely to think at least some of the students currently studying in Breifne College will be able to avail of the new school. The sixth and fifth year students will probably not have that luxury but perhaps students after that could. It would be amazing if we could get that going.

Water Services

Deputy Robert O’Donoghue: I have been going back and forth on this with Uisce Éireann since I was a councillor. I appreciate that it checked the system for an update prior to this coming to the floor, but there is still no update available for the residents, and the residents have now moved it on to the CRU also.

For background, there are six homes in Ellen’s Court in Rush. Arthur Brett was the first to move in on 19 September 2022, and the other residents moved in over the following months. As with all developments, services need to be signed off before the build is completed and residents move in. Mr. Brett was told the day he moved in that there was a slight issue with Uisce Éireann and that the water connection would be worked on in the next couple of weeks and everything would be sorted out.

Mr. Brett reports now there is a hose connection between the adjacent apartment block running into Ellen’s Court, supplying water to the houses in Ellen’s Court. I have pictures of a Qualpex hose pipe coming over the wall between the two developments, which has been a problem because it freezes over in the winter and they had to put lagging on it last year on one occasion. Ellen’s Court is at the end of the water supply line, so its water pressure is low, and the water pressure in the adjacent Lady Cove apartment block is probably even lower, with some of the residents reporting that they cannot take showers from time to time.

In April 2024, a contractor was on site to install meters, and he was surprised to discover that there was no branch connection. No contractor has been on site since, and the residents have no answers as to when the issue will be resolved. There have been two, if not three, cases opened with Uisce Éireann, looking for the case to be resolved – two by me and one by a previous Minister in a previous term of Government.

The residents would like to know why it has taken nearly two and a half years for the estate to be fully and properly connected to water services. Why are the residents’ concerns being ignored and kicked down the line by Uisce Éireann? Why can no one from Uisce Éireann come out to address the problem or meet one of the residents so they can walk through the problem thoroughly? Can we get commitment from Uisce Éireann that someone will come out and engage with the residents to help fix the issue? Can we get a plan to have a proper connection made to the six houses, which, by proxy, would fix the water pressure in the adjacent Lady Cove apartments?

These are not big asks. After nearly two and a half years since the residents moved in, it should be sorted at this stage.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I thank Deputy O’Donoghue for raising this. I know it is frustrating. He has probably tabled parliamentary questions on this and got an answer saying that he cannot get detailed responses in parliamentary questions because it is a responsibility for Uisce Éireann. Therefore, this is a good opportunity to raise it in the Dáil and get a bit more detailed response from the Department. I welcome that. I will go into more detail in the response, but there seems to be several complications – legacy issues inherited by Uisce Éireann. I think concerted effort between the developer and Uisce Éireann is needed to resolve this. What is there seems to be a bit of a mess, which is causing, as the Deputy outlined, many of the issues.

As the Deputy will understand, the supply of public water and the provision of water services in general are matters for Uisce Éireann in the first instance. Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The scope, prioritisation and progression of individual projects are matters for Uisce Éireann and approved through its own board and internal governance structures.

Under section 7 of the Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013, neither I nor the Minister, Deputy Browne, have function regarding Uisce Éireann’s specific operations at Ellen’s Court. In other words, Ministers cannot get involved in individual projects; that is a matter for Uisce Éireann. However, I have made inquiries for the Deputy, and my understanding from information provided to me is that this matter relates to a water and wastewater connection issue for six houses in Ellen’s Court, County Dublin and has been raised directly with Uisce Éireann previously.

Contractors working on behalf of Uisce Éireann undertook some works at the location in November 2023, but their investigation established that connection works could not be completed by Uisce Éireann due to separate works needing to be completed by the developer of the estate on the private side. Engagement has been ongoing with the developer in the interim, with a view to remediating the issues outlined below.

In summary, Uisce Éireann’s contractors identified that the wastewater connection for the development had already been made to the wastewater network, contrary to the requirements of the connection agreement. On this basis, the wastewater connection is an unauthorised connection. Further, Uisce Éireann’s contractors also identified that the unauthorised connection to the wastewater network was made directly through an existing storm water pipe, causing very significant damage to the existing storm water network and significantly increasing the risk of flooding in the area. One can see the level of complication and the legacy that has been inherited here. Uisce Éireann understands that the local authority, as the competent storm water authority, has been in touch with the developer as a result, seeking remediation of the storm water network. That absolutely needs to happen.

On the water side, the water pipe installed by the developer is laid directly on top of the wastewater pipe, rendering the installation non-compliant with Uisce Éireann’s relevant standards. While it may be technically feasible to make a water connection to the existing pipe, any such connection will only compound the existing non-compliance issues, including the existing damage to the storm water network. As a result, and pending rectification of the water-wastewater pipe layout to achieve compliance with Uisce Éireann’s relevant standards, it is not possible to proceed with a connection to the water network.

Finally, the Uisce Éireann contractors observed that the development is currently provided with water by way of an exposed onward supply from an existing premises, which is causing water pressure issues both for the existing and new developments and runs the risk of service interruptions for occupants arising from exposure of the pipe to the elements.

Given the unauthorised connections to both the water and wastewater networks, this is now a legal matter for Uisce Éireann. I have requested Uisce Éireann to engage directly with the residents of Ellen's Court to keep them informed of progress. I hope Uisce Éireann does reach out to the residents, as per the response. I directed Uisce Éireann to do that.

The Deputy can see that it is a bit of a mess, and it has been inherited. While I 100% agree with the Deputy that the constituents he represents need answers, connection and for this to be resolved, when developers go about things in such a way, it makes things incredibly difficult, and that has to be acknowledged as well.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: We can all agree it is more than a bit of a mess. I appreciate the Minister of State's intervention and him speaking to Uisce Éireann to try to get this sorted out. I welcome that Uisce Éireann will engage with the residents, and I am quite happy to follow up with them. I thank the Minister of State for his response.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I will elaborate a bit more. Uisce Éireann has a customer service function through its water charges plan and customer charter, which outlines the standard of services customers should expect to receive. It is open to any member of the public to lodge a formal complaint with Uisce Éireann if they are not happy with the service provided. Details on how to do so are on its website. Any issues that cannot be resolved by Uisce Éireann to the satisfaction of the customer can be referred, under the formal complaints process, to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. The details on this process can be found on the CRU website.

The Government's priority is to ensure that people's health is protected and that adequate water is available for all consumers. Both our water and wastewater systems require substantial and sustained investment over a number of investment cycles to bring the systems up to the quality of resilience standards required of a modern service to provide for population growth and to build resilience in the face of climate change. I assure the Deputy that the Government is delivering a sustainable funding path to further enhance the ongoing significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services.

Again, I have contacted Uisce Éireann and asked it to reach out to the residents to try to give them some information and satisfaction in terms of the path forward. However, the Deputy will understand based on the response I gave earlier that there are a whole host of legacy issues that, unfortunately, are not simply resolved overnight. I know this has taken time. If Uisce Éireann does not reach out to the residents, the Deputy should come back to me and we will ensure that communication happens.

10 o'clock

Fair and Sustainable Funding for Carers, Home Support and Nursing Homes Support Schemes: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges:

— the vital role played by carers and front-line healthcare workers in supporting older people, people with disabilities, and those with high care needs within their homes and communities;

— the indispensable contribution of these workers in alleviating pressure on hospitals and long-term residential care facilities through early intervention, continuity of care, and dignified in-place support; and

— the rapidly increasing care needs of an ageing population and a growing number of individuals with complex medical or support requirements, which demands urgent planning and investment;

notes that:

— carers, both paid and unpaid, are under significant and unsustainable strain due to inconsistent access to services, limited financial supports, inadequate staffing levels, and regional disparities in care provision;

— the current structure of means testing for carer supports disincentivises care work, punishes low-income families, and fails to reflect the true economic contribution of carers to the health and social care system;

— in 2024, the Health Service Executive (HSE) increased home support hours by 7.4 per cent compared to 2023, yet as of December 2024, there were 5,556 individuals on waiting lists for home support, with rural areas experiencing higher demand;

— over 7,000 individuals receive disability home support, highlighting the service's reach beyond the elderly population;

— currently, there is no legal entitlement to home support services, access is based on assessed need and available resources;

— the expansion of home support services has been met with staffing shortages, particularly in rural areas, impacting the timely delivery of care;

— failure to provide timely and adequate home support services leads to increased numbers needing to avail of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Fair Deal);

— the average weekly Fair Deal rate has seen a 14.2 per cent increase in the last 2 years;

- HSE-operated nursing homes receive significantly higher funding under Fair Deal compared to private and voluntary homes, with an average of more than €744 per resident per week than their private counterparts; and

- with these financial challenges leading to many nursing homes closing, with the stakeholders citing financial viability as the cause;

further notes that:

- in assessing an applicant 's financial contribution to the Fair Deal scheme, the “three-year cap”, which limits the contribution from certain assets, such as the family home or farm, to three years, does not apply to leased land as it is not considered “actively operated” by the owner or a qualifying family successor; and

- consequently, the entire value of the leased farmland remains subject to the 7.5 per cent annual charge for the duration of the individual's stay in a nursing home, potentially leading to substantial financial liabilities;

calls on Government to:

- abolish means testing for carers to ensure equitable access to financial support, recognising the essential social and economic value of care work;

- fully fund the projected increase in costs for staffing and regulatory compliance;

- end the pay disparity between Section 39 and Section 38 workers;

- provide funding for recruitment campaigns, training, Information and Communication Technology systems, and provision expansion;

- provide a fixed timeline for the rollout of the statutory home support scheme;

- recognise long-term leased land as “actively operated” for the purposes of the three-year cap;

- allow for the appointment of a broader range of family successors, accommodating diverse family structures;

- provide clear guidelines and support to farmers navigating the complexities of the scheme; and

- provide increased capital and operational grants to community hospitals, residential care homes, and day centres, including specific provision for dementia care and disability-friendly infrastructure.

There are few responsibilities more profound or revealing than how a nation treats the most vulnerable in its society. In our role as legislators, we often speak of policy in the abstract - budgets, frameworks, schemes, etc. Behind each one of those lines, however, lies something far more human - a person, a family, a home. Today, this motion brought by Independent Ireland is asking that this House do more than just debate figures. We are asking the Government to confront a crisis of care, a silent systemic failure unfolding daily in our homes and communities across this nation.

Let us begin by stating what we already know. Ireland's care infrastructure, from the unpaid family carer to the overworked home support staff and the underfunded nursing home, is at breaking point. Yet, somehow and in some way, it still functions. This is not because of efficient planning on the HSE's side or adequate funding, but because of the devotion, sacrifice and sheer moral strength of carers across this entire country who hold it all together. These carers, mostly women, often older and frequently isolated, step in where the State takes the step back. They do this not for recognition or reward but because it is simply the right thing to do. In doing so, they save this country billions of euro. What do they receive? They receive a patchwork of supports which are inconsistent and inadequate and simply unjust. We have means-testing systems that punish low-income families, a structural home support scheme that remains continuously and perpetually in development and a fair deal scheme that is neither fair nor dealing with the reality of modern Irish life.

Let us turn to the facts. More than 5,500 people are waiting for home support. Rural communities are disproportionately impacted. Carers are leaving the profession because wages are poor and the respect is non-existent. Let us consider this point. A HSE-run nursing home receives over €744 more per resident per week than a private or voluntary counterpart. This is not equity and not sustainable and it is a clear failure of policy. Perhaps most unjust of all is the treatment of leased farmlands under the fair deal scheme. Leased farmlands are not considered actively operated and the three-year cap does not apply. This means families face an ultimate financial burden simply because they choose to lease rather than sell the family farm. This is not just bureaucratic cruelty but a direct threat to the generations of family farming. I therefore ask this House to act with urgency.

This motion calls for clear responsibility and implementation of reform. We in Independent Ireland propose the abolition of the means test for carers, recognising that care is not a charity; it is an essential labour. We call for fully funded real cost of staffing, regulations and compliance. We call for an end to the pay disparity between the section 38 worker and the section 39 worker. We call for investment in recruitment, training, ICT systems and rural development, the establishing and fixing of the timeline of statutory home supports, the recognition of leased farmland being actively operated and the broadening of the definition of eligibility for family successor to reflect a modern Irish family. This is not a wish list, radical or utopian, but it is fair, affordable and most definitely necessary. Above all, it is right.

The success of those on the Government benches will not be measured in press releases, headlines or grandiose statements. It will be measured by whether this State has upheld its duty to the people who gave their trust to the Government and the Minister of State. In the realm of care, we are failing the test of trust. I ask Members on the Government benches not to consider their whip but to consider their consciences. I ask them to think of the carer who has had no break for five years, the farmer on the verge of losing the family home because of long-term costs or the elderly man or woman waiting alone for support that will never arrive. These people are not asking for special treatment but they are asking for fairness and to be seen. Independent Ireland has brought this motion not to divide this House but to unite it. We have brought the motion not to shame this Government, although there is shame to be had. We offer a path of redemption and reform. Let us build a care system worthy of the people this State serves. Let us honour those who sacrifice daily for the dignity of others. Let us not speak of value but let us act on values. Let the history of this House record that on this day in Dáil Éireann we chose justice and compassion for the carers of this country and we chose the common good.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome this motion from Independent Ireland. It is very well

written and if implemented would make a significant difference to carers and people who are cared for. Care is the most valuable service delivered in Ireland now. First and most significant, it is most valuable in human terms. The relationships we have with people are actually the most important things that exist. When we strip everything back and take all the superfluous stuff away, at the end of the day it is the relationships we have with our loved ones that are the most important issues. So many individuals and families have either a parent - a mother or father - or a child who they are struggling to care for or are struggling to find care for. Care, therefore, is enormously valuable in human terms. It means as well that those individuals can be brought on, developed and loved and cared for in comfort and without pain and suffering. This is enormously beneficial for society.

Care is also extremely valuable in financial terms. Billions of euro are saved in terms of the care given by loved ones to loved ones throughout Irish society. If the State were to take on the cost of delivering that care, it would put great pressure on the State's coffers. Undoubtedly, it would not do it as well or efficiently or with the same level of love. This is the second major aspect. According to a response we in Aontú received to a parliamentary question, right now in the hospital services there are 373 people who have been clinically discharged in hospitals in Ireland currently. This means they have gone through the hospital system and been looked after. All the work to be done by the doctors and nurses is complete. They cannot do any more for these individuals. These individuals are only in hospital because there is nowhere else for them to go. This is incredible. These people could leave hospital if they had a proper nursing home, a proper carer in their home or a step-down facility such as the national rehabilitation centre but, because these services are not provided or funded, these individuals are stuck in hospital. This means there is an enormous cost to the State because these individuals are stuck in hospital. It is also extremely difficult for these individuals because they are stuck in hospital. Additionally, practically the same number of people are stuck on trolleys outside hospitals and cannot get in because these beds are taken up with people who should be elsewhere. An enormous cost to the State results from that level of dysfunction and not providing the necessary care to individuals.

If carers were paid with money instead of platitudes, they would be the richest people in Ireland. We are going to see this Chamber fill up over the next two hours and Members are going to tip their caps and express enormous gratitude for the wonderful work of carers. Carers do not want platitudes any more, to be honest. Carers just want a proper salary and wage for the work they do. The problem I have is that typically the Government looks at carer's allowance as social welfare. I think this is at the root and the heart of the difficulty in Irish society. Carer's allowance is not social welfare. It is a payment given to people for work of value given to other individuals. We need to delete the idea that carer's allowance is in some way social welfare from the heart of Government. Having a carer's allowance threshold in place is at the heart of the difficulty for so many individual families who are struggling to provide care for their families. The Government put it into the programme for Government that it would delete the threshold in the context of achieving this, but we have seen no meaningful step change on that. We have seen no meaningful pathway or progress on getting rid of that in completion. Yes, there have been changes in the threshold levels, but we need to delete that threshold and we need to do it fast.

Looking at care in its totality, I mentioned that it is one of the most valuable services delivered in the country, but it is the most devalued service in terms of Government approach. Whether it is those caring for children in care centres, early years education or State care, for example, or for older people in nursing homes, or carers delivering care in the home, it is in-

credible that they are probably the individuals who are paid least in the State. We are talking in the main about people who are paid just above the minimum wage. This encompasses individuals who are in early years education. Incredibly, the majority of them have gone through third-level education to achieve their qualifications, yet the pay is horrendously low. This Government even has a cap on the amount of money individual businesses can earn, and that has a knock-on effect on how much they can pay those particular individuals.

The situation regarding children in State care is absolutely shocking, one on which there will be tribunals of investigation in the future. There are currently children going missing or going into special emergency accommodation that is not properly regulated, with children in some cases being exploited by criminal gangs involved in sexual exploitation. Again, individuals working in that space are not paid what they should be paid.

As regards nursing homes, last year a raft of nursing homes closed throughout the country. Older people were taken out of nursing homes and put into new nursing homes just so they could find somewhere to live. Most people across the country who need to find a nursing home for an older person, such as a parent, are struggling to do so. Families looking after loved ones are not being paid properly.

As well as this, people who are working in caring for elderly people or people with disabilities get very little money for hours worked and have to travel from client to client off their own bat, paying for their own fuel during the day. The Government is basically ensuring there is continuous tightness in the labour market because it will not pay the proper wages.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Independent Ireland brought this motion before the House in order for the Government to see common sense. Independent Ireland recently received the chairmanship of the Committee on Budgetary Oversight. The first thing the committee will look at is the cost of healthcare in this country and the value it gives for money, including the overspends. We will not discuss the National Children's Hospital because it is an open book, and a waste of funding.

We look at the carers in this country and the fact that the Government wants to means-test them. This motion advocates for the removal of the means test for carers allowance, ensuring that a full-time carer is supported financially and not penalised by their partner's income. That is common sense. They are providing care.

How many people do we know have given up their jobs because they cannot get carers in their area? My own family members are doing the same. My nieces and nephews have given up their own time and jobs to make sure that a loved one is cared for. They also have their own families, including young children whom they care for. By not providing a proper payment system for carers, we are actually creating a double impact because this affects the families' ability to care for their own families, if they have young families.

As to the minimum respite guarantee, this motion proposes a legal entitlement to a minimum number of weeks of respite care each year for all carers, acknowledging the importance of breaks for carers. If you go to some place where a carer working 24-7 gets no break, what do they hit? They hit burnout. We have to ensure that carers also get a break. We get a break from the Dáil. Everyone else gets a break from their working life. No matter what sector people are working in, they have a guarantee of breaks. The problem is that sometimes carers feel that if they take their break, there will be no one left to care for the person they are caring for. We have

to allow for this through respite.

This motion also calls for improvements to home support services, including ensuring adequate funding for home support hours and addressing workforce shortages.

I do not believe there is anyone in this House who values what carers can do. I mentioned the National Children's Hospital and the overspending on hospitals. If there is a shortage of nurses in a hospital, where does the hospital get people to fill in? It uses agency staff. If we look at the cost of agency staff, they come to hospitals for a day here and a day there, which does not fix the problem. We should have full-time nurses in hospitals. To me, there should be very few agency staff. There should be full-time staff, not agency staff, because to make somebody better the nurse has to have a relationship with the person. Agency staff should only be brought in as a stop-gap, to fill in if there is no other option. At the moment, however, our health service is top heavy with agency staff who should actually be staff. If we look at the cost of employing an agency staff nurse and the cost of providing a carer in a person's own home, and we look at the difference in what that costs the State, it is absolutely bizarre. For the cost of an agency staff nurse, the Government could possibly employ three carers. This is what we are looking at.

On one side the health service is top-heavy with money in and on the other side the Government is penalising those who care for people well within their own home. People are going above and beyond to care for people in their own homes, and the Government is penalising them. Why can we not have something streamlined that allows us to look after the people who want to help? Carers are taking pay cuts to care for people. They are travelling across this country for an hour here and an hour there. They may be travelling 30 or 40 miles to care for people. They do not go to just one house. They go to people and they help them. In addition, what has been brought into the care system is a regulation that is stopping people who really want to help somebody they know needs extra help within the household. We need to protect that as well and allow for it. If we fund carers properly, we will have people who want to do that work.

Recognition and support for young carers is vital as they are the next generation. They see what people are doing. They see the care provided for their parents, grandparents and people who have disabilities and want to be cared for within their own home. They see that at first hand; they are getting the experience of watching other people do it. What they are actually watching is carers being penalised. They see there is no career choice for them to be carers and to help if they also want to have a life themselves and support a family. If they wish to go into the care sector, we have to make sure it is possible and that it covers all generations. We need to ensure the next generation can see that if they want to be a carer and do good, they can also have a life and will not be penalised for trying to help somebody.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I welcome the opportunity to discuss fair and sustainable funding for carers, home support and the nursing homes support scheme. The Minister for Health is not opposing the motion.

I echo the motion in acknowledging the indispensable contributions of carers and front-line healthcare workers. We all know that they do phenomenal work. Their valuable work supports older people, people with disabilities and individuals with high care needs to live independently in their homes and communities. This Government is committed to ensuring that carers are supported and that investment in services for older people continues at a high level and grows to meet the changing need of our population.

The programme for Government sets out commitments that are ambitious but achievable. The Government recognises that the demographic challenges of our ageing population are already upon us. Investing heavily in services for older people means we can ensure that their later years can be lived in good health and in their communities for as long as possible. The Government is committed to supporting family carers. The Department of Social Protection provides a range of income supports for family carers. These include the carer's allowance, carer's benefit, carer's support grant and the domiciliary care allowance. The total value of payments in these schemes is estimated to be over €1.9 billion in 2025. Recognising the vital role of carers, the programme for Government sets out a timeline that commits to significantly increasing the income disregard for carer's allowance in each budget. This is being done with a view to gradually phasing out the means test during the lifetime of this Government.

I will make two quick points. Deputy Richard O'Donoghue made reference to supports for carers. Everyone here, as practising politicians, will be aware that the respite care grant will be paid automatically to people who are availing of carer's allowance, carer's benefit or the domiciliary care allowance on 5 June. People who are not in receipt of the carer's allowance can apply for the scheme. It is not means tested and is worth €2,000 this year. It is a contribution towards recognising the work that carers do. That is a practical measure I want to highlight.

In July this year, the income disregard for a single person will increase from €450 to €625 per week and from €900 to €1,150 per week for carers with a spouse or partner. That was part of budget 2025. I make reference to those two practical measures. The increase in the income disregard is being done with a view to gradually phasing out the means test during the lifetime of this Government. That measure is highlighted in the motion.

To provide further supports to people who provide care to their families, since September 2018 individuals in receipt of either a full or half-rate carer's allowance or carer's benefit are automatically eligible for a GP visit card. On foot of this measure, as of 1 January, 7,614 people in receipt of these supports have gained GP visit card eligibility. In addition to these supports, we will deliver on the programme for Government commitment to fully fund the carer's guarantee. At the moment, the carer's guarantee is supported by an annual investment of €2.6 million. It provides a standard package of supports to families in every region in tandem with the community and voluntary sector. The motion highlights regional disparities and one of the areas in which we are addressing that issue is the carer's guarantee. These supports include education and training, community carer supports, intensive and emergency supports, a free-phone care line, psychosocial supports and the development and delivery of online supports for family carers. Increased funding for the carer's guarantee will also support the programme for Government commitment to increase support for carers by providing new training opportunities to support them in their caring.

Acknowledging the impact of caring for family members, €62 million in funding is provided annually for respite beds in older persons' services. Respite may be provided in the community within the person's own home, in HSE residential care settings, by agreement with voluntary organisation or by contracted private facilities. Since 2021, the home support emergency respite scheme has been funded by the HSE through Family Carers Ireland to provide emergency respite care. I know how important that is. We want to continually provide additionality in that area.

Deputies O'Flynn, O'Donoghue and others made reference to the role of women in caring. An additional €250,000 has been approved under the women's health fund for a project to sup-

port mid-life and older women family carers in collaboration with Family Carers Ireland. The project aims to research the impact of the gendered nature of family caring. Men also do this work but it is predominantly done by women. The project will also aim to develop effective responses to support women carers.

Through the HSE, investing in services for older people has been a national priority in recent years. There has been an increase of approximately €1 billion in funding for services for older people since 2020. This year has seen an increase of €350 million on the amount secured under budget 2024, bringing the total figure to €3 billion in budget 2025.

Improving access to home support is a priority for this Government. The budget secured for home support for older people in 2025 was the largest ever at circa €838 million to support 60,000 people. The budget has increased from just over €400 million in 2020 to €838 million. That increase is to support people to stay in their homes if they wish to do so and is in line with Sláintecare.

It is acknowledged that while progress is being made, disparities in accessing home support services remain. Many Deputies made reference to the fact that rural areas are particularly affected and there are ongoing recruitment challenges. In recognition of this, the strategic work-force advisory group on home carers and nursing home healthcare assistants was established in 2022. It set out to examine the challenges in front-line carer roles in the home support and long-term residential care sectors. The implementation of the group's 16 recommendations is well advanced. Reforms have been delivered as a result, including payment for travel time for home support providers and paying carers the national minimum wage at a minimum. In 2025, the delivery of longer-term recommendations will continue, including a survey of the experience of healthcare assistants, which I am due to launch shortly.

The development of the statutory home care scheme is a priority. It was in the previous programme for Government and has been reiterated in the current programme for Government. It will be a process. Delivery of this scheme requires effort across a range of areas. We must bring in regulation of home care providers. We are doing that through the health (amendment) (licensing of professional home support providers) Bill 2024. It will establish a licensing framework for professional home support services and provide for regulation by HIQA. Final drafting is under way, and I hope to present it to Cabinet in this quarter. The Government is committed to ensuring that home care is regulated and that there are quality standards in place against which services can be inspected. In doing so, everyone can be assured that their provider meets minimum standards of quality, safeguarding and governance.

The desired direction of travel is to provide care as close to one's home as possible, which is in line with Sláintecare. That said, long-term residential care remains a crucial part of the continuum of care. The programme for Government commits to strengthening the nursing home sector by increasing funding for the nursing homes support scheme, also known as the fair deal scheme. Budget 2025 increased investment in the fair deal scheme by €67.6 million. The allocation for the scheme is now more than €1.2 billion annually.

The following is referenced in the motion. Recent legislative changes recognise the distinctive position of farming and agricultural land. The scope of those eligible to avail of reliefs under the nursing homes support scheme has been expanded, making the fair deal scheme more accessible for farm and business owners who require long-term residential care. As is mentioned in the motion, amendments to the definition of those eligible to be considered as a

family successor have expanded to include cousins, great-nephews and great-nieces, and great-grandchildren.

The delivery of additional long-term residential care capacity in community nursing units and community hospitals is required to deliver on the programme for Government, Sláintecare and Project Ireland 2040 commitments. This Government's commitment to delivering on this goal is demonstrated by the allocation of €4 million in budget 2025 to staff and operationalise an additional 615 community beds. Those are public beds. The new nursing home residential upgrade scheme, with a sanction of €10 million, will provide financial support to private and voluntary nursing homes to improve compliance with HIQA standards.

The programme for Government has a strong focus on community supports for older persons, including day centres and Meals on Wheels. An additional €10 million has been allocated for the community capital funding initiative. This will support improvements to service provision for HSE-funded Meals on Wheels and day centres.

The Government is committed to the area of dementia. Some €19 million in additional recurring funding has been allocated over the past five years for dementia services. The programme for Government features eight specific commitments on dementia, the majority aiming to continue the expansion of dementia services nationwide. Given the commitments, and we take the trust in which the motion has been put forward, it is clear that the Government is dedicated to sustainable funding and supports, carers, home support and the nursing home support scheme. As I said earlier, the Minister for Health has proposed that the motion not be opposed.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Without carers, especially family carers, the burden on the State would be far greater. Over the years we have heard stories of people being placed inappropriately in geriatric wards or people who need more intensive care being sent home early because of insufficient spaces. Carers play a valuable role and unless we totally change our definition of what constitutes society in Ireland, it will never be every family for themselves and every individual without a family around them for themselves. We do see the value of supporting one another and this has a cost that has to be recognised. Many hours are put in for far less than the commercial cost of care, even allowing for the nature of the voluntary work and the ties that bind people caring for one another. That has to be said. Families will always care for each other whether or not they are getting any sort of contribution, but that is not the point. Families have a lot of pressure and they are the forgotten heroes.

An indispensable contribution is also made by care workers in alleviating pressure on hospitals and long-term residential care facilities. Carers, paid and unpaid, are under pressure. Those on lower incomes are disproportionately affected by the current system of means testing and some illogical decisions. I have one constituent, for example, who works 20 hours a week and is also a half-rate carer. When she went on maternity leave, her carer's allowance was cut because of the double rule, even though in the months following she would be caring for her relative and minding a child. One way or the other, the caring work continued, but she did feel the pressure as a result.

There is also the issue of insufficient respite hours, as Deputy Richard O'Donoghue has mentioned. The Minister of State referred to the €62 million allocation but when this is spread out, it does not really give enough support. The carers' guarantee in the programme for Government is, of course, welcome. I also welcome the fact the Government is supporting this overall motion but looking at this sector holistically, we are adding unnecessary costs and bur-

dens to the State when targeted funding could probably save money overall. For example, because of inadequate funding to service providers, we have staffing shortages. This may affect the rural areas more but it is also an issue in urban areas, with insufficient hours allocated and sometimes home care visits rostered at hours totally unsuitable to the person receiving the care. Heavy traffic can also mean that an allocated hour is cut short by 15 to 20 minutes.

The HSE has increased its dependence on outsourced companies to provide valuable services. Some of these companies are more focused on the monetary aspect and I have found it difficult to engage on behalf of constituents to try to get a response when raising issues. Others provide a dedicated service and there is absolutely no questioning the commitment of the workers themselves. If the pay is poor, however, we will not get the level of staff required. It is worth focusing for a while on the differential between the section 38 organisations, funded by the HSE, where pay is subject to public service agreements and where the workers receive the same pay increases as other public sector employees, and the section 39 organisations, which receive grant funding from the HSE and whose employees are not considered public servants. They are not subject to public sector pay scales and their pay is negotiated between individual organisations and employees. Going back to the 2008 financial crisis, there were pay cuts across the sector, including in section 38 organisations. Section 39 staff, however, did not get the same level of pay restoration, which has led to a significant pay gap. There have been some efforts to address the pay gap but the section 39 organisations continue to struggle with attracting and retaining staff due to lower pay and conditions compared with the section 38 organisations. The pay disparity has led to reduced capacity to deliver services as section 39 organisations have often struggled to recruit and retain the skilled staff.

If we do not provide the means to support people in the home, there is often increased pressure on nursing homes, with increased numbers of people needing to avail of the nursing home support scheme, the fair deal, yet the HSE does not respond. Caregivers Ireland organised weekly protests outside Lucan Lodge in an effort to get the HSE to take over the facility as a going concern but this did not happen and families were forced to scramble for places. Unfortunately, a number residents passed away within weeks of being moved. That is not service.

This motion addresses the financial challenges leading to many nursing homes closing. I support this aspect, but we do need a full rethink and a proper cost-benefit analysis of the entire homecare system and support structures. It is saving the State money, money that we apparently do not have in the bigger scheme. We need to focus funding in the best way possible to support families caring for loved ones and ensure that the dedicated staff are able to continue working in the service. I very much welcome this debate and do hope the Government will respond, as well as accepting the Independent Ireland motion.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the motion and thank my colleagues in Independent Ireland for bringing it forward, which we in Aontú are delighted to support. I am happy to hear that the Government will not be opposing it. Every day in Ireland, carers, both paid and unpaid, provide tremendous service to their families, their communities and the State. The value they provide, both socially and economically, is significantly undervalued by the State. Over 5,000 people, in the main elderly people and the most vulnerable people in our society, are still waiting for home care help. This is absolutely an emergency situation because if they cannot get home care help, many of these elderly and vulnerable people will go into a full-time setting that will cost the State significantly more.

I welcome the programme for Government promises made in respect of the means test for

carers. We have campaigned for this for some time. I want to be very clear that the Government must deliver on this. I got a phone call from a constituent weeks after the formation of the Government. This constituent had been canvassed by a Government representative. They phoned me and asked whether, now that the Government had been returned to office, the means test would be abolished. This is genuinely what the Government told the people of Ireland. I asked myself whether this was going to be another promise like the promises the Government gave to the scoliosis families or to the children and families with autism and the assessments of need crisis, and so many other promises. I put it to the Minister of State that this is a promise the Government has to keep. It would save the State so much money in the long term.

The motion quite rightly raises issues in regard to farm families and the fair deal scheme. The fair deal scheme is crippling farm families. It is costing farm families significantly. These are families who have built up their farms over generations. In the time I have left I want to focus on the cap. I attended a meeting of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, recently. A farmer walked out of the meeting and he said he would be better off dying before he needed a nursing home if he wanted to give as much of his land as possible to his family. I know of one family who had satisfied all of the criteria for the fair deal scheme but because their son had left for Australia for six months, he was penalised and this family had no idea that would happen. The bureaucracy and the criteria need to be addressed. It is unfair that non-farming estates automatically qualify for the three-year cap but farm families do not. In many ways, those restrictions and criteria are incredibly onerous. Take succession, for example. The case I raised just a moment ago cost that family significantly. The issue of rented land also needs to be at looked at. These are key issues facing farm families and I believe they should not be penalised in such an unfair manner.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I thank the Independent Group for bringing forward this motion.

As someone who has worked as a carer in the disabilities sector for 18 years, I am acutely aware of the struggles facing this sector. This motion clearly sets out the vital role carers and front-line healthcare workers play in our society. The role they carry out every day across Ireland is a quiet but vital contribution to Irish society. They are the backbone of our care system, ensuring older people, people with disabilities or those with high-care needs are given the highest level of dignity possible and supported to live at home for as long as they wish.

As we are all aware, our hospitals are under pressure and we have a growing shortage of nursing home beds. It is family carers and home care assistants who are doing the lion's share of work in reducing pressures on our hospitals and nursing homes by supporting people to carry on living at home. For someone to remain living at home in the community they have known for possibly all their life, it makes an enormous difference to their health and well-being. By the end of February, almost 5,000 people were awaiting home support hours.

The Government needs to get serious about addressing this need because not only are those seeking home care being failed by the Government but family carers and other healthcare workers are too. These workers and family carers have been left to pick up the pieces as a result of Government failures despite their work saving the State €20 billion each year. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independents need to stop stalling, scrap the means test on carers and introduce a pay-related carer's benefit. It is time that social protection for people with disabilities and carers was increased.

Approximately 70% of carers are struggling to make ends meet. This is an absolute disgrace and a shame on the Government parties for standing idly by. Across the State, nursing homes are facing increasing stress, with closures due to financial or workforce pressures. Families are paying ridiculously high costs for private care and consecutive Governments have failed to properly invest in public care homes. The continuing notion from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that the private sector will provide for the shortcomings is only heaping more pressure on families across the State. We need to see significant investment by Government into public nursing homes. By 2030, there will be more than 1 million people aged 65 or older. By 2057, this number could nearly double. Consecutive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have failed to plan for this demographic shift. It is reckless carry-on.

The Government could quickly put into action measures that would make a meaningful difference. The Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, made a clear recommendation on pay for section 39 workers. This recommendation was accepted by the workers but the Government is stalling. We need to see this recommendation put into effect and ensure funding for section 39 organisations is guaranteed. If the Minister of State was serious about this role, he would have scrapped the means test. He said he would gradually phase it out over the lifetime of the Government. If home carers took that attitude, our hospitals and nursing homes, which are already seriously under pressure, would be bursting at the seams.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Let us remember the time during Covid when people went out to clap for our front-line healthcare workers. We were told we now recognised these workers and that things had changed. That seems like a lifetime ago. These are workers who enable people with high care needs to live with dignity at home. They are a vital support to our hospitals and nursing homes, yet carers, both paid and unpaid, are under significant and unsustainable strain due to inconsistent access to services, limited financial supports, inadequate staffing levels and regional disparities in care provision.

We also know from all our constituencies that nursing homes are overstretched. I am sure many of the Deputies in this Chamber have heard from nursing homes in their constituencies that are facing significant pressures and maybe even closure. There can also be a language element to this in the case of Gaeltacht areas and people being able to access that care through Irish.

Hard-pressed families are facing major costs to pay for loved ones who require long-term care but there has been next to no investment in public care homes. From what I can see, Sláintecare 2025 does not seem to have any proposed policy framework for long-term residential care, despite it being home to more than 32,000 people. When it comes to home care, too, there is a gaping hole in the Government's plans. It has failed to deliver the statutory home care scheme, a long-term commitment of the Government. We have proposed a scheme that would give a legal entitlement to health and social care, which would try to keep people in their homes. Again, there is a regional issue here with regard to people being able to access care from their homes, depending on how far and isolated they are from their local town or city.

I am concerned we are once again drifting towards a situation where the State is stepping back further from public provision, just like in housing, where investment funds and asset managers of all stripes have stepped in, or perhaps been incentivised to come in. We do not want to see the same here.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I welcome this motion from Independent Ireland. As some-

one who was an unpaid carer for my husband before he passed, I have lived the reality of a system that does not value care work, whether it is done in the home, in our communities or in nursing homes. I know first hand the emotional and physical toll and the financial hardship carers face every single day. However, I would do it again because I felt it was the right thing for me to do.

In Sinn Féin, we believe in a fair, sustainable and compassionate model of care that enables people with high care needs to live with dignity at home. Right now, our care system is under enormous strain. Carers are being punished by a broken means-testing system that actively disincentivises people from taking on care roles. We call on the Government to abolish the means test for carers immediately. The Minister of State has said the Government is acting “with a view” to phasing this out over the lifetime of this Government. However, a view is not a guarantee.

Carers alleviate pressures in hospitals and long-term residential care facilities. They are under significant and unsustainable strain due to inconsistent access to services and limited financial supports. Rural areas, such as Clare, are experiencing higher demand, which means the failure to provide timely and adequate home support services leads to an increased number needing to avail of the fair deal system. We also need to end the pay disparity between section 39 and section 38 workers, as was also promised. Please do not let this be another broken promise.

Caring should never come at a cost to a person’s financial security or health. The HSE-operated nursing homes received significantly higher funding under fair deal compared with private and voluntary homes. These financial challenges are leading to many nursing homes closing due to financial viability. They are also causing long-term waiting lists for those needing to avail of the system. The fair deal pricing review must be published, as per the commitment in the programme for Government.

It is time to fix the broken system and treat carers not as burdens but as the backbone of our health and social care system. When residential care becomes the appropriate setting, nursing homes need to be fully recognised and resourced.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We have a model of assistance for older people in their homes in Donegal that we are very proud of. It is a publicly delivered system in the main and we have not delegated it out to the private sector. Some tremendous people are working in those services in Donegal but they are being held back by the Government. Its pay and number strategy is basically a recruitment freeze.

The Government and HSE senior management are preventing the recruitment of home care assistance in Donegal and waiting lists are growing. These are older people who need essential care and their families need respite. The knock-on effect of this is that we also have a profound crisis in our major acute hospital, Letterkenny University Hospital. Beds in that hospital could be freed up every single week but because of the growing waiting list, we have a knock-on crisis. If there is a failure in recruiting the necessary numbers of home care assistants and a lack of beds in community hospitals, there will be a bottleneck at the emergency department and a crisis. A disaster zone is how it is regularly described.

I ask the Government to get rid of its pay and numbers strategy, to respect the publicly delivered model we have in Donegal and not to force us to privatise our home care system in Done-

gal. That is a model we are proud of and we will fight the Government hard if it tries to do that.

Deputy Mark Ward: We are discussing funding for carers and I want to talk about one funding source, namely, the domiciliary care allowance. The domiciliary care allowance is payable in respect of a child under the age of 16 who has severe disability requiring continual care and attention. Over the past number of years I have noticed a pattern of people contacting me and coming to my office with the same problem with the domiciliary care allowance. A very high percentage of applicants seem to be turned down on their very first application only to get it on appeal. I submitted parliamentary questions to try to get to the bottom of this and see what information I could get back. I was informed that 33% of all first-time applications for the domiciliary care allowance were refused. Of this, 50% of the applicants appealed it. Out of the 2,146 appeals, only 823 were not successful. I will be honest with the Minister of State. I will recommend to any parent out there who has been turned down for the domiciliary care allowance to appeal because based on these figures, it is likely they will win. As one parent said to me, "You would think the Government wants us to go away after we are turned down the first time." Looking at these figures, I have to agree with parents when they come to me like that.

Another issue is the abolition of the means test for carers. That was one of the pre-election promises by Government. It is six months since that election and we have not seen any movement on that. We have to see movement on that; we cannot have another broken promise. We have to see carers recognised. We have to see the means test abolished and the Government parties have to stick to their pre-election promises because the people of Ireland simply will not forgive them if that is one of the promises the Government rolls back on.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Carers and front-line healthcare workers are the backbone of our care system, enabling people with high-care needs to live with dignity at home. Home care workers and family carers bring significant improvements to people's health and well-being, reduce pressure on hospitals and deliver enormous savings for the health service but we know that many vulnerable people are not receiving the level of care that they need. It is extremely important that any person who requires care receives it in a timely manner, that they are supported to remain at home if that is their wish and that people are not left in unsafe situations, particularly when they are discharged from hospital or other medical settings.

I was recently contacted about an elderly constituent who has a tumour and had undergone five days of intensive chemotherapy in hospital. She was sent home without any supports despite her family's concerns that they would not be able to care for her properly. This is a person with limited mobility and poor short-term memory, who cannot get out of bed or use the bathroom on her own. Her family expressed concern for her well-being and that they would not be able to meet her care needs, yet she was sent home without any home supports put in place. Unsurprisingly she ended up back in hospital only a couple of days later. It was a desperately unfair situation for that person and that family to be left in.

I also want to raise supports for carers. The Government parties gave a commitment during the general election to scrap the carer's allowance means test. We will hold them to that commitment because the failure to adequately support carers up until now has been appalling. Their role has been undervalued and unrecognised and many are struggling to cope. The Government needs to follow through on that commitment and it needs to increase payments as well and finally begin to value the significant contribution that carers make.

Deputy Ann Graves: Carers and front-line health workers are the backbone of our care

system. I want to acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of home carers in Ireland who are our unsung heroes. Carers enable people to care and to live independently in their own homes with dignity for as long as they can. This is hugely important for people's quality of life and it greatly reduces the pressure on our healthcare system. Home carers in Ireland are estimated to save the Government €20 million annually through caregiving work. This amount is equivalent to the cost of building numerous hospitals, MetroLinks, building projects and houses. More than 500,000 family carers in Ireland provide this essential service. Their unpaid work is crucial for the functioning of the healthcare system. This essential work should not be taken for granted. It should be respected, supported and adequately funded. Sinn Féin would abolish the carer's allowance means test, introduce a pay-related carer benefit and increase social protection supports for people with disabilities and carers. Abolishing the means test would have a positive and immediate benefit for people.

A constituent of mine has been refused carer's allowance because of the means test. Collette had a carer who went above and beyond the call of duty. She was Collette's lifeline to the outside world. Unfortunately, she was denied the carer's allowance in March this year. This has had a devastating effect on Collette who said:

I am legally blind and have Parkinson's disease. She was not just my carer; she went above and beyond to help me. She brought me to appointments, of which I have many, she did some housework and looked after my showers. She got me up and dressed and put on some make-up to make me feel good about myself daily and this has taken a toll on me the last couple of weeks without her help.

I appeal to the Minister of State and the Government, on behalf of all the Collettes out there, to please support this motion.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank all the carers of Ireland for all the great work that they do in performing essential work for our communities. They allow people to live at home in dignity, they help ensure better outcomes for those that they care for, they contribute considerably to people's health and well-being and they reduce the pressures on an already-stretched health service and care homes. In doing that, they make incredible savings to the taxpayer. Unfortunately, this is not acknowledged and the praise they receive in this House is not always matched in practice. As of last year, 5,556 individuals were on waiting lists for home support. While we have the thanks, we need to commit and we need to work to ensure the lives of carers are made better. A report from Family Carers Ireland last year laid bare the true impact. A total of 72% of home carers never receive respite. Nearly half of carers are paying for products or services privately that should be paid for publicly. A total of 69% are struggling financially while nearly a third were cutting back on essentials such as food and heat or missing mortgage payments and 76% reported moderate to severe loneliness. Some families cannot get carers and we wonder why when we look at the conditions they have to work under. The Minister of State needs to take action. It is within his power to address these failures. I want to acknowledge the work of my party and constituency colleague Senator Pauline Tully for having consistently brought forward concrete proposals in this regard. The carer's means test needs to be abolished and the pay and conditions of workers needs to be regulated to address, recruit, and retain workers in these care settings. We need to begin respecting, delivering and caring for our carers.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I commend all the home carers and the people who are providing a great service.

We need to have some truth around this situation because the Minister of State knows, going back to 2007 and 2008, we had an excellent home care service in this country. The HSE and the Minister for Health at the time went around and they chopped and chopped and privatised the service. They privatised home care, which is such a vital service. This was wrong. I have a file that thick at home since we worked at it in Mayo, because they started implementing the cuts on home care in the county. This is not the right way to provide home care.

I commend and thank those who brought forward this motion. This situation need never have happened. It has been constructed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael together and that is the honesty around it. The HSE has confirmed that currently 242 people in Mayo are on the waiting list for home support. That is not right. That is home support they vitally need. A spokesperson for HSE West and North-West said that home support is provided to a total of 1,581 clients in Mayo. We cannot operate a health service without a proper home care system and despite the great work that is being done by home carers, we do not have that because staff cannot be retained.

11 o'clock

The deal some of these staff get, in terms of the money they are paid or the lack of travel allowance they get, is not right. That is why there are problems with retention and recruitment. This situation has to be fixed because it obviously has a knock-on impact on people who are in acute hospitals longer than they need to, but also on other situations in other hospitals as well. There is a way to fix this, and we have presented to the Government time and time again how this situation can be fixed. I urge the Minister of State to listen.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the members of the Independent Technical Group for bringing forward this very important motion. The first motion I brought to this House along with my party regarded young carers, so it is positive to see Members continuing to highlight the issues impacting family carers. During the general election, disability and care were central policy areas. I am glad to see that it continues to be a main policy priority among Members here. I am sure like many Deputies across the House, access to carer's allowance, home care hours and disability services are frequent issues that are raised with my office.

The carer's allowance payment needs to be reformed, beginning with the abolition of the means test. The payment itself was designed for people caring for older people and is therefore outdated. The payment itself is entirely inadequate. We know that caring households face additional costs due to caring. Two in five such households have a household income of less than €30,000 a year, and nearly 70% find it difficult to make ends meet. It is estimated that a household caring for a child with a profound disability has additional costs of €244 a week, while the carer's allowance is only €260. That is only a difference of €16. This rate of payment falls way below the poverty line, and with St. Vincent de Paul estimating that for 2024, €346 was needed, this means that many carers on the payment are €86 below the poverty line.

As the means test is based on household income, it leaves many carers who do not receive the payment, the majority of whom are women, financially dependent on their partners. This is another reason we must end the means test. A further point I will add is that taxation of the carer's allowance is grossly unfair. When we look at other comparable payments such as the jobseeker's or disability allowances, we see that they are not taxed even though the carer's allowance is. This places an undue penalty on family carers and further diminishes the caring allowance. We must reform the carer's allowance.

21 May 2025

I note that in the programme for Government, there is a commitment to continue to increase the income disregards for the carer's allowance in each budget "with a view to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of the Government". This wording is obviously not what was sold to the electorate because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are on record as committing to abolishing the means test. The wording in the programme for Government is a weak commitment to family carers and is one they will not buy. I ask that the Government once again makes a commitment to abolishing the means test, not having "a view" to abolishing it.

Family carers save the State €20 billion a year, which is close to the annual budget of the HSE, and provide 19 million hours in unpaid care every week. We need to value and recognise the societal good provided by family carers and abolish the means test. We also need to look at the appeals process. I have raised the fact that some family carers are waiting over four months for a decision to access the carer's allowance. Figures show that in 2024, the average wait time for progressing a carer's allowance appeal was 16.9 weeks, or over four months. In 2023, the wait time was 16.6 weeks, while in 2022 it was 12.7 weeks. Overall, family carers have seen processing times for their appeals increase by nearly a third since 2022. These are just average, and I am aware that a number of carers are waiting well over a year on their appeals, so the wait times are much higher for so many carers. For a family carer, accessing the payment can be a lifeline. We cannot expect family carers to wait for well up to a year for a decision on their appeal. We are seeing a year-on-year increase in the Department's need to get a handle on this processing time.

The motion also highlights statutory home care. This was a Government commitment made back in 2017, and it had a deadline for 2021, when it was set for implementation. It was a deadline the Government missed. In 2023, €1.5 billion was spent by the Government on the fair deal scheme, compared to only €723 million on home care. We have a long way to go to scale up investment to ensure that people have the right to be cared for in their community. The ESRI has estimated that the projected demand for a statutory home care scheme could increase from 18.56 million hours in 2019 to nearly 42 million hours following that.

When we look at nursing home care, we see that the Government spent €1.5 billion on the fair deal scheme compared to €723 million on home care. Given the projected demand, we clearly need to scale up the amount of investment in home care to ensure we can deliver a statutory home care scheme. Yet it is not just a matter of funding, as we all know. There is a massive recruitment and retention issue in the home care sector. I hope we can see further action on addressing the recruitment crisis. Failure to do so will only slow down the introduction of that statutory scheme.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank Deputy O'Flynn and his group for this important motion, which raises a whole raft of really important issues with regard to care in the community and at home, and indeed for any person with care needs. While most of the conversation today is about older people, it is about care right across the ages.

It is five years since the Minister of State's Government committed to a statutory right to home care support. I must tell him that I am now probably more pessimistic than ever that it is going to be delivered by the Government any time soon, particularly when we hear from the Minister for Health that the funding is still being considered. There is a real concern now that if we are going to wait for the various ducks to be put in a row, we are never going to have it. This Government needs to change tack and ensure that all efforts are put towards launching that statutory right in the immediate future. The importance of that statutory right is absolutely plain

to see in respect of the growing share of older persons we have in our communities, the longer life expectancy, the desire to be looked after at home and, of course, the better health outcomes when people are looked after at home.

However, we currently have a haphazard system of care in the community. There is an irony in the fact that you have a right to be looked after in the hospital system but no right to be looked after at home, and that has given rise to this haphazard system where there is inconsistent access to public health nurses, and a postcode lottery with regard to where you can access home care supports. In far too many areas, I see there is little or no occupational therapist advice, so families have to figure it out for themselves. I am reminded of a number of people coming to me over the last 12 months and being utterly baffled as to how they can help their spouse remain at home, try to procure the various equipment, and care for them. There is no centralised point of information. The public health nurse system should be that point but when we look at the figures, we see that there are fewer public health nurses now across the country than there were in 2019. That is damning of this Government. It is a reflection of the complete under-resourcing of community health nursing. It is a reflection of the lack of understanding and the lack of importance applied to public health nurses, which is a vital role in the community.

We know there were just over 1,500 public health nurses - 1,507 - in February of this year. That is down from 1,539 in December 2019. Obviously, our population has grown since then and the need within our population has also grown since then. As we know, public health nurses make very important decisions in the community with regard to who can access home care packages and equipment. If we do not have enough of them, there are going to be massive issues. We saw that earlier this year, particularly in my own area, where developmental checks for infants had to be scaled back because of a staffing issue in CHO 9. We know, just as crucially, that older people are suffering because we do not have enough people on the ground.

The other key point is the postcode lottery for home care support. Here in Dublin, there is not as big a problem as there is in Cork and Kerry. I know from my family members where I come from originally that people who need that care are not accessing it because the bodies are not on the ground. That is down to pay, the inconsistency of hours, the lack of certainty with regard to hours, and the travel allowances. Ultimately, it is an allowance by the Department of Health, the HSE and the Government of this day to ensure that whatever growth we have had in home care support is by the private sector as opposed to the HSE.

In order to ensure we have proper terms and conditions for those workers, we need to ensure they are going to be HSE workers. If we look at recruitment over the past number of years, we see that the HSE hours grew by 12% between 2020 and 2024, as opposed to 36% in the private sector. I believe that this approach is wrong because we are condemning far too many people who want to work in the home care sector to a life of precarity. The Government has to reverse tack and ensure that more people are employed by the HSE. We see in the nursing home sector that people want to work in HSE-run nursing homes. They are leaving private sector nursing homes because of the pay and conditions. In the home care sector, we need to make sure there are more HSE bodies on the ground delivering those vital services to people in order that they can stay in their homes.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I commend the Independent Technical Group on its motion before the House today. I welcome the discussion of issues that are of such fundamental importance in the pursuit of a fair and inclusive society, and in how we value or fail to value the lives of our disabled citizens and our elders and, essentially, who we are as a society and as a republic.

In this context, the means test for the carer's allowance, which is an essential support for those providing care to relatives, usually with chronic illness or disabilities, is unjust and should be abolished. Under intense pressure leading up to the election, abolition of the means test was included in the programme for Government, but we have yet to see clear movement on this. The carer's allowance is designed to support people who give up their own time and income to provide unpaid care for a loved one. This care work is essential to the health and well-being of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

However, the current means test penalises low-income carers, often pushing them deeper into financial insecurity, rather than acknowledging their commitment, their hard work and the burden they are actually lifting from the State. The means test for carer's allowance currently takes into account both the income and savings of the carer and his or her partner. This system, although initially intended to target support to those most in need, has proven to be a further financial and psychological burden for many carers who fall just outside the eligibility threshold. The means test fails to reflect the true financial needs of carers, particularly when they are forced to reduce their working hours or leave employment entirely for the care of a loved one. Many carers who are providing essential care are left without the financial means to support themselves, even though they play a vital role in the healthcare system and make a huge contribution to our society.

Carers, particularly those in low-paid or part-time jobs, often live on the edge of poverty as a result of this. The current system does not take into account the increased costs that carers face, such as medical expenses, mobility aids and additional transport costs, all of which further aggravate their financial hardship. By abolishing the means test, the Government could provide all carers with a guaranteed minimum income, thereby ensuring that they can continue their work without facing this level of financial distress. The means test undermines the principle of equality by treating carers as though their contributions are secondary to the economy. Care work should be properly valued, not means tested. Everyone who provides care should be treated with dignity and respect, not subjected to financial hardship.

Nursing home care should be a last resort for older adults whose physical and cognitive needs are reaching a point where they can no longer live at home. I welcome the emphasis placed by the Minister of State, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, at the outset of his tenure on the importance of facilitating older adults to live at home for as long as possible, and his commitment to a fair deal for home care. However, it is important that we see a clear timeline soon on the creation of this scheme. Older people have the capacity to live full, authentic lives, defined by connection, a sense of humour, community, purpose, creativity and intimacy, in stages of life where physical and cognitive decline are also taking place. There is a real human rights issue with the current system of mostly private nursing homes, many of which provide for basic care needs at huge financial expense but are not tuned in to the wider needs of the whole person.

There has been a consistent trend in the policies of successive Governments toward privatisation of both home care and nursing home care. Private companies account for approximately 80% of all nursing homes, and provide 60% of all home care hours. The outsourcing of these core services to commercial for-profit entities results in poor value for money, low pay and precarious work conditions for the people who staff them. That does not bode well for the provision of care for our older citizens. The Government needs to act on the promises of Sláintecare and reverse the increasing privatisation of health and social care. At any one time, there are approximately 700 people in hospitals throughout the country waiting to be discharged, but who are unable to return home as there is no home care support available. As of the end of

2024, 6,000 people had been approved for a home care package, but were not receiving one as resources were not available.

Crucially, and this is a real human rights issue that is very close to my heart, we need to end the scandal of young adults with brain injury and intellectual disability stranded in nursing homes because community residential services are not available to them. This is a desperately sad situation, and another example of how much of a distance is opening up between our economic prosperity on the one hand, and the vindication of our disabled citizens' basic rights on the other.

I previously spoke in this Chamber about my work in the Peter Bradley Foundation, now known as Acquired Brain Injury Ireland, in Glenageary and Dún Laoghaire many years ago. Its residential services have had a transformative effect on the lives of people who would otherwise have ended up in nursing homes or living precariously in the community. Unfortunately, one of the despairing aspects of our work involved telling so many people who had been referred to the Peter Bradley Foundation that they were being put on a waiting list for residential services that were not available because there was a limited spread of services throughout the country, and it remains so.

In May 2024, there were in excess of 1,200 people with disabilities living in nursing homes. The ombudsman, Ger Deering, has warned that Ireland will look back with regret at how we treated these citizens. His office authored a report, *Wasted Lives*, on their plight. Mr. Deering has appealed to the current Government to include improved funding for the HSE to relocate these young adults. He said he was “deeply unhappy” with the funding allocated in budget 2025, and he warned that “a huge amount of work” in implementing the recommendations of the *Wasted Lives* report may have to stop as a result. People with acquired brain injury and intellectual disabilities should be able to avail of long-term specialised residential care in the community where that is needed. They should be able to live somewhere they can call home, where they can feel safe, form healthy relationships and pursue meaningful goals. They should be supported to fully take part in their local community.

It is very welcome to have this discussion today on an area that is of such fundamental importance to our values as a society, to human rights and to the essence of what we mean by “community”. This is a subject that touches the lives of all families in the State. How we support our disabled citizens, our carers and our elders to enjoy life to their fullest will define - more than anything - who we are as a society.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I also welcome today's motion on carers. In fact, in the late nineties, I was a carer in London and I was a carer in Dublin when I returned after living abroad for a while. At that time, I noticed there was a significant difference in the level of training and support that carers were given by the agencies I was working for. I was happy to do that work. I was very young at the time, and it was a great introduction to being humble and being a carer for somebody else and putting their needs before mine.

Today, there are so many people in Ireland who are carers. I am thinking of the young carers we met recently in the audiovisual room and what they do in our community as they care for siblings, parents and other family members. Caring touches on every single family. Nobody will not be touched by it in the future. Some of us will need care. It is fundamental to who we are as humans that care is valued and appreciated.

This country runs on care. It is not the rhetoric of fiscal reports, budget surpluses and all those things that holds our society together, but the invisible, often unpaid, work of carers. Right now, they are exhausted, under-resourced and increasingly demoralised. The system is broken. It is one that penalises people for doing the right thing or staying home to look after a loved one, for stepping into gaps left by the State and for providing essential services that prevent hospital overcrowding and delay the need for residential care.

We in the Social Democrats have long advocated for a rights-based model of care. That means putting people first, not processes. It means making home support a legal entitlement, not a postcode lottery or a vague aspiration based on “available resources”. It means finally ending the cruelty of the current means-testing regime, which also punishes low- and middle-income families for their compassion. In 2024, we saw a 7.4% increase in home support hours. However, let us not think that is brilliant - it is brilliant - without bearing in mind that there are still more than 5,500 people on waiting lists, with rural communities hardest hit.

My own mother was reliant on those services until she died last year. It was very difficult to get them. I want to personally thank those people who cared for her and who are caring for others, those paid professionals who are like gold dust.

We have a fair deal scheme that is increasingly unfair. The financial penalty for leasing farmland because it is not deemed “actively operated” is a clear injustice to rural families, who are already doing their best to hold things together. How can we claim to value farming families while allowing these loopholes to gut intergenerational livelihoods?

As a member of the Social Democrats, I would like to see the abolition of means testing for carers, while recognising their role as essential workers in our health system; full pay parity between section 38 and section 39 workers; and a statutory timeline for the rolling out of universal home care.

Deputy Charles Ward: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the motion and thank Independent Ireland for bringing it forward. I fully support the motion and its call on the Government to abolish the means test for carers to ensure equal access to financial support, and to recognise the essential social and economic value of care work in communities. I also support its call to provide increased capital and operational grants to community hospitals, residential care homes and day centres, including specific provision for dementia care and disability-friendly infrastructure.

Having worked in healthcare, I understand how important it is that our community hospitals and residential care homes are properly funded and resourced, especially in Donegal. From Malin Head to Arranmore Island, access to community care is vital for people living in rural Ireland. Despite this, community care is too often overlooked and underfunded. Investing in community hospitals would ensure that patients do not have to travel long journeys unnecessarily, which rural patients so often do.

Community hospitals also have the potential to take significant strain off our model 3 and model 4 hospitals. If patients in Donegal could attend some routine appointments at their local community hospital, it would take considerable pressure off Letterkenny and would lead to far fewer appointment cancellations. It is shocking that over 6,000 appointments were cancelled at Letterkenny University Hospital last year due to increased emergency department attendances, staff shortages and infection outbreaks. This is a massive 44% increase compared to 2023,

which is outrageous.

It is clear that Donegal people are at a severe disadvantage in terms of healthcare and this is outlined in black and white. The inequality between Letterkenny University Hospital and other hospitals is truly mind-blowing. The recent suggestion, for example, to locate a surgical hub in Sligo instead of Letterkenny was a slap in the face for every single person from Donegal, especially when we know that, both distance-wise and population-wise, Letterkenny makes the most sense. As I have said before, this is not a Donegal versus Sligo thing. The north west, as a region, needs far more focus and investment. There should be a surgical hub in both Donegal and Sligo.

There are almost 10,700 unpaid carers in Donegal, which is 6% of the county's population. That is over 10,000 people who do not get a cent for the incredibly difficult and important work they do within their communities, caring for people. It is a disgrace and completely undermines the vital role played by carers in supporting older people and people with disabilities within their homes and communities. It is time the Government valued the essential work of our carers and front-line healthcare workers.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The acid test of the bona fides of the Government on carers and caring is the immediate abolition of the carer's allowance. This has been the demand of Family Carers Ireland for years and was promised by all political parties in the run-up to the last general election. It was understood that the means test would be abolished within the first 100 days of this Government coming into office but we are still waiting. Worse still, the programme for Government is silent on it, so we do not know when or if it will ever happen. The Minister should announce its abolition immediately.

Family carers play a very vital role as front-line healthcare workers in supporting older people, people with disabilities and those with high care needs in their own homes. Half a million family carers provide 19 million hours of unpaid care each week, saving the State approximately €20 billion. The abolition of the carer's allowance means test is the least the Government should do in return. The cost is modest in the overall budget of the State. In 2024, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the full cost at €375.3 million, which is similar to the figure of €389 million that was estimated by Family Carers Ireland.

The provision of respite is another vital support that is needed both for carers and those cared for, almost three quarters of whom have never received respite care. This leads to ill-health and burnout, particularly for carers.

All statutory and voluntary organisations supporting people to live in their homes for as long as possible have called for a statutory, rights-based home support scheme. Currently, there are 5,556 people on waiting lists for home care and home help. There is a huge divide between Dublin and the rest of the country. There is little or no waiting list in Dublin. For example, there is no waiting list at all in north Dublin and central Dublin, whereas the south Tipperary area has the second highest waiting list and the north Tipperary area the third highest. This postcode or geographic discrimination must stop. Many individuals in south Tipperary who have been approved for home care are either not getting any entitlement or not getting their full entitlement. Again, this needs to be addressed urgently.

Home and Community Care Ireland, in its prebudget submission for 2025, called for the restoration of the 1.9 million hours cut previously and an additional 2 million hours to meet unmet

needs, and a support structure for home care workers. I strongly support this.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an ngrúpa teicniúil. I thank the technical group for once again putting the spotlight on the absence of services and the failure of successive Governments to recognise the invaluable work that care-givers give us. I am not going to use my own words. I am going to use the Policy Statement on Care published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in 2023. As the Minister may recall, IHREC was set up in 2014 to put the spotlight on human rights and equality so we would have an inclusive society and to guide successive Governments.

What did IHREC tell us, even if it is being utterly ignored? It said that the State should prioritise the deprivatisation of care and that there should be an updated carers strategy, which is not there. The report states that care is central to a functional, equal and inclusive society. This is on pages 10 and 11, if the Minister of State would like to read it. It quotes the OECD and tells us that 9% of global GDP is unpaid-for care. It goes through this step-by-step to tell us that the privatisation of care is a disaster. Of course, it does not use the word “disaster” - I am using that word - but it tells us that it is seriously defective. It states:

Seeking to make a profit from care is antithetical to its values.

[...]

Our positions and recommendations require a fundamental change in how the State views and values care across the life-cycle.

I know the Minister of State agrees and this is what frustrates me. I know his heart and soul is behind everything that IHREC is saying because no rational person could disagree with it. It provides the solutions. The report states:

Market driven solutions can no longer be the answer. Adequate investment by the State in care, as a public service, is required... The care sector in Ireland has become increasingly privatised and commercialised...

It goes on and on. The main point is that seeking to make a profit is antithetical to care and its recommendation is to deprivatise it.

IHREC then goes on to tell us that homecare is unregulated, which is part of today’s motion. It also states that the age of carers is getting younger and younger, and that 64% of Irish disabled women have children. It tells us that the whole care issue is gendered, as the Minister of State knows, and that the conditions are appalling. It makes practical suggestions in terms of permits and so on.

I am standing here today and I do not know how many motions I have spoken on. Indeed, the Minister of State has spoken on them very eloquently and raised issues in his own constituency. Why were we at this? It is because we blindly followed a neoliberal ideology that made a product out of care. I had someone in my office lately, as have all TDs. I will not exaggerate but, over approximately three weeks, 11 different carers were sent to visit a person who has senile dementia of one form or another. Does the Minister of State know what I was told when I was on the health forum for ten years of my life? I was told that a person does not have a right to the same carer. That is the neoliberal ideology. The Progressive Democrats were instrumental in introducing that, leading Fianna Fáil. They made a product out of everything.

They knew the price of everything and the value of absolutely nothing. On top of that, to add insult to injury, a value was not even put on what it means to the economy. We cannot have an economy without carers.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I will highlight a totally unfair flaw in the operation of the fair deal scheme as it relates to land transfers. This is causing great financial hardship for families. I will explain how this operates. This rule must be changed. In over 20 years in politics, I have never come across such an unfair system. I have raised this matter previously. If a family transfers land within five years of the owner entering a nursing home, this land is valued and, if the recipient leases the land, he or she must pay the nursing home 7.5% of the value of the land on an annual basis with no time limit. I will give an example. If 40 acres of land was transferred and valued at €400,000, the recipient would be liable to pay €30,000 per annum to the nursing home. This land might be rented for approximately €8,000. The person who has the land would have to cover the shortfall of €22,000. Where are they supposed to get this money? No three-year time limit such as that which applies to the assets of the person in the nursing home, for example, their house or farm, applies to this so it could go on until such time as the total value of the land has been paid over, perhaps 14 years. This is totally daft. There is no possibility of deferment of payment as there is in the case of the family home. This is therefore a very substantial financial burden on families. Where are these families to get the funds? I know of a case in which this financial burden is causing great financial hardship. I am sure the Minister of State will agree that it is totally unfair and must be changed immediately. I do not want to speak on the other anomalies I have found in the fair deal system because this flaw is so great that the Government must focus on it fully and get it resolved.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I support the motion. In my constituency of Tipperary and across the nation, family carers are the unsung heroes who provide unwavering support to their loved ones, which often requires great personal and financial sacrifice. These carers, numbering more than 500,000, save the State an estimated €20 billion annually - imagine that figure - through their unpaid labour yet many are subjected to a means test that is both outdated and completely unjust and which disqualifies them from essential supports. While budget 2025 increased the income disregard thresholds, this measure falls short of the comprehensive reform needed. It is imperative that we move towards abolishing this means test. I compliment Councillor Richie Molloy, the manager of south Tipperary carers, all of the managers and all of the carers who provide such wonderful care.

Furthermore, the issue of home support services remains pressing. Despite an allocation of €830 million for home support in 2025, there are still over 6,000 individuals languishing on waiting lists. Think about that; there are 6,000 individuals languishing on a waiting list. It beggars belief. This shortfall is not due to a lack of funding but stems from recruitment and retention challenges within the sector. What are we doing to address these challenges? We are not doing very much. These challenges have been ongoing for a number of years now. Carers are doing a good job. We need rationalisation and recruitment so that we will have staff. Along with every other TD, I regularly get calls from people who have been approved for home help but there is no one to do the job. The HSE sees the box as ticked. That is not acceptable.

We must also address the dire need for respite services. A recent report indicates that nearly three quarters of carers have never received any form of respite. This is totally unacceptable. Implementing a minimum respite guarantee would provide much-needed relief to these dedicated individuals. We are currently not treating these carers with the dignity they deserve. They are saving the State a fortune and, in return, the State is abusing their goodwill by not

providing them with decent services.

I urge the Government to take decisive action, to abolish the means test for carer's allowance, to standardise pay across all care sectors and to ensure timely access to home support and respite services. Our carers deserve recognition, respect and robust support but, unfortunately, they are not getting them.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Deputy Michael Collins and his group for giving us the chance to talk about this worthy motion this morning. I support everything that has been said. It should be every politician's ambition to allow elderly people to stay and be seen after in their own homes for as long as possible. That is not happening in Kerry. At the present time, you can qualify to get home help or a home care package but no one arrives because there are no people to provide that home help. That is very serious. I am sure the Government could be more inventive in ensuring that people are available to do this very worthy work, which would save the State an awful lot of money.

I concur with that new TD over there whom I do not know said. I thank him for raising the issue of the fair deal scheme and how it affects the farming community. As I have often said before, when it comes to assessing people's farms and the conditions that are imposed, even under the new scheme, the fair deal scheme is a lousy deal for farmers. It is not a fair deal. It is a lousy deal for farmers and must be reviewed. As that man has said, the value of the farm can be wiped out before the person who is sick passes on or something like that happens. That is very unfair. The farm should not be assessed.

There is a hospital in Cahersiveen. There were four beds there for elderly people. They were done up, revamped and everything but they have not been used for the last four years because there are no staff to staff them. Cahersiveen is very far away. If you get sick on the Iveragh Peninsula, Cahersiveen is the nearest place to you. You are miles away from Killarney, Tralee, Listowel, Kenmare or anywhere else. That has to be seen after. Those four beds have to be reopened.

The means test is one of the things we ensured was in the programme for Government. It must be abolished for carers because it is not fair. Am I all right yet?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): No, your two and a half minutes are up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: All right. I appeal to the Ministers to see after the elderly people because they brought us to where we are. They fought to ensure that Ireland was a better place. They did their best. We must see after them but we are not doing it.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: It is my first time seeing the Minister of State sitting on the Front Bench. I congratulate her. She is a fine representative for Carlow and it is great to see her in the elevated office of Minister of State.

I will make a few comments as part of this debate. I am glad that the programme for Government includes as a priority the abolition of the means test for carers. It is only right. It is shameful that it has taken this long for it to happen. However, I will make the point that there are currently 100,000 people in this country availing of carer's allowance. It is costing the Exchequer €1.24 billion per annum. Abolishing the means test will, of course, allow more people to qualify for the payment. It will cost the Exchequer an estimated €3 billion per annum. I note

that the programme for Government states that the means test will be incrementally wound back across the five years of the Government's term. It should be brought forward and front-loaded to the Government's first budget in October 2025. We are going to be reducing the VAT rate on food and beverages in the autumn. That is very important but it is more important that we do this for carers. If we are going to front-load the reduction in VAT, we should front-load the abolition of the means test for carer's allowance. It should be done in the budget in the autumn, and I ask the Minister of State to fight for that.

I will speak about respite, as have others. Carers are at absolute burnout. They do not get breaks. The majority of them have never had respite and if we want someone to be cared for in a loving home environment, it is crucial that we look after the carer. Far too often, they are not looked after, and they quickly see their own health suffer. They are often of a similar age to the older person they are looking after. They may have health problems themselves and that all gets exacerbated the more entrenched they become in this care scenario without respite from the State.

I will speak about the home support service, which is more commonly known as home help. Some 98% of people who are home helps or home carers are women. We struggle to find people to work in this area even though it is hugely funded by the HSE. I suggest that we make an adjustment for the people who work in this area. Let us look at taxation. A lot of these people want to be at home to be able to do the school pick-up and school drop-off. During the day they should be able to work a considerable number of hours as a home help without being penalised by the taxman. Consideration of the taxation issue could free up a lot of people to work in this area.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank everyone for the opportunity to address the House on the issue raised by the Deputies who tabled this motion. I begin by echoing the opening remarks of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, and thank the Deputies for their constructive and positive contributions to this important motion on the issue of fair and sustainable funding for carers, home support and nursing home support schemes. I make the point, as did my colleague, that the motion is not being opposed. However, before speaking on Government commitments in this area, I take the opportunity to acknowledge the essential work of carers and front-line health-care workers. Their exceptional diligence and dedication to deliver the highest quality care to some of our most vulnerable citizens is commendable. As a result, individuals have the choice to age in their own homes and communities for as long as possible and I thank them for efforts and expert care.

Work is ongoing to ensure that carers throughout the country are supported. The care they provide is a key enabler for Government policy that supports people to live with dignity and independence at home for as long as possible. As such, it is crucial that supports for family carers are carefully considered. Recognising this, in March 2024, an interdepartmental working group examining supports for family and carers was established. The work of the group will be informed by a broader review of means-testing under way across a number of Departments. The group is chaired by the Department of Social Protection with members from the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The group will report its findings once finalised.

As outlined by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, through the carer's guarantee the Government has increased funding to support carers and to provide new training opportuni-

21 May 2025

ties to support them in their caring roles. GP visit cards have been made available for those receiving a full- or half-rate carer's allowance or benefit. Funding has been approved under the women's health fund for a project to support mid-life and older women family carers.

Respite continues to be a vital support for carers. The Government is committed to progressively increasing funding for respite services. I have seen in my own area how respite services are so important, and it is important we have those services there, including the home support emergency respite scheme.

Addressing the challenges faced by care workers is also a priority for Government. The implementation of the recommendation of the strategic workforce advisory group has delivered significant reform in the care sector. This has included payment for travel time for home support providers, paying carers the national living wage at a minimum, and the allocation of work permits for home support workers. The work of the group will continue in 2025. Alongside this is the timely legislation being advanced to establish a licensing framework for professional home support services.

Several supplementary work programmes are ongoing. This work seeks to address a variety of areas. The future financing of home support will be an essential area of consideration in the new strategic scheme, or the strategy as we call it. The ESRI's imminent capacity review will help to inform levels of service provision required into the future. It will be a key piece of research for this work. The development of a reformed model of service delivery for home support is also under way. The HSE is in the process of procuring a comprehensive ICT system, which will facilitate robust monitoring and planning of HSE home support services. Initiatives exploring the effectiveness of home support and the rural provision of home support are being advanced, including research into the use of assistive technologies in home support. This is the way forward.

The Government will continue to ensure the nursing home sector is funded. Investment in the nursing home support scheme - the fair deal scheme as we all know it - now stands at more than €1.2 billion. It has provided access to nursing home care to many people who will never have to pay more than they can afford. Legislative changes have taken place to expand the scope of the scheme, making the scheme more accessible for farm and business owners who require long-term residential care.

I will highlight something a lot of my colleagues have spoken about. I have spoken about it myself through the years. A commitment to address means-testing is in the programme for Government, and I know it is crucial. I will go back to the Minister to speak about this. The issue of means-testing of carers is in the programme, and it is something we are committed to. I will highlight it with the Minister. I know there are the other changes and staffing challenges within the sector. That was also brought up this morning. The other thing, as Deputy Crowe has said, is that 98% of the workers are women.

It is important, as the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, said, that we acknowledge today the work that carers throughout the country do. It is so important that we recognise that and work to deliver on what we have promised in the programme for Government. I acknowledge the input of all Deputies this morning. This is a vital area of work. It is clear to me that we are all motivated to ensure that services for older people are funded. That the services are funded and that carers are supported was a priority today. I echo my colleague, Deputy O'Donnell, by saying the Government is committed to delivering on this. This is demonstrated by the work

this Government is currently engaging in, and that is the work we will continue. I thank everyone. The motion is not being opposed.

Deputy Michael Collins: I appreciate the Minister of State saying the motion is not being opposed, but is the Government going to deliver? That is the question here, and it is a huge question. Since I came here in 2016, that has been the case - non-delivery for home care services. I thank John Campbell and Mark Nolan for helping us put this motion together. This motion is about people. It is about the backbone of carers. They are forgotten families. There are rural communities being left behind. It is about fairness, and right now what is happening in home care and the fair deal is not fair.

Almost 100,000 people are on the carer's allowance. These are our mothers, fathers and neighbours keeping loved ones out of hospital beds with their own two hands, but we punish them with a cruel, bureaucratic means test. A threshold of €450 for a single person is insulting. We need to abolish the means test altogether because care is not a luxury. It is work. It is a sacrifice. It is worth more than figures on a page.

In 2024, more than 5,000 people were waiting for home support. That is not a list; it is a line of hardship. The Government has been rolling out this statutory home care scheme since 2016, and in 2025 there is still no deadline and no legal right to home care. This is not reform; it is a farce. We want a timeline. We want rights-based care in law, and not regional roulette. If you are in Dublin, maybe your mom gets a carer next week. If you are in Connemara or west Cork it could be months. Rural areas are short-staffed, underfunded and flat-out ignored. Let us be clear. No postcode should decide whether your parents get to stay in their home. I have seen families forced to sell off land that has been in the family for generations just to pay nursing home bills. If you work the land, the three-year cap applies, but if you lease it to keep it productive, suddenly it does not. That is nonsense. We want leased farmland recognised as actively operated. We want fairness for every farm family. The Home Care Coalition says we need €327 million more in 2025. That is not overspending, that is catching up on years of neglect, inflation, regulation and staff shortages. None of it gets fixed by half measures. We are calling for capital grants, an ICT system and full staffing support. The Minister cannot run a health service on good intentions.

Nursing Homes Ireland says Ireland's ageing population is a success story that requires strategic investment in long-term care services. Care should be viewed as an investment in social infrastructure essential for the dignity and independence of citizens. The Government must urgently publish the fair deal pricing review to ensure rates reflect the true cost of care. Additionally, a cohesive policy framework for nursing home care is needed, as current plans overlook this vital sector. The promised policy paper on nursing home sustainability must be delivered without further delay. The nursing home sector faces significant challenges, including underfunding, workforce shortages and rising operational costs. Immediate engagement with representatives of the sector is necessary to stabilise the system and prevent further closures. Private and voluntary nursing homes play a crucial role in providing quality care and must be recognised as an essential part of Ireland's mixed-model health and social care systems. Funding disparities between public and private providers are unsustainable and require immediate reform to ensure equitable funding and to safeguard access to care. This is about doing what is right, not what is politically safe. Dáil Éireann must support this motion, not for show but to ensure action is taken because when we back carers, fund home care, and protect farmers, we do not just save money, we save people.

21 May 2025

I accept that the Minister is supporting the motion, but that must be backed up with immediate action. We cannot have the same situation happening again in four to five years' time.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I appreciate that the Minister is supporting it.

The means test for carers is mentioned in the programme for Government. I have seen many cases where people's sons or daughters went from the west to Dublin or wherever else and when they came home to mind their parents they were not allowed to get the carer's grant because they had a house in Dublin, for example. They were told they could not live in two houses. That is wrong, because they were saving the State money. They wanted to get €250 a week but the general cost of a nursing home is €1,000 or €1,100. We should appreciate the work done by carers right across the country. I know most people do, but the Department is throwing out wild figures of what it would cost. We do not seem to mind spending money on other things. Carers are crucial.

I know it is not just the money side of it because, unfortunately, even if somebody at home is deemed to be deserving of some hours of home care no one might show up. That is a major problem for the elderly. There is no point in getting a letter stating a person has been allocated 14 hours a week, seven hours a week or nine hours of home care if no one shows up to help. The system is not working at the moment and families are left scrabbling and trying to make sure their loved ones are looked after. Carers right across the country should be recognised for the amount of work to do, the effort they make, and what they save the State. That is ferociously important.

Some years ago I welcomed the new move on the fair deal in regard to succession, but there are anomalies. The first issue relates to who succeeds. Deputy O'Flynn spoke about succession and the case of couples who do not have children. There is a significant problem in that regard. In many farms around the country a son or daughter might have gone to a different country or they might be in Dublin for X number of years -----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: If I could have just one second. They might lease the land, and if they do, they are in trouble.

An Ceann Comhairle: One second or not, I call Deputy O'Flynn.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Could the Minister look at this because it is ferociously important to help the situation?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Flynn. I apologise for my distraction.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I take a little bit of umbrage of what the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, said. Perhaps it was just a slip of the tongue when she mentioned the number of people who have spoken on the motion. The majority of those who have spoken on it are from the Opposition benches. Only two from the Government benches turned up for this debate, with the exception of the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, and the other Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell. That just shows what the Government thinks of this debate.

It is all very well to say the Government will not oppose the motion, but in one part of the

reply it states that the Department is providing funding of €250,000 to conduct a survey on mid-life and older women and their health and well-being. Did the Minister of State ever think about going out and asking a carer what their life is like? Did she ever think about sitting down and having a cup of tea with somebody who is looking after a husband or a wife – who is washing them, feeding them and changing adult diapers? That is the reality of life. We do not need to spend a quarter of a million euro on a survey to work out what difficulties a carer has. It is all very well to say the Government is not going to oppose this motion and that it will let it go through.

We had two speakers from the Lowry Independent group, who came on our side and supported us. Why were carers not put to the fore when they were negotiating the terms of the programme for Government? Some of them were too busy trying to get into positions of power rather than negotiating for carers. Another Member mentioned the VAT rate. He failed to recognise that the cost of everything has gone up. Costs in the food industry have gone up by 40% so the Government's income from VAT is way up.

I thank the Minister of State for the fact that the motion is not opposed. While I welcome it, we must get things done correctly. The Government is spending a quarter of a million euro on a survey. While it is not costed, the Minister of State's reply also refers to another survey on healthcare assistants. That will probably cost another quarter of a million. That is money that we could be spending on the front line.

What do I say when I go back to the person in Mallow who sat in my office and said she was caring for her father and because of her husband's salary, she is getting a couple of euro a week from the Government to care for him? It costs her €80 a week to drive from Mallow to Blarney Street.

What do I say to the person in Blackrock who is changing her father's diapers and is entitled to nothing due to her husband's salary? As my colleague, Deputy Fitzmaurice, said, what do we say to the person who has had to give up their home and move into the family home, and is entitled to nothing? I can say they should not worry about it because the Government – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independent group - have decided to commission a survey that is going to cost a quarter of a million. What benefit is it to such a person? We already know the answers to the questions. The Minister of State should go into the AV meeting room and meet the carers groups. We must care for the carers. I will leave it at that.

Question put and agreed to.

12 o'clock

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: I hope Members will join with me in offering a warm céad míle fáilte to a delegation from the British House of Commons Procedure Committee, led by the Chair of that committee, Ms Cat Smith MP. The delegation has a very busy itinerary of appointments today and I trust the information we provide will be of some assistance in their work. You are all very welcome.

Members applauded.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Renting has never been more expensive or less secure than under the Taoiseach's Government. This week, *daft.ie* published its figures for the rental market for the start of this year. Rents are now climbing faster than at any point in the previous 20 years. Average new rents are now over €2,000 a month. That is an eye-watering €24,000 a year on rent. In Dublin city, new rents now average €2,500 a month. That comes to a €30,000 yearly rent bill. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, how can working people afford these rents? How an earth could anyone save for a home while paying such extortionate rent? People are getting ripped off and they are sick of it. It is no surprise that young people are going to Canada and Australia. What chance do they really have to make their life here?

It has never been harder to rent a home, buy a home or get a council home. We are in the middle of a housing emergency. It is a crisis that requires emergency measures but there is absolutely no sense of urgency from the Government. I have never seen a Government move so slowly or achieve so very little. In six months, the Government's most significant piece of legislation was to increase the wages for the biggest ministerial team ever seen. We have seen week after week of statements and committees limping into place. It is a real do-nothing Government. Of course, it blames everyone else for its failures. It is the Opposition's fault. It is the local councils' fault. Now, the Taoiseach's housing Minister is blaming the one modest protection that renters have; the rent pressure zones.

In an interview with the *Irish Examiner*, the Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, said that rent caps were "significantly inhibiting the delivery of apartments in Dublin.". To decode that, what he actually means is that vulture funds are telling him in order to invest, they want to charge even higher rents. The Minister said there has to be change. He said there is no question about that. What does he mean? Does he mean the rent pressure zone cap is to be raised? Does he mean that landlords can reset the rent between tenancies to new market rents? Does he mean that new rental properties will be completely exempt from control? Renters need to know what the Taoiseach's Minister means because any of these measures will mean even higher rip-off rents for tenants.

Tá an cíós ag méadú níos tapúla anois ná ag am ar bith le 20 bliain anuas. I lár ghéarchéim costas maireachtála ina bhfuil an praghas ar gach uile rud ag dul in airde, conas atá oibrithe in ainm is a bheith in ann €2,000 a íoc in aghaidh na míosa mar chíós? Tá a fhios ag daoine go bhfuil drochmhargadh á dhéanamh leo agus tá siad braon de.

In the same interview, the Minister, Deputy Browne, promised to protect renters. That is gaslighting renters - he is speaking out of both sides of his mouth. He tells landlords they can jack up rents while at the same time, he promises tenants protection. Of course, that is not possible. He cannot do both of those things at the same time. Can the Taoiseach and his Government come clean? Are they caving into the demands of vulture funds for even higher rents or are they going to give renters a break and stop these rip-off rent increases once and for all?

The Taoiseach: The RTB rent index is the most reliable indicator for rent prices. It was published on 15 May and, according to the RTB, the standardised average rent for new tenancies rose nationally by 5.5% year-on-year to €1,680 in quarter 4 of 2024 while the rents for

existing tenancies rose by 4.6% year-on-year to €1,440. These are high rents. We are under no illusions about that. Even if those figures represented a decline in rent levels from the previous quarter, quarter 3 of 2024, and continued the downward trend in the growth rate of rental levels observed since early 2023, of course, the rents are too high. The fundamental issue is supply. Deputy McDonald said she had never seen a Government like this. I have never seen an Opposition so bereft of ideas and so lacking in conviction of the housing issue. That is the bottom line.

Deputy Máire Devine: Listen to the defensiveness.

The Taoiseach: Look at it overall and look at the context. Across the European Union and many western economies, they are having this dilemma in the mismatch of housing demand and supply. In a European Union context, Ireland is probably doing more than most in increasing housing supply.

Deputy Máire Devine: No.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is it 40,000?

The Taoiseach: In terms of real investment in dwellings, the Irish economy registered the fourth largest increase across the 27 EU countries. The recent ESRI publication comparing housing supply across Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales found that on a *per capita* basis, Ireland and Northern Ireland had the highest rate of house building and Ireland and Scotland had the highest rate of publicly built housing. That is against the backdrop of a very significant population increase, persistent strong economic growth and income growth and huge pressures on housing.

The Government is spending very significant amounts of public capital money on housing. We need more private sector investment. The Housing Commission, which Sinn Féin supported, called for a review of the rent pressure zones. The rent pressure zones are effective in terms of protecting renters and rent increases. However, all of the established literature, and the most recent quarterly bulletin from the ESRI, says that long term, we are restricting the growth of supply in the private market. By the end of 2025, State investment will certainly go close to €9 billion. We are at approximately €8 billion at the moment for State expenditure on housing. The Department of Finance says we need approximately €20 billion to get to the targets of what we need and the targets that everybody in the House is agreed on.

The Opposition is so lacking in any initiative in terms of how we bring private sector investment in. It is a serious issue.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: He is blaming the Opposition again, the local authorities, anyone but himself.

The Taoiseach: You can smile all you like but we need to be real with people here. It seems to me that what the Opposition really wants is for us to stay static in policy terms so that we end up not actually making the step change that is required on housing.

Deputy Máire Devine: Protect people. That is the job the Government is meant to do.

The Taoiseach: Parallel with sustained investment from the public purse, the Exchequer, we will need a significant increase in private sector investment. We need to be in line with the Housing Commission and we will see what the review brings forward but we most certainly

need to create a secure investment landscape for investment in housing into the future on the private side to supplement the record levels of public sector investment in housing that we currently have in this country. The first quarter of this year alone in terms of housing supply is the highest since 2004 - bar 2008 - bar the Covid bounce in 2023 that came up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In summary, I want the Taoiseach to stop screwing it up. That is actually what I want. I want the Taoiseach to take account of the fact and accept the fact that he is presiding over an emergency and a catastrophe. There are record levels of homelessness. This society is now so numbed to your failure that record numbers - there are almost 5,000 children in homeless accommodation - do not really cause a ripple in the public conversation. The Government has normalised its catastrophic failure. An entire generation is locked out of any prospect of homeownership and they cannot afford the rent. They are voting with their feet. They are in Perth and Toronto. They are not in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick, where we need them and their skill, energy and vitality. I asked the Taoiseach to explain comments from his housing Minister. I want him to answer straight. What did the Minister mean in respect of the one modest protection the Government has afforded to renters, in the rent pressure zones? What are his intentions? Is the Government siding again with the vulture funds or will it finally side with tenants?

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, ní aontaím leis an Teachta. Níl an ceart aici. Níl mórán déanta aici maidir le fadhb na tithíochta. Tá sé sin soiléir.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Ní sé sin soiléir.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has not addressed the core point I made. We need private sector investment. The Deputy used the phrase “vulture funds”. I believe-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: We are back to the heckling because the Deputies do not like the answers. I believe in public sector investment. We have provided 48,000 social houses alone in the last four years. We have the highest level of social housing provided by any Government in over 20 or 30 years. That is a fact.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The Government never built any.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is not enough.

The Taoiseach: We exceeded our targets in Housing for All, with more than 30,000 houses over the last three to four years. That is a fact, but it is not enough. We need private sector investment. Deputy McDonald calls it vulture funds. We need institutional funding in the country to supplement the State-level investment. That is the problem. In the last election, Sinn Féin had proposals that would screw first-time buyers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In the last election, you told lies. You lied your way through the election.

The Taoiseach: Those proposals are why the people did not give Sinn Féin any ringing endorsement of its housing promises. It failed to convince people about them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach lied his way through the election.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The United Nations warned this week that 14,000 babies will die in Gaza if humanitarian aid is not allowed to enter. Last night, there were more child casualties, including a week-old baby. There are no words to describe the horror that Israel is inflicting on the people of Gaza. The wickedness of using starvation as a weapon of war against children cannot be overstated. It is a weapon of genocide. Human suffering at this scale requires us to do all in our power to stop it.

Ours is a small country but we have fierce diplomatic power. We know that Ireland and Spain led calls for a review of the EU-Israel trade deal. That is welcome. It is welcome, too, to see growing opposition to the deal among other member states. That was a change we led on, but we have a moral obligation to do more. Countries around the world - our British visitors may hear this too - have an obligation to do more. The Taoiseach has a moral obligation. The world is failing to stand with Gaza. Ireland must stand with Palestinian children and civilians. We must stand up for humanity because the response of the world would be very different if the headlines read that 14,000 babies in Ireland, Britain or any EU country would starve to death by the weekend. Every step would be taken to stop the preventable deaths of infants. Their suffering would not be treated with indifference, yet in Gaza it seems the world is going to stand by while 14,000 infants perish. History will not forgive us for it.

António Guterres has said the floodgates of horror have reopened and Gaza is a killing field. Civilians are in an endless death loop. Netanyahu's campaign was always driven by a plan to displace and exterminate. Josep Borrell has said, "Seldom have I heard the leader of a state so clearly outline a plan that fits the legal definition of genocide." More and more people, even within Israel, are recognising this. I heard from an Israeli citizen this week who said, "As a human being, I hate this government with all my heart. They are willing to sacrifice innocent lives, Palestinians and our own hostages. This madness has to end."

President Michael D. Higgins is right. The UN Security Council has failed in carrying out its primary responsibility to maintain international peace, and at what cost of failure? More than 55,000 people, including 15,000 children, have been killed in Gaza since 7 October 2023. Nearly 300,000 more children are on the brink of death and thousands are injured. This is devastation, and the UN is failing in all of our names. We must do more. Next week, we in Labour will bring a motion to the Dáil to mandate the Government to table an emergency resolution at the UN General Assembly to note the failure of the Security Council and to call for collective measures to secure a lasting ceasefire, a sustainable peace agreement and an international peacekeeping force for Gaza, to allow humanitarian aid to flow and to save lives. Our colleague Deputy Duncan Smith and I will be looking for unanimous support across this House for all our proposals. Will the Taoiseach pass the occupied territories Bill at home and, abroad, will he work to table that emergency motion at the UN?

The Taoiseach: Aontaím go hiomlán leis an Teachta. Is uafásach ar fad an méid atá ag tarlú i nGaza leis an gcogadh uafásach agus na mílte daoine, leanaí go háirithe, ag fáil bháis de dheasca polasaithe Rialtas Iosrael. I agree with the Deputy's presentation of what is an absolutely barbaric and appalling situation in Gaza. There is absolutely no justification in any shape or form for what is occurring. The prosecution of this war is causing immense death, destruction and suffering to an entire population. I have said recently that it is simply wrong in principle and in law to inflict hunger and suffering on a civilian population, whatever the circumstances. This behaviour clearly constitutes a war crime. It is also wholly unacceptable to contemplate the mass displacement of people in Gaza or to talk of permanent occupation. Not only is it an affront to decency and international law, but history tells us it offers no solution.

21 May 2025

I strongly welcome the decision to review the European Union-Israel Association Agreement together with Spain. As the Deputy said, Ireland first called for this. I believe the agreement should now be suspended pending the review. Yesterday evening, I saw comments from the minister for finance of Israel, Minister Smotrich, speaking openly about conquering Gaza and, with God's help, pushing the population south and into third countries. This is a senior minister of the Israeli Government articulating, in no uncertain terms, what the agenda is. It is absolutely reprehensible.

We also need to say consistently that the hostages need to be released.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I said that. We said that.

The Taoiseach: It is absolutely unacceptable that innocent people were abducted and have remained hostages for so long after 7 October. That was also an appalling, barbaric crime by Hamas, which needs, in my view, to stop the war and disband, because it has caused nothing but misery to its own people. The Israeli Government needs to stop what is happening right now. We need a ceasefire. We need a restoration of discussions towards a political pathway. Fundamentally, we need a massive surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza. What is happening is incomprehensible. It is beyond any moral compass. I have consistently called for an international delegation, both political and journalists or media, to be allowed into Gaza to see the enormity of the destruction that has undoubtedly taken place. The world has to press to be allowed into Gaza to see what is going on.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I have acknowledged Ireland's leadership at EU level on Gaza. That is welcome but we can and should do more. The Taoiseach used strong words, which I welcome. He acknowledged that what Israel is carrying out is a war crime. Of course, like the Taoiseach, I have condemned Hamas outright. Of course I have called for the release of all hostages. What Israel is doing now, with impunity, while we see 14,000 infants on the brink of death through starvation, has to stop. Ireland has to do more at international level and here at home to use every lever in our power to stop what Israel is doing. If the Taoiseach fears that the occupied territories Bill will be struck down, let us test that and take that risk, because across the Opposition, there is support for the occupied territories Bill. We have all been pushing for it to be passed. The Taoiseach told me yesterday that there would be progress on it. If the Taoiseach fears that the General Assembly will vote the wrong way, let us find out. Let us take that bold and brave step at a United Nations level. I call on the Taoiseach to do that. Our motion next week will call on all parties in this House to support that step.

The Taoiseach: To be fair, it is more than just words from Ireland. We have contributed significant funding to Palestine, to the Palestinian Authority and to UNRWA, which has been much maligned but is the only UN agency that has the capacity not only to facilitate the surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza but also to facilitate the reconstruction of Gaza. Most people will admit that privately if they are not prepared to admit it publicly. I am talking about international opinion.

Regarding the UN, Ireland has been very active with other countries. We recognised the State of Palestine with Norway and Spain back in May last year. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice delivered an advisory opinion on that and the Attorney General on behalf of the Government made an oral submission to the court in respect of this. We then co-sponsored a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 September which seeks to implement the court's advisory opinion.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We also intervened in the South African International Court of Justice case against Israel under the Genocide Convention. Now we will work very hard in respect of the EU-Israel Association Council-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. I call Deputy O'Callaghan of the Social Democrats.

The Taoiseach: -----where there has been a significant shift in opinion in the European Union, which is important.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Cara Darmody is continuing her protest outside the Dáil to-day because nothing she has heard from the Government has convinced her to end it. Asked repeatedly yesterday if the Government would stop breaking the law, the Taoiseach could not even give that assurance. The Government does not seem to see the problem with this. It has access to State resources, can direct policy and can authorise hiring. It can fix this, yet despite having all these tools and resources at the Government's disposal, all the Taoiseach could offer yesterday was the same old tired excuses. I want to examine some of those excuses now.

The Taoiseach said yesterday that, fundamentally, we need to change the legislation when it comes to assessment of need. When exactly did he arrive at this decision? The High Court struck down the accelerated assessment procedure more than three years ago. The Government has had all of that time to act but it did not. The procedure was struck down for a good reason. It consisted of one hour of observed playtime and a 30-minute discussion with a parent. Children were then diagnosed as having a disability but not told which disability they had. It was a completely inadequate, box-ticking exercise. Is the Taoiseach telling us that this is the system to which the Government will return or is its plan to get rid of assessment of need altogether?

The Taoiseach also said yesterday that he was in the process of setting up a disability unit in his Department. It is now nearly six months since the election. How far along in this process is he? What is the delay in setting it up? If the issue is really a priority, why was it not done on day one? The reality is that successive Governments have claimed disability is a priority. Endless waiting lists for assessment of need and vital services tell a very different story. Parents know that early intervention can make a world of difference to their child. It could be the difference between learning how to speak or getting left behind. Imagine what it is like to see your child placed on an endless waiting list as they miss key milestones.

As Cara has learned, when it comes to this Government, talk is cheap. Last year, when she met the Taoiseach's colleague Simon Harris, he made commitments to her. Instead of keeping those promises, they were broken. Cara has said it does not matter what age someone is; anyone who makes a promise should keep it and if they do not, their credibility will be gone. The credibility of this Government is already in tatters, with a list of broken promises, but there is an opportunity now for the Government to rebuild it. Following the Taoiseach's meeting with Cara this morning, will he now tell us when the Government is going to stop breaking the law?

The Taoiseach: I disagree fundamentally with the Deputy's sentiments when he says we do not see the problem. Of course we see the problem and we have made it very clear that we see the issue here regarding assessment of need. I am not making any excuses; I am just focused on solutions. I have heard precious little from anybody here on the Opposition side in terms of a solution-driven approach.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is wrong.

The Taoiseach: I have heard a lot of rhetoric but have heard little on the solution front.

Deputy Rory Hearne: You have been in government for five years.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: You are breaking the law.

The Taoiseach: Equally, the Deputy referenced the High Court decision. I have no intention of going back on the standing operating procedures, but I believe that when the High Court makes a decision, it is clinicians who should ultimately decide on the nature and type of provision of therapy, medicine or anything. The last Government did not follow through for different reasons. There was not agreement in respect of it after the High Court decision.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That was you. You were in the last government.

The Taoiseach: This Government is adamant it will deal with that aspect. It is only one aspect, one strand of it. It needs to be looked at because there needs to be a framework that allows therapists to intervene more quickly in providing services to children. An assessment of need, by the way, is not a static thing nor should it be. As a child develops, the child needs ongoing review. That is why the Government has already taken a decision to have a national in-school therapy service, something I campaigned for during the election and said would be a red line for me in the programme for Government. Our partners in government, the Fine Gael Party and the Independents, are fully aligned to that objective and the Minister for education, Deputy Helen McEntee, has initiated that process for a national in-school therapy service starting in the special schools, which is absolutely essential.

We are increasing the level of assessments but we need more than the approximately 20% increase that happened last year. We need to recruit more therapists and we will also do that. We need to engage with CORU on faster recognition of qualifications for those who come in from overseas to work in our services as therapists. Far more flexibility is required there to supplement and add to the therapists who will come through our colleges. We will also increase the places in third level colleges, but all of that takes some time and we will be procuring additional capacity from the private sector.

There is a fundamental point about ensuring there is early intervention with children by therapists, and then a problem arises. If every therapist is going to spend 90 hours assessing children, there will be precious little resource for actual intervention. We need to get that balance right. That is something on which the Government is focusing and something we need to work on in respect of the legislative provision. We have asked for ideas and proposals around that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Health Service Executive has been highlighting the court decision for quite some time. That is the answer to the Deputy’s question on that.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: That is an astonishing answer. The High Court judgment was more than three years ago and the Taoiseach has just now told us that the reason it has not been acted on or that the Government has not got its act together on this is that the previous Government could not agree on what to do. Is that the case? We have more than 15,000 children waiting for an assessment of need that they desperately need, beyond the six-month limit, and

the Government is breaking the law because for the past three years, the Taoiseach and his Government colleagues have not been able to get their act together and agree on what to do. Is that the case? What we need from the Government now is detail on how it is going to fix this. It has been talking around changing the law and hiring more people but when will it actually stop breaking the law? It is not acceptable if the Taoiseach and his Government colleagues have been breaking the law for more than three years and letting down children and their families who desperately need access to services and assessment of need simply because they could not agree among themselves what to do.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is not correct in that at all. He asked specifically about the law and I gave him a straight answer that this Government will deal with that aspect of it. However, the outgoing Government dealt with a whole load of other issues pertaining to this. For example, 4,162 assessments were completed in 2024, a 30% increase on 2023, and that upward trend is continuing with the assessments that were completed in the first three months of this year. There was a 65% increase in the first quarter of this year compared with the same period last year. It is not as if nothing is being done or the issue is being ignored. That is just a deliberate distortion by the Deputy's good self. He also needs to look at the reality and see what he is saying we should do about the balance between assessment and direct intervention with the therapists we have, be they those in the private or the public sector. There is a finite capacity. Maybe we can get more out of the entirety of that capacity of therapists in the country, be it private or public, but the Deputy needs to come clean as well and not just take the comfortable position of saying that whatever we produce on this side of the House, he will simply condemn and have a go at it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is outrageous.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Every day we come to the House, we are hear about housing, housing, housing. During the week, the EPA released a report on the inspections of septic tanks by local authorities. Areas were targeted where septic tanks were near rivers. The councils completed 1,390 inspections of tanks and found that 82% of the tanks were inadequate. We are talking about meeting housing targets here. What the EPA has not done is look at the treatment systems going straight into rivers, which we have been looking to have upgraded for decades. I have been working in construction all of my life and I still am. We have given ideas to the likes of Uisce Éireann about how they could have more sewerage capacity in towns or villages on the same systems they have already if they separated the storm water from the sewage. In all towns, villages and cities, when they are piped from the houses out to the main street they all go into the one pipe. We gave Uisce Éireann the idea of putting in separators for water. At the moment, our treatment systems are working at their best during the summer because they are not dealing with water and are way below capacity. Some 25% to 30% of our sewerage systems are working perfectly during the summer. During the winter, what we are now treating is approximately 70% water. When the sewage comes in with the water and comes to a certain level in the treatment system, nothing gets treated because it goes out over the baffle wall and straight into the waterways around Ireland. This means that all the rivers and streams, and all the sewerage heads all around the country, are untreated because we do not have the proper people dealing with it.

Uisce Éireann, to me, is a runaway train. It is not giving value for money. It is not listening to anyone. There are solutions for our systems in this country to give us clean water by putting in different systems in order to deal with the equipment we have at the moment. Then we can upgrade as we can afford to do so. Uisce Éireann is not listening to common sense or to other

engineers who say the technology is there to do what we need to do.

What we have to do is very simple, but Uisce Éireann tells us that this system is broken and that system is broken. Uisce Éireann is not listening to an engineering solution to help to build more houses with the same systems we have at the moment by just separating the storm water from the sewage. That is what I am asking for.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very key issue. He began by speaking about the septic tanks that are largely associated with existing housing stock across the length and breadth of the country. It is important that we improve upon them and refurbish and develop them and provide grant assistance to enable people to replace septic tanks that are old and not performing to the optimal level.

There are a lot of engineers in Uisce Éireann and a lot of them would argue that they know what they are doing.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: A lot of them.

The Taoiseach: I have met them. We discussed one of the critical issues in towns and villages across the country, which is the need to free up capacity, for example to local builders if they are developing a housing estate of 20 houses or 50 houses so that they would be able to develop their own treatment facility according to the specifications set by Uisce Éireann. That would then be subject to inspection. I think that would help to create additional housebuilding in towns and villages throughout the country where currently, because of the absence of capacity or because there is no further capacity, such projects cannot get off the ground. A memorandum of understanding is being developed by Uisce Éireann in respect of that issue to set out the proposals to enable it to happen.

On the separation of storm water from sewage, I will not profess I am not as technically competent as the Deputy in this area. Likewise, the Deputy mentioned the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. All of Uisce Éireann's work is subject to compliance with the EPA, which is one of the regulatory authorities that govern Uisce Éireann along with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities and others. There has been a lot of progress made; of that there is no doubt. There has been a dramatic increase in water quality across the length and breadth of the country over the past decade or so. Local authorities did a lot of that work initially prior to the establishment of Irish Water. I think we need to maintain or retain local competence and knowledge in our local authorities on water, sewerage and so forth. There needs to be good partnerships between local authorities and Irish Water in that respect.

I visited Arklow recently where a first-class state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant was provided by Irish Water six months ahead of schedule and on budget. A lot of progress is happening. I will relay what the Deputy was saying to Irish Water. I do not know whether the Deputy has engaged with its representatives, or others, as a Dáil Deputy. I note that the most favoured words among Independent groupings in this House are "common sense".

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I suggest that maybe if you guys have a monopoly on it over everybody else-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Donoghue.

The Taoiseach: I will say no more than that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In the first part of his remarks, the Taoiseach said he had met with representatives of Irish Water. Maybe he needs to bring me with him to teach them a bit of common sense and give them some ideas and solutions. The Taoiseach mentioned the EPA and septic tanks. Yes, there are grants but the problem with the grant system for septic tanks is that in 2013 the Taoiseach brought in a system where people got €5,000.

The Taoiseach: I was not in government in 2013.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In 2013 there was a system whereby people got €5,000 to upgrade their septic tanks. They registered their tanks and if they qualified for the grant due to their tanks being defunct, they received the grant. The problem was that nobody qualified for the grant because the tank had to be tested first and only a small number of people got them tested. Now the grant is up to €12,000. There is a mapping system now, and three quarters of people do not qualify for that grant either. There are grants available for defunct tanks but people cannot get the grants. I ask the Taoiseach to look at the mapping system that has been introduced by the EPA. I am asking about equal opportunities for towns and villages. I am offering to help the Government. I am not going to criticise; I am offering to help.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We have tanks in Oola for 15 years. Askeaton is waiting 46 years for its treatment system to be upgraded. This is what I am talking about.

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

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am offering help. I will meet Uisce Éireann representatives along with the Taoiseach and we will ask them how we can improve the system.

The Taoiseach: What is the Deputy saying about Askeaton?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It has been waiting for 46 years for a sewerage system.

The Taoiseach: I have spoken to Uisce Éireann representatives about this and they have a national mapping exercise already. With the best will in the world, if we want to build 50,000 houses per year and if we give an extra couple of billion euro to Uisce Éireann over the coming years, it will have to concentrate that spend on the big cities and big areas of population. Therefore, for smaller villages and towns we need an alternative system which allows for the provision of sewage treatment plants by the builder in accordance with detailed specifications by Irish Water, which has agreed to this now. It is my understanding that this will happen. That would help the Askeatons and Cloughjordan of this world and all of those who have been waiting for quite some time. If we look at the enormity of the investment required for every village in the country, we will see that it cannot be done centrally by Irish Water alone. The capacity just does not exist to do it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It can be done by separating the water. I said I would help.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I accept the Deputy's good wishes.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Emer Currie: There is not a week that goes by that I am not contacted by a parent seeking access to childcare. On Monday, 1,500 new childcare places were announced nationally, funded under the national development plan's building blocks extension grant scheme. These places, at a cost of €25 million, include 18 much-needed places in Dublin West. This Government is delivering but it needs to keep delivering. Given the scale of unmet need, 18 places are a drop in the ocean. The programme for Government commits to providing capital investment to build or purchase State-owned childcare facilities. To do that at scale and to achieve value for money, I believe we need a new State building scheme specifically for childcare, something that does for childcare facilities what design and build has done for school buildings.

The private sector has played a vital role for years in delivering childcare in our communities but reliance on the private sector alone will never deliver the capacity we need for children's early learning and to enable parents, primarily women, to stay in work. A sum of €45 million has been allocated under the NDP for additional capacity in childcare over the last three years. The education capital budget for 2025 alone was €1.4 billion. That is €45 million versus €1,400 million. If we are serious about changing the delivery of childcare places for local communities, our ambition should be reflected in the upcoming review of the national development plan.

We have a model for building childcare facilities already, but it is not working. Under planning authority guidelines for childcare facilities from 2001, 20 childcare places should be delivered for every 75 new dwellings but that scale of delivery is not happening because developers are allowed to claim that a new facility is not required, even in areas of overwhelming need such as Dublin West, or a developer is only required to provide a shell of a building, often resulting in buildings that are not fit for purpose or are hopelessly expensive and regular childcare providers cannot purchase them. Some of them have lain empty for years in my constituency even though providers are crying out for space. Those guidelines fall across the two Departments of housing and children. We were previously promised a review and we are still waiting. The longer we wait, the more we miss out on the delivery of new childcare facilities in line with the delivery of new housing.

Will the Taoiseach give an update on these interlinked issues, the review of local guidelines, Government plans for State-led childcare and the potential for a new State building scheme for children, parents and the economy?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this crucial issue. Investment in childcare has quadrupled since 2015 from €260 million to close to €1.4 billion in 2025. Last year alone, funding went up by 26%, or €261 million. Childcare costs meanwhile have dropped by more than 38% since early 2023. The last Government did a significant amount of work. I acknowledge Deputy O'Gorman is in the Chamber. He worked with all three parties and made it a priority and that yielded results. Enrolments in early learning care increased by 19% between 2021 and 2024. That is from 197,000 to approximately 234,000. There was a net gain of 226 childcare services in 2024. That is a six year low in closures. Staff numbers are up 8%. The national childcare scheme provider participation is up 136% since May 2022 with children benefiting enormously as a result. The national childcare scheme now supports approximately 220,000 children, with €530 million in funding and the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme offers two free pre-school years, covering 107,000 children.

I will expand on the access and inclusion model, AIM. More than 9,000 children with disabilities now have access to the ECCE scheme and broader early learning childcare services. The Equal Start programme supports children facing disadvantage through 770 priority services nationwide and core funding has increased. The two employment regulation orders introduced in 2022 and 2024 were breakthroughs as regards boosting wages, but we need to do more in that area.

For the first time, the programme for Government commits to the public model of childcare and a strong foundation was put in place over the past five years. There is an existing funding programme through the national childcare scheme and core funding on which to build the next phase of reform. Work will be needed in the Department to detail extensive policy development and design to progress to implementation stage. A lot of work is needed to map out how we do that in terms of the public building programme for early education and making sure it synergises and harmonises with the existing provision.

The 2001 planning guidelines need to be reviewed. The Department of children is engaging with the Department of housing to examine and review those planning guidelines for local authorities on early learning and childcare settings. A working group is in operation between the two Departments. That is an important piece of work that is required-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----to ensure stronger provision.

Deputy Emer Currie: I am the first to say there has been progress, but serious issues remain with capacity, access and core funding that need to be fixed. Today, I am hosting local childcare providers and parents in the audiovisual room. We will focus on a payscale that reflects qualifications and expertise, pressures they are facing with recruitment, making core funding work, especially for small providers and how paperwork and bureaucracy are suffocating the sector. There are major holes for parents and providers in the fee adjustment that was introduced last year. I refer to the local independent provider who has not raised her fees in eight years and is struggling to survive and who was granted an increase of just €4 per month when others in the area charge €200 to €300 more, and to the parent who was on enhanced subsidies, not universal subsidies, whose fees were increased overall last year.

The programme for Government recognises these challenges-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Emer Currie: -----as has the Taoiseach when I have raised them, but they want to hear from the Government about now-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Emer Currie: -----not just about the future. They want to get back to building partnerships, starting with really listening.

The Taoiseach: First, I have to say very strongly that it is one thing to say we acknowledge it. We need to more than acknowledge it. There has been a significant step change in investment in childcare in the past four years. That will continue as regards the level of it. The State funds nearly 40% of all early learning and care of school-age childcare places across multiple funding rounds. Last year, the supply and management unit was established to have a forward

21 May 2025

planning and delivery unit to assess demand, plan better and expand public supply. The new planning model also draws on expertise in the Central Statistics Office, early learning and childcare specialists and geographic information system, GIS, mapping to predict the future need for childcare. That all needs to happen and investment needs to be parallel with the planning framework that is being designed. The key issues will be how we sustain and retain people in early childcare in the future-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and the employment regulation is key to that.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to Questions on Policy or Legislation. We had 69 applicants, of which 18 were chosen. I ask all Deputies to co-operate on time or we will have to decline some Deputies the opportunity to speak.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Today marks day two of the protest by Cara Darmody, aged 14. She is again outside the gates of Leinster House and, for as long as the Taoiseach and his Government are breaking the law and leaving children behind, Cara will protest, as will many others. She is not going away. The Taoiseach met her this morning. From what I hear, he made no commitments and no progress with Cara. The Government is not opposing the combined Opposition motion before the House. That was obviously just a ruse not to look bad on its part. It has been entirely unclear as to what action it will take on foot of the motion.

The Taoiseach talked a lot about the law and a response to the High Court, three years later. The Disability Act 2005 affords significant protection-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----to people-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and an entitlement to an assessment of need within six months. What changes to the law does the Taoiseach envisage?

The Taoiseach: I met Mark and Cara this morning at 9 a.m. It was a positive and constructive meeting. We discussed all the issues involved and I outlined what I will do and what the Government will do. I already outlined in a response under Leaders' Questions earlier, all the steps we will take.

I was involved in drafting the 2005 legislation-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You are great.

The Taoiseach: -----so I am fairly well clued-in with the legislation.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You are breaking your own law.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: The important point is this: I am interested in solutions. I am not at all clear that Sinn Féin is.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So what change-----

The Taoiseach: I get the feeling from the Deputy that the longer-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the nature of it?

The Taoiseach: Sorry? We will bring that forward to this House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the nature of it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I said it yesterday-----.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Say it again.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of greater flexibility so that we use therapists optimally and get interventions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What does that mean?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: On Monday, we learned that average rents nationally have now surged beyond €2,000 per month, a new all-time high. Renters in different counties are seeing shocking rises. Limerick, for example, has seen yearly increases of more than 20% on rents. The Taoiseach said earlier that housing is all about supply and we, of course, agree. However, he has accused the Opposition of having no new ideas and not being solution focused. We have offered lots of ideas. The Labour Party offered very clear ideas for a State-led intervention to resolve the housing supply crisis. We also offered a renter's rights Bill to ensure renters have better security and protections against rent increases. What we are hearing from the Government is no new ideas, no solutions and the same failed policies repackaged and re-announced, but not reformed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Will the Government take on our renter's rights Bill in light of this astronomical rise we are seeing in rents across the country?

The Taoiseach: The fundamental intervention at the moment is State-led. The Labour Party says it believes in State-led intervention. Almost the entirety of the intervention nowadays is State-led. It stands at more than €8 billion at the moment.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is not enough.

The Taoiseach: That is the highest ever on record. We need a private sector dimension to house building. I do not know whether the Deputy believes in that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Of course, we need a mix.

The Taoiseach: Does the Deputy believe there is a role for institutional funds, for example?

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: I am just putting it to the Deputy because I have watched over the past three or four years on housing. All I get is an antipathy on the Opposition side towards any private sector funding in housing. If they maintain that position, we will not deal with the housing supply issue.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Government is not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a back and forth, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Taoiseach was inviting it.

The Taoiseach: That is ultimately the way to deal with reducing the rate of increase in rent. The RTB is quite clear in terms of the levels at the moment.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: After nearly two years of slaughter, destruction and devastation in Gaza, the EU has finally run out of excuses for inaction. A review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement has finally been authorised. I welcome the Government's support for it. How long is this review going to last? The Israeli state is not just engaged in an openly genocidal campaign in Gaza; Israeli Government officials are now boasting about it. The Taoiseach mentioned Minister Smotrich earlier and I would like to quote him:

We are disassembling Gaza, and leaving it as piles of rubble, with total destruction [which has] no precedent globally. And the world isn't stopping us.

Netanyahu praised these comments. His Government has abandoned all humanity. Its clear policy is to starve, murder and maim Palestinians in Gaza before ethnically cleansing any survivors. What is the EU waiting for? What further evidence does it need? When will we see sanctions and Israel treated like a pariah state run by war criminals?

The Taoiseach: What we have witnessed in the last 24 hours is welcome but it is too late in some respects. There has been a division of opinion among member states in respect of this issue for quite some time. It is quite historic as the Deputy knows. Not everybody agrees with Ireland. We have a number of like-minded states, such as Slovenia and Spain, and Belgium to a lesser degree, which has a coalition government. There is a really broad strand of opinion in respect of the Middle East, some of it historic in respect of what happened in regard to the Shoah and so on. That has informed some countries' perspectives on this. In our view that historic prism has given Israel a latitude that has created the most appalling death and destruction. I hope now that in the context of the Israeli-EU Agreement, we could have a suspension of that pending the review.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Has the Government abandoned its commitment to run a catch-up HPV vaccination programme just when we need it most? The programme for Government pledges to extend the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up vaccination programme to anyone under the age of 25 who missed the original vaccination. I have been in touch with both the Department of Health and the HSE to find out when the new programme will run. No one has been able to give me a straight answer. They tell me how important the HPV vaccine is. I agree. They tell me they are going to run a distinct programme for minority groups. That is brilliant. However, no one can tell me when the Laura Brennan programme will run again. I am worried that they have decided not to do it and more importantly, the Irish Cancer Society is concerned

that this scheme is not going to run again. We have good HPV vaccination rates in the country but they have been dropping since 2019. It is estimated that about 16,000 kids do not get it each year now. That is why we need this programme. Is it going to run again?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please stick to your time. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We have made significant progress in terms of the HPV vaccine. I will check with the Minister for Health in respect of the catch-up programme. I will ask the Minister to revert back to the Deputy in respect of it. It is a fair question to raise and I will follow it up.

Deputy Michael Collins: A report published this week by Grant Thornton, having been commissioned by the Irish Postmasters Union, predicts that more than 100 post offices could close in the next five years if they do not get an urgent injection of State funding in the region of €15 million annually. This is required to keep the network viable. The local post office, whether rural or urban, is a critical public service.

Only in the last few minutes I have been reliably informed that Crosshaven post office is about to close, in the Cork South West constituency. The population of Crosshaven is 4,228 people. That is a huge loss to that community. The time for reviews and promises is long past. We need investment, innovation and real recognition that local post offices are not luxuries, they are a lifeline. My local parish lost its post office and since then the town has been at a major loss. Will the Taoiseach be able to step in to address the Crosshaven situation? Will he give the extra funding needed to keep the doors open?

The Taoiseach: I do not know the background to the Crosshaven situation. As the Deputy said, it is just hot off the press. However, I will follow it up. I work closely with the Irish Postmasters Union and we keep in touch with the network. As the Deputy knows, the Government has committed to supporting Ireland's post office network and as part of that commitment, it is currently providing An Post with €10 million funding per annum over a three-year fixed term from 2023 to 2025. Obviously, there will be a further evaluation post 2025. The programme for Government is clear in recognising the need to support Ireland's post offices. We will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. In some instances someone may retire and there may not be takers for the position, but it depends, so I will check out the Crosshaven situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I ask Members to welcome pupils from Kilrane National School who are members of the Blue Star programme. They are here in the Public Gallery today. We missed a few of them. Welcome everybody.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The news that reached us last night about the review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement was very welcome. Unfortunately, our attempts and those of Spain to bring our EU counterparts to this position in February of last year were frustrated. Now at least a significant number of our EU colleagues have been equally appalled at the devastation inflicted on the Palestinian people. It is not just the EU that has now finally changed tack. Both the UK and Canada in the past few days have expressed their condemnation at what is happening and indicated a firmer stance in that regard. Does the Taoiseach agree that the EU now needs to look at an immediate suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement pending that review?

The Taoiseach: I also welcome the pupils from Kilrane National School. I hope they will

learn something from observing the activities in the House and also from the rich history and heritage that the House has to offer.

I agree with Deputy O'Sullivan that the time is now for the suspension of the agreement because Article 2 is not being complied with. All human rights have been abandoned. The weaponisation of aid is appalling. It constitutes a breach of international humanitarian law; of that there is no doubt. The latitude that has been given to Israel over the past year is regrettable. There should have been a sustained ceasefire a long time ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, they brought some strawberries from Danescastle that I might share.

The Taoiseach: Strawberries are very high in nutrients and that is very important so I will not say no.

An Ceann Comhairle: In Wexford, yes. I call Deputy Catherine Callaghan.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I would like to shine a light on the dire need for an increased roads budget in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. The programme for Government states that the Government will invest in all road projects in the current national development plan, NDP, and consider additional important road projects as part of the NDP review. We all know we are in the midst of a housing crisis. Across Carlow town and county, we have builders and developers lining up to help us in that regard. There are landowners who would happily sell to a developer to help their towns and villages to create homes. We also have people willing to purchase homes in Carlow town and county to make Carlow a place where they want to live, work and raise a family. However, there is a massive impediment to this development and that is the lack of access to potential sites for home building due to the need for more investment in our roads in Carlow and Kilkenny. Will the Taoiseach ensure that three roads in my constituency - the Tullow town ring road, the Carlow town ring road and the Kilkenny city ring road - are included in the national development plan?

The Taoiseach: Generally speaking, this Government has taken a position to support the construction of roads within the provisions of the public capital programme. The updating of the national development plan will involve provision for roads. We may not go into every specific road in the country in that plan because flexibility has to be allowed to Transport Infrastructure Ireland and to local authorities. However, we want to progress projects that are currently under way. That is the objective. We also have to invest in water infrastructure, grid infrastructure and public transport along with the road and rail networks. That is the overarching objective of increased allocations to the NDP.

Deputy Mark Ward: It is not often the Government gets things right when it comes to housing, but in the case of the tenant in situ scheme it was working. What does the Government do when something is working in housing? It moves the goalposts. South Dublin County Council has seen a significant cut on the 2024 expenditure on the tenant in situ scheme.

I o'clock

The Government has imposed significant new restrictions on tenant in situ applications. All non-closed 2024 acquisitions must be reassessed under the new rules. I am dealing with at least 20 families who are left in limbo and are waiting on a decision. There is no guarantee with the changed criteria that they will be able to remain in their homes. Why did the Govern-

ment change the rules on tenant in situ? If these families cannot remain in their homes, where are they to go?

The Taoiseach: There has been an increased allocation for the tenant in situ scheme. There were reviews around making sure the resources would go to those tenants who were in danger of being rendered homeless. The tenant in situ scheme is not for general acquisition of second-hand homes. It is specifically for those in danger of becoming homeless. The Minister is engaging with local authorities to make sure the commitments can be fulfilled and realised in respect of families and councils that had been in discussion with landlords regarding the purchase of homes to prevent families falling into homelessness.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: The programme for Government commits to improving our services throughout the health service. Specifically, I refer to St. Joseph's campus in Longford. Recently, following a HIQA report, the physiotherapy department which serves the people of Longford and the patients in St. Joseph's Care Centre has had to move location in the centre into a building that is due to be demolished in six months due to ongoing works and welcome investment into the campus. However, staff have been notified of the possibility that they might be moving to Athlone or Mullingar which would mean that service would no longer be available to the people of Longford. I seek commitments that physiotherapy department will go back to its location on that site or an additional site will be located to make sure we maintain that service in our county and, indeed, to improve the services available on that campus in general.

The Taoiseach: This is a disability service, is it?

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: Physiotherapy.

The Taoiseach: For where?

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: For St. Joseph's Care Centre in Longford.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): The Deputy referred to the HIQA report. Obviously, it operates independently. It was felt the current location on the campus was impacting the residents of the nursing home, that is, the community nursing unit itself, so an agreement was reached that it would look for an alternative permanent location. In the interim it has temporarily located on another area in the campus where there is separate access. The older persons services in primary care is working with St. Joseph's Longford to look at a permanent location. I will take the Deputy's point about it being located in the area back to the HSE to ensure it is incorporated into the deliberations on a permanent solution.

Deputy Shay Brennan: As the Taoiseach is aware, the free primary schoolbooks scheme has been a welcome support for families and schools across the country. However, schools experiencing significant increases in enrolment often find the current *per capita* funding model based on the previous year's enrolment figures does not fully meet their needs, particularly when new pupils join after the funding has been allocated. On top of this, schools now need to purchase a new maths book to reflect the changes in the primary maths curriculum this September, which places further pressure on already stretched book grants. Given these challenges, will the Government consider introducing a more responsive funding mechanism or a supplementary fund to ensure schools with rising enrolments are adequately resourced to provide free books and materials to all pupils throughout the year?

The Taoiseach: The introduction of free schoolbooks for some 940,000 children and young

people in primary and post-primary and special schools in the free education scheme from the start of 2025-26 was a really significant progressive decision that was taken some years ago by the then education Minister, Deputy Foley, and has been continued. The Deputy has raised interesting points about the mechanics of the scheme and how it operates with regard to enrolment numbers and textbooks consequent on curricular change. I will raise these issues with the Minister to see if a more flexible and responsive model can be developed. Of course, that could also have implications for schools that lose pupils. Sometimes we have to be cautious about what we wish for.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: School secretaries and caretakers play a vital role. They are the glue that holds our schools together. Despite this, they are denied pension parity and, in the case of caretakers, pay justice. Teresa Cassidy is one such example. Teresa has been the school secretary in Gaelscoil na Rithe in Dunshaughlin, County Meath for 27 years. When she spoke to the *Meath Chronicle* in recent weeks she said school secretaries just want to be recognised and treated the same as their SNA and teacher colleagues. The management and staff at Gaelscoil na Rithe fully support Teresa. It is a matter of fairness. It is the same in schools all across the State. Yesterday Fórsa commenced a ballot of school secretaries and caretakers. Will the Government act? Will it deliver pay justice and pension parity and avert the risk of strike action?

The Taoiseach: I fully understand the issue the Deputy has raised. The ask is that there would be access to a single public service pension scheme. That is something that needs to be resolved through the industrial relations processes. We have made progress in respect of the salary side and the payroll aspect of this. Since September 2023 the Department has been providing a payroll service for formerly grant-funded school secretaries. Currently 85% of school secretaries have opted for the new package and are on the Department's payroll. That happened on foot of an agreement arrived at in the WRC in 2022. Until then, they had been paid directly by the schools as the employer. There has been progress made on the school secretaries front compared with where we were. As regards the pension issue, these are not easy issues to resolve overnight but it is something on which we will engage with the union.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Will the Government review the Adamstown and Clonburris strategic development zone plans? The last Adamstown review was 12 years ago. There is a major issue arising now due to insufficient carparking spaces. Planning permission has been granted on the basis of 1 to 1.25 spaces per unit but we now have one development near the train station, The Sidings, where there are no parking spaces provided whatever. There are growing families, workers with vans renting houses together and insufficient childcare facilities and a lack of public transport. It is not a panacea. People need to be able to drive but they also need to be able to park their vehicles. They are parking on bus lanes and footpaths all over the place. It is a total mess and there are ongoing complaints. By all means restrict car use, but not car ownership. The same problem arises in Clonburris but there is also woefully inadequate provision for services tied into the plan. There is only one full-size GAA or rugby pitch. It is a recipe for disaster, with 20,000 people living in the area. Adamstown needs a limited statutory review order, while Clonburris will need to be looked at in the next five years. Will the Taoiseach consider this?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has raised fairly legitimate issues. There has been a tendency lately in planning to have no car parking spaces in certain developments. The Deputy made a fair point about restricting car use but not car ownership. There has to be more flexibility in the planning frameworks governing developments of this kind and, as the Deputy said, the

Adamstown plan itself. I would like to see a complete review. You would lose another couple of years with that but the points the Deputy is making should be fed into the process and a bit of common sense and flexibility should be applied.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Ireland has one of the highest numbers of drug-induced deaths in Europe. We desperately need more services to save lives. Yesterday, the Health Research Board published numbers showing 128 people died while homeless in 2021. The overwhelming majority, almost 86%, had a history of substance misuse. There were 128 lives cut short way too early and, for the most part, that could have been prevented. The State, to its credit, spent almost €36 million building a 100-bed treatment and recovery unit in Usher Island in Dublin 8 to be run by the Dublin Simon Community. It is one of its kind in Europe. However, as of today, only 51 of those beds are available for use, while of those beds are sitting empty, all because the Department of Health has yet to provide funding which was committed to back in 2019. These are vital beds for stabilisation, recovery and step-down. They are beds that will save lives. Where is the money to open these beds? Will the Taoiseach stand over a situation where the State has provided capital investment that is not being put to use? Will he commit to doing much more for drug treatment services in this country?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is the Department, together with the HSE, will provide a total of €6.53 million to meet the full operational costs of the 51 beds in the new facility in 2025. I will follow up again with the HSE and the Department to confirm, but that is what I am being told.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Well, there are 100 beds.

The Taoiseach: Further resources will be available to expand the capacity of the new facility on an incremental basis in 2025, subject to an agreed business plan between the HSE and the Dublin Simon Community. The Deputy is correct that it is a very significant development. The Government has already provided €35 million to construct the facility. That provides for the 51 beds that were, up to now, in temporary locations. These include step-up and step-down beds for acute services and inpatient treatment beds for drug stabilisation, detoxification and recovery. Up to 700 treatment episodes-----

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Taoiseach-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can go back to the Taoiseach if she is not happy.

The Taoiseach: -----per year across four clinical programmes can be provided. Approximately €6.5 million will meet the full costs. I will get the Department to come back to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: As someone who has heard the heartbreaking descriptions of the plight of women and emaciated children in Gaza from heroic front-line defenders and medics over the past 24 hours, like others, I cannot stand here without referring to that particular matter and adding my voice to the calls for a ceasefire and for peace. We have to acknowledge that Hamas terrorists and the monstrous Netanyahu regime have brought about an apocalyptic situation that horrifies all decent, right-thinking people. Further words of condemnation seem hollow and of no particular use any more. What we need to do, and what this Government has done, is take action. We first need to spotlight those who supply arms to Netanyahu to enable the murder of the innocent. We also need to move to revoke rather than review the EU-Israel trade association agreement.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for eloquently and very strongly putting the issues pertaining to what is happening in Gaza in terms of the behaviour of the Israeli Government and Hamas, and stating that action is required. We have taken a series of actions but I take the Deputy's point. The focus now has to be on this EU-Israel association agreement because, without any question, Article 2 of that agreement has not been adhered to at all. What is now happening is barbaric. People are appalled at the slaughter of innocent children. I am conscious we will debate this shortly, but I appreciate the comments of the Deputy in this regard.

Deputy Colm Burke: As I understand it, a total of nine diseases are included in the heel prick test for newborns in Ireland, with approximately 120 babies identified each year as having rare diseases. However, Ireland is falling significantly behind the rest of Europe. For instance, Italy tests for a total of 48 diseases. Countries such as Austria test for 31 diseases, while Poland and Portugal test for 29. In 2023, the national screening advisory committee, NSAC, recommended that severe combined immunodeficiency, SCID, and spinal muscular atrophy be added to the programme. This was accepted by the then Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly. More than €1.4 million has been allocated to expand the screening programme, yet, two years on, no progress has been made. In Italy, 48 diseases are tested for in newborns. We are doing nine at present. Why is there such a delay in expanding that programme?

The Taoiseach: It needs to be expanded. I will talk to the Minister in respect of it. The funding was allocated. There could be issues clinically - I do not know - with the allocation of resources. However, I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy in respect of the issue.

Deputy Ann Graves: We have gone beyond the stage of debate and discussion on the genocide being carried out by Israel in Gaza. Gazans are now being subjected to forced starvation. We see evidence of the crimes against humanity being carried out every day on our television screens, social media and right across all networks. There is no hiding from the evidence. Israel must be held to account for these actions. We all have our part to play in highlighting and opposing Israel's crimes against humanity. Ireland's support for Palestine is recognised across the world. We know about occupation, colonisation and forced starvation. The time for talking is long over. Statements of condemnation are not enough. When will the Government enact the occupied territories Bill? I urge it to do so before the summer recess.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. As I said, the situation is barbaric. We urgently need to facilitate a high-profile visit by the international community to Gaza, including both political and media representatives, who could see at first hand the level of destruction and the appalling situation the civilian population there is now in. That would do more than anything to change the situation and the momentum of war in Gaza. The occupied territories Bill is being progressed. On its own, it will not change the mindset of the current Israeli Government, I am afraid. We have taken many measures already in respect of the issue, from recognition of the State of Palestine to intervention in the genocide convention case and the ICJ judgment and so forth. However, the international community collectively must bring all of its influence to bear to stop this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Two Deputies are left. We are out of time. I will ask the Deputies to briefly state their questions. We will have a combined response from the Taoiseach.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The maximum age for Bus Éireann bus drivers is 70. At the moment, our children cannot get to school because private operators with contracts with Bus Éireann cannot take them to school if their drivers are over 70. However, these drivers,

even if they are over 70, can be called by the school to take children to a tour of the Dáil. The same bus driver who cannot take our children to school can take them anywhere in the country, but Bus Éireann will not allow that driver take those children to school under its contract.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Schools are getting ready to close for the summer but yet again, in County Wicklow, a number of students and children do not have places for September. I am aware of seven in Greystones. A small number in Newtownmountkennedy and Ashford do not have places for September either. This is a problem every year. It is really unfair on students. Will the Taoiseach send a departmental liaison to meet with the parents and schools to resolve this issue? Ultimately, we need a common enrolment process in these areas to solve this problem once and for all. In the meantime, will the Taoiseach send someone there to get this sorted because this is not fair on students?

The Taoiseach: I agree with Deputy O'Donoghue and sympathise with his point. I will again talk to the Minister for Transport on this and ask him to engage with Bus Éireann to get this issue sorted. Chronological age is meaningless as a metric. It can be general but it is meaningless. There could be a very fit 75-year-old and an unfit 65-year-old. To borrow the phrase again, we need a little common sense applied here.

On Deputy Whitmore's point, I will talk to the Minister for Education in respect of the specifics in County Wicklow. There are common enrolment systems in some parts of the country as regards general enrolments, but the Deputy said one is required in Wicklow. Is the Deputy talking about general enrolment?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Just where the schools come together and actually-----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is saying there is a general problem-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Yes, just general enrolments.

The Taoiseach: -----and an insufficiency of general school places.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: A number of students who do not have a place-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy might need to engage further.

The Taoiseach: It is very distressing for them and for their families. I will talk to the Minister in respect of this.

Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy George Lawlor: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the provisions relating to the constitution of joint labour committees, so as to provide for cases where organisations of employers or of workers fail or refuse to engage in consultation with the Labour Court prior to the appointment of representative (employers) members or representative (workers) members, as the case may be; and to provide for connected matters.

With regard to the purpose of the Bill, a system for guaranteed statutory minimum pay and conditions for certain employment sectors was established more than a century ago, in 1909.

The purpose was to improve terms of employment in the sweated industries, where pay was chronically low and union representation was either non-existent or inadequate. The purpose was to set up bargaining bodies in low-wage sectors where the industrial actors were insufficiently organised. These bodies could then set binding minimum wages and conditions across the sector. The importance of industry-wide enforcement to prevent undercutting was an essential feature of the legislation. The goal was explicitly to reduce downwards wage competition, where, in the words of Winston Churchill when introducing the first Trade Boards Bill, “the good employer is undercut by the bad, and the bad employer is undercut by the worst”.

Since that time, the law has maintained this twin-track approach to collective bargaining. On the one hand, there were sectors where trade unions were able to organise effectively. While collective bargaining was encouraged as a matter of policy, the State did not in those sectors impose the forums in which collective bargaining should take place. On the other hand, compulsory machinery for collective bargaining, through the mechanism of trade boards and subsequently joint labour committees, was reserved for sectors in which existing organisation was very weak or non-existent. Clearly, the representative members were there to represent a particular side. However, under the regulations the power of appointment was always the Minister’s, with the right of the two sides of industry being a right to be consulted and to supply names for consideration before the appointments were made. A “representative member”, therefore, was never representative in the sense of being an elected representative. He was a member who represented the interests of his side.

The Industrial Relations Act 1946 allows the Minister to apply for a JLC establishment order where “the existing machinery for effective regulation of remuneration and other conditions of employment of such workers is inadequate or is likely to cease or to cease to be adequate”, or, “having regard to the existing rates of remuneration or conditions of employment of such workers or any of them, it is expedient that a joint labour committee should be established”.

A JLC was to consist of the Minister’s appointees, as independent members, plus representative members appointed by the Labour Court being employer representatives and an equal number of representative members who, in the opinion of the court, represent workers in relation to whom the committee is to operate. However, following judicial review proceedings brought a decade ago by the Irish Hotels Federation against the Minister’s decision to reconstitute a JLC for the hotel sector, matters now stand on a very different footing. The Minister’s statement of opposition to the hoteliers’ case asserted that a JLC could not be established or operate in the absence of employer representative nominations. The State argued that the decision to come together under a JLC framework was a matter for the two sides of industry and was not compulsory. On that basis, the legal proceedings were struck out. Therefore, the case ended before it reached the court because of a shared assumption that the non-co-operation of an employer representative body would effectively stymie the appointment of representative members to a JLC. In short, there was an employers’ veto.

On this understanding, it follows that, in any sector of industry where there is little or no worker organisation and representation but there is an employer representative body, that representative body can prevent the establishment of a JLC by not turning up to the negotiation table, even though these are the sectors that the legislation has always targeted for intervention. If it is now the law that a JLC cannot be appointed without the voluntary agreement and participation of bodies representing either side, this represents a dramatic collapse of machinery that has been working for over a century and which was aimed precisely at sectors where representative bodies were not to be found. The current situation is that the process of setting up a JLC is stated

by the Government to require the co-operation of both sides of industry, so the employer side, if sufficiently organised, can exercise a veto. Our Bill is aimed at clearing away that impasse.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development – External Wall Insulation) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Planning and Development Act 2000 to exempt external wall insulation from planning permission, with the exception of certain limited circumstances.

This Bill is inspired by a particular case, that of Clive and Samantha Ryan, who live in Kilnamagh, Tallaght. In the past week, thankfully, they have finally been granted planning permission for external wall insulation that they installed on their home six years ago. This news is, of course, very welcome. It is a massive relief for the family because they were threatened with five years in prison if they did not remove the wraparound insulation. This was despite the fact that they had used a Government grant from the SEAI as well as an SEAI-approved contractor to install the insulation. This was clearly a case of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing. One arm of the State, the SEAI, was rightly promoting retrofitting and the reduction of carbon emissions, which would reduce the family's energy bills, while another, South Dublin County Council, was implementing planning laws that the Government had failed to update in line with the legally binding climate action laws. It is the Government that is at fault.

The Minister for Housing has himself admitted that new legislation is needed and has said public consultation will be held on it this year. However, given the roll-back of climate action across a range of areas by the right-wing Fianna Fáil–Fine Gael–Lowry Government, I will not be holding my breath. Since January, it has reneged on previous Government commitments to introduce minimum BER standards for the private rental sector. It has reneged on banning imports of fracked gas and is now welcoming in fracked LNG from the US. It is trying to overturn the moratorium on constructing new data centres in the Dublin area and turning Ireland into a Wild West for the uncontrolled fossil-fuelled expansion of AI and data centres. Therefore, I do not trust the Government to take action on this very simple issue either. People Before Profit and I are introducing this Bill to get the Government to move on this as quickly as possible.

The purpose of our Bill is to ensure that outrageous situations such as the one experienced by Clive and Samantha Ryan will never happen again. The Bill does this by exempting exter-

nal wall insulation from planning permission, except in certain very limited circumstances - for example, if a building is a protected structure or is in an architectural conservation area. This is similar to the current exemption that exists for installing solar panels, and the reasoning for it is the same. The climate and cost-savings benefits outweigh any minor aesthetic impacts in the overwhelming majority of cases. The presumption should be that external wall insulation, just like solar panels, is exempt from planning permission. It is not rocket science; it is simple common sense.

When I raised this with the Taoiseach, he told me the following: “We want people to insulate. We do not want people to be penalised for insulation.” However, penalisation is exactly what the Government is doing every day, not just by leaving people at risk of imprisonment for insulating their homes but also by refusing to fund the cost of home retrofits, even though retrofitting is a win-win for people, for the cost of living and for our environment. Anyone who gets a home retrofitted, including Clive and Samantha, is always delighted at how much more comfortable that home is and how much they save on their energy bills. When you talk to Clive and Samantha about it, despite everything they have been through, you note that they sing the praises of external insulation, but the Government persists in forcing people to pay thousands of euro to finance home retrofits. The grants on offer are entirely inadequate to meet the costs involved, and the practice of individual home retrofitting by a hodgepodge of private contractors is incredibly inefficient. What is needed is a State-wide public retrofitting programme carried out for free by a State construction company. It would go into towns and villages and retrofit whole estates at the same time, regardless of whether they are privately owned or owned by the council. This would generate huge economies-of-scale savings and ensure the benefits of climate action are shared equally by all.

At the moment, low-paid workers and renters are being excluded from retrofitting although they are the ones who would benefit most from lower energy bills. Instead of including them, the Government has chosen to target retrofitting grants and tax breaks at better-off homeowners and landlords because they are the core voter base of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the right-wing Independents. It is a disgrace that this kind of self-serving political logic still dominates in the midst of a climate emergency. We need to recognise that this is an existential crisis and immediately move to universal free retrofitting for all. Exempting external wall insulation is a small but important part of doing so.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members’ Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members’ time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

Restricted Financial Measures (State of Israel) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to empower the Minister for Finance to make regulations imposing certain restrictive measures in respect of securities issued by or on behalf of the State of Israel; and to provide for related matters.

Israel is committing genocide. A population bombed relentlessly is now on the brink of starvation. Some 14,000 babies are hours away from death. This is no famine; this is hunger as a weapon. Palestinian men, women and children are being exterminated as the world watches on. Arms shipments and preferential trade - it is sickening. It makes a mockery of so-called western values and European values when you scratch the surface and they are colonial values underneath. Irish liberation and Irish republicanism are anti-colonial movements. That is the history that shapes the Irish people, and we stand firmly on the side of Palestine in this dark hour.

The inaction of this Government is a disrespect to our history - every Israeli arms shipment that passes through our airspace, every excuse and delay to the occupied territories Bill, every day our Central Bank facilitates the sale of Israeli war bonds. Many people still do not know but would be horrified to find out that Ireland is playing a key role in Israel raising money in Europe for its genocide. Our Central Bank provides permission to sell war bonds across the European Union - not any other central bank; it is only the Irish Central Bank that gives such permission. These are not normal financial instruments. Israel is openly advertising this as a way of supporting its so-called war effort. This, however, is not a war. We are being made complicit in funding genocide and it runs completely against the will of the Irish people. This came to light before the election last year from reporting from *The Ditch*. I raised it with the Central Bank and the Minister for Finance. The Central Bank said it needed guidance from the Government. The Minister washed his hands, saying it was the Central Bank's decision. He tried to pass it off as business as usual in the face of genocide. Shamefully, we heard the same yesterday from the Taoiseach.

In July 2024, the International Court of Justice concluded that Israel's occupation of Palestine is illegal and urged member states "to take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that assist in the maintenance of the illegal ... [settlements]". That is exactly what we are doing in this legislation; we are following international law, ending any complicity in funding genocide. I and Deputy McDonald here, the sponsors of this Bill, took every effort to make sure this legislation is watertight because we feared the Government would use any excuse to delay or oppose it. I thank the independent Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers. The work it has done on the legal opinion and the drafting of this legislation is first-class. The legal opinion concluded that "we can provide for restricted access to financial services on the basis of public policy grounds that are rooted in Ireland's fundamental interest in pursuing its international law obligations". Let us be clear, then, that the legal advice is that this Bill is constitutionally compliant, compatible with EU law and in accordance with international law. Therefore, any blocking of this legislation would be a political choice. It is important we drop the myth that is coming from the Government and that it is trying to peddle that this is somehow not allowed under EU law and that the Government cannot interfere with the Central Bank. All of that is nonsense. The Central Bank has made it clear that the Government can intervene. The Central Bank wrote a letter to the finance committee and made it clear that it can refuse the approval only where it has a legal basis to do so. It went on to outline the two legal bases it would require: by either EU financial sanctions or national restrictive measures to the same effect. That is what this Bill does. It provides for national restrictive measures that have the same effect and that will end the sale of Israeli war bonds through the Irish Central Bank.

21 May 2025

This has happened before. Direction has been given to the Central Bank before in the context of Russia. The Government needs to be straight with the Irish people. The Bill will give the Minister for Finance the explicit power to intervene to stop Israel using Ireland to raise money in Europe, money that pays for the bombs and the tanks and the weapons being used to slaughter children. We have the ability to end the sale of Israeli war bonds across the European Union. We should never have had any involvement in this but we now have the power to pull the plug.

We will advance this legislation next week. It will be tabled for Second Stage. I urge the Government to drop the nonsense of denying that this is happening and to work with us. This legislation is ready to go. It was drafted not by us but by the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers. It is compatible with the Constitution and EU and international law. We need to pass this legislation without delay, we need to give effect to the will of the Irish people and we need to ensure that Ireland is in no way complicit in funding genocide, which is what is happening under our very eyes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Membership of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders and until further notice in the 34th Dáil, parties, groups and non-party/group members may appoint members to the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight in accordance with paragraph (4) of Standing Order 129, and the Ceann Comhairle shall announce the names of the members so appointed for the information of the Dáil on the first sitting day of the Dáil following their appointment.

Question put and agreed to.

Gaza: Statements

The Taoiseach: It is hard to find words sufficient for the topic before us. It is hard to describe the immense suffering, physical and psychological, that civilian Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have endured for more than 19 months: to never feel safe; to be uprooted time and time again; to feel the desperation that comes from not being able to find food for your children; to see your elderly parents and grandparents suffer rather than having the comfort and dignity that

should come with age; to carry your disabled child mile after mile to get the care they need; to have your home and everything you own and have built over the course of a lifetime wiped from the earth in a single moment; to dig your loved one from the rubble with your bare hands; to see your family, your neighbours, your colleagues, your friends injured, maimed and killed, your neighbourhood laid waste to; to be subject to constant surveillance and the intrusive overhead buzzing of drones; to see hospitals destroyed and exhausted medics struggle on without supplies adequate to the needs of their desperate patients; to see humanitarian workers - ambulance drivers, paramedics - targeted and killed; and to see journalists trying to tell the world what is happening struck down. It is hard to imagine. It is hard to describe. It is hard to see it on our television night after night. How much harder must it be to endure?

I have been clear on many, many occasions that what happened in Israel on 7 October 2023 was an horrific and brutal attack on an innocent civilian population. Nothing, and I mean nothing, could possibly justify it. I saw the aftermath for myself when I visited Kibbutz Be'eri. We all saw the horrific pictures of young people fleeing for their lives from a music festival and young women being brutally manhandled and shoved into cars and taken hostage. Let us not forget that a young Irish-Israeli citizen, Kim Damti, was murdered. Let us not forget that a young Irish-Israeli child, Emily Hand, was abducted from a sleepover and held hostage for 50 days. Let us not forget that Israeli families still wait for loved ones held hostage to come home, after 19 inexpressibly cruel months.

These are truly unspeakable and despicable crimes. Hamas is responsible and must be accountable but let us remember also that those crimes were not perpetrated by the civilian population of Gaza, which has borne the brunt of the overwhelming Israeli response day after day, week after week, month after month, with only a short ceasefire of respite. Ireland is a small country but I hope it is one with a strong moral compass. Irish people know that what has happened in Gaza over the past 19 months is wrong in a fundamental way. It is not just a question of international humanitarian law, international treaties and conventions or UN charters and resolutions, although they are all important. To inflict this level of suffering on a civilian population with nowhere else to go is just wrong morally and legally. It is an affront to human decency. It is without mercy, compassion or a shared sense of humanity. It has to stop.

Ireland has not been and will not be silent in the face of what is happening in Gaza. Together with Norway and Spain, we recognised the State of Palestine 12 months ago this weekend. We did so because we believe that the people of Palestine and the people of Israel both deserve to live in peace and security, side by side. The Government will continue to do all we can to realise that goal, however distant it may seem from today's grim perspective. Let us be honest about where we are - rather than working for a ceasefire, the release of hostages and the surging of humanitarian aid into Gaza, as leaders from all parts of the world have called for, Israel this week launched a further military ground operation in the Gaza Strip, compounding an already dire situation. After a blockade of aid lasting months, the World Food Programme said its food stocks in Gaza are depleted and UNICEF warned that children are experiencing severe malnutrition. One in five Gazans is at risk of famine. The UN has been forced to shut down most of its humanitarian work in Gaza at a time when it has never been more desperately needed. UNRWA is unable to carry out its vital mission. The United Nations head of humanitarian aid said that unless aid reaches them, 14,000 babies could die in 48 hours, a statistic so shocking it is almost hard to think about. The dribble of aid Israel has allowed into Gaza in recent days is completely inadequate. Its plan to take control of the supply and distribution of aid does not offer a credible way to address the appalling deficits. Rather, as the UN has described

it, it is “designed to further control and restrict supplies”. I welcome the statement from High Representative Ms Kallas and Commissioners Šuica and Lahbib in which they expressed their concerns about this proposed delivery mechanism. I urge Israel to listen to the voices of the international community demanding the full restoration of aid - do it properly, now.

Last week, I joined my counterparts from Iceland, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Malta and Slovenia in calling on the Government of Israel to immediately reverse its current policy, to refrain from further military operations and to fully lift the blockade. We were clear that the safe, rapid and unimpeded distribution of humanitarian aid in Gaza has to be undertaken by international humanitarian actors according to humanitarian principles. The obstruction of life-saving aid by Israel is a clear violation of its international obligations. So too would be the large-scale displacement of the population were Israel to put plans to move Gaza’s population to the south of the Gaza Strip into action. More than 90% of the population has already been displaced, some up to 13 times. Ireland, with European Union and international partners, has been clear that there can be no forced displacement of the civilian population in Gaza. There can be no occupation of the strip by Israel. Let nobody say they did not know what the plan was. The Minister for Finance in Israel, Bezalel Smotrich, has spoken openly of conquering Gaza, destroying everything that remains of the Strip and pushing the population south, he said, “with God’s help, to the third countries.” He said a trickle of aid will be let in so “that the world does not stop us and accuse of war crimes.” This is from a senior Israeli Government Minister. I am also deeply concerned about the situation in the West Bank, where Israel is conducting its longest operation in 20 years. At least 40,000 people have been displaced. Combined with unprecedented levels of violence and record levels of settlement construction, there is huge risk of further destabilisation. Ireland, alongside its European Union partners, is strongly opposed to Israel’s settlement policy and activities, including in and around east Jerusalem. We call on Israel to immediately bring them to an end. The situation of the civilian population in Gaza is desperate but we cannot allow despair, or worse, indifference, to be our response. We must continue to do all we can to bring about a ceasefire, the release of hostages and the relief of their suffering. We will continue to work with like-minded partners, including in the region, to build a political process that can deliver peace and security for Palestine and Israel - two states, the only sustainable solution. We will pursue that goal, including through the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution. We will participate actively in the international conference on implementing the two-state solution at the United Nations which Saudi Arabia and France will co-chair in June. We hope it will be a decisive moment for the international community - we urgently need to find a new positivity and direction.

I welcome yesterday’s decision to review the EU-Israel Association Agreement to examine Israel’s compliance with its human rights obligations. It is a step that is long overdue. Operation of the agreement should now be suspended immediately, pending the outcome, as a sign that there can be no business as usual. I expect the review to be carried out expeditiously and effectively and to have meaningful consequences. Human rights clauses have to mean something. In keeping with our commitment in the programme for Government, we will continue to progress work on fit-for-purpose legislation to prohibit settlement goods from the occupied Palestinian territories. We will do so in a way that is in line with the Constitution, limits the risk of EU infringement procedures and takes account of the wider context. We welcome the recent agreement among Arab countries on a joint plan for the reconstruction of Gaza. We will do what we can to support and drive it forward. The Arab-led plan provides that Palestinian ownership must be a guiding principle in reconstruction and that the right of Palestinians to remain on their own land must be upheld. We will work with partners to support a reformed

Palestinian Authority so that Palestinians can take responsibility for their own affairs. There can be no role for Hamas.

After 19 long and brutal months of war on the people of Gaza, I believe we are at a turning point. Increasingly, some of Israel's closest allies are calling on it to change course. I urge Israel to listen not just in the interests of the people of Gaza but in its own interests. This is not who the people of Israel are. Even in these times of divided politics, I know there is a strong consensus in this House and indeed in the country at large on the urgency of the situation and the need to find a better way forward and a credible political path to peace for the people of Palestine. Like their neighbours in Israel, they are entitled and deserve to live in peace and security in their own state. We know from our own history how long and difficult the road to lasting peace and justice can be but we are resolute and unwavering in our commitment to walking that path with those dedicated to the same goals. Let that be the united message we send from today's debate. I am sharing time with the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: We gather for these statements today with warnings ringing in our ears that thousands of children are at risk of death in the coming days. According to UNICEF, more than 15,000 children in Gaza have been killed, more than 34,000 injured and nearly 1 million displaced. Gaza has the highest number of child amputees *per capita* in the world and 17,000 children are unaccompanied or separated from their parents. Beyond this vast physical harm, the psychological trauma inflicted will take generations to heal. No child will emerge from the horrors of bombardment without the imprint of trauma. We are witnessing enforced starvation afflicting the most vulnerable while humanitarian aid remains blocked by Israeli forces.

Three months ago, four Irish Aid trucks arrived in Jordan just as the Israeli blockade began. Carrying the potential to assist thousands of people, these trucks today remain in a warehouse in Jordan while people starve. They are among 44,000 aid trucks that have been denied entry since March, while there are no functioning public hospitals and thousands upon thousands of people have been displaced.

Faced with the unconscionable plight of the people of Gaza, any words or actions that cannot immediately bring this suffering to an end seem, and are, inadequate. What is happening goes against our very humanity. It goes against the strongly held values of the people of Ireland. It goes against the desire for peace, stability and security. A failure by the international community to respond to this moment is also a rebuke to multilateralism, international law and the universal applicability of human rights, both at home and across the world.

The convictions and values we hold dear have emerged from our own history of conflict and peacebuilding on this island. We also have long-standing engagement in the Middle East region through our diplomatic missions and the presence of peacekeepers in Lebanon. The images we have been witnessing in Gaza for the past 600 days are an affront to these convictions and an absolute indictment of a collective failure to end it. More than 18 months of bombardment has caused total destruction that can be difficult to comprehend, now compounded by the almost 80 days of an Israeli blockade of vital and life-saving humanitarian aid.

A total of 58 hostages still remain in Gaza, whose families are enduring continuing anguish. The Irish people, and most of the world, are asking what it will take for the world to do more and act. This is a moment for clarity. Therefore, let me clearly restate Ireland's position. We unequivocally condemn the terror attacks by Hamas in Israel on 7 October 2023. We unequivocally condemn the taking of hostages by Hamas and have repeatedly called for their release.

21 May 2025

We do so again today. Hamas has brought nothing but death and destruction to the people of the region. It offers no positive future. We strongly condemn the continuing Israeli military operations in Gaza and are alarmed at reports that Israel plans to extend further this violence and killing.

We have used every lever at Ireland's disposal and we will continue to do so, both through building on the progress achieved yesterday with the achievement of majority support for a review of the EU-Israel association agreement and through our own legislation to prohibit imports from illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, which we will now bring forward. While I will speak in more detail on these actions later, I can inform the House today that work on this legislation is well progressed within my Department. It is my intention to bring a memorandum to Government on this next week.

We call on Israel to fully lift its blockade and allow for unimpeded access of humanitarian aid at scale into Gaza. We must see further sanctions if Israel does not end this military offensive. We call for urgent efforts to ensure an immediate ceasefire. Of course, we call for the release of all remaining hostages.

The situation for Gazans today is worse than it has been at any point. In excess of 52,000 people have been killed. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has described Israel's actions as "aimed at inflicting on Palestinians conditions of life increasingly incompatible with their continued existence in Gaza as a group.". A fragile and imperfect ceasefire at the start of the year, which provided a brief glimmer of hope to Israelis and Palestinians alike, has been replaced by the resumption of further Israeli actions that have brought fresh suffering to the people of Gaza. Israel unilaterally imposed a total blockage on all aid and commercial supplies for almost 80 days. That meant no food, medicines, medical devices, clothing or sanitary products. While minimal supplies are now entering Gaza in the past 24 hours, this is a miniscule drop in the ocean. The entire population is facing high levels of food insecurity, with one in five - 500,000 people - facing starvation.

Famine is a spectre no Irish person can endure. Only an immediate end to hostilities and a full, unimpeded resumption of humanitarian aid delivery can prevent a further descent into that grim reality for Gazans. The Israeli security cabinet has decided to take control of the distribution of humanitarian aid through private contractors. The UN has rightly described this as unacceptable and "designed to further control and restrict supplies". Along with many others, I strongly condemn a system that does not ensure that the entire population gets access to humanitarian aid.

On Monday, with colleagues from 21 countries in the EU, I urgently called again for immediate and unhindered access to humanitarian aid and for the killing to stop. I concur with the words of the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Tom Fletcher, that Israel's plan "makes starvation a bargaining chip". This is another example of Israel's conduct that is clearly at odds with human rights and international law. It is repugnant. It is a further example of war crimes.

Amid this darkness, I pay tribute to the humanitarians who continue to save lives every day and work in unspeakable conditions. The year 2024 was the deadliest on record for humanitarian workers, a surge driven by the war in Gaza, which has killed almost 300 UNRWA staff alone. The attack on 15 Red Crescent ambulance staff starkly illustrated the immense risks these humanitarians run every day in the course of their work.

Ireland has been principled and consistent in our approach to this dire situation. We are using all the tools at our disposal, be they political, legal, diplomatic or humanitarian, in response to this dreadful conflict. Next week will mark one year since Ireland, in tandem with Norway and Spain, recognised the State of Palestine. The decision was about keeping the hope for a peaceful two-state solution alive and about the right of Palestinians to self-determination, self-governance and territorial integrity and sovereignty. It was about believing that the two-state solution is the only way forward for Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side. Since then, Ireland has consistently raised our voice in pursuit of the two-state solution. In September 2024, we joined the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution during the UN General Assembly high-level week in New York. This is a key diplomatic platform for advancing meaningful progress towards peace in the Middle East and advancing the two-state solution.

Even though established political thinking in Israel is absolutely hostile to this goal, international momentum is building. Ireland is taking a leading role in the work and evolution of the global alliance, including as part of the so-called Madrid group, which is a core group of European, Arab, and Islamic countries particularly concerned by the catastrophic situation in Gaza. The global momentum building around this work is visible in the upcoming high-level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, which will be co-chaired, as the Taoiseach said, by France and Saudi Arabia at the UN in New York in June. Ireland will play an active role in the conference and we hope it will be a decisive moment for the international community.

Ireland continually seeks to build alliances to address the horror of what is happening on the ground in Gaza. Two weeks ago, I issued a joint statement with my counterparts from Iceland, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia and Spain expressing concern about Israeli plans for further expansion of military actions in Gaza. We outlined our firm rejection of any demographic or territorial change in Gaza and called on Israel to show restraint and co-operate with the UN and other humanitarian organisations in the unhindered provision at scale of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance. On 6 May, the Dutch foreign minister wrote to the UN High Representative, Kaja Kallas, calling for a review of the EU-Israel association agreement in light of Israel's blockade in Gaza and other developments on the ground.

Ireland has consistently called for a meaningful interpretation of Israel's human rights obligations under the agreement. We welcome this initiative from the Netherlands. As this House will recall, Ireland and Spain wrote to the President of the European Commission in February 2024 requesting this urgent review. In all my engagements at the Foreign Affairs Council, we have repeatedly called for the EU to take this step. At the time, our proposal did not enjoy the support of all EU partners. The fact there is now a clear majority of support shows a significant shift at European level.

The EU review of the association agreement with Israel is a significant decision. As the Taoiseach rightly said, however, it should now be suspended pending the outcome of that review. This would reflect the grave concern held by citizens in Ireland and across the European Union regarding the ongoing horrific situation and actions of Israel and the blockade of humanitarian aid entering Gaza. It also demonstrates that a clear majority of member states have now agreed on the need to take concrete actions to pressure Israel to reverse course, halt its military action and lift the block on life-saving aid in Gaza. This is about using the tools set out in the association agreement, in conformity with our values, and conveying clear messages to Israel regarding the EU's position. This was also the case in February, when Ireland welcomed the

convening of the EU-Israel Association Council as an opportunity to deliver that same message.

From the outset, Ireland has been clear that we would not accept a business-as-usual approach to relations between Israel and the EU. In my intervention at that meeting, I underlined that each of the EU's bilateral relationships must be grounded in respect for international law and our fundamental principles. I expressed grave concern about the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and underlined the EU's call for full and unimpeded access for humanitarian aid and, of course, the release of remaining hostages. We have made clear that we will reject any attempt at demographic or territorial changes in the Gaza Strip and stressed the importance of unifying Gaza with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.

2 o'clock

I was also pleased to attend the first ever EU-Palestine high level dialogue in Luxembourg in April. This dialogue provided an opportunity for the first time for the EU to engage at this level with the Palestinian Authority and Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa, whom I met last February in Munich. At that meeting we took concrete actions to financially support the Palestinian Authority and we commend the progress it is making in what is an extremely challenging environment. Ireland maintains strong channels of communication with the Palestinian Authority, including through our mission in Ramallah and the Palestinian Embassy in Dublin. As well as providing funding to the authority through the EU, Ireland also provides practical support to the Palestinian Authority on the ground, including in institutional capacity-building. Together with a number of other donors, we also support the Palestinian Authority's ministry for education to strengthen the education system and help to ensure more children can access education.

Ireland welcomed the recent agreement among Arab countries on a joint plan for the reconstruction of Gaza. We must continue to work towards this aim. Ireland has consistently stressed that the governance of Gaza must involve the Palestinian Authority. There can be and will be no role for Hamas, which offers the people of Gaza no future. The Arab-led plan provides that Palestinian ownership must be a guiding principle in reconstruction efforts and that the right of Palestinians to remain on their own land must be upheld. Ireland, the EU and international partners have been clear that there can be no forced displacement of the civilian population in Gaza, nor any occupation of the strip by Israel. However, first we need a ceasefire and a permanent cessation of the hostilities.

While the focus of this debate is on Gaza we cannot lose sight of the situation unfolding in the West Bank, where Israel is conducting its single largest operation in 20 years. At least 40,000 people have been displaced since January. Combined with unprecedented levels of violence and record levels of settlement construction, there is a huge risk of further destabilisation. Ireland is strongly opposed to Israel's settlement policy and activities, including in and around East Jerusalem. This is a point I raised directly with Israel at the association council. We strongly support the sanctions adopted by the EU against both individuals and entities involved in settler violence and we continue to call for the imposition of further EU sanctions.

What is happening in Gaza and in the West Bank should not be taken in isolation. This is meticulously planned Israeli Government policy. It is illegal. It is unconscionable. It is inhuman. This brings me back to the issue of settlement trade. The Government's position, and indeed that of the EU, is clear, namely, settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the realisation of the two-state solution. As this House will be aware, the Government carried out an extensive analysis and review of the occupied territories Bill late last year. The

Government's analysis was that substantive amendments would be required to most, if not all, of the Bill's provisions in order to bring it in line with our Constitution and to reduce the risk of EU infringement procedures. We want a Bill that will withstand the test of legal challenge. We want a Bill that will make impact. The programme for Government sets out a clear commitment to progress legislation in relation to the occupied Palestinian territory and aligned with the July 2024 International Court of Justice advisory opinion. As I said earlier, we now intend to advance this commitment.

Respect for international law is at the core of Ireland's foreign policy. Ireland has consistently stated this and consistently called on Israel to comply with international law. International law must apply to all countries. We have stressed the universal applicability of international law, including humanitarian law. This commitment has been backed by focused action at bilateral and multilateral level and in international legal proceedings. In 2023 and 2024, Ireland participated in advisory proceedings at the International Court of Justice concerning the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories. The court's advisory opinion in that case largely confirmed Ireland's legal analysis, as outlined in our submissions to the court, that Israel's settlement and related policies in the occupied Palestinian territory amount to illegal annexation. On 6 January, Ireland filed a declaration of intervention in South Africa's case against Israel at the ICJ under the Genocide Convention. A declaration of intervention was also filed in Gambia's case against Myanmar on 20 December 2024. The purpose of both interventions is for Ireland to set out the factors it considers relevant in assessing whether a state is fulfilling its obligations under the Genocide Convention. On 28 February this year Ireland filed a detailed written submission with the ICJ in advisory proceedings concerning the obligations of Israel in relation to the UN and other international organisations, as well as states, in the occupied Palestinian territories. These proceedings arose from a UN General Assembly resolution Ireland co-sponsored in December 2024 following the adoption in October 2024 of legislation by the Israeli Parliament which, in effect, prohibits the presence and activities of UNRWA.

While Ireland's submissions have been published by the court, and I encourage colleagues to read them, I would like to briefly update the House on the legal arguments made in our detailed written statement, which was prepared by my Department in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General. We argue Israel is legally required, under international humanitarian law and as a member of the United Nations, to co-operate with and facilitate relevant UN agencies and programmes in the provision of essential humanitarian assistance and services to the Palestinian civilian population in the occupied territories, in particular those of UNRWA, as a subsidiary organ of the UN. In addition to this unprecedented level of activity by Ireland at the International Court of Justice, Ireland continues to press for action at EU level in light of the ICJ's advisory opinion, including at all our interventions at the Foreign Affairs Council and by the Taoiseach at the European Council.

This is just a summary of the practical actions Ireland is taking in response to this most horrific situation, but we must and will do more. Until hunger in Gaza is consigned to memory, until all remaining hostages are back with their families, until hospitals and schools in Gaza are functioning, until the hopes of Palestinian children turn into their realities and until we see two states - Israel and Palestine - coexisting in peace and security, Ireland will double down. We will not rest. We will provide financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority. We will bring forward our own legislation on the occupied Palestinian territories. We will seek a suspension of the association agreement between the EU and Israel. We will work at the International

21 May 2025

Court of Justice. We will support UNRWA when others turn their back on the organisation. We will do everything we possibly can to let the Palestinian people know that they are seen, that they are heard and that they are not forgotten. We will continue to represent the convictions of the people of this country and the democratic values on which this State was built. We will continue to fight for peace and for an end to the barbaric cruelty being endured by the people of Gaza at the hands of an Israeli Government engaged in war crimes. We will continue to urge the international community to vindicate our collective responsibility to stand up for the supremacy of human rights always.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move to Deputy McDonald, I acknowledge the presence of the Palestinian ambassador in the Public Gallery. You are very welcome.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go raibh maith agat as sin. Cuirim fáilte freisin roimh H. E. Dr. Jilan Wahba Abdalmajid. You are very welcome, madam ambassador, and we are honoured to have you here.

Today we stand with the Gazan people, who face annihilation. Entire families have been wiped out. Millions have been displaced from their homes and schools and hospitals have been obliterated. They are now starving and blockaded on all sides. Some 14,000 children are on the brink of starvation. There have been 11 weeks of a blockade of food, a blockade of water and a blockade on medicines. More than 500 have been killed in a matter of days. Humanitarian aid has been used as a weapon of war and there has been collective punishment again against the Palestinian people. The siege is continuing. Not an ounce of food or a drop of water has been distributed. The bombardment and killing is continuing as the air and ground offensives intensify. The mass displacement of the people of Gaza is continuing.

All of this is carried out in full sight of the world and in full sight of international leaders. They see the carnage, the collective punishment, the starvation and the mass displacement. All are breaches of international law. They have long known that Israel, an occupying power, imposes an apartheid regime. All of this suffering Israel is responsible for and Israel must be held to account. Its actions are not simply wrong, but are criminal. They are genocidal. Israel continues to act with impunity because, very simply, it can. Major Western powers are not alone turning a blind eye; they are protecting Israel from any meaningful sanctions and they are continuing to fund and sell arms to Israel. They are complicit in every single thing that is happening. The EU now reviews its trade agreement with Israel. Britain has suspended trade talks with it. This is very little and very late. We need much more. We need action. We need sanctions. We need an end to the arming and funding of Israel's war machine. Today my colleague and First Minister in the North Michelle O'Neill has written to the British Prime Minister demanding that Britain end the export of arms to Israel. The British Government has a legal and a moral obligation to stop arming Israel when there is a clear and obvious risk that these weapons are being used to slaughter Palestinian children. That obligation applies to the United States of America and to European powers that are funding and generating a genocide. Stop it. Stop that now. Ireland also needs to act because words are not enough - neither weasel words nor carefully crafted platitudes - as a refugee population is being decimated. Calls for restraint will not cut it either. Action is needed. Sanctions are needed.

Today Deputy Pearse Doherty and I have brought forward legislation to stop Ireland's involvement in the sale of Israeli war bonds, which are used to fund the genocide in Palestine. It is going to be debated in the Dáil next week. It is utterly unacceptable - an obscenity in fact - that the Irish Central Bank oversees the sale of Israeli war bonds right across the EU. It is com-

pletely at odds with Ireland's position in respect of humanitarian standards and international law; a position that is against occupation, terror and genocide. Yet when I raised this with the Taoiseach yesterday, his response was to call our legislation "repulsive". That is the word he used.

The Taoiseach: On point of order, I did not say that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is truly repulsive is allowing the Irish Central Bank to oversee the sale of Israeli war bonds that are funding this genocide.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is misleading the House. That is not right, now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If the Government is serious and sincere, it will back our Bill and stand with Palestine. If you are really serious, Tánaiste, about recognising and respecting the convictions of the people of Ireland, if you are serious about doing everything as you say within your reach, and if you are serious about ending the clear barbarism that we watch every day in Gaza and indeed in the West Bank, you will back our Bill and of course you will also pass the occupied territories Bill. Ireland's history speaks powerfully to us and it demands that we speak out. It demands that we act in defence of Palestine and in defence of refugee populations that have been brutalised not for weeks or for months but for decades. That barbarity has now escalated to genocide itself. The Irish Central Bank should not and cannot be facilitating that genocide through the sale of Israeli war bonds. I challenge every Member of this House and every person of conscience to stand with the Palestinians and against genocide, and to back our legislation when it comes to the House next week.

The Taoiseach: On a point of order, the Deputy misled the House when she said that I described the tabling of Sinn Féin's legislation as "repulsive". I said no such thing. I would ask the Deputy to withdraw that given the seriousness of the debate. This is a very serious debate involving lives and it is not good enough that the Deputy would falsely make that assertion. I did not say that and she knows I did not say that. I ask the Deputy to withdraw it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy McDonald withdraw that remark?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I cannot withdraw it because the record of this House will reflect that fact that the word that was used across the Chamber to me was the word "repulsive."

The Taoiseach: It is very easy to check.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: The Taoiseach is using our time.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said that the Government is funding a genocide and I said that phrase was morally repugnant. At no stage did I say the tabling of legislation in respect of the Central Bank was repulsive. You know that. Why did you conflate the two to make a false statement? I would ask you to withdraw.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Why is the Taoiseach using our speaking time with this nonsense?

The Taoiseach: I ask you to withdraw.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not withdrawing it.

The Taoiseach: It was a smear against me.

21 May 2025

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not withdrawing a remark that you made.

Simon Harris: It was a smear against the Taoiseach.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will leave it at that and move on to Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

The Taoiseach: No sincerity.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Is the clock being brought back?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Four and a half minutes, I think; okay. The Taoiseach in his opening speech said that it is difficult to find words for the human suffering. That is true, it is difficult to find words. It is difficult to find words for the scale of it. When before in any international situation could we have ever imagined a UN official talking about 14,000 babies potentially facing starvation within 48 hours? Can we think of any precedent that even casts the tiniest shadow on a statement like that? There is no comparison. There is no comparison for the total destruction of Gaza in terms of hospitals, schools, refugee camps and bombs raining down on innocent civilians in their tens of thousands. Hundreds of people have been killed in recent days. The potential for a ceasefire is a distant shadow at this stage. Dozens of children have died in that time. It is difficult to find the words for the scale. We are talking about 14,000 babies dying, that level of starvation. This is no flood, hurricane or crop failure. It is a result of a deliberate decision to starve people and deny them essential medical equipment and food. It is based on deeply malicious intent to punish a civilian population.

If it is difficult to find words in terms of scale, it is even more difficult to find words in terms of the individual and the pain, with families completely wiped out, children left without anybody in the world, communities wiped out, with their histories, their stories and everyone belonging to them completely gone. I refer to the pain mothers and fathers must feel and the pain children must feel when they think of their parents and everyone belonging to them now gone. I extend that point to say that pain exists for every human. Like the Taoiseach, I condemn the attacks on 7 October and the pain their relatives felt. There is no justification for that either but how could that occasion this level of collective punishment on a civilian population on a scale we can hardly imagine? Out of 35 hospitals, 33 are damaged. These are the very hospitals that are trying to deal with the carnage, the bombings, the starvation and every possible kind of human suffering off the back of that. These hospitals are struggling to survive. Maybe we struggle to find words. Some words do matter; I will say that too. “War crimes” - it matters to say that. It also matters to say “genocide”.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I think many people would have baulked and would have found that word highly charged, but it is difficult to dispute that there is an intent to effectively destroy Gaza and the people of Gaza as a people.

Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Words matter, but actions matter more. I welcome the progress on the EU association agreement, which is something we called for. There is a lot more that is needed. On the occupied territories Bill, I think at one stage the Taoiseach understood why that was a logical conclusion of the International Court of Justice decision. It

is about the fact that settlements are illegal and require consequences. There is no distinction between goods and services in the judgment. The Tánaiste should not make a distinction either.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Let us be frank. The future survival of Gaza - its actual existence, as well as that of its people - is at stake. That is not hyperbole. I wish it was. I urge the Tánaiste to issue strong words, yes. Strong statements matter but, by God, actions matter a lot more. Are there more actions we can take that we are not taking? There certainly are.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, can you clarify how much time I have?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Two and a half minutes.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Go raibh maith agat. A Thánaiste, 14,000 babies could die in the next 48 hours if food is not allowed into Gaza, according to the UN. The Tánaiste will have seen those figures. We have all seen them just as we have all seen the pictures and the video footage of harrowingly gaunt faces, bodies down to skin and bones, and bodies consuming their own muscle tissue and organs as they try desperately to avoid starvation and stay alive. One of the greatest crimes against humanity is playing out before our eyes in real time. The best some of the western leaders have to offer is hand-wringing and words of condemnation which never evolve into meaningful action. No normal state would ever carry out such atrocities against defenceless civilians. Terms like "rogue state" just do not do justice to the evil that is being perpetrated. The cowardice in the face of this great evil is one of the most disturbing things I have ever seen in my life. At the same time, we have to take hope from the tremendous courage of citizens across the world, including here in Ireland. We have to take hope from people who know that we can do more and that we must do more. We must stop the use of Shannon Airport, stop the use of our airspace, enact the occupied territories Bill and stop the facilitation of Israeli war bonds.

Women have always been to the fore of this activism. Women like the workers in Dunnes Stores who stood up against South African apartheid. We have seen the tremendous activism of the Mothers Against Genocide as they have consistently protested throughout this genocide. Only a few days ago, we saw three women protest at the continued use of Shannon Airport. In a statement, they clearly said they wished they did not have to do this but the inaction of our Government makes them complicit in the genocide in Palestine and they cannot let this go on. They were arrested and detained as a result of this. They want the planes searched. I want the planes searched.

The Tánaiste cannot control what other world leaders do. He can only control what he can do and what his Department does, so pass the occupied territories Bill and bring in sanctions now. Enough of the empty words.

Deputy Mark Ward: Gaza needs aid. Gaza needs a ceasefire. Israel needs sanctions. That may be a very simplistic message but that is what is needed right now. Israel has displaced the people of Gaza. Israel has murdered the people of Gaza. Israel has starved the people of Gaza. The people of Gaza are being ethnically cleansed right before our very eyes. If you do not believe me, believe the words of Israel's finance minister, Bezael Smotrich. He said Israel is going to occupy the Gaza Strip. He then predicted that Gaza would be totally destroyed within a matter of months. He has vowed that the aid entering Gaza would be the minimum necessary

to ensure the world did not stop them and accuse them of war crimes. Imagine that. He went on to say Israel will destroy everything that still remains in Gaza. That is straight out of the mouth of the Israeli finance minister. That is straight out of the mouth of a genocidal maniac. If any world leader made such statements and carried out such policies against any other people, there would be sanctions. There would be arms embargoes. There would be diplomatic consequences. Instead, there is silence and inaction.

Yesterday, the United Nations warned that 14,000 babies in Gaza are at risk of dying in the next 48 hours. If emergency aid and medical access are not immediately restored, 14,000 babies will die. These are not military casualties. These are babies. They are starved, dehydrated and critically ill. Their deaths will not be tragic accidents. They will be deliberate consequences of Israel's genocidal policies and international inaction. There have been small, but welcome, moves by the EU to review trade ties but the people of Gaza simply do not have time for reviews. They need action. Israel needs sanctions. That is the only way it will stop its genocidal atrocities on the people of Gaza.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Right-thinking people are horrified at what they are seeing in Gaza. It is difficult to comprehend the barbarity. It is even more difficult to see it on your TV screen. Right-thinking people are ashamed of their leaders, many of whom are standing idly by as we see the intentional destruction of healthcare by Israel, the obstruction of medical supplies and humanitarian aid, the slaughter of children and the extent to which Israel has normalised the bombing of hospitals. There was a time it pretended it was an accident.

Last week in the audiovisual room, prominent Palestinian human rights defender, Mahmoud Nawajaa, acknowledged Irish efforts but said it is not enough. We need sanctions with impact. We need the enactment of the occupied territories Bill, the enactment of the divestment Bill and the enactment of the war bonds Bill. We need actions, not statements, on Gaza.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: In Gaza, we see a situation so dire, it defies comprehension. An Oxfam worker with 20 years of experience working in conflict zones worldwide has said he has never seen anything like this. Children in Gaza are being starved. Israel has blocked all aid supplies from entering, leaving millions to go hungry for the past 11 weeks. It is genocide. That is what is happening and yet most of the world remains silent as a humanitarian catastrophe unfolds.

Women and children make up the majority of those killed. Nearly every piece of infrastructure has been levelled. People are being displaced all the time. Places where people are told to seek safety turn out to be death traps. The childhoods of the children of Gaza are being destroyed and they have lost entire families. More than 20,000 children have been killed, with many left with injuries that cannot be properly treated. Day in, day out Palestinians are being massacred by Israel using military grade weapons on tents, burning children to death. Apache helicopters are deliberately targeting and shooting fleeing families. The world has failed the people of Palestine. The European Union has failed the people of Palestine. What haunts the Palestinian people is not just famine; it is also the fear of outsiders arriving under the guise of aid to then start laying the foundations of colonisation and using the weaponisation of food.

Israel must be stopped now. They are the Nazis of the modern world. It is a disgusting, Zionist regime of supremacist beings who attack everyone who stands against them as anti-Semitic. Most of the world is just plain sick of this victimhood and right of entitlement to slaughter the Palestinian people at will. The people of Palestine will liberate their land because

it is their land. In Ireland, we need to do more. The Taoiseach is not using all the tools at his disposal. Get off your backsides and stop the mealy-mouthed pretence of horror. At the very least, enact the occupied territories Bill.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: After the longest blockade yet, Israel is starving the population in Gaza. Israel brazenly continues its airstrikes and full-scale ground offensive, advancing its openly stated imperial imperative of the total occupation of the Gaza Strip, regardless of the human cost. Yet, our Government still places zero sanctions. Ireland, a State with a proud history of principled neutrality and human rights, is instead enabling this destruction. We are literally fuelling the war machine. We are selling bonds that finance the war machine. We are exporting parts that become components of the war machine. We are a privileged trading partner and there is no question that it makes us complicit in genocide.

It is against this shameful backdrop that the May Day three and Operation Sound the Siren from Palestine Action Éire took matters into their own hands. Fed up with Government inaction and hollow statements, they attempted to inspect military aircraft landed at Shannon Airport for weapons being carried illegally through Irish airspace. They did this because the Government refuses to enforce its own laws.

Ní cóir go mbeadh ar mhná na hÉireann teacht chuige seo. Níl muintir na hÉireann ag iarraidh go n-úsáidfear ár n-aerspás chun airm a iompar le haghaidh coireanna in aghaidh na daonnachta. Ar feadh blianta anois, tá daoine ag máirseáil, ag síniú achainí agus ag cur brú ar ár gcuid ionadaithe poiblí ach fós níl tada tar éis tarlú. Níl sé ceart go dtiteann an t-ualach ar roinnt saoránach cróga chun seasamh suas le haghaidh luachanna na hÉireann. Teastaíonn gníomhartha ón Rialtas ar son thoil mhuintir na hÉireann anois seachas amárach ná an mhí seo chugainn.

Why should it come to this? The Irish people have made themselves clear. We do not want our skies used to ferry munitions for crimes against humanity. It should not fall to a few brave citizens to take personal risks in order to uphold our values and our laws. The Government needs to act now; not tomorrow, not next month.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I listened to the statements from the EU leaders and what I heard is that this genocide has become so horrific for those who supported the slaughter, agreed that withholding food and water could be used as a weapon of war, supplied the weapons and bombs to target the Palestinians and provided political cover for this genocidal regime talked about trade agreements yesterday for the first time. I am sure the Israeli apartheid regime is quaking in its boots at such mealy-mouthed words.

What tipped them over the edge? Was it that they just want to cover their own arses because of their support for this genocide? Was it the 60,000 dead men, women and children? Was it the horrific murder of 15 humanitarian workers? Just yesterday, a 15-year-old boy who witnessed that murder was shot dead by an Israeli sniper. Was it the destruction of all the hospitals, the schools, or water, electricity and sewage infrastructure? Was it the forced displacement of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank? They were nowhere near Hamas, nowhere near Gaza. Was it this happening with the full support of the police, military, political and judicial systems in Israel?

Information has come out that 14,000 children are potentially going to die of malnutrition within 48 hours. Just think of that number - 14,000 children. I do not know what moved them

to make the statement. This Government - in fairness, I will give it to it - has moved a bit further with words than EU leaders. Unfortunately, words are not enough. The people of Palestine need action now. They need the end of the military support by EU countries, militaries that many on the Government benches want us to join in some sort of military alliance in the future, which would make us complicit in all of this. We need to expel the ambassadors across the EU, end all trade with this murderous regime, and when the war is over, because all wars end, all of the political and military figures and all of the people who supported this genocide need to end up in court and in jail.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I send my solidarity to the people of Palestine. I condemn the Israeli genocide and the ongoing starvation of the people of Gaza. A blockade is preventing humanitarian aid from being brought in and it is certain that thousands more men, women and children will die. These deaths are entirely preventable. We cannot turn our eyes away. Every day, we are reminded by people living in Gaza that we must not look away and that we must not stop talking about Palestine, but it is hard to look at children being slaughtered. It is hard to see their emaciated bodies. Of course we want to turn away. It is hard to see parents with their children's remains in bits in plastic bags, but still, we cannot look away. There must be a full and immediate ceasefire.

We condemn the commentary of Benjamin Netanyahu about the ceasefire, when he said that the Israeli military will enter Gaza "with full force". Jesus Christ. What is "with full force" going to mean when we have seen the brutality that regime is capable of? Nobody is saying that the Government is doing nothing, but where the Government can do more, it must do more. It could start by passing the occupied territories Bill in full, not a watered-down version of it. It could give its support to an Teachta Pearse Doherty's legislation to end the sale of Israeli war bonds. It could stop warplanes using Shannon. As I came into the Chamber, I read on my phone that Israel has fired warning shots at a delegation visiting the Jenin refugee camp.

Israel blockades and commits genocide because there are no consequences. There must be consequences for the actions of the Israeli genocidal regime. In Ireland, we have a proud history of standing up against apartheid. Women like Mary Manning stood up against the South African apartheid. That is our history. We must be true to who we are. We must stand up to the apartheid Israeli regime and do everything. We must never stop, never look away, and never rest and say this is enough until there is a ceasefire and until the people of Palestine can begin to rebuild their lives.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I welcome Her Excellency, Dr. Jilan Wahba Abdalmajid to the Public Gallery for this debate. My colleagues and I missed the start of the debate because we were meeting the ambassador, so we are just catching up with what the Taoiseach and Tánaiste have said.

We know that a bomb is dropped on Gaza every four minutes, on average. Since this debate began, approximately 15 bombs have fallen. Another 35 will fall before the end of the debate, making 50 bombs in total. More destruction, more war crimes and more death. We welcome these statements but seldom, if ever, has there been a topic on which this Parliament and indeed the people of this country have felt so impotent. The Irish people are enraged, saddened and left bereft by the suffering being inflicted on the people of Gaza. The traditional responses of the Irish people to such suffering, such as aid donations, fundraisers and the opening of their homes to victims are being denied, as no aid can get in and no victims of this genocide can escape. It is butchery, pure and simple, with the world watching on and with many so-called developed

states having blood on their hands and allowing the slaughter to happen.

Despite the paltry number of trucks that have apparently crossed the border, there are no reports that this aid has even been delivered. In fact, we have some reports that even in those very few trucks that have gone over there is no aid, but in fact there may be coffins. That is what Israel is allowing to cross the border. The blockade which has been in place since March is essentially still in place. Médecins Sans Frontières has described the amount of aid that Israel has started to allow into Gaza as “a smokescreen to pretend the siege is over”. Médecins Sans Frontières, UNICEF, the United Nations, UNRWA, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the list of trusted humanitarian organisations goes on, are all saying the same thing.

What do we hear from the Israeli side? Finance minister Smotrich has called for Gaza to be totally destroyed. He said that sovereignty would be applied to the West Bank between now and the end of the lifetime of this Israeli Government in 2026. He has called for the conquering and cleansing of Gaza. This is genocide. It is war crimes. There are no other words to describe it. The Israelis are clear in their intent and they are following through. Their attacks on journalists, with 219 Palestinian journalists having been killed since 7 October, show that not only are they killing men, women and children, they want to ensure that the full truth cannot get out.

With the European Union resolving to review relations with Israel, perhaps the international tide is turning on Israel but it feels like a day late and a dollar short. We in the Labour Party want to ensure that, in our role in the Irish Parliament to hold our Government to account, we are being constructive in offering some solutions, albeit within the constraints that we have.

The Security Council of the UN is broken. I know the Tánaiste believes that. We also believe it. We will have a different debate on that in the not-too-distant future. The power of the veto has crippled it and led to inertia. It has failed in its primary responsibility to maintain peace and security in Gaza. A total of 55,000 people are dead, including 15,000 children. Yesterday, a child, only one week old, was killed in an air strike. What an awful week for the life of that poor baby, born into starvation, living under bombardment every day until finally, on the seventh day, their brand new life was ended by one Israeli bomb. The Security Council is failing. We believe in the UN General Assembly and we still believe in the power of the United Nations. Here is where we believe the Irish State can act. We think the Government should look at the precedent that was set in the uniting for peace resolution. That could provide a precedent and mechanism for the UN to act to ensure we can provide a humanitarian corridor and peacekeeping force to ensure that enough aid can get into Gaza, which would be hundreds and hundreds of trucks per day.

The suffering is so high, the relentlessness of the Israeli bombardment is so extreme and our levers are so few, which is why we are asking the Government to consider what the Labour Party will be proposing next week in our motion. We are looking for cross-party support for this. Our President, Michael D. Higgins, arguably our greatest-ever President, has called on the UN General Assembly to act. Some people may take issue with our President straying into policy areas; I do not. What people cannot deny is that Michael D., more so than any public representative, has his finger on the pulse of Irish public opinion. I ask that we listen to our President.

While all of this carnage is taking place, Israel continues to enjoy the fruits of European cultural and sporting competitions. This needs to stop. We need to engage with international sporting bodies and, in the case of Eurovision, for example, RTÉ, to push for Israel to be excluded from international sporting competitions, at both international and club level, and from

events such as Eurovision. This may sound somewhat frivolous in the face of such slaughter, but with such limited levers, we need to pull every one we can. Israel at all levels cannot feel welcome in the modern world when its Government is acting with such impunity in the name of its people. It is acting like a state that is above international law and no state should be. It needs to be treated like a pariah until such time that peace is in place and the rebuilding of Gaza can begin.

I and the Labour Party have published the occupying power securities and handling settlement goods Bill, which we hope to get signed off this week. This will outlaw the selling of Israeli bombs but it will also protect workers who do not want to handle goods from the occupied territories. This is something we will look for the Government's support on. We believe we need to break down the barrier between Opposition and Government to ensure that we as an Irish Parliament do everything we can for the people of Gaza and the Palestinians. In speaking with a senior activist from civil society last week, his message was that the stance Ireland has taken is welcome, but we should not clap ourselves on the back too much, because it is still not enough. I firmly believe this not as a stick with which to beat the Government but as a message for us on this issue to break down those divides and to work together to be leaders, not just in Europe but globally, to stop the slaughter, protect the innocent and save lives. We are best when we are brave and we are pushing boundaries. I have said to the Tánaiste that I do not think what we have done is unimportant. The recognition of the State of Palestine, the advisory opinion of the ICJ and the work in the EU are important. We recognise that but we have to push. Many of us in this Chamber have young children. The Tánaiste and I both have children of a very similar age. In years to come they will ask us what we did. Right now, we will not say we did nothing but we have to say we can do more. I genuinely believe that. The Labour Party believes that. We can do more. We are going to put forward a suite of actions we hope the Government will be able to support in the next few weeks and months.

Deputy Mark Wall: Night after night on our news channels we see the devastation as bombs rain down on the innocent civilians in Gaza. Aid has only begun to trickle into Gaza after 11 weeks without anything, and we are told today that this is only six aid trucks. It is only a drop in the ocean of what is required and what this state was used to before the bombardment started. As a country that recently commemorated our own Gorta Mór, in the psyche of the Irish people famine now waits for Palestine. It has become a weapon for Israel. It is, as our President has said, forced starvation. We have children who are starving, malnourished, too weak to cry. It is like something from an historical Dickens novel. However, this is no novel; it is genocide by the Israeli state. The Labour Party has continued to call on Government to enact the occupied territories Bill in full and I welcome the update on that this afternoon. We will, as my colleague Deputy Smith says, bring a motion to debate on the floor of this House next week and it is already encouraging to see the support the House is giving that particular motion.

I acknowledge the Palestinian ambassador in the Public Gallery, whom we met today. She described the situation in Gaza as being beyond anybody's imagination. It seems Israel is being treated by some in the international community as a state beyond international law while Israel does everything in its power to end the State of Palestine. As my colleague has asked, the question is what the UN is doing in all of this. Last weekend I listened to a British surgeon who is working in Gaza. He said, "I mean, it's difficult to describe in words what's happening here ... [with the] constant sound of bombardment jets overhead. ... If Cambodia was the killing fields, then Gaza now is the slaughterhouse." What we need is a ceasefire now.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: This starts and ends with Benjamin Netanyahu. For many years,

Netanyahu and his regime propped up Hamas at the expense of Abbas and the Palestinian Authority in order to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and nobody has done more to undermine the State of Israel than Benjamin Netanyahu. Finally, we are seeing a shift - belatedly - in the position of the international community, with the exception of Ireland. Judgment is coming and not just for the perpetrators but for the enablers of this too. I am ashamed of the response of the West, with a few notable exceptions, on this. Germany, led at the time by a supposed centre left Chancellor, was responsible for 30% of the arms that were imported into Israel between 2019 and 2023. The British Prime Minister, a Labour prime minister, turned around and said it was acceptable in 2023 to suspend food, water and electricity to Gaza. I am ashamed of that as a Labour TD and I am ashamed as well to be European because of the response of the European Commission and the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

I acknowledge the work which the Tánaiste and the Government have done but we in Labour implore them to do more. This is the largest orphan crisis in history. More than 15,000 children have been murdered.

Finally, the use of propaganda by the Israeli regime no longer washes. This is the greatest crime of our time and we are seeing it on Instagram, on TikTok and on our television screens. However, this was foretold from the start. Israel said it would do this. This is not just a humanitarian crisis. It is an illegal occupation and a resulting genocide. Israel deserves to be a global pariah, and not today or yesterday. The fact of the matter is that to protect Israel's colonial enterprise in Palestine the world became complicit in the forced displacement of Palestinian refugees. Wherever Israel decided to forcibly displace Palestinians, the international community by and large funded, facilitated, armed and welcomed it.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: If the headline stated that 14,000 Irish, British or American babies would starve to death without aid in the next 48 hours, would we stay completely silent? If the answer is "No", ask yourself why and speak up now. We are witnessing a genocide being livestreamed on our handheld devices. Every day, people across the world are seeing images and videos of innocent civilians and children being slaughtered. There is no grey area. No one can deny the pure and simple fact: Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians. Israel has committed multiple war crimes. Israel has a terrorist government led by a war criminal.

I welcome and support the actions taken thus far by the Irish Government to call out this murderous Israeli campaign for what it is. I welcome the lobbying the Government has done in the European Union on behalf of the Palestinian cause. I welcome the fact that the Government has continued these efforts in the face of the EU's refusal to recognise what is happening right before our eyes. This week, 17 member states called for a review of the co-operation deal with the State of Israel. This is, of course, welcome but I cannot help but feel embarrassed at how long it has taken to get to this point. How many innocent children have been murdered to get to this point? It feels like some sort of a sick joke to reconsider the EU co-operation deal with Israel.

The Government must act. We must enact the occupied territories Bill, for the love of God. The Government supported every Stage of the passage of this Bill. It should enact it. The Irish people want it. Dáil Éireann wants it. The world needs to see it. The people of Palestine need it desperately. The Taoiseach often says in this Chamber that we are an outlier in Europe and the rest of the world with the actions we have taken. The fact that this Chamber may be the only assembly in the world that is saying Ireland is not doing enough should be taken on board. The country that the world views as having the most solidarity with the Palestinian cause is

calling on the Government loud and clear to do more. As a father himself, I do not doubt the Tánaiste's personal bona fides on this. It is positive to hear that he will bring an updated memo to Cabinet next week on the occupied territories Bill. However, I am fearful of this Government's response, not the Tánaiste's personal one. I remain hopeful. Dáil Éireann wants it. The people of Ireland want it. We have been on the side of peace and justice on this issue for a long time. We can do more. I am begging the Tánaiste to do more.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: With others in this House, and I am quite certain people right across the entire country, we share the horror of what we have been seeing going on in Gaza and across the Middle East. The denial of humanitarian aid to citizens is, as the Taoiseach rightly said, a war crime. The fact that we are now hearing evidence, as Deputy Duncan Smith has said, from a number of trusted humanitarian organisations which this country has always stood by shows the sheer depravity of what is going on within Gaza. As Deputy Sheehan has said, this can all be traced back to Benjamin Netanyahu. Even within Israel, there are now many voices speaking out against what is happening. Yair Golan, an opposition leader and a former deputy chief of staff of the Israeli army, stated this week, "A sane country does not fight civilians, does not kill children as a hobby, and does not aim to expel populations." It is very clear that the Netanyahu government is engaged in a bloodthirsty action that will continue to have serious consequences for many years to come and we need to do everything we can to stop it. There will be long-term scars, obviously for the families of the innocents who have been killed but equally for those who have been taken hostage by Hamas and have now spent 587 days in captivity. There are short-term challenges but our obligation, when we talk in this House about what more can we do, is to illustrate what that can be.

Yes, the immediate ceasefire has to be our top priority and every pressure needs to be brought to bear. I commend the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste on their work. The strong stance that has been taken by countries like Ireland, Spain and, indeed, Slovenia is finally being listened to by some of our European colleagues. For instance, the fact it was the Netherlands that brought forward the proposal to review arrangements with Israel at EU level shows that we are finally being listened to at a European level but the decision was only reached on the basis of a qualified majority vote. There are still nine member states that are not happy to enter into this, so there must still be a process of persuasion at a European level.

A critical point is that we, as a country, have always supported the principles of multilateralism and of engaging at EU and UN levels, and the evidence has shown consistently that this is what works. Ireland going it alone does not work. The way that we, along with Spain and Norway recognised, and rightly so, Palestine as a state, was the right thing to do. It stands to this House and to the late Brian Lenihan senior who, as early as the 1970s and in the 1980s, as the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, called for the recognition of the Palestinian state.

In our search for peace we need to move to where we go after this and to how we can guarantee the horrors we see now - and we have to stop them - can never happen again. How can we build some sort of trust among those parties within the Middle East? I believe that can only be done with the removal of the Netanyahu government but that is a matter for the Israeli people. I believe if an election were to happen, that would be what would happen. I also believe that can be done with the removal of Hamas, because they do not serve the Palestinian people either. It is in the interests of the ordinary Palestinian people that we must continue to speak out.

It is critical that when peace comes about, and there will be a requirement for a multilateral force to engage in peace maintenance, or peacekeeping, that Ireland will contribute towards

that peacekeeping initiative. We, in this country, have a very proud peacekeeping tradition, as everyone knows. However, I would say that if at the UN Security Council there is an attempt by the United States to veto any form of peacekeeping, if a multilateral peacekeeping mission is sought, then we should support it. We should work with those other members states with which we have so proudly stood in calling out these horrors and we should take an active part.

I believe we should listen to the peacemakers within the region. I am glad Ireland has engaged with the peace initiative of the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the former Palestinian foreign minister, Nassir al-Kidwa, where they have come up with a potential long-term solution which includes the recognition of the Palestinian state on the basis of the 1967 borders with certain land swaps, and immediate Israeli withdrawal, the move to elections in the West Bank and Gaza within 24 to 36 months and the establishment of an Arab peacekeeping force with engagement with Israel to ensure Israel's security. It is not just good enough to seek a ceasefire; we have to seek a long-term possibility for peace within this region. That will require us to ensure the people of Palestine and the people of Israel can live side by side well into the future.

It will be very important that we recognise the dangerous role of Iran in the region and that it is called out for its continuing support for Hamas and Hezbollah and as a global centre for cyberattacks. I do not believe we can simply divorce the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from what is happening in the broader region. We need to ensure we try to seek peace between all countries and all peoples within that region.

It is very important that we start to work with other countries towards a plan for the rebuilding of Gaza. Everyone knows the appalling state it has now been left in as a result of Israeli actions but it will be important that nation is rebuilt. Palestine will rebuild. It must be led by the Palestinian people but Ireland, working with our European and other partners, needs to set out a plan on how we can invest in providing support for the infrastructure, for the rebuilding of hospitals and schools, and for putting in a democratic structure that is in the best interests of the Palestinian people. Our immediate focus must continue to be on the ceasefire and on securing peace but I believe that in the long run Ireland can play an important role, learning from the experiences of our own peace process, in building confidence between the peoples of Palestine and Israel.

Deputy Barry Ward: This is a very important debate and one that is very close to my heart. I have spent quite a lot of time in the occupied territories in Gaza and in the West Bank. I have eaten iftar with friends in Hanunas. I have sat down with people in Rafah, Gaza City and other cities such as Nablus and Ramallah in the West Bank. This is a centuries old conflict. It is not something we will resolve quickly or anything like that. I am generally proud of what Ireland has done in terms of taking principled stance on this issue. I see Ireland as the first western country to have called out the behaviours of Israel as being illegal and contrary to all of the norms of humanitarian and international law.

I made a speech a number of years ago, when I was a Senator, in which I reiterated the fact that one can be opposed to Israeli actions without being an anti-Semite. The two are not mutually inclusive. Many of the commentators I see and hear on the Israeli side of the house would try to conflate the two as if somehow to oppose the illegal and genocidal actions of the Israel Defense Forces is to be opposed to the Jewish people, to be anti-Semitic or to in any way question their right to exist or to be where they are. Those two things are absolutely side by side and I have friends who live throughout Israel who are disgusted, appalled and ashamed by what is

being done in their name by the current Israeli government.

That is why this is not easy. There are always two sides to a story and this one seems particularly imbalanced. I acknowledge those Israelis who see the damage and the appalling nature of what is happening - the breaches of humanitarian law and of basic humanity going on there. I applaud them and encourage them to stand up wherever they can against what their government is doing.

I also know many Jewish people in Ireland - Israeli citizens included - who are appalled by what is happening there. This is not a black and white issue and it is not the bad guys and the good guys. We know what Hamas did on 7 October 2023 was in itself an appalling act of barbarism. Hamas sacrificed the civilian population of Gaza on the altar of its own political ambition and nothing more can be said about that. Every one of those hostages should be returned. There is no justification for keeping the hostages, for allowing them to die or, in the event of them being returned or their bodies being returned, to be paraded as war trophies the way they have been. It is disgusting and absolutely reprehensible and unjustifiable.

By a strange twist, while all of that is true, what Israel has done in response is also absolutely unjustifiable. It is outside the norms of any conflict I can think of. When we look back on this in years to come and when our children and our children's children look back on this, the questions we will have to be accountable for is: what did we do to try to stop it? Did we speak up? Did we use our influence internationally to say this cannot continue? I believe that, in Ireland, we have.

I support the occupied territories Bill but let us be honest, it will not stop a single bullet from being fired. It will not save a single Palestinian child from starving to death the way they are at the moment. It does not mean we should not do it. We should but let us look at what we can actually do. One of the things I was really heartened to learn this week was the fact that now other European countries are coming around to our perspective on this. I recognise that some European countries have a very difficult history with the State of Israel and with the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Second World War. None of that justifies acquiescing with the genocide that is currently happening. Anybody watching their televisions in Ireland yesterday and this morning will have seen reports from UNICEF, which is an independent broker and has no skin in the game other than to represent what is happening, telling us about the atrocities that are happening to children.

3 o'clock

It is a disturbing set of events. I have a child who will turn two next month. I cannot countenance the notion that she would be in that position, or that any of us, our children, friends, families or parents would be starved to death, not for any good or justifiable reason or legitimate end but because there appears to be a blood lust on behalf of Benjamin Netanyahu and his Government to wipe out Gaza.

Let us call it what it is. Let us do what we can and also recognise what we cannot do. One of the things we can do is broker that agreement with our fellow European states. As I said at the start, I am proud of the stance this Government has taken in building a coalition with such countries as Malta, Belgium, Spain and Norway and recognising the Palestinian state. These are all important things, but again, though they are important principles, as the occupied territories Bill will be, they have not stopped a single rocket being fired or saved any lives. What we

need to do now is build on that and speak to our European colleagues in all the other countries, especially those which are being acquiescent or intransigent on this issue, and make sure they understand exactly what is happening. I am not in Germany, Austria or Poland. I do not know what their national media are covering in respect of these issues, but what I see on our television and on the Internet from trusted news sources is appalling. It is absolutely unforgivable and will be stain on the people of the world for generations to come.

Let us take those steps forward, towards building alliances within Europe and showing we actually respect the rule of law. If we do not, what is it all for? I consider myself to be a proud European. In about half an hour, I will chair the first meeting of the Joint Committee on European Affairs in this House and I am looking forward to that immensely. I am immensely proud of what we have done within Europe, but I am also deeply ashamed of what Ursula von der Leyen and Roberta Metsola did. They are members of my party at a European level. I also recognise that they apologised for it, but it was unforgivable in many respects. To stand next to Israeli ministers and stand by them at the same time as they were openly saying they would commit war crimes is indefensible.

Let us move on from that and see what we can do about brokering alliances with other member states of the European Union, other nations which, like us, include people who respect the rule of international law. Let us recognise that we cannot allow to continue in Gaza what has been happening, that the collective punishment of civilians, including children, in Gaza is absolutely unsupportable and that the blockading of aid, those most basic things we all need in our lives, such as food, water and shelter, by a state that claims to be part, a normal member, of the international community cannot be allowed to continue. The thing about it is, however, that it will continue until the international community stands up and says it cannot. The difficulty we have is that there are major players within the international community, like the United States and some countries in the European Union, that will not take that stance. We can understand what their difficult history is, but none of it justifies what is happening, none of it justifies standing by, none of it means it is okay not to challenge Israel on the way it is behaving. None of it means Israel is not committing genocide or breaking international law.

All those things are happening and we are a member of the international community. Ireland is a country that has built its international reputation on respect for the rule of law and human rights and aid that is true to help people. Ireland needs to stand on its own two feet. I acknowledge what the Tánaiste has done in Europe, even this week. We need to build on that. We need to stop it because we will be judged on this by our children and grandchildren.

Deputy Pa Daly: This is not a time for equivocation. It is not a time for saying “on the one hand and on the other hand”. We have had 19 months of genocide, land grab, breaches of human rights and breaches of other international laws in Gaza. We have had two months of a blockade of basic human life-sustaining and life-giving aid for children. Last night, we were warned that unless this aid reaches people, 14,000 babies are likely to die within 48 hours. It is collective punishment of defenceless children on a grand scale. If this does not stop you in your tracks, I do not know what will.

Israel is acting with impunity as the world watches and what did Europe do? We sent candidates and singers to a manipulated rigged vote, a propaganda piece masquerading as a song contest, while the backdrop was scenes of innocent men, women and children being slaughtered on our screens.

I will quote Parnell, who said:

When a man takes [land] from which another man was evicted, you must shun him... by isolating him... as if he were the leper of old, you must show your detestation of the crime he has committed.

Is there no line Israel will not cross? Is there no land grab, murder, killing of children, medics, aid workers or journalists that will make the people of Europe shout stop? While there has been in the last few days international scrutiny of Israel's unrestrained war crimes, it is all words and what matters is action, but the world is resoundingly silent.

Our Government should be doing more. Since last August, there have been reports of Israeli war planes flying through Irish airspace with bombs, munitions and weaponry going to commit those crimes in Gaza, passing through our sovereign territory. What is the Government saying or doing? The Department of Transport has apparently been investigating Ireland's de facto open door policy to genocide. A draft report was produced in March, but the Irish people, most of whom would be horrified at the prospect of complicity in genocide, remain in the dark. Why is the Government remaining silent about this? If these planes are not in our skies, let us know, publish the report. It is another long line in the Government's failure to stand up against Israel's genocide. It should be standing more in solidarity with the people of Gaza. We saw it in the run-up to the election when the three-card trick produced by the Government was used to confuse the people about the occupied territories Bill. The Irish Central Bank continues to invest in Israeli war bonds. Our complicity must stop.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: When the Dunnes Stores workers made their stand in the 1980s in Ireland, the Government eventually followed suit. It led the way in confronting the South African apartheid regime internationally with sanctions and eventually that regime and apartheid in South Africa came to an end.

The Palestinian people recently commemorated the *Nakba*, the catastrophe, the ethnic cleansing of them from their lands. They have endured oppression, tyranny, genocide and now the mass starvation of their people and the world stands by, but I want to talk about us. We cannot even pass the occupied territories Bill, for God's sake. This is not sanctions against a regime or state. This is about the lands stolen by settlers. We are talking about sanctions against settlers who are committing war crimes as defined by international law. We are allowing commerce and trade to be done. We cannot even pass that Bill.

What has happened to us? There was a time when we led the way, inspired by ordinary workers in Dunnes Stores, in moral outrage and the world followed. We have utterly failed to honour our tradition when it comes to the Palestinian people - utterly failed. We cannot even pass the occupied territories Bill. Our Central Bank is dealing with Israeli war bonds. This is a shameful period. The Government should not console itself that it finally recognised the State of Palestine 12 years after a motion was passed by both Houses. It should not console itself that it finally supported the case in the International Court of Justice. It has held back the occupied territories Bill for years and is facilitating war bonds being sold. We are shaming our legacy in respect of a people that needs us so much more than anyone has.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Caithfimid a admháil nach bhfuil Éire tar éis a dóthain a dhéanamh chun an cinédhíothú a stopadh. Sa chéad óráid a thug mé os comhair na Dála, bhíomar ag glaoch ar an Rialtas an occupied territories Bill a chur i bhfeidhm. Ceithre mhí níos déanaí, níl

sé déanta aige. Tá sé soiléir le fada céard ar cóir dúinn déanamh. This Government has time and again defended inaction by stating that Ireland has done more than other nations to support the Palestinian people, but the bar is not merely on the floor, it is hidden under the rubble of Gaza. In my comments today, I will speak specifically about the role of the media and the nature of reporting throughout this genocide and about the normalisation of many breaches of international law and order. When it comes to reporting and the media, it is important to recognise the incredible work done by many Irish journalists. I would single out the coverage of RTÉ's "Drive Time" in particular. However, there are many ways in which reporting and journalism have been hugely problematic over the past 18 months. I have heard directly, as I am sure many in this Chamber have, from Palestinians and their allies how terrifying it is to be silenced in the face of genocide. Gaza is the deadliest place on the planet in which to be a journalist. Some 73% of journalists killed globally last year were in Palestine. While Israeli Government representatives are free to go on news panels, to give official lines and blatant lies that are accepted as true, editors all across the Western nations make sure to remind us that reported figures of dead children are from a Hamas-run health ministry. The words of Israel are never qualified by the fact that its Prime Minister is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes. We are told massacres cannot be independently verified, as I heard on the RTÉ News just this morning, with no acknowledgement that it is impossible to independently verify such statistics in Gaza because of the blockade. Always we are given an invitation to mistrust Palestinians reporting on the crimes committed against them but to accept whatever Israel says.

I condemn Hamas, but even now my words on the genocide are discounted by many and set aside if I do not take the time to repeat that condemnation of Hamas and its attack, time and again. We are not allowed to say what is before our eyes without indulging cynical both-sides narratives, something that the UN rapporteur, Francesca Albanese, called out live on RTÉ a number of weeks ago. All this, while blatant evidence of the murder of paramedics and the subsequent cover-up is countered by copied lines from the Israel Defense Forces press releases in the name of balance. We are not allowed to focus on the genocide without paying some respect to the official Israeli line no matter how high the lies pile up.

This propaganda and the actions of this Israeli Government have led to a normalisation of horrendous war crimes considered up until now beyond reproach. In the past few months, we have seen what was unthinkable become normal. At the beginning of the genocide, people were incredulous that Israel would bomb a hospital, a university, a school. More than a year and a half later, air strikes on hospitals, which are still heinous war crimes, have been completely normalised. They have been normalised by the impunity that Israel enjoys. Our lack of action as a nation, as an EU bloc, has legitimised that because anyone who believes in justice, in international law, who believes that these things are crimes against humanity, surely would have done something, anything, everything to stop it.

Crimes against humanity are called that because these crimes are an attack on every living person on this earth. If we accept them anywhere, we say that human life and dignity is optional. It has desensitised us to similar crimes the world over. Hospitals and civilian areas are bombed and attacked in Ukraine, Sudan and Congo. Our failure to protect the lives of the people of Gaza is a failure to protect all humanity.

Last week, I attended a briefing with healthcare workers for Palestine. One Government representative showed up to that. I really wish more of them had been there because what I saw and what was shared in that briefing room will stay with me for the rest of my life. Even now, our failure to act in a concrete way, to lead as a nation with such a clear solidarity between our

people and the people of Palestine, fails us all because in our thousands and in our millions we are all Palestinians.

I would like to set out clearly what our asks are, as the Social Democrats. At domestic level, enact the occupied territories Bill, including as it relates to goods and services; stop the sale of Israeli bonds from our Central Bank; end illegal weapons flights over Irish airspace and inspect planes; remove the flawed International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA, definition of antisemitism; examine the sale of dual-use goods; and use our diplomatic influence at EU level to seek EU-level recognition of the State of Palestine.

The review of the association agreement is welcome but it is revoking a privilege. We need sanctions, the same as have been imposed on Russia. We need to see true leadership from our EU leaders and from this Government.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Only now, after 19 months of siege and slaughter, after the images of starving Palestinian children with swollen bellies and hollow eyes, after the mass graves and the bombed-out hospitals, after the annihilation of entire families, only now do we hear the Government saying that next week, it will bring a memo in respect of the occupied territories Bill. Only now, when the scale of destruction has pierced even the most hardened conscience, when the term “plausible genocide” echoes in the halls of the UN, do we hear Europe agreeing to question or even just review its trade deals with the very state responsible. Let us not dress this up as courage. That is not leadership. This is a catch-up with our own conscience.

A Bill was written in 2018 with Senator Frances Black. Its purpose was clear, to stop Ireland trading in goods produced in stolen Palestinian land and to recognise that the settlements built through dispossession are not just illegal but are part of a system of apartheid and oppression. Fianna Fáil brought that Bill to Second Stage in Dáil Éireann in 2018. That was the punishment Fianna Fáil felt Israel deserved at that point. This is what is coming next week, the exact same thing, while we are on the precipice of a genocide.

Successive Governments have blocked the occupied territories Bill. They have delayed it and buried it under excuses and we were told it was complicated, that Ireland might get sued and that we needed to wait. Wait for what? Wait for the apartheid, the ethnic cleansing, the ongoing genocide that has been inflicted upon the Palestinian people by the State of Israel?

That moment should always raise a question that goes far beyond Ireland. What exactly does it take to say that when a state can announce its intent to annihilate another people, it can effectively do so without sanction? What does it say when a lack of food is used as a weapon, when journalists are targeted, when aid convoys are bombed and the international community keeps trading as if nothing is happening? Why should any nation on earth not feel emboldened to do the same when clearly there is one state on earth that has felt no consequences for its actions?

The EU found its backbone when Putin invaded Ukraine. Sanctions came swiftly, trade was cut and assets were frozen. There was no debate about sensitivity. There was no moral clarity. However, when Israel commits atrocities in broad daylight, we hesitate. We use the language of diplomacy to cover the language of war. We talk about complexity while children starve. We should have led on this. Our history could have enabled us to do so. We had the legitimacy of our own past to stand forward and lead, but we did not. We equivocated.

I hope this small step we take will be the first sign of consequence. Let this not be the end

of it. Let this be the moment when Ireland says we will not trade in the spoils of colonisation, stay neutral in the face of ethnic cleansing or look away while people are systematically erased. If our history means anything to us, it means we need to learn the lessons of our own history and apply them faster when others are enduring the same.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The horror going on in Gaza right now is beyond words. The UN reports that 14,000 babies could lose their lives in the next 48 hours unless aid is allowed in. It also states that almost 1 million children are at risk of famine. More than 16,000 children have been bombed and murdered by Israel in Gaza. These numbers, every single one of them, represent a child with parents. How can we as a common humanity allow this to continue? Our collective humanity, even the notion of a common humanity, is being bombed into the rubble by Israel and the complicity of countries around the world. What is happening in Gaza is that an entire population is being ethnically cleansed and children are starving and being bombed. It is an open-air extermination camp, with all the significance of what that concept is. The Irish Government is not doing enough. It could be doing more. We could enact the occupied territories Bill immediately, including services. We could stop the Central Bank from authorising Israeli bonds. We could stop the transport of military weapons of war over our airspace. We could be taking a lead at the UN General Assembly and leading an action that should be taken there. Do not say the Irish Government is doing all it could. It could be doing more and it must. We plead with the Government to do more. Because even if it is just one country, at least we will have stood up when the world has been silent and complicit with what is going on.

I spoke at length to a journalist named Abubaker for a podcast. He is a young journalist aged 22 years. I would really encourage people to listen to it. He is only out of Gaza a month. He described how he had sat down with his family about two or three months ago. They had no food left and they had to eat pet food. He described how that was the moment when he and his family were completely dehumanised and humiliated. He has come to Ireland and he took part in the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign march this weekend. He said there that he felt human again. He has been broken like so many people in Gaza. We have a responsibility to act. I commend all the protests being organised by people across this country and the world. We have to continue. We are not powerless. We have to stop this.

Deputy Liam Quaide: In his magisterial meditation on the Holocaust, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Italian survivor Primo Levi detailed in a chapter “Useless Violence” some of the cruelties and deprivations to which the Nazis subjected the Jewish community of Europe prior to their murder in concentration camps. The term “useless violence” reflected the lack of any rationale, even in the twisted logic of war, for this treatment. The point was to inflict suffering for its own sake. Levi gave the example of there being no facility for toileting on box cars that were packed with people destined for concentration camps. The severely ill, the elderly, the pregnant and children were forced to urinate and defecate in view of others on torturous journeys lasting days. Levi described this deprivation as “a trauma to which our civilization does not prepare us, a profound wound inflicted on human dignity, an obscene and ominous attack; but also the sign of a deliberate and gratuitous malignancy.”

The genocide that is being perpetrated by Israel today in Gaza has been distinguished by repeated and varied patterns of useless violence, symbolised for all of us by the thousands of aid trucks lined up at border crossings indefinitely as the population starves, and as what is left of society in Gaza moves closer to a state of anarchy while people get increasingly desperate and driven to the limits of despair. There are so many examples of this: the withholding of pain medication or anaesthetics from people who are in agony due to burns or wounds or from

women giving birth and undergoing caesarean sections; people with amputated limbs being denied crutches and wheelchairs; the targeted bombing of sanitation and sewage facilities to inflict maximum misery on survivors; and the countless videos posted by Israeli military personnel mocking victims of their crimes. The word “evil” should be sparingly used but if this is not evil, what is?

The scale of killing in the Nazi Holocaust was of a much higher magnitude than that of the Gaza genocide, but the contours of suffering and wanton cruelty and the clear intent to dehumanise and destroy a civilian population are increasingly similar, as all genocides share such patterns of inhumanity and destruction. The IHRA definition of antisemitism, which made its way into the programme for Government, forbids drawing such parallels and in so doing prohibits us from fully learning from history. The use of the IHRA definition to conflate criticism of Zionism with antisemitism will potentially harm our ability to fully oppose the horrific crimes being committed by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. It is not clear how this emerged in the programme for Government despite all the concerns that have been raised about it internationally. Will the Minister tell us how this came about and commit to overturning this programme for Government commitment?

Deputy Colm Burke: In 2009, I was in Gaza after Israel went in, following the changeover of the US President. It went in on 27 December 2008 and kept bombing until 18 January 2009. On 20 January, the new US President was sworn in. I was there in February 2009 and saw the devastation of less than 28 days of bombing, where 1,400 people were killed, of whom 400 were children. I was reporting to a subcommittee of the European Parliament on the atrocity that had occurred. Now, that has been multiplied by 100, with over 45,000 people dead, although the figure is probably far higher than that.

Article II of the Genocide Convention defines the acts of genocide as including “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”. Article III states that complicity in genocide is also a punishable crime. As we speak, genocide is being committed in Gaza. On Monday of this week, the Israeli finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, said, “We are conquering, cleansing, and remaining in Gaza until Hamas is destroyed ... We are disassembling Gaza, and leaving it as piles of rubble, with total destruction with no precedent globally”. In February, Nissim Vaturi, deputy speaker of the Israeli Parliament, referred to Palestinians as “scum” and “subhuman”. He called for the killing of all adult men in Gaza. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, speaks of total victory, which echoes the Nazi Second World War slogan of the final victory. Israel is now doing to the Gaza ghetto what the Nazis did in the Warsaw ghetto during the Second World War. If anyone doubts what kind of person Benjamin Netanyahu is, Alon Pinkas, former senior Israeli Government adviser, described him last September as a “vile messiah leading a cult of lies and death”. Another former head of the Israel Defense Forces and former Israeli minister for defence referred to Israel becoming a “messianic dictatorship that is racist, fascist, homophobic, misogynist”. There is no doubt the Prime Minister and his criminal crew have embraced what Sigmund Freud called the death drive. They are now motivated by the manic forces of death and destruction. Their final solution for the Gaza ghetto is the total destruction of the ghetto and the killing and ethnic cleansing of its people. Speaking this week, Yair Golan, a former senior Israeli general and now leader of the Democrats political party, said:

This government is full of people who have no connection whatsoever to Judaism. Vengeful types who are bereft of any intelligence, morality or ability to run a country in

a time of emergency. Israel is on the way to becoming a pariah state ... [like] the South Africa of yore, unless it reverts to acting like a sane country.

All the while, settler terror gangs are marauding across the West Bank, fully supported by Israeli security forces. Israel also embarked on a major bombing campaign in Lebanon and Syria and used the opportunity during the collapse of the Assad regime to grab more Syrian territory in the Mount Hebron region. Extremist politicians in Israel are advocating for a greater Israel stretching from the Nile to Euphrates. While the genocide unfolds in Gaza, the world stands idly by and issues calls for restraint. The time for talk has passed. The need for action is urgent. The time for action is now.

What is happening in Gaza has been described as a medieval starvation siege. Israel must be forced to stop. Europe is Israel's most important trading partner. It has a privileged association agreement with the EU. Israel is in gross violation of international law and therefore in breach of article 2 of the association agreement. Reviewing the agreement is welcome but genocide is already under way. The association agreement should be immediately suspended. There should be no trade with Israel while the blockade continues. More forceful action must be taken against Israel. The time has also come for a complete boycott of Israel - military, economic, social and cultural. Any person or country giving support to Israel as it pursues a campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing is complicit in these crimes. This is especially so for countries supplying military aid to Israel. The United States and Germany have the capacity to stop this genocide if they wish. To their shame, they refuse to do so. The bombs being dropped in Gaza are made in America.

The powerful Arab states in the Middle East appear to have abandoned their fellow Arabs and Muslims in Palestine. Shame on them.

The EU published its 2025 values document earlier this year. The section on human rights violations states that the EU will continue its work to end and prevent human rights violations globally, including those related to Russia's war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East, particularly Gaza. The challenge for EU leaders is to live up to their stated values when confronted by the situation in Gaza. Gaza is a political emergency and a moral crisis. The world is watching. The time for talk is over. Decisive action is now required.

In *The Irish Times* last Saturday, Berlin correspondent, Derek Scally, wrote a beautiful article about the life of a German Holocaust survivor who died at the age of 103. Her parents and brother were murdered in Auschwitz. She survived the war and emigrated to the US in 1946. She returned to Berlin in 2010 and spent much of the last years of her life informing and educating young Germans about the Holocaust. She kept repeating a powerful message:

There is no Christian, Jewish or Muslim blood, just human blood. People killed millions of people because they didn't see their victims as people. It is your task to make sure, in future, that nothing ever happens like what we experienced. My message is simple: be human.

The future she talked about is now. The Palestinian people of Gaza are human too. We have a moral obligation to come to their assistance to stop the killing, starvation and genocide.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Like every Member, I am horrified at what is currently unfolding, and has been for months, before our eyes in Gaza. On Sunday, there was a little hope with the Israeli statement, which stated it would allow some aid to cross the border into Gaza. However, with this morning's news from the UN that no aid has reached any civilian in

21 May 2025

Gaza yet, I just could not sleep last night thinking of the little children, like my own little children, who are in danger of dying from hunger in 2025, in a world where there is an abundance of food, simply because of the brutality of the actions of Israel. As the Tánaiste said, what is happening in Israel goes against our humanity. It goes against the strongly held values of the people of Ireland. It goes against all of our desire for peace, stability and security.

As a mother and a human being, this is heartbreaking. This is wrong. I know the Government has consistently called for a cessation of violence, the release of hostages and the supply of aid, and is working towards a two-state solution, but we need to see more action. We need our friends in Europe and beyond to stand with us, to call out what is wrong and to demand that Israel stops what it is doing, and the horror it is inflicting on the people of Gaza, who are experiencing unimaginable suffering at the hands of Israel. They are innocent Palestinian men, women and children. I am heartened by yesterday's announcement that the EU will conduct a review of the EU association agreement with Israel after the majority of member states supported a proposal to do so at yesterday's meeting of EU foreign ministers. There is no doubt this is a significant and important decision that reflects the grave concerns shared by member states regarding the ongoing military operations by Israel and the blockade of humanitarian aid entering Gaza. It is important to see the EU agree on the need to send a strong signal to Israel to reverse course, to halt its military operations and to lift the blockade on life-saving aid.

Children are in grave danger of dying of hunger. I cannot believe I am using those words in real time in the Chamber, and that I am not speaking about some historical horror. This is happening now, in real time, in your world, my world and our world. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to act. I cannot stress this more strongly: we need an immediate cessation of hostilities. We need the release of all remaining hostages. We need to see a surge in vital humanitarian aid into and throughout Gaza.

I am here to represent the many constituents of Carlow-Kilkenny who have urged me time and time again, in countless numbers of phone calls, text messages and emails, to urge the Government to take action, to stay strong and to keep pushing for what we all know is right, which is a cessation of violence in Gaza, the return of hostages, the immediate supply of humanitarian aid to the citizens of Gaza and the enactment of the occupied territories Bill. I welcome the news that the Tánaiste is bringing a memo to the Cabinet on that Bill next week. Ireland and Spain called for the review of the Israeli association agreement in February 2024 but did not get the support they needed at that time. I commend the Government on continuing to be consistent in its calls for the cessation of violence, the release of hostages and the supply of vital humanitarian aid, and its desire for dialogue in reaching a two-state solution.

We now need the European Commission to act with speed on the position of a clear majority of members. We need to see a timeline for action. We need that to happen quickly. We do not have time. The innocent women and children of Gaza do not have time, as there is clearly an urgency to this, considering the worsening situation on the ground in Gaza. The situation on the ground has become immeasurably worse, with catastrophic consequences for the civilian population and a clear and present danger of famine. We continue to witness appalling scenes in Gaza but we can take action. We now have two avenues for progress that I would like to see progressed. These are to take action in Ireland to pass the occupied territories Bill and, as a result of the decision on Tuesday, we now have an ability at EU level for speedy action. We need to see action. I believe that we are stronger together and that action at EU level will be far more impactful than anything we can do on our own domestically.

We need to strengthen our action. I thank the Government and the Tánaiste for his being so consistent in his messaging, in his calls for a cessation of violence in Gaza, for the release of hostages, for the free flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza and the need to work together towards a two-state solution. Underpinning all of the above, we need to stay consistent and strong, we need to keep pushing and we need to keep calling out Israel. We need action now.

I cannot finish my statement without mentioning our serving personnel in Lebanon, which is obviously very close to Gaza. As a former peacekeeper who spent some time in Israel, I remain concerned about the fragile security situation in southern Lebanon and our serving men and women of the Defence Forces, including the ongoing Hezbollah planning and the continuing Israeli strikes and overflights into Lebanon and Beirut. I urge all sides to meet their commitments under the ceasefire agreement. I commend the Lebanese Government on its efforts to deploy the Lebanese armed forces in the south to achieve a monopoly of force throughout the country. Israel's suggestion that it will continue to occupy parts of Lebanon - let me be very clear on this - is a breach of international law. Communities on both sides of the blue line must be allowed to return to their homes in safety. We also need to see a massive surge of humanitarian aid and assistance into southern Lebanon. I encourage the steps that are being taken by Prime Minister Salam's government to reform Lebanon's economy and towards Lebanon's reconstruction. I would like to see Ireland and the EU remaining committed to supporting this work.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I extend my solidarity to the Palestinian people. Israel has imposed a blockade across the occupied Palestinian territories, using the most brutal military tactics, and murdered tens of thousands of people. This is particularly true in Gaza where, over the past 19 months, there has been a systematic campaign of murder, forced displacement, attacks on health centres, the arbitrary detention of thousands of people, which has been a near-daily occurrence, and many actions that clearly constitute a genocide. Since the attack on 7 October 2023 by Hamas and others, the response from Israel has been brutal, uncompromising and criminal. Thousands of people, particularly women and children, have been killed by Israel. These attacks have targeted hospitals, schools, universities and displacement camps, and seen the forced displacement of millions of people. A number of politicians in Israel have been clear about their goal: the removal of Palestinian people from the land of Gaza. Israel, with the staunch backing of the United States, has been allowed to act with impunity. Israel faces no consequences and pays no penalty for the terror it has imposed on the people of Gaza. European leaders have been enablers of Israel as it has massacred men, women and children. Many of these scenes have been broadcast on our screens in the past 19 months, and Irish people are truly horrified at what they are watching.

The State of Israel seems immune to the criticism of the international community. Why would it not be? Condemnation without action can be and is being dismissed and ignored. The lack of sanctions allows Israel to continue to trade and gather resources for its campaign of genocide against the people of Gaza. No humanitarian aid has been allowed into Gaza in the past 80 days. We learned today that none of the tiny trickle of aid that has been allowed in recently has been distributed. Humanitarian trucks full of food and medicine are blocked and people are literally starving a few miles away. That is a genocide. Mr. Michael D. Higgins, Uachtarán na hÉireann, said on Saturday in Limerick at the Famine memorial day event that, during our Gorta Mór, food was leaving Limerick at the same time as people were starving, and that we are seeing similar scenes in Gaza. The UN and others have highlighted the widespread malnutrition in Gaza. Global hunger monitors have warned that 500,000 people face starvation and hunger. We in Sinn Féin urge the Government to use all diplomatic, legislative and political

options to press for the end of military action and the achievement of a lasting ceasefire.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: What we are witnessing in Gaza is not just a failure of diplomacy but also a moral collapse of the international order. The bombardment, forced starvation and displacement of Palestinians are not abstract tragedies; they are livestreamed horrors etched into our collective conscience. Ireland, with its history of colonial oppression and enforced starvation, cannot look away as mums and dads – those few who are left alive after 19 months of bombardment – watch their babies die of hunger in their arms. We need action, not words or statements. We need concrete, tangible actions.

Uachtarán na hÉireann, Michael D. Higgins, in his address at the national Famine commemoration, correctly stated that the UN Security Council is blocking action and thereby facilitating the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. He has pointed a path forward: the UN General Assembly. It can demand and approve an urgent UN-mandated humanitarian and peace support operation. Ireland is uniquely placed to lead in this regard as a neutral voice and former colony that is respected and valued internationally in Europe and the global south. In Waterford, groups such as Gaeil ar son Gaza and Waterford for Palestine demand sanctions against Israel and organise rallies, which are growing ever larger. Waterford is twinned with Ramallah in the West Bank and many towns and cities are following suit. South East IPSC organises aid convoys and Irish Healthcare Workers for Palestine sends vital supplies. Even children are acting here in Ireland. Scoil Náisiúnta na Rinne has, along with others, fundraised to send water tankers to Gaza, teaching us that empathy knows no age. Solidarity marches, rallies and vigils are growing in size and are happening in cities, towns and villages all across Ireland. That is patriotism. Solidarity is part of our DNA. Our history is the Gazans lived reality. We know right from wrong and we stand with Palestine. In this context, it is beyond infuriating that the Irish Government refuses to follow words with tangible, concrete actions.

Despite the review and the progress of recent days, the EU–Israel trade deal still stands. Israel enjoys preferential trade with the EU while committing genocide. The Government is still blind – wilfully, if we are being honest – to the use of our airspace to equip the genocide. The Irish Central Bank is used as a conduit for Israel’s so-called war bonds, financing the horrors unleashed on the captive civilian population of Gaza. If there is any shred of humanity, the Government should take tangible, strong actions, enact the occupied territories Bill, close our airspace to those transiting weapons and components, and lead the UN General Assembly.

Deputy Seamus Healy: We must now ask ourselves whether the State, the Government and we as a people are complicit in genocide. I acknowledge the State’s support for the South African case in the international courts, the Taoiseach’s description of Israeli action in Gaza as a “war crime”, and the statements at the weekend by the Taoiseach and other Government leaders; however, we must do more. We must take action. What is happening in Gaza is the ultimate appalling vista. It is the deliberate destruction of the Palestinian people by bomb, bullet and starvation. This country, because of its Famine and its neutrality, has unique moral authority and, indeed, an obligation to lead the international community in stopping this genocide.

Shockingly, the Government is complicit in genocide. It is allowing the Irish Central Bank to sell Israeli Government war bonds. It is allowing planes carrying arms through Irish airspace, and military planes are going through Shannon. This must stop and we must immediately enact the occupied territories Bill.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: As we all grapple with the images of deliberate starvation

that we see in Gaza, each one of us thinks about what meaningful actions we can take in the face of such obvious war crimes. Ten months ago, the then Tánaiste, Taoiseach and I all received the same legal advice, namely that passing the occupied territories Bill was legally possible with some amendments, following the opinion of the International Court of Justice. The Government has since told us that it plans to introduce its own legislation, which will ban only goods produced in the occupied territories but not services. The Government has never told us why. It has said it received legal advice. What is it?

In the letter the Attorney General sent us last year, there was no mention of the need to make a distinction between goods and services. There was a 23-page letter going into great detail about the issues the Attorney General had with the Bill but there was not one reference to the need to make a distinction between goods and services. Let us remember the obligation the ICJ says member states have regarding the occupied territories: to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings with Israel concerning the occupied territories. The International Court of Justice has made no distinction between goods and services. Ten months ago, the Attorney General made no distinction between goods and services. On what basis is that distinction being made now?

Deputy Charles Ward: Some 14,000 babies in Gaza will die if aid trucks do not reach them in the next couple of days. Just think about that. We cannot help but question where the humanity is in this world today. Israel is carrying out a blatant, deliberate genocide for the world to see. What are we doing about it? How can we allow this to go on? We are seeing shocking images of dead and dying children every single day in Gaza. We are hearing reports about children who are so malnourished that the doctors cannot even tell what age they are. No child, no matter what and no matter who they are or where they are from, should be starved to death by a government. We have to intervene. If we continue to do nothing, we will continue to facilitate the atrocities. What Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli Government are doing is a crime against humanity. We continue to do nothing about it. We must enact the occupied territories Bill, yet the Irish Government continues to delay it and water it down. We have never seen anything like this in our lifetime. We must do all we can to save 14,000 children within the next 48 hours, the 48 hours after that, and the 48 hours after that. Stop the genocide.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Israeli finance minister stated, “We are annihilating everything that remains in the Strip”, “we are conquering, clearing and staying”, and “the world still hasn’t stopped us”. That is the Israeli finance minister admitting in plain sight that Israel is carrying out a genocide. Food trucks are sitting by with baby food and baby formula, and 14,000 babies are set to face death in the next 48 hours, according to the UN. What does malnutrition actually look like? It is a shutting down of the body’s mechanisms. It is absolutely the most horrible way for people to die. The Taoiseach said “no business as usual” but it is business as usual.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: He said it was a war crime.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Tánaiste said global momentum is building, but what happened yesterday with the EU? Those concerned sat on their hands as this information was brought to their attention.

The EU and UK are feeling the pressure because half a million people took to the streets in London and there were huge marches all over the globe. The global movement of ordinary people is the only light that shows humanity still exists. The sanctions the EU has imposed on

21 May 2025

Russia include travel bans, the immobilisation of €210 billion in Russian central bank assets, and trade restrictions. What has the EU imposed on Israel? Absolutely zilch. One hundred and nine thousand people are considered to be dead, according to *The Economist*. The Government can pass the occupied territories Bill, stop Shannon being used, take away the definition of “antisemitism”-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: No, no.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----and stop the Central Bank of Ireland from processing bonds in Ireland.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The level of death and destruction in Gaza demands us not just to talk but to act and to do everything possible. What is happening is genocide and war crimes. Gaza is not just a warzone; it is a horror zone. The State of Israel is a terrorist state. Its Government has stooped to a level of depravity never seen before. It is shameful, and that Government will never be forgiven lightly for what it is doing: 53,000 dead, thousands buried beneath the rubble, families missing, neighbourhoods missing, hundreds of thousands of people injured and maimed, and up to 2 million starving while truckloads of food stand at the border and are stopped from entering by terrorists from the IDF. They are called the IDF but I call them a bunch of terrorists.

The Palestinians have been hunted and hounded by Israel since 1947, a refugee population within their own country. What does it take for the so-called civilised world to act? I acknowledge that the Government has joined the South African case at the International Criminal Court. I accept that we have recognised the State of Palestine, that we are sending aid to Palestine and taking in injured children and that we want a cessation of all hostilities, but we must do a lot more. We have also been part of the call for the Israeli-EU trade agreement to end. This shows what a neutral state can do when we put our mind to it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Stanley.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is okay.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We need to pass the occupied territories Bill, step up efforts at EU level and use our position as a neutral State on the international stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Catherine Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: There are two of us left, so it is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I know but, at the same time-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is okay. I just wish to be fair to the other speakers. I know it is difficult for the Chair.

I have attended many protests, as all my colleagues have done. There was a time when I was most uncomfortable with the chant “Israel is a terrorist state” because I am an absolute democrat. I have no such reluctance now and I am ashamed that I was not comfortable with that chant because Israel is a terrorist state. It is out of control, it is a rogue state and it has got that far because it has done everything with impunity from the big powers that be, including Europe, America and many other countries. We have just learned that a delegation from 22 EU countries overlooking a refugee camp in the West Bank has been shot at. We are told that

the delegation “deviated” from the route. The only deviant here is Israel. It has deviated from international law.

The speeches the backbenchers made today were absolutely wonderful. I was near tears with the passion. I wish they had made those speeches earlier, when we were appealing to the Government to stop Israel from acting with impunity. Today we are looking at 14,000 children about to die in the next 48 hours. What words will we now use? We have set the lowest bar in telling ourselves we are very good. We let troops through Shannon. Ireland’s exports of dual-use goods to Israel increased sevenfold in 2023. We are trading with Israel and we have failed to enact the occupied territories Bill. We learn now that tomorrow, in the face of 14,000 children about to die, a memo will go to the Government. Shame and embarrassment come to mind but, most of all, let us act and show leadership.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Palestinian people are being starved to death in Gaza. We have heard again and again, rightly, about the 14,000 babies who face death from deliberate starvation in the next 48 hours. This is while the Israeli Government is openly boasting about the ethnic cleansing being carried out. Let us not forget that the bombing continues, with 82 Palestinians killed by this indiscriminate bombing in the last 24 hours. We should not allow a few late weasel words in the West to obscure the fundamental truth that this is a genocide made in the West. It is one that could not be happening if it were not for the funding, the arming and the supporting by the US, Germany, Britain, the European Union and many other countries.

What does the Irish Government do? It is true that the Irish Government has good, strong words of criticism of the war crimes of Israel. We could do with a very clear statement describing what is happening as genocide. What actions, however, does the Government take? Ultimately, its defence is that it is less complicit - less complicit than Starmer or Biden or Trump. The Minister of State and his Government, however, are still complicit because they are not acting to stop a genocide. They are dragging their heels on the occupied territories Bill. We heard from Deputy O’Gorman about the advice that he received and that has been published by *The Ditch*. The Attorney General was clear: it is a political choice not to proceed with that Bill. The Government is allowing Israeli war bonds to be traded in the European Union, authorised by the Irish Central Bank, shamefully. The Government is doing nothing - hear no evil, see no evil - about the thousands of tonnes of munitions flying illegally through Irish airspace to be used in this genocide. When I raised this with the Tánaiste two weeks ago, I got a letter back from the Minister for Transport saying that an examination is ongoing and that a considerable amount of documentation has had to be scrutinised. This has been happening for nine months, during which time the airlines have said it is happening and this has been on their waybills. We know a draft report was finished on 13 March. When will the report be published? When will action be taken to stop these overflights?

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is great to have the Minister of State here. We are all here speaking on the same matter, looking at the photos and the videos of what is happening in Gaza and the horrendous situation playing out right in front of our eyes. I utterly condemn the continuing Israeli military operations. I wish to speak about the fresh hell the Israeli Government has brought upon the Gazan people. There must be an immediate ceasefire, the release of all remaining hostages and the resumption of unhindered humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza at an unprecedented scale. Israel’s humanitarian blockade is pushing Gaza closer to a hunger crisis, to starvation. Israel is starving the people of Palestine, and the blockade must be lifted immediately. What we are witnessing is nothing short of a humanitarian crisis and a catastrophe. The death toll among Palestinian civilians, particularly women and children, is

absolutely unconscionable. The destruction of homes, schools, hospitals and other vital infrastructure is not accidental; it is systematic. We see the use of collective punishment, the denial of humanitarian aid and the deliberate targeting of civilian life and dignity. Let us be honest: these are not isolated incidents; they are war crimes. They are grave breaches of international humanitarian law. They demand a response that matches the scale of the injustice.

Palestinians in Gaza are still waiting for aid after Israel's so-called ending of the 11-week blockade on Sunday. The UN says its teams have not been able to distribute aid. UNRWA, the UN's Palestinian refugee agency, has said supplies are "sit waiting" in a warehouse just a few hours' drive from Gaza. People in Gaza tell the BBC that the situation is "getting harder every [single] day" as global experts warn of an imminent famine in the territory. It is said that 14,000 babies are at risk of dying in the next 48 hours. It is a shame on this world that we are allowing this to happen. Even to imagine what 14,000 little bodies, little people, look like and to think that the world is standing by - we are standing by and looking at starvation and those babies dying.

Europe cannot continue with business as usual. The EU-Israel Association Agreement, which was built upon mutual respect for human rights and democratic values, must be reassessed. Israel has absolutely breached those contractual obligations. Those values are not being upheld - not even remotely. Therefore, it is time for the European Union not only to review but to suspend that agreement. To continue trade and co-operation under these conditions would render those principles meaningless.

I acknowledge the strong and principled role the Irish Government has played throughout this crisis. Our voice on the international stage has been clear and consistent. I commend An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin. His leadership, his engagement with the UN, his call for a ceasefire and his efforts to ensure accountability have been recognised across Europe and beyond.

4 o'clock

Ireland must continue to lead not just with words but actions. That is why this House must give serious consideration to the occupied territories Bill as soon as possible. This legislation would prohibit the import of goods from illegal settlements in occupied territories in an Act that aligns with international law and Ireland's long-standing commitment to human rights.

Let us be clear. This is not about being anti-Israel. It is about being pro-human rights, opposing the illegal annexation of land and saying international law must mean something even when politically inconvenient. Fianna Fáil has always stood for the principles of peace, justice and international co-operation. Our history in foreign affairs is rooted in the defence of multilateralism, diplomacy and the rule of law. In that spirit, we must all speak with a moral clarity and act with resolve. It is not a time for ambiguity; it is a time for Europe and Ireland to match our words with action. The people of Palestine have waited far too long for justice and for real and definite help. We owe it to them and the principles we claim to uphold - we need to act now.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I strongly condemn in the most certain terms the brutality Israel is inflicting upon the innocent people of Gaza. Equally, I strongly condemn in the most certain terms the atrocious acts committed by Hamas, particularly those of 7 October 2023. The murder, maiming and unjustifiable terror being waged on innocent people on both sides of this conflict have no place in our world yet they continue, to the horror of the world looking in. The continuing Israeli military operations which have brought fresh and unwavering suffering to the

people of Gaza are blatantly in breach of the ceasefire, international law and basic humanity. There must be an immediate ceasefire, the release of all remaining hostages and the resumption of unhindered humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza at an unprecedented scale.

Israel's blockade is pushing Gaza into a hunger crisis. It must be lifted immediately. The UN's head of humanitarian aid said that unless aid reaches the people of Gaza, 14,000 babies could die in 48 hours. It is wrong in principle and in law to inflict hunger and suffering on a civilian population whatever the circumstances. This behaviour clearly constitutes a war crime. It is wholly unacceptable to contemplate the mass displacement of the people of Gaza or to talk about permanent occupation. Not only is it an affront to decency and international law, history tells us it offers no solution. Ireland remains convinced the implementation of the two-state solution is the only way to establish lasting peace and security for Israel and Palestine and the wider region. Ireland must continue to work with international partners to step up our efforts and achieve this goal. I recognise the stance Ireland has taken from the outset of this conflict in particularly and officially recognising the State of Palestine along with Norway and Spain a year ago this week. For a long time, we were one of few nations in the West that spoke out against the crimes being committed by Israel against the Palestinian people.

I have just come from the first meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth. The young people for whom we are setting policy today will study what we are living through as part of their history. I have no doubt they will look back with shock and, rightly, disgust at the delayed response from so many in the West - the EU, the current US Administration and others - and ask how this was allowed to go on for so long. Thousands upon thousands of children, women and men have been displaced, murdered, starved, chased from their homes and terrorised. Aid workers and journalists have been killed, hospitals have been levelled and genocide has been committed. Vital aid has been prevented from reaching people who are now being starved. History will judge what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank today. It will not be kind nor should it be. A two-state solution is the only solution to this issue. Those responsible for war crimes must answer for them. We should suspend the EU-Israel trade agreement. The EU needs to move a lot faster than it has to date. Innocent people in Palestine and Israel deserve to live in peace, free from the threat from Hamas and the Israeli military. The international community must now step up and act to prevent further war crimes, murder, killings and the displacement and terrorising of an innocent people.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I speak not only in condemnation but in deep outrage at what we are witnessing in Gaza. More than 53,000 Palestinians have been killed over the past 19 months, children have been bombed in their homes, hospitals and shelters, starved due to the denial of aid and treated as pawns in a brutal campaign that flies in the face of every principle of international humanitarian law. Entire families have been wiped out in a matter of minutes, refugee camps have been flattened and hospitals have been deliberately targeted. These are not unfortunate by-products of conflict; they are deliberate acts and war crimes. We must call them that, which they are. Bombing and starving children is not just immoral; it is genocide. The Israeli Government has ignored calls for ceasefires, violated international law and imposed a blockade that has pushed Gaza to the brink of famine. The UN warns that 14,000 children may die before this weekend if aid does not reach them. That is not just a tragedy, it is a policy choice. The release of all hostages is essential. The atrocities of 7 October were abhorrent and must never be forgotten or excused but they do not justify the systemic and disproportionate assault on an entire civilian population. Collective punishment is illegal and unacceptable. It must end.

This crisis has laid bare the urgent need for meaningful international action. I welcome the decision by the European Union to review the EU-Israel association agreement over human rights concerns. This is a long overdue and vital step. Ireland and Spain first called for this review in early 2024. I commend our Government for persisting on this front. I ask it to look at a full suspension. The reality is that trade and economic co-operation cannot continue as normal with a state committing clear violations of international law. The EU must go further and suspend trade preferences where human rights abuses are evident. We must stop rewarding impunity. That is why the occupied territories Bill, which I have always fully supported, is more important than ever. With the EU now moving to review trade co-operation with Israel, the legal and international context for this Bill has fundamentally shifted. This legislation can no longer be delayed. It is not symbolic; it is a real, lawful expression of our values and obligations under international law. It is necessary. I welcome that it will be brought before the Cabinet next week.

I raise growing concerns about the implementation of the IHRA definition of antisemitism in this context. While we must always challenge and condemn antisemitism in all its forms, we cannot allow a definition, even one that is well intentioned, to be used as a shield for a government's actions or to silence criticism of clear human rights violations. The lead drafter of the IHRA definition, Kenneth Stern, warned that it is being misused to stifle free expression and legitimate debate. It is deeply worrying that adopting this definition in full could impede Ireland's ability to speak out clearly and credibly on Gaza or prevent civil society from advocating for Palestinian rights. Criticising the actions of the Israeli state is not antisemitic. It is our duty when those actions constitute war crimes.

This House cannot look away. We must continue to push, as this Government has pushed, for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages, the lifting of the blockade, unfettered humanitarian access, legal accountability for war crimes under international law, the advancement of the occupied territories Bill, a full review of EU-Israel relations with a human rights focus and a suspension of the trade agreement for the breach of those human rights, and to ensure no flights in or out of this country are harbouring war weapons and that war bonds are not being sold through the Central Bank. Peace, as we have seen in this country, will not come through violence or domination. It will only come through reconciliation, justice and a recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, dignity and a future free from occupation and fear.

The Taoiseach has made extremely strong statements today and in the past, as has the Tánaiste. I welcome the fact we have such strong leadership in this country. It is acknowledged internationally that the position of the Irish Government is one of supporting the people of Palestine. A more collective understanding of the efforts the Government is, and has been, making is needed across this House, particularly in the context of the EU and trade. While I support and wish to see the occupied territories Bill advanced, there are natural concerns from Government. Hopefully, those concerns can now be overcome. The matter is coming before the Cabinet next week and we will hopefully see progress in that regard.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: First, I extend solidarity with the people of Palestine. What we bear witness to in Gaza is a starvation of a nation. The response of many world leaders over the past 19 months has been non-existent. It has been the actions of millions of ordinary people the world over who, at every moment, have challenged their governments' failures. The Government has failed meaningfully to defend international law and to deploy, in most cases, meaningful sanction in the face of humanity. It has provided political cover for the genocide

that has unfolded before our eyes. In the worst instances, ordinary people have challenged the Government for arming the rogue force.

The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste want to laud themselves as being one of the most pro-Palestinian governments. I caution them that their moral superiority is relative. In this case, it is relative to those who have provided political cover and weaponry of genocide to Israel and morally superior to those who in the past week have just woken up to the genocide after more than 50,000 people have been murdered and with 80 days of total siege. It is only now, when 14,000 babies are at the brink of death, the Government believes it is warranted to conduct a review of Israel for breaking human rights obligations. While I acknowledge the Government has joined the ICJ case, the Government believes this leaves it as the most pro-Palestinian in the world. It is a sad day for Ireland.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is exactly what the Israeli Government accuses us of.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: A review is nearly 19 months too late. How long will it take for the Government to wake up? It has been investigating the legal transit of genocide-bound weapons through Ireland for nine months. Where is that report? It is time to recognise Israel for what it is, namely, a rogue state that has to be sanctioned as soon as possible.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I add my voice to the many voices in this House and the thousands of the voices around the world condemning the Israeli Government on what is legitimately described as a calculated, ethnically-cleansing slaughter of the Palestinian people. Israel is demolishing their homelands and denying them their true birth rights. Before the eyes of the world, Israel is systematically demolishing Gaza zone by zone. It is flattening infrastructure, including homes, hospitals and water facilities, and using starvation as a weapon of war. It is flouting international humanitarian law and attempting to diminish the International Court of Justice. We are witnessing Israel's propaganda machine in full motion when it declares that these are legitimate acts of war and a justification for killing innocent people, including women and children. A total of 53,528 are dead and more than 1,119 wounded, not to mention the killing of 166 journalists and a shocking 224 humanitarian workers. Some 300 UNRWA workers have also been murdered. The language of mainstream media, with words such as ground offensive or ground operation, is repeated instead of calling it what it actually is, namely, a full scale invasion by anyone's moral compass.

The renowned Palestinian humanitarian rights activist, Mahmoud Nawaja, recently visited Leinster House. He said that complicity is the enemy of his people and that boycott and divestment are the two non-violent tactics anyone can use. For example, the Australian company funding Norwegian pension funds has divested from former Israeli military industries. What can we do and what should we do? As a nation, we must stand with the downtrodden and the oppressed. We must stand with the besieged Palestinian people against apartheid and genocide. We must introduce the occupied territories Bill now and stop being complicit in the use of Shannon Airport. The Government must stop acquiescing in the act of selling Israeli war bonds through the Irish Central Bank. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment must be held responsible for deploying dual licenses for products and components that are used for military purposes in the destruction of the Palestinian people. Government contracts with Israeli military companies must be forensically examined and transparent. The people of Palestine will always have the support of the Irish people. We say no to genocide, apartheid and colonisation.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is not a numbers game but rather a humanitarian catastrophe. The whole population of Gaza, including 930,000 children, are now in famine. With our own history of an enforced famine at the hands of an occupier, the Irish people have a unique understanding and empathy for the people of Gaza. Some 66,000 children suffer severe malnutrition and 14,000 babies are potentially facing death within 48 hours if aid does not reach them. These are not statistics; they make up sons, daughters and futures lost. There are no moral means to condone this by right-minded people.

We have all seen the horrific images that no parent or child should ever have to witness of children being buried under rubble, hospitals turning to ashes and families being torn apart. We in Independent Ireland say that our neutrality gives us a powerful voice. Ireland's neutral status, which is enshrined in the triple lock system, is not a weakness but a strength. We are not beholden to any military alliance. That makes us a trusted broker, especially for those who have no voice in the big geopolitical arenas.

Our role is not to take sides but to push for peace. This war is brutal on all sides. Israel has the right to protect its citizens. No one denies that. Collective punishment and the displacement of 90% of Gaza's population, the blocking of food and medicine and the bombing of hospitals is not defence, however. It is a breach of international law. We must be honest about the facts and not blinded by emotion or ideology. There has been 356 incidents of settler violence in the West Bank this year alone. Entire Bedouin communities have been displaced. A total of 431 Palestinian structures have been demolished. This is not how peace is built. Out of the 36 hospitals in Gaza, 27 have ceased operations and the remaining are functioning at partial capacity, which severely limits the availability of medical care.

We must also acknowledge the pain and fear in Israel where more than 1,700 lives have been lost, including 260 innocent festival goers on 7 October. We do not condone violence by Hamas. Hamas is not a partner for peace. Its actions, rocket attacks, tunnels and hostage-taking have deepened suffering for Palestinians and Israelis alike. If Israel continues on its current path, however, it strengthens rather than weakens Hamas.

Where does Ireland come in? We do not come in through grandstanding or expelling ambassadors. Expelling the Israeli Ambassador would close doors to peace rather than open them. It would be immature and dangerous. As I said before, we need open dialogue, not empty gestures that makes us feel good but leave people suffering. We can lead diplomatically. Ireland must push at every international level, be that at the EU, the UN or directly with the United States, to demand: a full and immediate ceasefire; the release of hostages; full humanitarian access to Gaza; an end to settlement expansion in the West Bank; and most importantly, the resumption of peace talks aimed at a two-state solution. Independent Ireland calls for the Irish State to be practical, not performative. We need to use our relationship with the USA Administration in particular to advocate for peace. We need to work through backchannels, which is the kind of diplomacy Ireland excels at, to bring both sides back from the brink. We have done this before. Ireland played a proud role in peacekeeping from the Congo to Lebanon. We understand conflict. We lived through our own Troubles. We also understand that peace is not made by shouting but by listening. This is our chance to live up to the promise of our neutrality. We should not sit idle but rather lead quickly, firmly and consistently in the name of humanity. While peace is still possible, it is important it must start with an immediate ceasefire and allowing aid to be delivered without any restrictions. In the most ironic way, I ask all Members to pray for peace in the Holyland.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Israel and its government have murdered 53,000 people. The grim horror of that sentence is still incredible when you think about it. Hamas has murdered 1,700 people, is a terrorist organisation and must release all hostages. However, Israel is killing 51 people for every person Hamas has killed. My colleague, Deputy Collins, is right that it is not about numbers, but it is about proportion and 51 times the level of blood has been shed by the IDF than has been shed by Hamas, a terrorist organisation. That reflects what Israel is today.

I never imagined I would ever see this level of death and destruction happen in the world in real time and I never imagined most of the international community would turn their back to it and ignore it as well. One of the reasons it is happening in real time is because it is underwritten by the European Union and the United States. Ursula von der Leyen strode the world stage distorting Irish foreign policy, distorting the views of the Irish people and she said the European Union would protect and support Israel. What is happening is incredible. We are seeing bombs land on hospitals, bombs land on schools and bombs land on tents. The bodies of babies are being atomised by armaments being supplied by the United States of America. That underwriting by the West is an absolute kick in the moral authority of the West that will be felt in the future. The West can never look to a conflagration or conflict anywhere else and speak with moral authority anymore as it allows this to happen. I am quite shocked the West has not broken the blockade on food coming into Gaza. It is an absolute disgrace that the West is allowing this to happen and is not dropping food into Gaza.

There is no doubt this is a genocide. There is no doubt either that this is not protecting Israel. Israel is foolish if it thinks murdering children is a protection of its people and its borders. The murder of children historically has been a force of radicalisation. It has been a force to make other people take up violence against the state committing those atrocities. Our own history echoes significantly with what is happening in Palestine, where there is enforced famine and state killings of innocent civilians. Irish people in the main see themselves in the eyes of Palestinians who are suffering in Gaza and the West Bank. That the West Bank is being planted with illegal settlers and that this State and other states are buying products from those illegal settlers and allowing them to gain profit from the illegal plantation of those parts of Palestine is incredible. In many ways, if you allow people to profit from this level of murder and destruction, you are in some way responsible for it as well.

The European Union has been a disgrace on this issue, it has been shocking on it and it is dragging its feet considerably on the EU-Israel association agreement. That should be brought to an end. This Government, while stronger than those of most other European countries, is not doing enough on that. We need to speak more strongly, more openly and independently of other people in the European Union.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Today it is 80 days since the humanitarian aid blockade of Gaza began. This regime has long since passed the threshold for what would constitute legitimate defence following the horrific and condemnable Hamas attacks on October 7. This was already genocide before the deliberate and inhumane blocking of lifesaving food, medical supplies and shelter, not to mention continued bombing, but new lows continue to be reached. The UN says no aid has yet been distributed in Gaza despite a few lorries starting to cross the border after 11 weeks. It estimates 600 trucks a day are required to begin tackling this chronic humanitarian crisis, so nothing is happening in real terms. UN humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher said today that as many as 14,000 babies could die in Gaza if Israel does not immediately let aid in. These babies are suffering from severe acute malnutrition and many of them will die over the next number of hours if food is not supplied. What is this if not another Holocaust? To be

clear, it is sanitised extermination. There is no defensive justification. It is murder, pure and simple. The entire conflict over decades has been one-sided in terms of the atrocities committed, with Israel responsible for multiples of deaths. There have been ratios of 20:1, 30:1 or 50:1 depending on the sources and time periods. One life is precious and any life is precious, but the facts are undeniable. Despite this the world watches and lets the murder continue, except for a few lone voices.

It appears things have got so horrific that even the EU, or at least some of its constituent member states, may be waking up. At this week's meeting of foreign ministers in Brussels, foreign affairs chief Kaja Kallas announced the European Commission would review the EU-Israel association agreement. We have yet to see what details emerge, but even from a signalling perspective this marks the first formal response to mounting calls for stronger EU action over the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. It is long overdue even if it is too little too late and if the Government was involved in pushing for this then fair play, but we need real, tangible action and not platitudes. The EU has a preferential trade agreement with Israel that allows Israeli goods to enter European markets with reduced tariffs. Suspending this would significantly impact the Israeli economy and potentially force the Israeli government to reconsider its policy. There are a whole load of areas of co-operation where engagement could be frozen and in this respect I ask the Minister of State to ask the Tánaiste whether there have been any discussions on whether the EU could restrict banking and financial transactions with Israeli institutions that support settlement expansion and military operations. This would make it harder for Israel to fund its activities in Gaza and the West Bank. For our part, we need to hurry up and bring the occupied territories Bill forward at the earliest opportunity. While it was good to see the arms embargo Bill pass to the next Stage in the Seanad unopposed, I hope the Government will continue in that spirit over the coming months and get it passed through the Dáil.

As I have said before, and feel compelled to say again because of the propaganda machine out there, I have nothing against the Jewish people. I condemn antisemitism. I acknowledge Israel's right to exist. However, it is a powerful state that is abusing its power and committing atrocities. I feel for those families attacked by Hamas and condemn it outright, but this is nothing, in number terms only, compared to the atrocities being carried out against innocent Palestinians. As I and others have said, one life is sacred, but anyone with a moral compass will recognise Israel has committed way more atrocities. This is why we in Ireland stand steadfast with the oppressed in Gaza. We know what it is like to be oppressed and we will not be intimidated in the face of any threats from the Israeli government or indeed from the White House. It is good the rest of the EU and Europe appears to be finally waking up, but we will see. We must remember change only comes about when the bullies are confronted head on.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Emer Higgins): Every time we speak in this Chamber about Palestine the situation is worse, but it is still important to speak about it in this Chamber, in our national Parliament, because that is a privilege people whose voices are being silenced do not have. Some 14,000 babies in Gaza are at risk of dying if humanitarian aid continues to be blocked. These are innocent, helpless lives, yet there is still no breakthrough. Tragically, we are not actually talking about them being "at risk" any more as it looks like it will become a certainty unless those blockades are removed. That would mean 14,000 innocent, helpless lives lost in fear, in pain and in misery.

Having spent time in Palestine I have seen at first hand the utter disdain with which the Israel Defense Forces treat Palestinians daily, and that was before this escalation. I cannot begin

to imagine what it must be like now and I do not think any of us can. However, collectively we are heartbroken, devastated and sickened. That is because this is not hidden but happening right in front of us. That is what makes it really hard to understand and why we cannot comprehend why it just is not stopping and why the EU and the US are not doing more. It is not just horrific; it is deliberate, it is avoidable and it is happening in full view of the world. This week Israel has launched another intensification and that is despite international condemnation. Because of Israel's deliberate actions, the humanitarian system in Palestine is crumbling. Food supplies are depleted, children are starving to death. UN agencies are being forced to shut operations right when they are needed the very most. UNRWA cannot fulfil its mandate any more. Aid workers, some of the kindest, bravest souls there are in our world, are being killed. Essential supplies are being used as a bargaining chip. Aid is being weaponised. That is the very essence of a war crime. It is a clear breach of international humanitarian law. Ireland has been a strong but often lonely voice on the international stage in support of the people of Palestine. We were among the first to formally recognise Palestine and intervene on the genocide case in the International Court of Justice. We have called Israel's actions out for what they are - war crimes.

As an elected representative, I have worked with Sadaka and others to help influence Irish, EU and UN foreign policy. Last week, I met again with the Palestinian ambassador to Ireland, as I have done regularly since I was elected a councillor. She thanked Ireland for showing our continued international leadership. What struck me the most was that so many of her colleagues are lonely voices in the countries where they are posted. Many of her fellow ambassadors are still fighting uphill battles to get their governments in their countries to speak up for Palestine. I am so proud of the way in which Ireland has supported our ambassador of Palestine. I am in awe of her strength and all that she is doing for her people. Last week, she asked me to do something simple but powerful. She asked me to help Ireland use our diplomatic voice to influence the United States and the EU, which have significant sway and must do more to bring about a ceasefire. I commend my colleagues in the EU, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and the Tánaiste, because yesterday we saw some of that influence come to bear at EU level. We saw the correct and, in my view, overdue decision to review the EU-Israel association agreement. Given the ever-worsening situation in Palestine, that agreement should be suspended while the review happens. That is the bargaining chip the EU has right now if it backs the survival of 14,000 babies over the destruction of innocent, helpless lives. Of course we absolutely condemn Hamas's horrific attack on 7 October, but nothing justifies the collective punishment of an entire population like this.

What Israel is doing in Gaza and increasingly in the West Bank is not self-defence. It is the use of overwhelming force against a trapped civilian population and it has to stop. Ireland has not been afraid to say that loud and clear on the international stage but we need others to do it with us if we are to have a meaningful impact on Israel, and if we are to release those blockades and save those 14,000 babies.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: A few weeks ago, I raised the issue of Gaza here on the occasion of statements in respect of the European Council. I noted that we needed a united European voice in response to the conflict. Unfortunately, across the Continent we have not seen that united voice. I certainly welcome yesterday's news regarding the review of the trade deal but, sadly, since then the situation in Gaza has not changed. In fact, it has worsened, with fears of more deaths, starvation and destruction. It was reported this morning that 93 trucks carrying aid entered Gaza yesterday but, according to the UN, Israel's new security processes are preventing it from reaching Palestinians on the ground. I am at a loss for words at this stage of the con-

flict, knowing what we know now and seeing the atrocities unfold directly before our eyes, that the people of Gaza are being led to forced starvation. I have said before in this House that the memory of famine lives large in the Irish people. The idea that any state would be deliberately using starvation as a weapon of war is unconscionable.

I welcome the EU foreign affairs chief's indication that there will be a review of our trade arrangements with Israel, but I worry about the timeline of this. The people of Gaza need real solutions and driven action. They need it now, and Israel cannot be allowed to continue getting away in this manner. I particularly welcome the comments of the Taoiseach today in the Chamber that he not only welcomes the review but believes there should be a suspension of the EU-Israel trade agreement while that is taking place. This would obviously go far further than the occupied territories Bill, which I and many other people hope to see passed in this House and in respect of which the Government proposes to bring legislation. Suspending the EU-Israel trade agreement would prevent trade between Israel and the entire EU bloc. The Government statement on that is welcome and I ask others around Europe to consider it.

The response of the Israeli Government to this conflict is wholly disproportionate. Whether or not there are breaches of international law - I believe there are and agree with the Taoiseach that there is a war crime here - we are seeing a complete lack of morality on the part of Israel, which has led to the atrocities in this conflict. To inflict hunger and suffering on a civilian population is immoral. What has continued to unfold day by day in Gaza is plain and simple genocide. We must remember that those who are suffering the most at the heart of this conflict are vulnerable children, the sick and the elderly.

I understand there are complexities and challenges to ensure the safe arrival of aid trucks to the region. However, the UN is now estimating that approximately 600 trucks per day are needed to address this humanitarian crisis. With only 93 trucks entering the region yesterday, this is entirely inadequate. We need a complete flooding of humanitarian aid into Gaza. We need the work of agencies like UNRWA to be supported. The Irish Government has not only supported it but protected it from other countries' attempts to demonise it. We cannot allow ourselves to become numb or desensitised. Judging from the emails that come into my inbox and the calls we get, the Irish people are not desensitised to this issue. There is a clear humanitarian blockade directly impacting on the assistance of people on the ground. Israel is pushing Gaza closer and closer to hunger and crisis.

Nothing I have said takes away from the horrible atrocity that took place on 7 October, the need to release hostages or the need for Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace in the long term. We have to cry stop, however, when such disproportionate action is taking place. Ireland has been a lonely voice on this for some time, as the previous speaker said, but it is welcome to see others coming to the table. I noted the presence of members of the House of Commons Procedure Committee in the House today when the Taoiseach made his comments. There was a very different debate in other countries on this issue. I welcome the fact that in some countries, people are waking up to the horror that is happening in Gaza. Violence without repercussions is just not tolerable.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Since this tragedy began 20 months ago, we have heard some of the most passionate and sincere contributions in this House from people whose concern is palpable about what we see transpiring before our eyes. Our inboxes over recent days have been inundated by correspondence from members of the Irish public right across the country who are concerned, troubled and heartbroken by what they see happening in Palestine. At the risk

of repeating myself, when this conflict commenced with the Hamas attack and kidnapping on a kibbutz in Israel 20 months ago, I pointed out here in the Chamber that the terrorist organisation Hamas deserves to be brought to account. I also pointed out, however, that we have a right to expect that sovereign governments' behaviour will be far better than the behaviour of any terrorist organisation. The Netanyahu regime has shown itself in the intervening period. He has shown himself to be a monstrous leader and his Government a monstrous authority that has done so much damage not just to the Palestinian people whose lives they have taken and whose children and women they have slaughtered but to the State of Israel. The State of Israel has a right to exist. I respect and love the Jewish people but I deplore, detest and reject Netanyahu and his people.

We should not, however, be here today to just engage in the politics of condemnation because what the people who are emailing us are saying is enough talk, let us see some action. I am proud this Government has taken action and has been a leader among governments, not just in Europe but in the world, and while that may not be recognised sometimes in this House, it is bloody well recognised in neighbouring countries like Qatar, Türkiye, Morocco and many other countries in the region that Ireland has been firmly on the side of the people of Palestine.

I want to put forward a couple of quick proposals. Convoys of aid are gathered on the border waiting to get in while children are at risk of dying. Why does the UN not have the capacity to go in and provide safe corridors of access for those aid convoys? Why is the EU not doing what Deputy Tóibín suggested in providing airdrops of aid into the country? If the UN cannot do it and the EU cannot do it, why do we not try to put together an alliance of like-minded countries that would have the courage to do it?

We need to highlight to the world the purveyors of arms to Netanyahu. These countries and these people might as well go and slaughter the children of Palestine themselves because when they provide the arms to the government, they know what is going to be done with them. The US, Germany and the UK seem to be the principal providers. I do not think we could embarrass the Trump regime, but we can make an appeal to the decent American people over the head of Trump. We do not need to be skilled historians to understand the complexity of the relationship between Germany and the State of Israel, but Germany needs to realise it is not assisting the State of Israel by assisting Netanyahu. In fact, if it wants to assist the long-term development of the State of Israel, it will do it best by embargoing Netanyahu and his regime. Likewise, the British Government would do well to wake up and see the damage it is doing as well.

The EU-Israel Association Agreement has been referred to, and what the Taoiseach said this morning was valuable because to review something is purely tokenistic if it is going to take ages and if it is not accompanied by an immediate commitment to suspend.

We need to identify and name those countries that provide succour to Netanyahu or fail to condemn. They, too, are complicit. They, too, have the blood of the innocents on their hands. Let us all unite in calling for an immediate ceasefire and a lasting peace.

My wife and I look at TV every evening. We look at those little children with their wonderful brown eyes. We wonder what will happen to those children who survive this atrocity. What will they be doing and what will their attitude be in ten years' time? One thing is certain. Unless urgent action is taken, they will not have to be radicalised.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Looking at what happened to an ambulance and all its crew travelling

through Gaza, I wonder what the response of the IDF would be to an humanitarian corridor, but everything needs to be tried. Listening to the contributions of both the Government and the Opposition this afternoon, it is worth pointing out that many of the statements from both sides of the House could be construed as antisemitic according to the IHRA definition to which this Government signed us up. While every effort must be made to stamp out antisemitism, the IHRA definition must not be used as a pretext to criminalise activism against genocide, as has been seen in some parts of Europe and the US.

There are more than 53,000 dead in Gaza now, the majority of them women, children and the elderly. Nine aid tracks were allowed to enter Gaza on Monday. This is a trickle when we need a flood and is only permitted so that Israel can turn around and say it is letting supplies in. It is cynical and callous but it is predictable. There are 2 million people starving in Gaza and that is not an accident. They are being starved just as surely as they are being bombed. The people of Gaza are being denied access to food, water and medicine. What shelter they can cobble together from tarpaulins and sheet metal is woefully inadequate. Far from the lies and smokescreen surrounding the first attack on the Gazan hospital in October 2023, Israel is now deliberately targeting medical facilities and storage areas, such as at the Nasser hospital, which had half of its precious reserves of medical supplies destroyed.

The Israeli Government has said there will be no let-up and no negotiations. Some countries, such as Britain, Canada and France, are only now discussing possible targeted sanctions against named Israelis. This is hardly enough. If Ireland and the wider EU do not take concrete action now, we are giving *carte blanche* for the levelling of Gaza and its resettlement by Israel. This is not an exaggeration. This is the stated wish of Netanyahu. As a state, Israel must be held accountable for its action and for the wanton destruction and brutal violence that has rained down on the heads of Gazan children.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: The United Nations has reported that up to 14,000 children in Gaza are at risk of starving to death in the next 48 hours. That is the same number of children under the age of 18 living in Carlow. It is unimaginable to picture that amount of death for such innocent children - 14,000 childhoods erased in 48 hours. The genocide in Gaza is reaching levels of unimaginable horror. Yesterday, the EU Foreign Affairs Council met and agreed to take the softest action possible in reviewing the EU-Israel trade agreement and see whether Israel is in breach of Article 2 of the agreement, on respect for human rights and democratic principles. In the next two days, 14,000 children are expected to starve to death and the best the EU can muster up is a review into whether Israel is breaching respect for human rights.

Israel's crimes against humanity, its deliberate attacks on hospitals, civilians and medical personnel, could not be documented any more clearly but the EU is still unsure as to whether Israel is breaching a respect for human rights. We need to be frank with our EU counterparts. The EU is complicit in this genocide and in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Arms and public funds continue to flow from Europe into Israel. We need sanctions on Israel and an arms embargo. We need to stop the flow of arms through Shannon and Irish airspace to Israel. We need an immediate cancellation of the EU trade deal.

Israel is a rogue, terrorist state and needs to be treated as one. While ours is only one state within the EU 27, there is so much more we can do at home. We can enact the occupied territories Bill and the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill. All the main parties gave their support to the occupied territories Bill in the run-up to the general election but, of course, it has fallen into the category of the broken election promises of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. We

need to end the sale of Israeli bonds by the Irish Central Bank. It is the inaction of the EU and our part of the international community that has emboldened Israel to take its genocide to new levels because it sees and feels that it is untouchable, thanks to its supporters within the EU.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: What we are witnessing in Gaza is an humanitarian disaster. Thousands of people have been killed. Thousands more are missing under the debris and rubble and more than 1.5 million face starvation. Entire neighbourhoods have been obliterated. Children are dying of hunger. Hospitals, schools and refugee camps have been bombed, and still the world hesitates.

I condemn the atrocities carried out by Hamas on 7 October. The killing of civilians and taking of hostages are crimes, but we cannot allow this condemnation to be used as a cover-up for what is happening right now. This is not self-defence. This is collective punishment that is targeted destruction of civilian life on a massive scale. These are war crimes. This is a genocide and the blockade must end immediately.

Ireland cannot and must not turn away. Neither should the European Union. This is why the European Commission's recent announcement to review the agreement is not only welcome but is long overdue. A growing number of member states, including Spain and Slovenia, are joining Ireland in demanding action. There is now clear momentum across Europe for an economic response to what is unfolding in Gaza. Let us be honest that diplomatic statements are no longer enough. The EU has real leverage. Trade and access are not just policy tools but they are instruments of accountability. The continued provision of economic benefits while war crimes are being committed is indefensible. Ireland cannot wait for a consensus to find its voice. We must lead. We must speak plainly. We must act with the same urgency we would demand if this suffering were happening elsewhere, because if we say we believe in human rights, now is the time to prove it.

The programme for Government committed to progressing legislation that would ban goods from the occupied territories and a direct response to international law and the International Court of Justice's opinion. That includes the occupied territories Bill. I have raised this multiple times. We need to take a stand. It might just lead to momentum and it can start there.

I would like to speak briefly about a young man who I met in my constituency, Amir, and his host, Marina. Amir is a Palestinian refugee from Gaza. I have met him multiple times and he has told me about everything he has faced, but he still has hope in his heart. His heart is heavy. His family remains in Gaza. His father has been displaced by war. His mother has public health qualifications. His sister is studying medicine, while under fire, and a younger sister is still in school in Gaza. This family has strength, education and resilience but they are separated. I have asked the Tánaiste to really look into this case for family reunification and I would like to raise it again please.

Deputy Gillian Toole: As a teenager, I was angered, interested and repulsed by the atrocities of the Second World War, as experienced through history classes, documentaries, Anne Frank's diaries and, in later years, exacerbated by visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau and Treblinka. Surely this would not and could not happen again. An end to man's inhumanity to man, morality and Maslow would ensure that we had moved on, but no. The daily news reports and images, and the evocative and graphic contributions by Members are proof positive that we do not learn from history.

21 May 2025

The announcement of the review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement yesterday is welcome but I am sad to say it is long overdue. Sanctions against Russia were implemented with urgency. Why not against Israel? A balance between commerce, economics, well-being and indeed life and death must be the bedrock of this 21st century. I would refer Members to Rutger Bregman's book, *Utopia for Realists*.

Enough is enough now. Hamas's cause has gained exponentially from the barbaric atrocities carried out by Israel against the most vulnerable Palestinian children, older people and women. The Arab countries' agreement on a joint plan for the reconstruction of Gaza is welcome and urgent. I fear that Israel's future and especially that of the lives of its innocent citizens hangs in the balance. They will become more exposed and vulnerable because of warmongering, provocative and lethal actions. The ceasefire is required now. Let aid and food through to the Palestinian people.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to say a few words about the mayhem that is taking place, in our time, in another country. I know that Ireland can do very little but we need to stand up and be counted. What is happening is barbaric. We see children, old people and women being starved. People are being starved in this day and age. In case someone does not know about it, I know what hunger is from my grandfather and grandmother telling me of when people were hungry here, what they went through and what they had to go through when they did not have anything to eat. They were poorer times. Gladly, that is not the case here in Ireland today. There is no one hungry like that, or there need not and should not be. It is terrible to starve people. They may not even have water. To think that this is happening.

I was glad to hear the Taoiseach talking today in the manner that he did. It was important. We have to play some part, through sanctions or whatever, and drive it home to Europe that it has to be more human. We are talking about a bit of humanity. What Hamas did was very wrong and it should release the rest of the hostages, because surely it is not blind to what is happening or what it is causing to happen. It should stop it and enact a ceasefire right away because it is terrible. I have youngsters who play football and so on and they ask why we cannot do something for these people. I know we can do very little but we need to stand up and say what we feel, because it is terrible. It is in our time. We are Members of the Irish Parliament and we must talk about it. We may offend others by doing this but so be it. It has gone way too far.

To think that children are going to starve, my God almighty, what is the world coming to at all? They cannot be let get away with this. I see that ordinary Israeli people are rising up against Netanyahu. He is not a man. There is no humanity at all in him to do what he is doing to innocent children who do not know what is going wrong. They are starving, thirsty, and their families have been broken up, with no contact with each other. You could not imagine that this is happening in our age, in the time we are living in. We had the atrocities of the Second World War, Auschwitz and all the terrible things that happened. We see films being made about it but this is reality. This is what is happening in front of our eyes. We can see it on the news every morning, noon and night. It is getting worse and worse. To think that Europe is making so little of it is disappointing. We are part of Europe.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, for sharing his time with me and allowing me to contribute to this really important discussion. It is clear that we are witnessing war crimes every single day. Every day when we turn on our TV, open our phones and our newspapers, we can be in no doubt that what we are witnessing is a brutal war on children unfolding before our eyes. Every time we think

things cannot get any worse and that there are no more lines to cross, we are proven wrong. The UN has told us that 14,000 children will die of starvation in the next two days, or less, because it made that statement yesterday. That is 14,000 innocent children on top of the 15,000 who have already been killed, murdered, in Gaza. That is on top of the 34,000 who have been injured. These are innocent children and innocent families who are living through hell, experiencing unimaginable pain, hunger, suffering and loss.

For 11 weeks, not a single ounce of aid has been allowed to enter Gaza. This is a deliberate action from Israel to simply deny people access to food, medicine and basic painkillers. The meagre amount of aid that has been allowed to enter Gaza this week will not change the fates of so many people who are facing starvation, who are injured, who require immediate medical attention, and the doctors and humanitarian workers who are risking everything to help those who need it the most. We saw only in the last few minutes a confirmation that Irish diplomats and other diplomats have been shot at in the West Bank by Israeli soldiers.

5 o'clock

Ireland will not stand by. We are working on a daily basis with our colleagues in the EU. We have consistently called for a review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. We welcomed the move yesterday but it has not happened fast enough. We recognised Palestine almost a year ago. We have increased our contributions to UNRWA when others turned away and we will legislate for the goods imported from occupied territories. Above all, Ireland will not be silent. The suffering we are seeing, the bombardment of children and the innocent people of Gaza at the hands of Israel who are living in pure unadulterated hell as we stand here today is beyond comprehension. We need an urgent ceasefire. We need to see the release of all hostages. Above all, we need to see the full flow of aid and we need to see it now.

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I thank everyone for their contributions. I will be clear from the outset, the attacks by Israel, which have all been detailed in this debate, are a further erosion of the principles of international humanitarian law that Israel is bound to comply with. People have been clear, as I am, in our condemnation of Hamas for its terror attack, for keeping people in captivity today and for the death and destruction it has brought to Palestinians and Israelis alike. Those hostages who Hamas is holding need to be released. We cannot be clearer about that.

Israel's plans to expand its military operation in Gaza and establish its prolonged presence is deeply alarming and will further compound an already dire situation. The humanitarian situation is horrific and the continuing blockade of humanitarian and commercial supplies for Gaza is rapidly deepening the hunger crisis in Gaza that has been outlined across this House. The UN World Food Programme has said that food stocks in Gaza are now depleted. UNICEF has warned that children are experiencing severe malnutrition. Israel must lift the blockade immediately. The obstruction of lifesaving aid by Israel is a violation of its international obligations. The Taoiseach said very clearly that it was a war crime. Israel must fulfil its obligations under international humanitarian law. The Israeli security cabinet decided on 4 May that it would take control of the distribution of humanitarian aid as a condition of lifting the blockade. The UN has described this as unacceptable. The UN's humanitarian chief, Tom Fletcher, said it was a "cynical sideshow". Ireland has been clear from the outset. We get criticised a lot by the Opposition but we get equally trenchant criticism from the Israeli Government. When we meet people who have similar views to us on the situation there in terms of supporting a two-state solution and having huge empathy for the people of Palestine, I certainly get thanks from other

ministers from other governments for the actions and the leadership of this particular Government.

The EU must of course speak clearly on this worrying development. The Taoiseach and others today, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail in particular, have said the EU works on the basis of unanimity. It has not been possible to get unanimity on some of the actions we would like to take in this situation and the reasons have been well set out. I welcome that the High Representative, Kaja Kallas, issued a joint statement with Commissioners Šuica and Lahbib on 7 May stating that the new mechanism that Israeli was engaging in was counter to humanitarian principles as underlined by UN agencies and humanitarian partners. We call upon the Israeli Government to immediately reverse its current policy, lift the blockade and let the humanitarian aid in to everybody. We are also absolutely clear - we cannot be clearer - that there cannot be any forced displacement of civilian populations anywhere, let alone in Gaza, and that Israel cannot occupy the Gaza Strip. This was made clear by Ireland and other EU member states recently at the EU-Israel Association Council in February. I am glad that this particular agreement is being reviewed. People can criticise it. Ireland was the first country along with Spain to look for this review and we have worked really hard as everybody in the Opposition has asked us to on a multilateral basis using our reputation and our neutral status. We have done all that and that has led to this today. However, it takes time with other member states of the European Union. We have been consistent in our leadership at EU and international levels in response to this conflict and our diplomats work really hard under the policy direction of Government. It is absolutely disgraceful today that two Irish diplomats were part of a planned diplomatic visit by a group of diplomats to Jenin with the Palestinian Authority when the Israel Defense Forces shot at them. Thankfully, no one was harmed. However, it is totally unacceptable to shoot at anybody but putting diplomatic representatives at risk, ordinary civil servants who are just going about their job on behalf of their country, we condemn in the strongest possible terms. It is absolutely outrageous.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: If I may, with the Chair's indulgence, I was not aware of it at the time I spoke and I wish to add my condemnation of that appalling attack. It is a disgraceful attack on any diplomat particularly Irish diplomats.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Yes, I think the word came through during this debate. I only heard about it when I came into the Chamber.

As I say, we have taken leadership on the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The Taoiseach was very strong again in calling for that agreement to be suspended while the review takes place. The EU must use all the levers at its disposal with the urgency that the situation demands. We in Ireland will use all the tools at our disposal to respond to this dreadful conflict and work towards achieving the aims.

We have provided over €87 million in support of the people of Palestine since January 2023. Of this, more than €75 million has been provided by Irish taxpayers through the Government in humanitarian assistance in response to the suffering caused by the conflict in Gaza since October 2023. This includes €58 million for UNRWA since 2023. Again, we have supported UNRWA. We have been steadfast in our support at an EU level and not everybody has been in the same position. We have provided humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza through other agencies, including the World Food Programme and the Red Cross and the Red Crescent societies. Through our rapid response initiative, 116 tonnes of relief supplies, including family tents, tarpaulins, blankets, water cans and hygiene kits have been provided. There are currently

two consignments of humanitarian aid in Jordan awaiting entry to Gaza. Both consignments have received permission to enter Gaza but they cannot do so because of the blockade.

UNIFIL was mentioned. It is very important that we remember our colleagues in UNIFIL because we welcome it continuing to play an important role next-door in Lebanon. We have seen incidents of aggression by the Israeli army against UNIFIL forces in its area of operation and that is unacceptable. Our solidarity is with all of our soldiers and all of the other soldiers working under the UN flag. Any deliberate targeting of UNIFIL personnel or installations is a violation again of international humanitarian law.

We have been active at the ICJ. We have filed detailed written submissions with the ICJ in advisory proceedings concerning the obligations of Israel in relation to the UN and other international organisations in the occupied Palestinian territory. Those proceedings arose from a UN General Assembly resolution. People were asking us to bring resolutions to the General Assembly and this is one that Ireland co-sponsored last December following the adoption in October 2024 of legislation by the Israeli Parliament which in effect prohibits the presence and activities of UNRWA. It is a considered set of legal arguments which cogently reflects our national position. I strongly reject suggestions some have made that by only doing written statements, which is the normal procedure, that we are somehow deficient in our support. We are leading the way at EU and UN levels, exactly what the Opposition is accusing us of not doing. We are being criticised by the Israeli Government for all of this. I stand over everything we have done and will continue to do in the court.

The long-term impact of the physical and mental scars being inflicted on children in Gaza is totally unconscionable and others have mentioned this. It is difficult to imagine the untold suffering they have experienced. Government approval was secured in September last for Ireland to evacuate a number of sick children from Gaza for treatment and care, following an appeal from the WHO to address the current health needs of people from Gaza. To date, 12 children and their family members have come to Ireland under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. I am sure everybody is proud that Ireland was able to offer these children the care they desperately need. Both medical evacuations required the efforts of numerous Government Departments, led by the Department of Health, and our embassy team in Cairo. It was a whole-of-government approach and thanks go to everyone involved. This is consistent with our support for the people of Palestine.

I have to reject this thing that keeps coming up that somehow Ireland is complicit in this, or the Irish Government is complicit in this. It is completely and utterly unconscionable that that would be said in this House. We have led the way on this. We are doing absolutely everything we can. It requires decisions at the Security Council, over which some countries have the power of veto, at the UN and at the European Council of Ministers, where everybody has power of veto over foreign policy. We are absolutely steadfast in our support for the Palestinian people and for a peaceful two-state solution and in our opposition to anti-Semitism in this country and around the world, and are working hard on that. On this idea of being complicit, the Opposition should just stop using these words. It can criticise the Government, hold it to account and ask it to do more - that is what oppositions do. However, to say that somehow we are complicit is just disgraceful language from the Opposition. We will continue to speak as loudly as we have been and we will continue to be that voice that has been recognised all over the world.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.10 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.10 p.m.

Biodiversity Week: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan): It is a privilege to address the House today to mark National Biodiversity Week, my first since being appointed Minister of State with responsibility for nature, heritage and biodiversity. This week continues to grow in reach and impact, with over 350 events happening nationwide. It is a time not just to celebrate Ireland’s rich natural heritage, but also to reflect, take stock and recommit to the urgent task of protecting biodiversity. Since taking up this position, I have been deeply moved by the people I have met across Ireland - farmers, conservationists, local leaders, volunteers and of course National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, staff - who are dedicating themselves to the care of our natural environment. Their passion, knowledge and sense of responsibility are both humbling and inspiring.

In 2019, this House declared a climate and biodiversity emergency. The 2020 programme for Government responded with the most ambitious nature commitments ever made by an Irish Government. Now, as in the 2025 programme, we are accelerating our efforts to meet the scale of the challenge. Since 2020, Ireland has made substantial and measurable progress in biodiversity protection, driven in large part by the renewed capacity and leadership of the NPWS. A major step forward came with the publication of Ireland’s fourth national biodiversity action plan, NBAP, in January 2024. This plan represents a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach to the governance and conservation of biodiversity. For the first time in the history of the State, the NBAP is underpinned by law, following the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2023, which mandates both the legal requirement to have an NBAP and to report on its implementation and progress.

Supporting the NPWS is key to supporting biodiversity in Ireland. Since 2020, core funding has increased from €28.7 million to €78 million in 2025; staffing has grown from 349 to 577; and the strategic action plan for renewal, published in 2022, has been delivered. The NPWS now manages eight national parks, including two new additions since 2020, as well as a large network of nature reserves. By making strategic land acquisitions, safeguarding corncrake habitats and expanding Connemara National Park, we are protecting endangered species while promoting sustainable tourism. The NPWS conservation measures programme is developing and implementing conservation measures on special areas of conservation, SACs, and special protection areas in the Natura 2000 network in Ireland, and addressing threats and pressures to the qualifying interest habitats and species in these sites, with conservation measures implemented at over 90 Natura 2000 sites in 2024. The NPWS farm plan scheme continues to grow and to engage with farmers and landowners to support nature on the land, through encouragement, advice and financial supports, with a goal of over 500 farm plans in progress by the end of 2025. The NPWS is also continuing to support community initiatives through the peatlands and Natura community engagement scheme. In 2025, funding of over €800,000 has been awarded to 45 community-led projects.

The local biodiversity action fund, LBAF, operated by the NPWS, has delivered nearly €11 million to local authorities since 2018, supporting 262 projects across 31 local authorities this year alone. Most local authorities now have a biodiversity officer, thanks to the Heritage Council’s rollout of the biodiversity officer programme. We have also launched biodiversity duty

guidelines to help public bodies to embed biodiversity into everyday decision making. We are seeing powerful partnerships emerge. Coillte and the NPWS have signed an memorandum of understanding for greater collaboration on nature projects. Bord na Móna continues peatland rehabilitation, with over 19,000 of 33,000 ha restored. The Business for Biodiversity platform is fostering private sector engagement. We are developing Ireland's nature restoration plan under the new EU Nature Restoration Law. Cross-border work continues through the shared island and PEACEPLUS initiatives. In addition, our built and archaeological heritage, including vernacular buildings, castle ruins, dry stone walls and earthworks, play an important role in the protection of biodiversity. Increasingly we are experiencing the co-benefits of measures and schemes which lead to improved awareness, care and protection of our built and archaeological heritage while also delivering significant benefits for biodiversity, such as through our community monuments fund, ACRES and farming community-led schemes. Farmers as generational custodians of our remarkable heritage landscape need to be acknowledged and fully supported in this regard.

These achievements offer a powerful snapshot of the heritage division's enduring commitment to safeguarding biodiversity and restoring nature across Ireland. Under the leadership of the Minister, Deputy Browne, our Department is supporting this work through strong policy, targeted funding and clear direction. We in government cannot do this alone. Real, lasting progress depends on strong partnerships with communities, farmers, local authorities, schools, youth organisations, NGOs and the private sector. A whole-of-society approach is essential if we are to meet our targets for 2030 and beyond. As someone newly appointed to this role, I have been encouraged by what I have seen but I am also realistic about the scale of the work ahead. Biodiversity loss cannot be reversed overnight. It requires long-term commitment, sound planning, investment and sustained action. Our efforts are grounded in science, but must also be rooted in local knowledge and lived experience. The best outcomes are achieved when scientific expertise, traditional practices and community insight work together.

Today also marks Natura 2000 Day, when Ireland joins the EU in celebrating the world's largest network of protected sites - over 27,000 across Europe, covering nearly 20% of land and 10% of marine areas. To celebrate, the NPWS is hosting a series of events across the country, including at St. Gobnet's Wood SAC in County Cork on 22 and 23 May. Natura 2000 sites highlight some of the finest examples of the habitats and species we are committed to protecting. This day is also a chance to acknowledge the incredible restoration work happening across Ireland. For example, raised and blanket bogs are being actively restored through various projects. Old oak woodlands are being cleared of invasive species like cherry laurel in the Glen of the Downs SAC in County Wicklow. There is also the clearing of rhododendron at Glenveagh National Park in County Donegal, which is at such an extent that we are starting to see the amazing regeneration and new growth of native species. I am pleased to highlight some of the fantastic events happening in County Cork during National Biodiversity Week, including a citizen science workshop at the Lifetime Lab and a bat walk in Blarney on 23 May. There will be marine biodiversity sessions at Fountainstown beach and birdwatching at the Lough in Cork city on 24 May.

Too often, biodiversity is seen as something external, separate from human life, but the truth is clear. Our choices directly affect the health of ecosystems. The loss of biodiversity does not just harm other species; it undermines our well-being, our food security and our resilience in the face of climate change. This Department remains firmly committed to halting biodiversity loss and reversing it. Our efforts must be rooted in science, informed by local knowledge and sup-

ported by community energy. We continue to support LIFE projects at European level, which have delivered significant positive outcomes across Ireland. At the same time, it is both fitting and essential for this Government to continue to invest in national projects, particularly those led by the NPWS. The valuable work carried out within our national parks and on our nature reserves supports biodiversity not only through direct conservation, but also by offering educational opportunities and increasing public access to nature. As Minister of State, I have seen at first hand the extraordinary work being done. Farmers are restoring hedgerows, communities are planting for pollinators, landowners are rewetting bogs and schools are instilling a sense of environmental responsibility in our children. These local actions are vital but they must be matched by strong national policy, sustained investment and effective enforcement. The national biodiversity action plan gives us a roadmap, but it will take all of us, across every sector and every community, to ensure that Ireland's natural heritage not only survives but thrives.

I am under no illusion. We have not solved the biodiversity crisis. Species are still in trouble. Habitats are still under threat and many trends are going the wrong way. However, we have an opportunity to fix that. We are putting together a nature restoration plan and we should use it as an opportunity first and foremost to improve outcomes for biodiversity, but it should also be done in a collaborative way. We need to include landowners, farmers, stakeholders and conservationists. Collaboration is the key. That collaboration is why we have set up the biodiversity council, chaired by Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, which has those stakeholders, including conservationists, NGOs and farmers. It will not be a top-down approach. We need to do this from the grassroots. It has to be bottom-up. We have to listen so that we come up with a plan that is beneficial to biodiversity, species and habitats, but is also right for the people. In doing that we will remove any misinformation. Already, we are seeing some of that misinformation emerge, especially in the area of rewetting. Some people would have you believe that all farmers in Ireland will have to rewet their land. That is absolutely not the case. Rewetting, under the nature restoration plan, will be done on State-owned land and any rewetting outside State-owned land will be done on a completely voluntary basis and there will be incentives. That has to be clear.

I have seen first hand the results of collaboration between farmers and conservationists. It can be absolutely incredible, particularly for the LIFE projects I mentioned earlier, such as the Burren LIFE programme, the LIFE on machair project or the corncrake LIFE project, which is an extraordinary example of how farmers and conservationists can work together with amazing results. Corncrake LIFE was a difficult journey at the start. There was distrust between the conservationists and the farmers. It was a frosty relationship, but now we are the stage where those same farmers and conservationists are having cups of tea in the farmers' kitchens and depending on one another. They need one another. It has not only resulted in a good outcome for farmers with them benefiting financially, but we are seeing it have a benefit for an extraordinary bird, the corncrake, that has such an important place in Ireland's history. We are seeing their numbers increase significantly in some areas because of this collaboration. It is a model for how Ireland should move forward to benefit nature.

At the Annagh Marsh reserve in County Mayo, a simple measure, predator-proof fencing, has absolutely transformed the area. A marsh formerly depleted of any biodiversity is now bustling with wildlife and buzzing with insects. You cannot hear yourself for the sound of skylarks singing at this time of year. On every post, there is a snipe displaying. It is an extraordinary wildlife experience and it has happened through these simple measures, including collaboration. We can do this. There is a way forward and young people are leading the way. Their

voices are powerful. One of my favourite parts of my role has been visiting schools, talking to children and listening to their passion and ideas for nature. We need to nurture that and make sure the future generation is our generation of ecologists who look after nature.

This is National Biodiversity Week, but as far as I am concerned, every week should be biodiversity week. I suggest that for people's sanity and mental health they spend two hours in nature. It will be good for them. That message could go to a lot of people in this House. It is a stressful job. We know that as TDs. If Deputies spend two hours in nature, they will not regret it. That goes for the general public as well. Nature is good for us. We can get benefits from nature so I suggest that this week and every week from now, people get a pair of binoculars and head to their local estuary to spend a couple of hours trying to find waders or tell the difference between a curlew and a whimbrel, or head to their local patch of woodland to listen to the dawn chorus. They do not have to try to identify the different species; they can just let it wash over them and they will get serious enjoyment out of it. Perhaps they could join a local biodiversity group or go kick sampling in a stream where they will find the incredible monsters that live beneath the surface. It is rewarding. There are many things we could do, such as heading to a headland in County Cork, for example. That would be a good place to start. At this time of year, if people spend time there and give it time, they will see the most amazing things. Basking sharks can be seen at this time of year, and dolphins. There is a chance people could see one of the great whales, finback whales or humpback whales. Give nature a chance. The more people immerse themselves in nature, the more they will appreciate it and the more of us who appreciate nature, the better the outcomes for nature. Happy biodiversity week.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):

We can all see how passionate the Minister of State is about National Biodiversity Week. I am pleased to follow my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, and to join this important discussion as we mark National Biodiversity Week. It is a key moment in our national calendar when we reflect on, celebrate and, most important, act to protect and restore Ireland's precious natural heritage.

Throughout my time in public life, particularly during my work in housing, local government and community development, I have seen how deeply biodiversity is connected to people's lives. From how we plan and build our communities to how we manage our public spaces and support rural life, nature is part of the everyday fabric of Ireland. As the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, has outlined, the challenges we face are serious. Biodiversity loss is accelerating at home and around the globe, but as we mark this dedicated week of awareness and action, we also have reasons for hope because momentum is building not just in Government policy but also in the growing engagement of local communities, young people and other citizens. Through such initiatives as the local biodiversity action fund, the town centre first scheme and green infrastructure planning, we are supporting practical projects that restore nature while improving people's lives. These projects are not abstract. They mean cleaner rivers, safer flood plains, thriving pollinators, pollination and green public spaces that bring people together.

Local government has a vital role to play. Local authorities now have dedicated biodiversity officers, supported by national funding, who are helping to mainstream biodiversity in everything from planning to parks management. Community groups, especially in towns and villages, are stepping up to protect native species, create pollinator-friendly spaces and engage the next generation. This is work I have seen at first hand in constituencies across the country and it is part of why I care so deeply about this issue. Nature is not just something to be protected in chosen sites; it lives all around us and it thrives when we work together to care for it.

21 May 2025

Of course more must be done. The national biodiversity action plan gives us a strong framework, but I will make sustained efforts in cross-sector co-operation to meet its goals. This is what we are all doing, through the Minister. We are all making the effort through all the different sectors co-operating to meet goals. Biodiversity must be considered in housing, agriculture, transport and education and we must listen closely to those already doing this work on the ground. The Minister of State spoke about farmers, volunteers and local experts because they are key to real progress.

Today is day six of National Biodiversity Week. It has seen a remarkable increase in participation, rising from 293 events last year to 350 this year. Over these ten days people of all ages throughout the country are engaging in activities that underscore the importance of biodiversity to our health, well-being and future. Organised by the Irish Environmental Network and supported by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, National Biodiversity Week is a nationwide opportunity to reconnect with nature. It brings together community groups, NGOs and local authorities showing off all their showcases and the very best of Ireland's natural heritage through guided walks, hands-on workshops and citizen science projects. There is so much going on. As I said, there are 350 events this year. That is absolutely brilliant and to be welcomed. Events taking place include hedgerow and woodland walks, whale watching, bat surveys and biodiversity cycle tours. Children are being introduced to wildlife in their local parks and gardens. They are learning how to support pollinators. We now have gardeners doing courses and very much involved in this. Families are participating in activities and what is called the backyard bioblitz. I am sure some Members are aware of that. There is also the biodiversity scavenger hunt.

Importantly, this week also aligns with a number of international awareness days. Today we mark Natura 2000 Day, celebrating Europe's protected habitats. Tomorrow is the International Day for Biological Diversity, with this year's theme being harmony with nature and sustainable development. European Day of Parks, which will take place on 24 May, recognises the legacy of Europe's first national parks.

In my own constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny there are inspiring examples of community engagement. In Carlow, daily guided tours at Altamont Gardens are drawing visitors, while the Carlow Beekeepers Association is sharing knowledge through online talks. For those who like to get out and about, guided walks are available throughout the week. A series of bat walks is arranged for evening time and, in Kilkenny, a dusk chorus at the castle and a hands-on water sampling workshop at Kenny's Well. These offer people a chance to connect directly with nature and learn how to support it. These events are important and bring everybody together. It was great that we had such good weather all week. That encouraged people to go to as many events as possible. We cannot give the Minister the praise for that.

This week also shines a light on the growing momentum behind Ireland's response to the biodiversity crisis through the work of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, in partnership with local authorities, landowners, communities and conservation organisers. We are seeing real progress in restoring habitats, supporting species and promoting sustainable land use. I acknowledge the tireless efforts of so many local volunteers, environmental educators, NPWS staff, farmers and community leaders who are on the front line of the work every day. Their efforts are often unseen but they are essential. That is what it is all about - recognising the good work that is being done around Ireland. It is important that we give them the thanks and praise they deserve. As with everything, the people behind the scenes are doing the work and sometimes we forget to recognise them. Our schools and youth organisations also deserve recogni-

tion. Such programmes as Green Schools and the youth biodiversity networks instill a deep sense of environmental stewardship in the next generation, a generation that will carry forward the responsibility of protecting what we risk losing.

With four days remaining in National Biodiversity Week I encourage everyone across this House and throughout the country to take part, attend an event and take time to appreciate the ecosystem that sustains us all. Biodiversity protection is not just a duty. It is an opportunity to create healthier communities, build resilience in the face of climate change and to leave behind a living, thriving natural heritage for future generations. I am proud to stand here during National Biodiversity Week to reaffirm my own commitment and that of this Government and the Minister of State, who has been working hard visiting farmers, schools and different areas around the country. We must all continue working with colleagues across the House to turn plans into action and ambition into results. I look forward to a productive and solution-focused debate on how we can continue to strengthen Ireland's efforts to protect and restore biodiversity.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta O'Sullivan, sa phost nua. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil a lán suime aige sa ról. I know this because I was on the climate committee with him for a couple of years in the previous term. Anyone who heard his speech will know it as well.

This week we mark National Biodiversity Week with events happening up and down the country, including my own County Kildare. It was great to meet the biodiversity officer in Kildare County Council. I am looking forward to taking part in more of the biodiversity events this week. The Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, said last week that we in Ireland are lucky to be surrounded by such a wealth of biodiversity which we must work to protect as well as appreciate. Although many of us certainly appreciate all that our lakes, parks and gardens offer us in our daily lives, this Government has not always worked to protect them. I am sure that will change now with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, in charge.

Year after year we hear calls from environmental agencies that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis. The eighth Ireland's State of the Environment report was published by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, last year. It found that almost 85% of our protected habitats and almost a third of our protected species of flora and fauna are in poor condition. The EPA claims this loss of nature and biodiversity is so severe that it could signal the sixth mass extinction event. Yesterday we all heard yesterday the news about the ecological disaster unfolding in Lady's Island Lake in Wexford. The pollution levels have reached an unprecedented level, according to Dr. Brendan O'Connor. This is a place of pilgrimage for so many and provides beautiful views of Eardownes Great and Ballycushlane. Anyone who has been there can attest to that. Castletown House, Celbridge, in my own constituency of Kildare North is also biodiversity rich, with beautiful nature trails and lakes. It is good to take time out in nature.

According to the Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland, there is not much emphasis on cross-Border coherence at a European level when it comes to ecosystems and habitats. Partition has done biodiversity and climate action a real disservice in Ireland. We have two jurisdictions managing the habitats and ecosystems on one island and, frankly, it is ridiculous. While Sinn Féin continues the struggle for a united Ireland, it is imperative that the Irish State plays a bigger role in the preservation of our biodiversity throughout the whole island. Our first climate committee meeting took place this afternoon. We all know biodiversity knows no political borders. With Britain now outside the EU and not adhering to any EU environmental frameworks, it is really important that the Irish Government steps up and takes a leadership role. We must

plan the biodiversity framework for reunification and make sure that the national biodiversity action plan is actually national, for the Thirty-two Counties. We must support local conservation groups in the Six Counties.

I was speaking earlier about Lady's Island Lake, the lagoon in Wexford, but Lough Neagh comes to mind as well. Bobby Sands spoke about the laughter of our children and that laughter is under threat if we do not get this under control. It is imperative that we recognise the threat to our climate, biodiversity and humanity by taking seriously our duty to lower our emissions, protect our network of protected areas, commit to afforestation targets and the decolonisation of Ireland and protect our waters through strong and ambitious marine protection area laws. *Caithfidimid go léir teacht le chéile ar an gceist seo. Ní neart go cur le chéile.*

Deputy Pa Daly: We face a biodiversity crisis. The green of our landscape masks the loss of so many key elements of our natural environment. Our life support system is on the brink of collapse and the picture is stark. Over the past 40 or 50 years every single indicator has been on a downward trend. Natural habitats are being degraded or homogenised, forest cover is being eroded and species are becoming extinct. We, as a country, share a deep connection with nature and this is a devastating loss for Ireland. As a result of the deep connection we have with nature, however, there remains hope - hope that with the right determination and political will we can turn this ship around. We are required to act.

I note a number of matters mentioned in the Minister of State's speech. I accept that a lot of work is being done. Perhaps more could be done about the rhododendron in Killarney National Park. We need a seven-year plan on that. The Minister of State mentioned our built and archaeological heritage. I refer to Tralee Courthouse, which is being ignored. The plan put forward by the Courts Service, supported by the Minister for Justice, is to close the courthouse, take away court services without any plan, build a new building on the other side of town and move there. It does not make sense.

ACRES needs to be fully supported, as the Minister of State said. It needs more funding and to be fully supported.

The Government does not seem to be acting but in some ways it is going backwards. I would like the Minister of State's opinion on the outrageous suggestion in recent comments by the Minister of State with responsibility for forestry, Deputy Healy-Rae, that we should plant more forestry on peatland. We think this would be a disaster for Ireland's emissions. Maybe he is rowing back and has changed his mind but there are different signals coming from different parts of Government. Will the Minister of State confirm that is not the Government's plan to put more forestry on peatlands, as doing so would be catastrophic?

We still have no marine protected areas legislation despite repeated assurances that the Bill would be published. Three years later we are still waiting and damage could be done. Our rivers are also in a precarious state. The antiquated Arterial Drainage Act obliges the OPW to dredge rivers and, as heavy machinery is employed in the process, trees are torn out and structures filled with debris. It is a disaster for biodiversity. Not only that, it can also lead to flooding. I am convinced that the flooding in Listowel before Christmas was a result of the lack of flood management and related to forestry. In the past the bogs used to soak it up but now the water comes down. Does the Minister of State have any comment on those points?

Deputy Martin Kenny: Biodiversity affects everyone in every part of the country. Biodi-

versity week offers an important opportunity to examine this critical part of life on our planet. It is not just nature for the planet; it is for human beings, too. It is for everybody and we are all a part of that.

It is crucial we take a serious approach to tackling the biodiversity crisis in Ireland. Farmers manage and own the vast majority of land on the island. While there are other agencies which are part of that and play a vital role, farming is the key thing we have to crack in order to turn around this biodiversity crisis. Agriculture often gets a bad name when we talk about climate change and biodiversity but, in reality, farmers have been to the forefront and have for decades been well aware of the need to protect our habitats and biodiversity and to prevent the extinction of species. Irish farmers have consistently adapted farming practices, going back to meet the challenges of climate change over the years. It was 1994 when the first rural environmental scheme was introduced and farmers willingly and enthusiastically entered into the highly successful measures to protect our watercourses and our rivers as well as planting trees, hedgerows and so on at the time. Irish farmers have continued to participate in environmental schemes as part of CAP, including REPS, AEOS, GLAS and now, of course, ACRES. There are huge problems in respect of ACRES but, at its core, it is a biodiversity plan for farmland across the country. We want to encourage more farmers to be in it but it is very hard to do so if they do not get paid in time or it is not followed up, the whole thing turns into a mess and everyone blames a computer system for it. There needs to be recognition that if we want to get this work done we have to have a partnership between everybody, and agriculture is key to that partnership.

I refer to the schemes which have contributed to improving our biodiversity in various species. We used to see bat boxes up on trees around our part of the country as well as owl boxes and sand mounds for bees in the corners of meadows. There is a need to provide bird cover by not cutting meadows until late August into September to allow ground birds to nest and so on. All these are vital parts. That is why we must have a much greater emphasis on biodiversity.

There was something that always struck me about the basic payment scheme whereby farmers get paid per hectare. Farmers would get a map which was captured by a satellite and be told that they would be penalised in how much they would receive because the hedgerows had grown wider and therefore the land area was smaller. If a farmer had applied for 24.9 ha they would be paid for less than that and be penalised. So what did they do the next year? They cut all the hedgerows out of the way. That was absolutely detrimental to biodiversity. There is a need for more joined-up thinking. It is very important that farmers are part of the plan in respect of all this.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The climate and biodiversity crises are utterly linked and cannot be underestimated. This is often overlooked and siloed in different parts of the Government. Rather than taking a whole-of-government approach it often seems that parts of the Government do not talk to each other at all. I recall one unit in the Department of housing proposing that hill farmers fence-off all watercourses, an action that the National Parks and Wildlife Service for which would never give the required consent. It is symptomatic of an approach to both crises where the Government mandates without due consideration of other impacts, whether emissions, biodiversity, family-farm incomes, fuel poverty or poverty generally. That is one reason it is regrettable that during the last CAP negotiations the Government did not throw its weight behind Sinn Féin's proposals that eco schemes would be a new third pillar of the CAP, crucially with a new funding model. Instead, farmers were asked to do more to secure the funding that was already in place. To assist our farmers to meet the challenges they face in the years ahead, I encourage the Government to seriously consider Sinn Féin's proposal to establish a €300 mil-

lion national restoration fund. If the Government wants farmers to do more, we should once and for all stop asking them to foot the bill for climate action from their already small margins.

Dwindling European funds for regional development have already damaged our ability to abate biodiversity loss at local level. Over many years local development companies across the State have run incredible programmes to protect and enhance biodiversity. However, their ability to do so has been hampered by a shrinking budget which has not been restored to the levels that were in place before the financial crisis. In Monaghan the annual allocation is only 10% higher than it was under the programme from 2014 to 2020. Inflation during that period has wiped out that small increase twofold, meaning a real term loss for local development companies. I appeal to the Government that, as negotiations on the new EU budget gather pace, it should support farmers and our local development companies and argue for a reversal of the cuts it has overseen for the past 15 years.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I am glad of the opportunity to speak on this issue today. The protection and restoration of biodiversity across Ireland is of critical importance. It is an all-island issue. The border does not exist in the context of biodiversity. We are facing a biodiversity crisis. Over 60% of Ireland's native species are in decline. Our bogs are drying and our rivers are polluted. The River Tolka comes through the middle of my constituency. It is heartbreaking to see the hard work by fisher groups and the young lads fishing all the way down to Finglas, and then to often see fish kills as a result of pollution. It is dreadful.

Hedgerows are being lost. My constituency is a very large urban area but 20 or 30 years ago when I moved out to Dublin 15 it was all farmland and fields. Much of that biodiversity has been lost. Thankfully the new county development plan has a very strong emphasis on protecting the existing hedgerows. Some 85% of Ireland's habitats are inadequate or in a poor state. Many of our native species are under threat from urbanisation and the destruction of their natural habitat. We have the lowest tree cover in Europe, at just 11%, compared with an EU average of 35%. A couple of hundred years ago there was a massive wooded area called the Scaldwood in what is now Dublin 15. It is now reduced to small pockets in Clonsilla, just across the road from me, in the Millennium Park and around Tolka Valley. I commend Fingal County Council for the work it is doing in trying to encourage the planting of more trees. Only this week, as I walked through the park I saw the operations department planting new indigenous trees.

We recognise that real environmental change must begin locally. Local councils are on the front line not only in protecting biodiversity but also in creating the conditions for it to thrive. I commend many of the local environmental groups such as Tidy Towns Blanchardstown, Clonsilla Tidy Towns, Castleknock Tidy Towns and Riverwood Biodiversity Group. We had a really interesting seminar last week in Dublin 15. There is really important work being done by local communities and it is important that we continue and support that work. I will mention one simple thing we can do for biodiversity and that is hedgerows. There are hedgerows throughout the State, which can be seen whenever you drive down any road. A very simple thing we could do is to help and support farmers by paying them to plant right beside existing hedgerows. We could double the number of hedgerows. It can be imagined the biodiversity we would create if we did that. It is something we should really think about in moving forward.

It is great to get an opportunity to speak on this because it is very important. It is not just a rural issue; it is an urban issue as well. We care about it as well.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue of biodiversity and

to mark biodiversity week. We have an awful lot to do in this area. The Minister of State will know that better than anyone else. He has a reputation for passion in this area. I look forward to working with him as best we can over this term.

In Ireland, we very often trade on the incredible beauty and richness of our landscapes. It is probably our most marketable asset, if it can be put that way. Millions of people come here every year to experience our 40 shades of green for themselves, but the unfortunate reality is that our prized asset, namely, our natural environment, is at serious risk. Just this week, we saw reports that 40 shades of green algae have taken over Lady's Island Lake in County Wexford, which is supposedly a special area of conservation. Excessive nutrients in the water have given rise to a high production of algae, which grow at such a density they block out the light and stop the plants that were growing on the lake bed, and stop anything living in the lake. The EPA has reported that agricultural run-off is the source of the excess nutrient levels. The lake is dead. Locals cannot even let their dogs swim in it.

Our landscapes and the beauty we all enjoy in this country are only as rich as our biodiversity. Our ecosystems are in a critical state. It is not an exaggeration to say we are facing an ecological crisis. Some 91% of our habitats are in an unfavourable condition and 15% of our protected species are in decline. The fact we had a Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, and a Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, is testament to the crisis we face, which is already here. We know what needs to be done. We have the reports and recommendations of those assemblies. The first three recommendations of the citizens' assembly are illuminating. They each point to a failure by the State in protecting our biodiversity and environment and call for urgent interventions, including just enforcing existing laws relating to biodiversity. I appreciate that many of the recommendations contained in the assemblies' reports are being put into action. This Government must continue on that path and ensure that each recommendation is fully realised. That will require a redoubling of the commitment to addressing our biodiversity crisis with sustained funding for initiatives that seek to improve our habitats, waterways and air quality.

We in the Labour Party have consistently called for a more active and ambitious State in respect of housing, healthcare and in our efforts to combat the climate and biodiversity crises. These are the most existential crises we face, not just as a country but as a species. This is about protecting our island and our seas but it also about protecting our future. The State has a crucial role to play, in particular, our semi-States. Bodies such as Coillte and Bord na Móna, for example, control extensive tracts of land where the State could make a huge difference in improving biodiversity and restoring nature. However, their mandates are largely defined in commercial terms. We need to look at what role they can play beyond a primarily economic one. We need to ensure that their objectives and operations align with our climate, biodiversity and nature restoration ambitions. I encourage the Minister of State to work with the Ministers for the environment and agriculture to look into amending the Forestry Act and the Turf Development Act to see what can be done in that regard.

The same can be said for the likes of Teagasc. We could reconstitute that as a food security agency, for example, tasked with working with stakeholders to ensure we are growing more of what we eat. The OPW could be given a stronger role in climate mitigation and mandated to take a more nature-based approach to things such as flood prevention work, as others mentioned, rather than the heavy engineering and concrete-pouring approach that appears to be its current preference, which is something I have direct experience of locally with the Whitechurch stream flood alleviation scheme in Rathfarnham. The point I am trying to make is we need to

21 May 2025

see a cross-departmental and whole-of-government approach to addressing this crisis, including by using the existing structures within our semi-States.

We are seeing great action at local level. My local authority, South Dublin County Council, is doing incredible work on biodiversity, nature restoration and nature conservation. It is leading by example, which my colleagues in Dublin Mid-West can attest to. Its biodiversity action plan is a superb document. It has been fantastic to see the actions it contains come to fruition over the past number of years. We are seeing great initiatives, such as the restoration of the Tallaght wetlands and the creation of biodiversity habitats along Dodder Valley Park, which was shortlisted for a green award. These areas are teeming with ecological richness and biodiversity. It is really great to see. There is also the development of the Dodder Greenway, a joint initiative between South Dublin County Council and Dublin City Council. While it is not finished yet, the impact the finished portions are having can already be seen in creating new ecosystems and habitats, as well as providing a wonderful asset to our community and preserving existing biodiversity, including our famous kingfisher. It is a great example of the benefits of connecting people with nature, particularly in urban areas.

It is very important that people feel that connection with our environment and recognise their stake in it. They see its intrinsic value. Ensuring continued access to the countryside can play a role here. I will recognise the efforts of the Keep Ireland Open group in this regard. We need to bring people along with us if we are to address the climate and biodiversity crisis. People need to feel and experience the benefit of a healthy and thriving natural environment, as the Minister of State mentioned, be it through our parks, waterways or woodlands, and taking time to do so. People are taking action on an individual level as well as a community level. Community allotments are terrific examples of people coming together and living by that principle of growing what we eat to the greatest extent possible. Organisations such as Community Gardens Ireland are doing fantastic work in connecting people with our ecosystems through the development of community gardens.

I also pay special tribute to Collie Ennis, the biodiversity officer at Trinity College, as someone who has inspired me on a personal level. He has done amazing work in promoting mini-ponds, including one on the Trinity campus that is teeming with ecology. Many of us Dubs will have noticed the rewilding of the former lawns outside the college on College Green. It is a great example of how even a small patch of land can provide such a rich habitat for plants and animals, even in the city centre. My party leader, Deputy Ivana Bacik, has also shown the sort of actions we can take in protecting and enhancing biodiversity in Dublin, with her Dublin Bay Bill. We need to reverse the decline in our rivers, lakes and coastal waters more broadly. As I mentioned, we are seeing the effects of excess nutrients in lakes and rivers all over the country. Ivana's Bill provides a good model to establish some sort of authority to monitor and protect against water pollution, not just in Dublin Bay but in other coastal areas and harbours around the country that are ecologically damaged.

We need to involve all stakeholders in our efforts to restore biodiversity and nature, including communities, environmental organisations, public bodies and, crucially, our farmers. It is vital that farmers are brought with us as we endeavour to tackle this crisis. A lot of the degradation we have seen in our biodiversity and ecosystems is, historically, as a result of farming practices. I acknowledge there is a lot of anxiety among that cohort about the necessary measures we have to take in the agricultural space in order to deal with this crisis. We saw that in some of the responses to the nitrates directive and the EU nature restoration law, especially with regard to rewetting. We urgently need to re-wet a considerable amount of our peatlands but we

must do so in a manner that ultimately benefits those who work that land. The principles of a just transition must apply.

I will bring the issue of biodiversity a little closer to home. While walking through the Merion Street side of our campus, I was glad to see a sign for No Mow May indicating that the grass will not be cut for the month of May to allow wildflowers and wildlife to flourish. The whole idea of having perfectly pristine lawns, be it at Leinster House or our own homes, is an anti-environmental and anti-biodiversity practice. There is an interesting history behind that practice, as an expression of colonialism and classism. The “civilised colonisers” in places like America kept their gardens pristine, at least aesthetically, while the native population lived in the wild. This is not to mention the fact that when we cut our grass, we are essentially colonising the habitats of various types of plant, wildflowers and species, and creating green deserts. It is another one of those things all of us could do to make one small improvement to our biodiversity at an individual level. Beekeepers are warning us that pollinators, such as the native Irish honeybee, are under threat because of issues of habitat destruction and the use of pesticides. Those pollinators are vital in maintaining our ecosystems. This is a threat we need to take seriously. If essential pollinators, such as honeybees, end up going extinct, we will see a massive depletion in ecosystems and further degradation in biodiversity. If the bees die, we die. A small but effective step each of us could quite easily take is to let our gardens and grass go that little bit wilder.

7 o'clock

The real beauty in our lawns and gardens is not in their aesthetics but in their role as homes for hundreds of species of flowers and insects.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am sharing my time with Deputy Cormac Devlin.

Sometimes they say a Minister is well geared to his Ministry. There is no better Ministry for Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan than the one he has. I congratulate him on his new role. It is great to see him sitting on the Front Bench. Those who do not know Deputy O’Sullivan, or Christopher as we know him on this side, should note that when he is not here in the Dáil and has done his constituency work, he will climb over ditches and go along cliff paths to do something called twitching, which I did not know was a thing until two years ago. It is nothing illegal, by the way. He goes down sea paths looking for rare birds and then photographs and documents them. He eats, sleeps and drinks biodiversity, and it is great to have him leading the associated section of the Department. Best of luck to him in his role.

For all the passion the Minister of State has for biodiversity, I have a passion for history. This is linked to biodiversity because, in my home parish, or just behind it, is Cratloe Woods, which was once western Europe’s most famous oakland. It had over 600 acres of prime oak trees – sessile oaks, the pride of Ireland. It was a forestry plantation that the British Navy looked at with envy. It looked at the battleships it could build. Indeed, the oak from Cratloe Woods was used to build *HMS Victory* and the Royal Palace of Amsterdam. Most famously, it was used in the period 1840 to 1857 to put a roof over the House of Commons. Therefore, when our counterparts in Britain were debating during the First World War, the Second World War and many other significant historical events, they were doing so under a roof of sessile oak grown in Cratloe, County Clare, a very special plantation. However, if you go there now, you will see conifers, including spruce and Scots pine. All the beautiful native trees have been taken. Of the 600 acres of the plantation, only about 40 or 50 acres have the native sessile oak.

Some of them are on the border of my farm. I see how beautiful they are and the biodiversity that surrounds them. When you go deeper into the forest, where there are spruces and other conifers, you see no biodiversity.

I ask the Minister of State to lead an initiative in his Department to reinstate the sessile oak by growing it in nurseries again and replanting it. I am part of a local group that, in the autumn, collects some of the acorns, propagates them in little tubs and pots, and replants them in and around Cratloe. I would love to see the Minister of State lead this initiative. Why not? We do not have a big island and 600 acres is not a whole lot of land. Why not consider giving us back our heritage woods, which would far outlive the 30-year cycle of conifer trees? The latter just get felled. It is like a post-apocalyptic site when they are felled. We could have beautiful oaks that will outlast all of us and that some other generation will talk about here in many years to come.

Also on trees and the lack of biodiversity, in the 1980s people in Ireland became obsessed with the cypress tree. They are ugly, sprawling, green conifer trees that were very problematic during Storm Éowyn. It is time that we banned these trees. They are not a native species and they take over. Some say they can become invasive in woodlands, and they do not offer any biodiversity. They are damned dangerous when there is a storm or high winds blowing.

In the past year, I tweeted on a couple of occasions about how dirty our riverbeds can be when the tide goes out. I tweeted to Limerick city council. The tweet was a little embarrassing. It showed that, down in the depths of the river, there were trolleys and old bicycles. It was not the council's fault but it does of course have a role in keeping the area neat, tidy and cleaned up. The same applies in Dublin. Just as you go over the little cast-iron bridge at Heuston Station, you see the river is full of litter of all sorts. We may care about everything in the sky and everything that grows on land but we should also be looking at what is in our waters. It would be great if the Minister of State could write to some of the local authorities and ask them what they are doing to make sure that riverbeds are kept free of the debris and junk that are particularly visible when the tide is out, that whatever settles in the silt is taken from it and that biodiversity and nature can thrive again. All the junk in the river looks pretty ugly to tourists on the quayside at Heuston Station, Dublin. I do not know if our counterparts responsible for the River Thames in London or the River Seine in Paris would tolerate it. It is the same in Limerick and most big cities where there are tidal rivers. Local authorities could do more. Maybe a little nudge from Deputy O'Sullivan, as Minister of State, asking them what they are doing might prompt some of them to take action. Legislators should not be conducting business by putting out embarrassing little tweets. The following morning, you see local authority staff cleaning up the river. That is not how it should be done; it should be done on a proactive basis, not a reactive one. Best of luck to the Minister of State.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I join my colleague in formally congratulating the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, on his new portfolio. Deputy Crowe failed to mention the waterways to which the Minister of State takes in his spare time.

Biodiversity Week gives us a moment to reflect not only on the wonder of Ireland's natural heritage but also on the scale of the challenge we face in restoring and protecting it. I acknowledge the tremendous progress made in recent years. Since 2020, we have increased National Parks and Wildlife Service funding from €28.7 million to €78 million. We have grown the service's team by two thirds, from 349 staff to 577. That represents real investment and, indeed, real ambition. I have spoken about this previously in the House.

We are also seeing the results of our investment, including the creation of Ireland's first maritime national park. Two national parks have been established since 2020. Over €2.9 million has been committed this year alone to local biodiversity projects in every county. In this regard acknowledge the work done on biodiversity in my constituency by the Monkstown Tidy Towns group. Tidy Towns groups up and down the country are making a huge effort for Biodiversity Week, as the Minister of State will be aware. In fact, there are 350 different events celebrating Biodiversity Week and engaging communities up and down the country – from whale watching and woodland walks to bat-box building and biodiversity cycles.

In my constituency, Dún Laoghaire, I warmly welcomed the recent allocation of funding for Loughlinstown forest, which will enhance a valued local amenity and protect a vital green lung for our community. Dún Laoghaire is a proud maritime constituency, home to our outstanding harbours and the seafront. It is part of the Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere. It is one of only a handful of such areas in the world that combines a capital city with a protected marine environment. Our coast, harbours and marine habitats are not just scenic treasures; they are also rich in biodiversity and critical to climate resilience.

Of course, Fianna Fáil's record on the environment stretches back generations. It began with Éamon de Valera's strong commitment to reforestation and nature, culminating in the Forestry Act 1946, which laid the groundwork for modern woodland restoration. The Ceann Comhairle will be aware of the creation of the 620-acre John F. Kennedy Arboretum, officially opened in 1968 in New Ross, Wexford, by the then President Éamon de Valera. It is a living monument to biodiversity that was well ahead of its time in promoting education, conservation and commemoration.

That legacy of action continued. It was a Fianna Fáil in government that introduced the first ban on smoky coal in 1990, a pioneering move that dramatically improved air quality and reduced premature deaths in our cities. We also established the Environmental Protection Agency under the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992, giving Ireland an independent environmental watchdog at a time when few countries had one. Today, that legacy continues.

However, beyond celebration, this week is also about responsibility. We are in the middle of a global biodiversity crisis. The extinction of species, degradation of ecosystems and impact on water and soil health all threaten our food security, climate goals and the well-being of future generations. That is why we now have a legally binding EU nature restoration regulation and why Ireland is developing a national nature restoration plan. The first leaders' forum met in March and community conversations will follow. Crucially, this will not entail top-down diktat; the process will be shaped by farmers, fishers, foresters, scientists and, indeed, citizens.

Fianna Fáil in government believes in a just transition. That means voluntary, well-supported measures, not punishment. Our agri-environment schemes are a clear example. ACRES now supports over 55,000 farmers and has seen €490 million paid to date for habitat restoration, tree planting and the protection of nearly 9,000 km of watercourses. Some 21,000 nest boxes have been built for barn owls and kestrels. This is biodiversity in action, led by our farming community. We have also expanded wetland restoration in the midlands, supported peatland rehabilitation through Bord na Móna and rolled out biodiversity duties for all public bodies, embedding nature into how we plan, build and manage public services.

There is more to do, of course. We must build on the fourth national biodiversity action plan for the period 2023 to 2030. The Minister of State worked on that with me when he was a

21 May 2025

member of the climate action committee during the previous Dáil. We must increase research funding and strengthen enforcement to combat wildlife crime. We must continue to bring nature into our towns and cities - into our schools, our greenways and our housing schemes.

Restoring nature is not just an environmental duty; it is a national project that binds community, culture and care for the land.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: By the sounds of things, we all now know what the Minister of State does in his spare time. It sounds very interesting. Comhghairdeachas on the new role.

I live in Galway city. Where I live, on the east side of Galway city, we are really lucky with different nature places we can go to. One of my favourite places is Ballyloughane Beach. I love going down there for a walk. Another place is Merlin Woods. During the Covid pandemic, I think we really noticed how important those places were, especially for people like me who live in a city. So many of us were very lucky to be able to go out in Merlin Woods in Galway city. It has been a huge respite for people on the east side of the city. I commend the fantastic work that has been done by Friends of Merlin Woods to enhance the woods in order to make it a place people can come to and use as a respite. There is also a community element. There is a community garden, litter pickups and all that kind of thing where people come together to have a sense of community and a place. Sometimes there can be not as strong a community in the new places in our cities. Friends of Merlin Woods have done huge work just this week again for Biodiversity Week organising so many different types of events. I commend them on that.

Likewise, we have the Dúlra Project, run with support from Forum Connemara. It is a community-based project in its approach to protecting our biodiversity. They are doing huge work to eradicate rhododendron in Connemara. Rhododendron is a highly invasive plant that takes over entire hillsides and prevents any native plants from growing. What is very difficult for the work of the Dúlra Project, for example, is that while it is doing the back-breaking labour of removing rhododendron root by root, you can go into the local garden centre and buy the very same plant for your garden, which totally undoes, obviously, the benefit of that work. Despite EU law, several invasive species are still sold in shops across this State. One of the recommendations from the citizens' assembly on biodiversity was to ban the sale of these invasive species. We need to look at that because huge work has been done.

We also need a long-term approach to improving our biodiversity. We have the people on the ground who are committed and willing to do the work but we need that vision as well. We have schemes like ACRES, but there are huge issues with ACRES and people not getting paid and not being able to get the information as to when they will get paid either.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I love the Minister of State's passion for nature. You can tell it is a huge part of who he is, and I look forward to working with him over the term of this Dáil to see what we can achieve in this regard. It is absolutely needed and I know he wholeheartedly knows and believes that as well. In his statement he spoke about how this needs to deal with nature and how our biodiversity crisis needs to be a grassroots exercise involving communities. I absolutely agree with him on that, but the Government has a huge role to play in this. We need a government that is a role model for nature. The Government and the State are the biggest landowners in the country, so there is a real responsibility and a real onus on the Government to use that land for nature and to be very active and conscious of its responsibility in that regard. I am referring specifically to the lands of Coillte and Bord na Móna and the practices of the OPW. The Minister of State was on the previous Oireachtas committee on climate and environment

with me. One of the main recommendations that came out of one of our reports was that the legal remits of Coillte, Bord na Móna and the OPW need to change. They need to reflect the need to protect biodiversity. There has to be a public interest element to what they do, and the protection of biodiversity should be at the core of what they do. Unfortunately, at the moment, they are on a purely commercial basis, and that really ties the hands of these entities in many regards. A lot of the time when we look to the likes of Coillte and ask why it is not doing more for nature, a large part of that is because the State has not given it the legislative framework to do more for nature. We could see that recently with Coillte Nature being quietly abolished earlier this year. No one really seemed to know about it. It happened very quietly and under the radar. That was a bad move and it should be revised, or certainly the legislative framework. If that were done, I think that would make a huge difference.

As regards Bord na Móna, I have heard recently that a solar farm is to go up on two lands that Bord na Móna own which are the exact site where we have a pair of breeding cranes. As the Minister of State knows, those cranes have tried to breed in Ireland for a few years. They have managed to produce fledglings in the last year or two. They have not been in Ireland or bred in Ireland for hundreds of years. I would have major concerns about any potential plans for a solar farm there. I have asked for more details from Bord na Móna on it, but I will certainly be keeping an eye on it and I ask that the Minister of State do so as well.

Not only have the Government and the State been the role model for nature, but we also need to protect and enhance what we have. We have some fantastic sites but they are not being managed properly and there has not been enough focus on enhancing and expanding what is there. I refer specifically to our national parks and many of our SACs in that regard.

I am sure the Minister of State expects me to mention the Glen of the Downs in Wicklow. It is a place very close to my heart, as it is to many people not just in Wicklow but on the east coast because it is such an iconic ancient woodland. There is an opportunity for the State to purchase land there. I know the National Parks and Wildlife Service is looking at that at the moment. I ask the Minister of State to expedite that process because I fear that that land could be sold and that that opportunity would be lost. Many areas like that are coming up for sale. Under the nature restoration laws, there will be a requirement on the State to purchase land and protect it for nature. We have Lugnaquilla. There is 1,500 acres going up for sale in Wicklow at the moment as well which is really in the heart of the Wicklow Mountains. Again, if we were to use that €3.6 billion set aside in the climate, biodiversity and nature fund to purchase sites like this, it would be a really good thing to do, not just for our current need to meet our nature restoration laws but for generations to come and for nature restoration. We need to grasp these opportunities when they arise.

I will also mention Our Lady's Island. I was down there recently. I do not know if the Minister of State has been. It has huge potential to be a fantastic site for birds and it is absolutely dying. When I was down there, I saw problems with the site. There was what looked like sewage being pumped into the site. I contacted the council, the EPA and the National Parks and Wildlife Service - I was ringing around everyone. No one, not one single entity, is taking responsibility for that site. Many entities are responsible for different elements of it; no one has taken responsibility for it on a whole. Again, I ask that the Minister of State look into it. It is a special area of conservation that has huge potential.

I also want to mention badgers. This matter is in the news at the moment. It is another instance where a species that is protected under the Wildlife Act is also being hunted or killed

under that Act. I ask that the Minister of State speak to the Minister for agriculture. The evidence is clear that the culling of badgers is not impacting on or reducing the incidence of bovine TB on farms. I understand how difficult it is when farmers get the result. It is devastating for them, but we need to work with them to make sure that the solutions that are put forward are actually working. They are not working at the moment.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I do not know if the Minister of State is a birdwatcher but I am delighted to say that on 10 May, the swifts arrived to Dublin South-Central. We were absolutely delighted. A group of us were out mapping trees to see how many trees were there, and then the swifts arrived. Maybe they have arrived down the Minister of State's neck of the woods as well.

Dublin South-Central is a constituency that has, particularly in the Dublin 8 area, the lowest level of greenspace *per capita* in the country. We have to work hard to keep areas in the city centre with biodiversity. I might mention some of the fantastic work that is happening. For example, Bloomin Crumlin has an orchard project and the Inchicore Environmental Group does vital work along the Camac river to restore the water quality and habitats. The Liberties litter pickers go out on the weekends to make sure the place we live is tidy, clean and free of rubbish and Trees for Tents advocates for more native trees in an historic part of our city. There are cleanup crews in all parts of Dublin South Central. People are working from the ground up, taking it seriously. The Social Democrats has always championed a rights-based model of environmental protection. We are delighted to celebrate biodiversity this week and to see the number of people who have come to the Chamber to talk about it. It belongs to everybody. The Camac and Poddle rivers run through that neighbourhood. We must make sure those waterways are protected and maintained and that there are no more incidents like the one earlier this year in Inchicore when a structure fell into the river. We look forward, with all the building work going on, to seeing more biodiversity there.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Ministerial appointments by this Government have not generally filled me with joy but I was glad to hear the Minister of State would be taking up this role. It is clear he has a genuine love of nature and a wealth of knowledge to back it up that would put most of us to shame, so I welcome his appointment. Unfortunately, our trees and hedgerows have never been more in danger. The legal protections in place for habitats are wide open to abuse, due mainly to exemptions in the Wildlife Act, the cultural failure to take such crimes seriously and the ongoing lack of resourcing of the NPWS. Those of us who care deeply about nature are often left in a state of helpless dismay as healthy trees whose existence may have spanned generations or long rows of hedgerows are destroyed by heavy machinery for agricultural or construction purposes or sometimes for mere aesthetic reasons. Hedgerows are routinely pulverised by flails, often in areas where no road safety risk is posed, at any time of the year without consequence. The health and safety rationale is too often a *carte blanche* to destroy everything in sight.

There is no district conservation officer, regional manager or park ranger in the NPWS, which is a long-standing state of affairs. Bizarrely, when the Department is asked about staffing levels across different regions in parliamentary questions, the response is that the NPWS does not, for reasons of operational security, provide these details. If we were to follow this logic, information would not be provided on the number of gardaí stationed in a particular town or region. This country is a wild west when it comes to the protection of habitats. There are huge morale issues in the NPWS because it has been chronically under-resourced and hobbled by weak legislation in carrying out its work. The Wildlife Act is in desperate need of strengthening. Section 40(2)(b), in particular, allows for the destruction of vegetation "in the ordinary

course of agriculture”. That needs to change. I urge the Minister of State to engage with Hedgerows Ireland and BirdWatch Ireland to see how to better protect the natural heritage, which provides us with so much of our sense of place, well-being and connection with the very essence of life itself.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am happy this debate is taking place. As previous speakers said, nobody is in this House more committed to protecting our biodiversity and natural heritage than the Minister of State. I am appreciative of the work he does personally but I know he is committed to action and not just words. The decision by the former Minister Michael McGrath to establish the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund will be seen as very significant, particularly to ensure resourcing of our commitments to the natural environment. With the forthcoming nature restoration plan, there will be active engagement with local communities. It is also critical to engage with farmers. I have always believed that farmers are our front-line workers in the campaign to ensure our biodiversity is protected.

The expansion of national parks is welcome. The Minister of State and I were very committed to the Conor Pass in Kerry becoming a national park, which came to pass. There is a campaign for the Blackstairs Mountains and Mount Leinster to become a national park. Councillor Barbara Anne Murphy in Bunclody regularly raises this issue. It is critical not just for biodiversity but for all of us to be able to enjoy those facilities.

Tara Hill is a beautiful area just north of Gorey. There are many habitats on the hill and all different kinds of flora and fauna, including a lot of Irish mammals like hares, foxes, red and grey squirrels, pygmy shrew and plenty of birds. The Minister of State is more than welcome to come birding on the hill. A lot of it has been mapped by the Tara Hill Community Development Association. As the Minister of State will be aware, on Sunday evening into Monday morning, there was a catastrophic gorse fire that swept across the hill. I pay tribute to the fire crews, emergency services and locals who battled it. While, fortunately, nobody was injured, there was quite a lot of damage to the ecosystem. The Minister of State will be aware of the damage these fires cause, not just on Tara Hill but throughout the country. I hope he will in due course meet the development association. We need to look at what supports can be put in place when gorse fires impact on areas of natural beauty and to support such rich ecosystems. It is critical that there is a strategy to try to prevent gorse fires and to restore the habitats after those incidents.

The other issue is the protection of our coasts. Our coastal communities are incredibly important as places for us to walk and enjoy and as significant contributors to biodiversity. While the Minister of State in west Cork and the Ceann Comhairle in south Wexford would make similar arguments, the constituency of Wicklow-Wexford has some of the finest beaches in the country where people can swim, walk and enjoy biodiversity, stretching down from Brittas Bay and Arklow north and south beach through Clogga, Kilpatrick, Ballymoney and Courtown, on to Cahore, Old Bawn, Ballinoulart and Morriscastle. I have not even named half of them. They are beautiful beaches and many Members will know them. A big challenge impacting on our enjoyment and biodiversity in the area is coastal erosion, not least because there is such a sandy coast. For most of the Wicklow and Wexford coast, the problem is sandy erosion. We need a strategy including beach nourishment programmes and to protect the ecosystems that live in and around our beaches. There are many active development groups and associations that would be happy to work with the Minister of State in that regard. Our beaches are critical to all our lives. The Minister of State and I know how much we love our coastal communities but the fear of coastal erosion, particularly because of climate change, is causing significant problems.

I ask him to prioritise that matter.

Deputy Joe Neville: I will not make a grand speech about something I have always been involved in, but biodiversity was something I always just knew about. On the farm where my mam grew up in north Roscommon or the farm my uncle had, there were meadows and bees but I never thought too much about biodiversity. I grew up in a housing estate in Leixlip. We were out and about and parks were just for playing football. When I became a councillor, it started hitting home. As I speak, I am thinking of Vanessa Liston, who was a councillor with me in the Celbridge-Leixlip area. She brought forward ideas, made biodiversity important and pitched it for all the council motions and I would sit there and listen. I recall Íde Cussen, a councillor in the Celbridge municipal district. She was also a colleague of Deputy Cronin. She brought up the issue of glyphosate and Roundup being used by the council. It was taken out of use because of one person's ambition. It was removed from use by Kildare County Council. I think of people like them during discussions like this. Some might ask what the point is or what impact politicians can have on biodiversity. When you see individuals such as that making those kinds of key impacts, they might seem small but they can change behaviours. Someone like me is talking about it a number of years later in Leinster House and continuing on that same message. When I first heard it, I would not have necessarily known about it. At the same time, it is people like Íde Cussen who have made the difference.

In respect of local groups, such as Tidy Towns, I had the good fortune to go to the Leixlip Tidy Towns annual general meeting last night. It was all about biodiversity. For many of us in Ireland, 20 or 30 years ago, Tidy Towns groups were about litter picking and flower boxes and ensuring the boxes were watered. It is now about sustainability and biodiversity and ensuring we plant and grow plants to make the place look better. It is about people like them. We can actually make an impact through the consistent education and messaging we get during weeks like this.

For biodiversity week, Kildare County Council held events throughout the county. I am sure it was the same in the other council areas. Deputy Byrne referenced every single place in Wexford and I am sure other people did likewise for their areas. We want to encourage visits to places like Donadea or the Curragh, which are outside my area. That is the importance of biodiversity week.

My friend, Benny McDonagh, ran in the local elections for the Green Party. He has since passed away. He was a great friend who passed away a couple of months ago. I am thinking of him and his family today. He was someone who encouraged me so much to raise this matter. Even at his funeral, he had little Irish seedballs for everyone to plant. That is something I took from him. In a small way, that will be a legacy he leaves. I know his daughter, Amber, is doing her leaving certificate. I am thinking about that too. Everyone has their own journey and can make their own impact if they keep discussing it and raising it.

I welcome this opportunity to speak with the Minister of State because he has the opportunity at the top table to raise these issues and impress them upon his colleagues. I will also be impressing them on my own colleagues, such as the Minister, Deputy Burke, in the context of the economic sector. We can make an important impact on biodiversity by helping farmers and encouraging natural farming. Farmers could potentially have their own businesses, which would encourage tourism and our economy. All these things can be linked.

It might be asked what the point of biodiversity is. People might say the best way is what

gets the most out of the land and biodiversity will mean farmers having to cut this and that. We have to think about the broader piece, however. That is something that has changed. The conversation has changed in Ireland in recent years. Since I first became a councillor in 2009, it has continued to change. My own personal journey has been impacted by certain individuals. I have learned a lot and I am delighted to be able to speak on this matter tonight as a TD. I smile across at my colleague who was there on part of that journey as well. She remembers many of those conversations.

During Covid-19 and everything else, people got their chance to go to different places. People referenced specific places. In my area, it was St. Catherine's Park in Castletown House. Those are the sorts of locations we loved and dealt with, in which we got to experience the biodiversity of our own areas. Everyone has their own places, be they the greenways or whatever it might be. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter tonight. I know the Minister of State will continue to do a great job considering his own personal interest in this area.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We are in the midst of a biodiversity crisis, one which threatens ecosystems, food security and our way of life. The facts are stark. Ireland ranks as one of the worst countries in Europe for biodiversity loss. More than 30% of our bee species are at risk of extinction. Wetlands, which are vital for carbon storage and flood prevention, have declined by 90% in the past century. Despite these alarming facts, the Government's response has been weak, delayed and fundamentally inadequate. The reality is that biodiversity loss is not just an environmental issue; it is a threat to our food security, our water quality and our resilience against climate disasters. When habitats are destroyed, we undermine the very systems that sustain life. The Government's failure to act with urgency is nothing short of negligence in my opinion. We have seen a lack of enforcement for existing protections and a planning system that continues to prioritise short-term profit over long-term sustainability. We need a step change in approach. We need strong legal protections and binding biodiversity targets, alongside independent monitoring and real consequences for those who damage ecosystems.

In respect of the marine protected areas Bill, the latest response I have received is that it is at an advanced stage of drafting. We need that legislation. We are too long waiting for it.

This Government must increase investment in large-scale restoration projects such as rewilding native woodlands, rehabilitating peatlands and creating wildlife corridors. This is just not about conservation; it is also about rebuilding what has been lost and connecting people with nature. I recently met with the park rangers at the new Brú na Bóinne national park, something I have talked about with the Minister of State. I ask him to please keep supporting and advancing that project. The park rangers spoke about the development of the boardwalk at Girley Bog outside Kells, with which I am very familiar. They were involved in that development. When it was originally proposed, some people questioned who would want to go to a boardwalk in a bog. In fact, it is hugely popular. Build it and they will come. People want to connect with nature now more than ever. People need to connect with nature. The Minister of State should grasp that opportunity with both hands. As part of this, education must be a priority in order to empower communities to become educated around methods of promoting biodiversity and engaging in a sustainable lifestyles. Incentives to empower communities and other funding measures must be implemented to support people in their efforts. I wish the Minister of State well in his role. He will know better than anyone that we have a lot of work to do.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I welcome the Minister of State's enthusiasm and fine words. The question is whether we are going to get the action to go with it. I raise a concrete case with

him today and seek action on it. It is an issue where the State is not only failing to do enough to protect biodiversity, but is actually destroying it. The issue relates to the ongoing slaughter of badgers by the Department of agriculture. The Minister of State will have seen “The Journal Investigates” report in which it states that the Department has killed more than 66,000 badgers in the past ten years. The way the badgers are killed is horrific. They are trapped in snares leading to internal organ damage, ruptured bladders and even disembowelment. This includes pregnant and lactating badgers, leaving their cubs to starve to death. Other wild animals, including more than 4,000 foxes in the past ten years, also get trapped in the snares. Ireland is the only country in Europe committed to the large-scale, Government-licensed slaughter of badgers. The snaring of badgers is banned in Scotland and Wales. According to opinion polls, in excess of two thirds of people in Ireland want it banned as well. England has promised to phase out killing badgers and replace it with a vaccination programme following scientific research that found that all the slaughter had no significant impact on bovine tuberculosis incidents in cattle. Fifteen years of research by the Department of agriculture in Ireland also found that vaccination is no less effective than culling. The real cause of the bovine tuberculosis epidemic is not badgers-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have another minute.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me. The Deputy is right.

Deputy Paul Murphy: These beautiful and innocent badgers are being made a scapegoat for industrial farming practices where dairy herd sizes have ballooned. With bigger herds and more intensive farming comes more disease. The Department of agriculture admits that killing badgers is not sustainable in the long term due to its ultimate impact on badger ecology. It knows it does not work to control bovine tuberculosis. Why on earth did it then slaughter more than 7,000 badgers last year, which was the highest number in a decade? Will the Minister of State commit today to end the irrational, State-sanctioned cruelty and biodiversity destruction?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I wish the Minister of State the best. I welcome his passion today and his invitation to all of us to go out into the country. There is a lot more than that to be done, however. He knows that more than anyone. If we go back, we declared biodiversity a climate emergency back in May 2019. The Minister at the time, Josepha Madigan, said that, “We are losing biodiversity around the globe at a rate unprecedented in human history”. She said that on 29 May 2019. The former Minister of State from the Green Party and current Senator, Malcolm Noonan, said, “The biodiversity emergency is among our greatest challenges, if not the greatest”. I pay tribute to the former Minister of State because he took a hands-on approach with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and we now have extra parks as a result.

We are in an emergency. The elephant in the room is the continued wars in which we are complicit. I do not know how we can talk about climate change with any honesty or sincerity while we allow wars to continue every day.

It is obviously the elephant in the room for biodiversity. Then we look at the EPA. It is never mentioned that ongoing wars are totally incompatible with changes in climate. The EPA’s state of the environment report is the eighth such report since 1996. It states:

... the scale of improvements that are being made ... is insufficient ... [...] In all cases, the outlook is not positive with substantial challenges to deliver [not just] on climate, air ... [but

on the economy as well].

Elsewhere, it states:

This report shows that serious deficits remain in Ireland's implementation of environmental legislation such as the Urban Waste Water Directive, Water Framework Directive ... [and so on] [...] There are currently nine Court of Justice of the European Union cases and 16 infringements open against Ireland for failures in implementing EU environmental legislation.

That is just a tiny taste in two minutes and 30 seconds, so maybe in his closing speech the Minister of State will direct himself to what the Government is doing about this crisis.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I wish the Minister of State the very best of luck with his new role. For the first time in the history of the State, nature was prioritised at government level thanks to the leadership of the Green Party during our time in government. We restructured and significantly increased funding for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, developed a new national biodiversity action plan as a roadmap to reverse nature loss by 2030, created two new national parks at Dowth in County Meath and Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara in County Kerry, worked with the Department of agriculture to reward farmers who are improving their biodiversity and funded reintroduction programmes for corncrakes, the natterjack toad and curlews. These policies are having a major difference.

Last summer I had the opportunity to visit Eamon Sheehan's derogation dairy farm in Kilkenny. That farm has abundant ponds, dense hedgerows, dung beetles recycling nutrients and a wide variety of bird and insect life. If we can provide space for nature on a busy dairy farm, we can do it everywhere. We can have productive agriculture, biodiversity and clean water as well. With the passage of the EU's Nature Restoration Law we face a real opportunity to restore nature at scale across our island, but that plan needs funding. The Green Party called for a dedicated climate and nature fund. Where is that money? When will it be spent?

At EU level, the multiannual financial framework has earmarked €1.2 billion for climate and biodiversity. However, the soundings from Brussels are not good. There is a real risk this fund could be raided to ramp up spending for defence. Do we want that money in the hands of arms companies or should we distribute it fairly to farmers so they can help to restore nature? The Europe I want to see has more bees and fewer bombs. This National Biodiversity Week, let us remind ourselves that nature is not just in remote wilderness areas but also in our city streets, our parks and even in our back gardens. It needs the new Government to continue the momentum and it needs the new Government to continue the funding to secure it for future generations.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The belief that zoos are necessary to preserve rare animals and biodiversity is the only justification for maintaining them. Why would we think it is okay for some animals to suffer to maintain biodiversity? In any case, it is not true because zoos do not lead to that. I have heard the Minister of State's great credentials. I am asking him to be the first Minister of State to look into Dublin Zoo. I have spoken to a number of former workers who are whistleblowers and are very concerned about animal welfare there, as well as other issues like work practices and sexual harassment as well. However, I am especially focusing on animal welfare here.

Take the elephants for example. Dina, who is much-lauded, had her sister split up from her and other offspring taken away despite matriarchy and family being so important to elephants.

21 May 2025

This is not on. There is also the climate we have in Dublin Zoo. The size of the enclosure, at less than 1 ha, is absolutely cruel and barbaric. There is also an elephant consultant who is a dogfighter. Does the Minister of State think that is okay, in Dublin Zoo?

I have been told that the chimps are obese. They are agoraphobic because they have been locked up for so long. They have no stimulation. They are on a cocktail of medication for depression and schizophrenia. They have had teeth taken out and they have been castrated. There is one orangutan left and the current orangutan had three offspring that she rejected because these are such unnatural conditions for any animal to be in.

I do not have time to go into all the issues, but the NPWS is meant to investigate Dublin Zoo. It is within the Minister of State's brief. The service does not have the necessary independence because it is very close to the management of the zoo. It does not have the zoological expertise on wild animals. I have a report that was done 30 years ago. I am asking the Minister of State to do an independent investigation into Dublin Zoo and these issues.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I understand the Minister of State, who has special responsibility for nature, heritage and biodiversity, has particular interests and b'fhéidir grá, even, for biodiversity. As Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy I really hope we can work together to ensure our habitats can be protected and the tools and mechanisms that delivered those protections for them can be strengthened.

This week provides us with a unique opportunity to appreciate all aspects of nature around our areas. I am aware of a few events taking place in Dublin Bay North this week, including a tree walk and talk through St. Anne's Park in Clontarf and an ecological field trip to Bull Island. In 1981 UNESCO recognised the importance of the bay by designating North Bull Island as a biosphere because of its rare and internationally important habitats and species of wildlife. To support sustainable development UNESCO's concept of a biosphere has evolved to include not just areas of ecological value but areas proximate to those areas and the communities that live and work within those areas. There have since been additional international and national designations covering a lot of Dublin Bay, parts of St. Anne's Park and other areas to ensure the protection of the bay's water quality and biodiversity.

I was a member of Dublin City Council for 20 years. The Dublin City Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2025 highlights the importance of biodiversity as a key indicator within the city's ecosystem. During Covid people's awareness and appreciation of biodiversity also went up a lot, especially as they were spending a lot of time outside. The National Biodiversity Data Centre reported a 60% increase in voluntary records being submitted compared with the same period in previous years as people got more involved during the lockdown. I chaired the environment SPC on the council and one of the policy actions we took was to move the city council away from the general use of glyphosate, also known as Roundup. This did not receive universal acclaim from residents but it was definitely the right thing to do. We have seen more and more ground-up initiatives take hold that are helping with biodiversity. They are coming up from the community, which is great to see. There is no-mow May, pollinator-friendly areas and community groups like Raheny Tidy Village group launching its own Raheny biodiversity action plan only a few weeks ago.

I do not know much about the National Biodiversity Data Centre. I understand that the Minister of State's predecessor Senator Noonan was very involved in putting it on a solid footing. I was just looking at the data it has and it is fantastic. Long may the centre continue because

the more data we can collect accurately, the better the policy decisions we can make. I only know the ground-level stuff. I have a lot to learn about what can be done through the national frameworks to protect and enhance nature and biodiversity. I look forward to learning all that in the term of this Dáil.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an-suim ag an Aire Stáit san ábhar seo. Everyone has recognised it is an issue the Minister of State has great interest in. There is a need for him to have a great interest in it because we are not exactly where we need to be. In 2019 a biodiversity emergency was declared in this State and across this island, so it is an absolute necessity that we follow up on what needs to be done. We have a huge crisis, with significant declines in many species and habitats. There has been a 40% drop in the number of watering birds since the late 1990s. This includes mallard ducks, which are one of our most familiar water birds. Kestrel numbers have dropped by an estimated 45% and 23 of Ireland's 24 species of nesting seabirds are listed in the red or amber categories as birds of conservation concern. Some 63% of Irish bird species are on a list of concern, with 30% on the amber list and 26% on the red list. Some 18% of the native Irish butterfly fauna is under threat of extinction and a further 15% is near threatened. Over 56% of Ireland's native plant species are in decline, with native grasslands suffering the most. Less than half our marine environments can be described as healthy and water quality needs to be dealt with also. We could spend a long time dealing with water quality and that would also relate to our treatment infrastructure, but that is for another day. We know the significant connection between climate change and biodiversity. Many of us have spoken here on the possibility for Ireland to be a wind energy superpower. We keep talking about it but the State has not done the necessary legwork to deliver it. I agree with Deputy Connolly and many others that no matter how vital the work we do is - a lot more needs to be done by this State - in an age when we are surrounded by war and profit-making by those who make armaments, it is very difficult to see how we can get to where we need to be. I suppose we deal with those parts that we can have an impact on.

I welcome the work being done in my local area, such as the community garden in Muirhevnamore which shares a space with men's sheds. It is a community facility that we hope will be able to get funding from the community recognition fund. They are allotments in the middle of a built-up estate in Dundalk. It is absolutely spectacular and we need to see more of that. I would hope there would be support for it but we need to get control of all those pieces in respect of climate change and biodiversity.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome biodiversity but I also welcome biodiversity in the right areas and places. I also welcome safety on roads. On biodiversity, the laws that have been passed in this country never took into account people travelling. This is where I have a major issue with some of the laws on wildlife and biodiversity: as regards safety of lives. Roads where two vehicles could once travel are now closing in because of laws made by the local authorities. When they go to do a road, they cut 2 m high and 1 m in. They close the road and do not allow for buses, trucks or people walking who cannot step in when there is a vehicle coming. We need joined-up thinking on biodiversity so we can also have road safety. Now we have vehicles travelling in the middle of the road. They cannot travel on the side because of all the hedgerows growing in together. I would like to see laws introduced in the case of health and safety. All local and regional roads where I live need a 1 m setback and hedges to be cut up straight. There are trees that are a danger to people travelling, walking and living on the road because ash dieback has set into them and they are rotting in the middle. I want to see them taken out for the safety of human life. I welcome biodiversity but I also welcome the health and

safety of people travelling on our roads.

If you have wildlife, they should be all off the roadways so you can actually see them. If you want to get into the parks or go across the fields to see them, yes. We need to make sure people can travel the road safely, whether they are cycling, walking, driving, taking their dog for a walk or just going out for leisure. You need to be able to make sure you can step in. You need to be able to make sure that you are not encouraging vehicles to drive in the middle of the road. Let there be biodiversity, wildlife and everything - fantastic - but we must also protect the people who are protecting the wildlife: our sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers. Let them travel safely to school, to work, to our front-line services and to our carers. They have to be able to travel the roads safely. We must also respect the biodiversity and wildlife in this country.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Making statements on biodiversity in Ireland is a bit like that time when Ghandi was asked about western civilisation and he retorted: “I think it would be a good idea.” Biodiversity in Ireland would be a good idea if we followed through. I welcome the €2.9 million funding announcement to local authorities for biodiversity projects under the National Parks and Wildlife Service local biodiversity action fund 2025. There has been great work done in my own local authority area of south Dublin, for example. We planted a pocket forest a few months ago which, much to the dismay of Lucan Tidy Towns and all the volunteers, myself included, after hours of diligent work, has now been torn to shreds and cut down for a cycle path because South Dublin County Council did not communicate internally - bureaucratic ineptitude at its finest. Someone needs to be called out. On the whole there have been some good projects, including other pocket forests and the Dublin Urban Rivers LIFE project. When all these are taken together on a national level, if colleagues will pardon the pun, unfortunately it is a drop in our dying ocean.

Social Justice Ireland estimates that 56% of native plant species have declined in range and abundance, with grassland plants suffering the most. Some 85% of EU protected habitats in Ireland are in an unfavourable state and 46% are showing ongoing declines. Yes, biodiversity would be a good idea. This week we heard the news that Lady’s Island Lake in County Wexford is experiencing severe pollution, primarily due to excessive nutrient run-off from agricultural activities. This has resulted in harmful algal blooms, fish kills and a general degradation of the lake’s ecosystem. The lake is a special protection area and a special area of conservation. It is struggling to recover from the negative impact of ongoing nutrient overenrichment. This is just one example on the island of Ireland. We have the dead lake, Lough Neagh, in the North. Dying and endangered lakes in the South include Lough Corrib, Lough Mask, Lough Carra, Lough Sheelin, Lough Derravaragh, Lough Ennell, Lough Cullaun, Lough Arrow, Ballycuirke Lough, Ballyeigher Lough, Lough Bane and Bleach Lough, as referenced by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. What all these lakes have in common is agricultural run-off - basically, animal excrement - spread excessively over land that is leaching into our waterways and causing havoc. In Ireland, agricultural practices negatively impact over 70% of our habitats. We can talk all we want about our commitment to biodiversity and point to the nitrates action programme and good agricultural practices regulations that aim to limit fertiliser application, but the fact is that we still seek derogations on the nitrates directive. Make me ecologically chaste, O Lord, but not yet.

Yes, biodiversity would be a good idea. We are a bunch of hypocrites, basically because we want to flog more beef and dairy abroad at a time when we should be encouraging the reduction of animal agriculture to reduce greenhouse emissions. That is before we even touch animal

welfare issues. We will not be anywhere near meeting the EU organic food targets, even those these sectors pay a premium. We should be promoting organic food as the norm, including subsidising it where it does not meet affordability thresholds, and encouraging a major reduction in meat and dairy consumption. Why are we not setting an example? As an aside, it is a pity that there is not more vegan and vegetarian food in the Dáil restaurant for all the staff. I must say they do a lovely vegan breakfast, albeit a fry-up. Maybe the Minister of State should try it sometime and promote meat reduction for climate and biodiversity enhancement, as opposed to pandering to lobby groups that do not have a leg to stand on, let alone four legs.

We need to give much more support to our small farmers especially, and to farming communities, in diversifying. We need to provide them with real incomes and real potential from enhancing our environment, planting renewable Irish forests and engaging in diversification as custodians of our environment. They have been doing a great job over many centuries but we have an issue with water leaching. They are not going to change the habits of generations without support and encouragement. Rural communities could thrive once again and our rivers and lakes could be clean, but the Government needs to make it happen rather than stand in the way.

As well as spreading nitrates, we have overgrazing, undergrazing, unsustainable peat extraction, although I love the smell of a turf fire as much as anyone else, the introduction of invasive species and overfishing. Let us be balanced, though. Residential and industrial development also plays its part. Its impact on climate change affects biodiversity. Building on flood plains has a knock-on effect. Air and water pollution from these sources destroys our ecosystem and needs to be tackled.

8 o'clock

We have this big, national biodiversity action plan that does not look like it is going to meet its targets. I have read through it. It has a puffin on the front cover. BirdWatch Ireland reported a 28% decline in Ireland's puffin population since the turn of this century alone, making it a red listed bird of conservation concern. We need to take biodiversity seriously, but we do not. We pay lip service. We pat ourselves on the back for the many laudable micro-projects, which I praise. I am not saying nothing has been done but not enough has been done because in terms of the big picture, we consistently fail to take action. Yes, biodiversity would be a good idea.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): As we conclude this important discussion, I express my sincere thanks for the opportunity to mark National Biodiversity Week in the Dáil and to reaffirm my Department's enduring commitment to the protection and the restoration of Ireland's natural heritage. I acknowledge and thank all Members who contributed, both today and at last week's debate in the Seanad. The quality of debate and the variety of issues raised by Deputies and Senators reflects the growing recognition that biodiversity is not a peripheral issue. In fact, it cannot be.

Biodiversity and its protection is not a nice to have and something we can look at supporting only when it suits us. Such an approach would be both careless and genuinely frustrating for the good work done so far. It would also be dangerous. Biodiversity is essential to our basic well-being, our economy and our responsibility as stewards of this island. The land we walk on and the air we breathe depend on so many factors interplaying. We are so incredibly lucky to have what we have in Ireland around us and it is imperative we do not lose sight of that.

As Minister for housing, I am in conversations every hour of the day about significant build-

21 May 2025

ing and infrastructure projects but our environmental duties are never far from those discussions at every level. It should be embedded in how we think and how we approach all our work across Government. We actually do not have a choice if we are to set ourselves up for a future where biodiversity thrives. There is very clear and strong cross-party support for preserving and enhancing our environment and I welcome that shared determination.

As we approach the end of National Biodiversity Week, I want to pay tribute to the countless individuals, community groups and organisations who have organised and participated in events right across the country. Their passion and energy is absolutely critical in driving real change on the ground.

In particular, I want to commend the Irish Environmental Network and the National Parks and Wildlife Service on their exceptional co-ordination of this year's programme. The growing engagement speaks for itself. With more than 350 events taking place nationwide, up significantly from 293 in 2024, this reflects our rising awareness and a deepening connection between people and nature. This week's events have helped to shine a light on the everyday places that matter, from protected national parks and nature reserves to hedgerows, riversides and urban green spaces. These are not just habitats; they are homes for wildlife and spaces of meaning and well-being for communities. This stuff really matters.

Each event has highlighted the powerful role that individual and collective action plays in supporting biodiversity. These events encourage the public to discover new things about their local surroundings, to learn and to share knowledge and to experience the riches of biodiversity. Under the programme for Government 2025, the Government has made a clear statement of intent. With record levels of investment in nature and heritage, including €78 million in core funding for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, this funding supports the protection and restoration of vital habits, the improvement of water quality and the conservation of threatened species. It also strengthens enforcement capacity, enhancing monitoring and research, supports the management of protected areas and enables collaborative, locally-led projects through initiatives like the local biodiversity action fund.

It is a whole-of-society, a whole-of-government approach, and one we are committed to deepening. However, investment alone is not enough. Personal responsibility also matters deeply. As the temperature rises and we enter the summer months, I must echo the call of the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, to please avoid lighting fires, using disposable barbecues or discarding cigarette butts in parks, woodlands or any areas rich in biodiversity. Even a single spark can cause devastating harm to delicate ecosystems and endanger human lives. It is not good enough and it should not be happening year-on-year. Respecting our wildlife means protecting it, especially during dry spells when it is most vulnerable.

This week is about our nature and our biodiversity, yes, but it is also about the people who care for it. I sincerely thank all of those across Ireland, from volunteers and local authority staff to farmers, educators, researchers and conservationists whose daily efforts often go unrecognised but their impact is so vital. Their work is laying the foundation for a more sustainable, balanced relationship with the natural world. I also want to highlight the role of young people. Through initiatives like the Green-Schools programme and youth biodiversity networks, a new generation of environmental stewards is emerging that is informed, engaged and passionate. We owe it to them to keep moving forward.

Just yesterday in my constituency of Wexford, I was delighted to announce nearly €89,000

in funding for local biodiversity projects through the National Parks and Wildlife Service local biodiversity action fund. This investment will enable communities across the county to take meaningful action to protect unique habitats and species. This is essential work for places across our county and coastline.

I also want to highlight some of the excellent events taking place this week in my county of Wexford. These events include Seashore Explore in Kilmore Quay on 24 May, along with a series of biodiversity walks and talks, and show what is possible when local knowledge, State support and citizen interest all come together. These are the kinds of efforts that make a difference. With just a few days remaining in National Biodiversity Week, I want to encourage everybody to take the opportunity to engage, explore, listen, learn and visit somewhere new. Every step we take to connect with nature strengthens our commitment to its protection. Let this week serve as a powerful reminder - nature is not separate from us; it is part of us. By safeguarding biodiversity we protect not just the environment, but our health, food systems, culture and our future. I thank everyone once again for their contributions.

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 14th May, 2025.

I thank the Members of Dáil Éireann for meeting to discuss this motion concerning the order the Minister for Justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, proposes to make to reduce the monthly financial contribution for hosts of temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine under the accommodation recognition payment, ARP, scheme.

The Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 provides that the draft order laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas cannot be made law until a resolution approving that order has been passed in each House. As announced in March this year, the draft order under consideration proposes a reduction in the monthly contribution from €800 to €600 from June 2025. The first reduced amount will be paid in July by the Department of Social Protection, which administers the scheme on behalf of the Minister for Justice.

My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Foley, has already sought and received the consent of the Minister for Social Protection and the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform for the reduction, as required by law. She also consulted with me and the Minister for Justice on the matter, due to the pending transfer of responsibility for this matter to the Minister for Justice. When the scheme was introduced in 2022, the monthly contribution to hosts was €400. It was not linked to the actual cost incurred by the person providing the accommodation and was a recognition of the humanitarian response to displaced Ukrainians. The contribution was increased to €800 from 1 December 2022 to coincide with the introduction of the local authorities' offer a home scheme for Ukrainians. Harnessing the many generous offers of ac-

21 May 2025

commodation pledged by the public and increasing the financial support available to hosts was seen as important in addressing accommodation challenges due to the continuing arrival of Ukrainians into the State. Pledged accommodation, whether spare rooms in people's houses through Irish Red Cross pledges or vacant homes through the offer a home scheme, were of significant value to the State in the humanitarian response to the Ukrainian crisis. I thank the Irish Red Cross and its partners for their ongoing engagement with hosts, beneficiaries of temporary protection and communities in implementing the Ukraine response pledged accommodation programme.

From the launch of the ARP scheme in July 2022 to date, some 23,900 hosts have availed of the ARP contribution in respect of some 54,500 beneficiaries. In March this year, when the extension of the ARP scheme was being considered in this House, many Members of the House reflected on the many positive aspects of the scheme. They acknowledged it as an innovative measure which has generated emergency accommodation out of largely unused housing stock. The scheme tapped into the goodwill of thousands of households and provided an economically and socially viable alternative to accommodation in the tourism sector. Under the scheme, Ukrainians have had access to accommodation that is more suitable for families, and that is a path towards independent living. The scheme has been a lifeline for displaced Ukrainians, given high rental market rates and scarcity of rental accommodation and has contributed to a shift away from a reliance on State-procured accommodation in hotels and guesthouses. On 18 May this year, more than 38,700 people were being housed under the scheme. This now exceeds the number in State-procured accommodation, which is some 24,100.

Notwithstanding the success of the scheme, it is now timely to reduce the level of the financial contribution under the ARP. I also acknowledge the concerns that were raised by Deputies in this House in March regarding the potential impact of the scheme on the private rental market, and note the amendment that Deputy Carthy intends to table today. I will address this matter later in the session. The reduction seeks to mitigate any unintended impact of the ARP on the private rental sector. While there are no definitive findings of any impact, I am mindful of the concerns expressed by Oireachtas colleagues and hope that the reduction will go some way towards alleviating those concerns.

My Department has shared ARP data for analysis undertaken on behalf of the Department of housing and it has been difficult to reach any definitive conclusion on the matter, in part due to the provisions of the scheme. For example, a property that is registered with the Residential Tenancies Board might also fall within the remit of the ARP as a tenant may apply for the ARP subject to the consent of the property owner and other tenants. There are also likely to be cases of RTB property registrations which were terminated for a range of reasons, such as the sale of property or change of use, in respect of which an applicant is in receipt of the accommodation recognition payment.

While there have been concerns about the scheme's possible negative impact, the results of the Irish Red Cross research of ARP hosts cannot be ignored. That research found that over 90% of hosts are not landlords, and that their primary motivation for involvement has been supporting people fleeing the war in Ukraine. The proposed reduced contribution reflects recent policy changes which aim to ensure that temporary and timebound supports for beneficiaries of temporary protection are proportionate and equitable. Our policies are continuing to evolve as we transition from a crisis to a more measured, standardised and sustainable response. Last year, for example, the 90-day State accommodation policy was introduced and the rate of payments to beneficiaries in designated accommodation centres was reduced. Those policies re-

sulted in a significant reduction in the number of beneficiaries arriving in Ireland and reduced numbers in State-procured accommodation.

I know that there are conflicting views on the impact of reducing the rate. There are those who see the current monthly tax-free contribution of €800 as outcompeting local renters. There are those who are concerned that the reduced rate will place a burden on hosts and that they will not be able to cover the cost of housing. The contribution is not, nor has it ever been, linked to the actual costs incurred by the person providing accommodation. It is not intended to substitute rent. It is not available where there is a rental agreement in place. With regard to so called top-up payments, the ARP does not create any obligation for the beneficiaries in the accommodation, such as payment of rent or provision of services. However, a beneficiary may agree to contribute towards certain household costs such as utilities.

A concern related to the proposed reduction is that beneficiaries may lose their accommodation and become vulnerable to homelessness. There may be a risk associated with reducing the contribution and it is impossible to predict ARP applicant attrition rates. In that regard, although the reduction has been flagged for some months, the number of ARP applications has continued to increase. Should hosting arrangements end, and they can end for a range of reasons, beneficiaries who may require support will be provided with that support. Of course, it should be recognised that there will be others already in employment and settled in local communities who will seek to make their own arrangements, as many of their compatriots have already done.

A monthly contribution of €600 tax free is still an attractive payment and is the equivalent of a normal rental property of over €1,000 per month, as most landlords pay 50% tax on rental payments. Since 2022, a number of European countries have introduced financial support schemes for private hosts for displaced persons from Ukraine. Most of those schemes' rates have been reduced, while others have been discontinued. Even after the proposed reduction, the accommodation recognition payment scheme is at the generous end of such schemes, both in the duration for applicants and the level of contribution. I hope that by continuing the scheme at a reduced rate, we can achieve a balance between the needs of displaced people, the hosts who have extended a warm welcome to them and the wider community. The House's approval of this motion today will endorse that approach.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 1:

to insert after “on 14th May, 2025”:

“provided that future financial contributions under Accommodation Recognition Payment (ARP) Scheme shall only be paid after the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 has been amended to provide for the following:

— existing recipients with respect to the beneficiaries of temporary protection currently benefitting from the scheme where those beneficiaries of temporary protection have satisfied a means test similar to those applicable for other housing assistance payments;

— new applications who propose to host a beneficiary of temporary protection in their property which is also their own primary residence and who have not availed of the Rent-a-Room Scheme in the previous 12 months; ensuring that the ARP does not further distort the rental sector; and

— recipients who are not in receipt of any additional or ‘top-up’ payments from a beneficiary of temporary protection.”.

This motion reduces the accommodation recognition payment from €800 to €600 but it does not deal with any of the other issues regarding the ARP which need to be addressed. As the Minister of State alluded to, Sinn Féin has repeatedly highlighted issues of unfairness with the Ukrainian accommodation recognition payment scheme that the Government has simply, again, ignored. For far too long, members of this Government have essentially stonewalled anyone who pointed out that the scheme was impacting on the private rental market, particularly in counties that might traditionally have lower rents. There was a point-blank refusal to deal with this issue on numerous occasions when Sinn Féin raised it.

It is acknowledged that at the beginning this scheme was an emergency measure to support those who opened up their own homes to people fleeing war, which was commendable. What we have increasingly been seeing is landlords in the private sector availing of the ARP because in some areas it is financially advantageous for them to do so compared with renting to other potential tenants. It is important to say that it frees landlords of the obligations they would have to tenants under formal tenancy agreements, which is something that some landlords unfortunately see as advantageous.

Currently, we know that the State is paying landlords €800 per month, tax-free, to accommodate a person from Ukraine here under the temporary protection directive. That puts other renters, including people who might be on lower incomes or in a more precarious situation, at a severe disadvantage as the scheme has incentivised landlords, particularly when there is a new property, to rent their properties to Ukrainians under the scheme, especially where there might be lower rents traditionally. The tax-free payment is going to be reduced to €600 but it is hard to know what difference this will make. The Minister has essentially not only refused to state that Government will ban the practice of top-up payments but has defended that system. We have a situation where, uniquely within the private rental sector, unregulated payments are being made, with no way of knowing what level they are, whether they are genuine payments towards costs incurred or whether they are top-up rental income being paid tax-free to landlords concerned.

The motion before the House today can only be described as a missed opportunity because there was a chance to address a number of key problems with the scheme that make it inherently unfair, including allowing for top-up payments and, crucially, for the introduction of a means test. We can have a situation where one person who is availing of this scheme could be employed in a well-paying job and, because there is no means test as there is in every other rental support scheme, they are availing of this subsidy. That is what makes this scheme divisive, deeply unfair and why, in our view, it should be ended for new entrants. It should be means tested, as all other housing supports are, and the practice of permitting top-up payments should be banned. In addressing the problems with the scheme, we are clear that obviously there should be no cliff edge that would put anyone at risk of homelessness. There is an important distinction to be made between those who are housing families in their own homes and landlords in the private sector who are availing of the ARP. The Government has to acknowledge that distinction as well.

The Government has said this reduction is to mitigate any unintended impact on the private rental sector. That is very interesting because the Government was at pains to deny that there has been any impact on the rental sector at all when Sinn Féin repeatedly raised these problems.

There is an issue with an absolute lack of transparency from the Government regarding what analysis or documentation it has regarding the impact of the ARP on the private rental sector. What we do know is that there are a number of reports in existence but FOI requests for access have been refused. We are told there is a record dated 30 September of last year entitled Accommodation Recognition Payment and Potential Impact on the Private Rental Market. We know there is a record dated 14 February this year entitled ARP and the Impacts on the Private Rental Market. That was a paper prepared for the Taoiseach, we are told. We are also told there is a record dated 26 February this year entitled Impact of ARP on the Rental Market. What we do not know is what any of those reports actually say because in the first instance the Minister of State refused to acknowledge they existed and now he is refusing again to admit there is any impact on the private rental sector. It was only in response to a parliamentary question last week that the Minister for Justice, who has now assumed responsibility for the ARP, explicitly acknowledged that the ARP was impacting on the private rental sector. However, all we have is the Minister's understanding of the indicative findings. We have not had sight of any of this research. We are simply told that the proposed reduction in payment seeks to mitigate against unintended impact on the private sector but we do not know if any of these reports have looked at the impact on top-up payments, as I have mentioned, that have been permitted alongside the ARP.

Let me be very clear. All the reports on the ARP impact on the private rental sector must be published without any further delay. This is taxpayers' money, a lot of it, being paid under a scheme and it is absolutely unfair and quite disgraceful that we are being expected, as Members of the Oireachtas to stand, speak and vote on motions such as this one without any access to information that is within the gift of the Government to share. That is why Sinn Féin has tabled an amendment to the motion to ensure the following steps are taken to address the fundamental elements of the unfairness within the ARP prior to any further payments being made under this scheme. Just to be clear, our amendment calls for an end to the scheme for new entrants. It confines the ARP to primary residents, in other words, people who are housing people from Ukraine in their homes, something we have repeatedly said is very commendable and that should be supported, but does not displace the private rental sector. We have said quite sensibly that the ARP should be means tested, as is the case with every other housing assistance payment. It is crucially important that we ban the practice of top-up payments under the ARP, particularly unregulated top-up payments that have nothing to do with throwing a few euro towards the cost of electricity or groceries in a family home but are, rather, I suspect, additional payments being made to landlords tax-free. I urge the Government and all Members of this House to support the amendment.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Labour Party will not be supporting the Government motion to cut the accommodation recognition payment from €800 to €600, nor will we be supporting the Sinn Féin amendment, which I call on its members to withdraw. Sinn Féin should support the parties of the left in opposing the motion and the €200 cut to the payment.

Since the outbreak of the Russian war of conquest against Ukraine, we have been proud to stand in solidarity with Ukrainian people. When the Dáil last discussed this motion to extend the scheme in March, it was confirmed that over 37,000 Ukrainians were being provided with accommodation in over 20,000 properties, down from a high of over 52,000 beneficiaries. This is by any measure a very successful scheme that has ensured Ukrainians have a place to call home and it saved the State millions of euro that would otherwise have been spent on private or commercial accommodation. As the Minister said in March, the average cost per night is €13,

21 May 2025

compared with €45 in commercial self-catering accommodation. There is a significant risk now that the cut to €600 will result in extra cost for the State by putting Ukrainians at risk of homelessness. That would pile further pressure onto the private market and worsen the housing crisis.

Internal documents on the ARP scheme obtained by the *Irish Daily Mail* and published last Wednesday by Craig Hughes show officials in the Department of public expenditure are concerned about the knock-on effects as there is a risk that it will end up costing more than it saves. A memo from the Minister stated there was a risk that this could undermine ongoing efforts to reduce reliance on expensive commercial accommodation and that, in effect, Ukrainians would be transferred from homes to hotels. The Minister of State should confirm if a business case was produced for the decision. It is estimated the current system is saving the State €1 million to €2 million every day based on current numbers. It takes pressure off the private rental market and, importantly, helps people integrate and learn English faster. It embeds people in their local communities through their hosts. A price cannot be put on those benefits to Ukrainians and local Irish communities.

The stated reason for reducing the payment is that it will facilitate the winding down of the scheme in an orderly way in advance of the temporary protection directive ending in March 2026. The Minister of State should clarify what will happen later this year and into 2026 if the directive ends next March. What is the transition plan? Is it to end the scheme entirely next March? If the war continues with Putin showing no sign of ending it, what is the Government prepared to commit to support the thousands of Ukrainians now living here?

Sinn Féin's amendment refers to the impact on the private rental market. However, I refer the Sinn Féin Members to the survey of hosts by the Irish Red Cross which showed that the vast majority of hosts, 91%, are not landlords, have never been registered with the RTB and do not wish to become landlords. Some 86% of hosts reported that their ARP is important for them to continue their hosting arrangements.

We all know the solution to the housing crisis is to build more homes and renovate and restore thousands of derelict properties across the State. We should also look at measures to bring holiday homes back into use. How many empty homes are there right now across the State, whether second homes or being used as Airbnbs? Putting the blame on Ukrainians is cynical and exploitative. Across our communities, they have worked hard to contribute and play their part. Nearly 25,000 Ukrainians are at work and over 17,000 children are in school. They are helping small schools across the country stay open. They are contributing to our economy and providing vital skills and filling jobs in every sector, addressing a shortage of labour in our economy. This scheme is supporting mostly women, children and older people who have fled their home country because of the Russian war of invasion.

The cost of living is not coming down in this country. It is the opposite; costs are going up. Electricity, grocery prices, insurance - you name it, the costs are rising. The cut will impact host families and change the basic economics for them. There will not be a once-off cost-of-living package in this year's budget, thereby piling further pressure on families. The Government is taking a huge risk by cutting this payment. It could have major ramifications in the private rental sector if more Ukrainians have to find accommodation there and, as internal Government memos show, there is a real risk it could result in higher costs if more commercial accommodation is needed. In a world of great uncertainty, I urge the Minister of State not to add to it but, instead, to maintain the payment. The ARP is a model scheme and has worked well. The Min-

ister of State must also outline to us the long-term plan for the supports in place for Ukrainians and continue to pledge Ireland's solidarity for their cause.

Deputy Gary Gannon: This proposed reduction in the accommodation recognition payment from €800 to €600 a month is not just a bureaucratic tweak, it is a deeply short-sighted move that will hurt the very people we have asked to step up, that is, the thousands of families who have opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees fleeing war. When the war began and we stepped up, we talked about the huge solidarity the Irish people demonstrated to the Ukrainian community who came here, to our towns, villages and cities. Now, while the war still is not over, the Government is saying that it will take that down a little bit.

We should be honest in recognising that this payment works. We know that. A recent survey of hosts carried out by the Irish Red Cross indicated that 91% of them had a positive experience. We should also remember that these people were never landlords. Some 91% of homes involved in the scheme were never registered with the RTB. These were ordinary families, not investors or speculators, and they did not join this scheme for profit. They were ordinary families who answered the call that came from all sides of this Chamber. Most cited solidarity as their primary motivation but the €800 payment makes it possible for them to keep going, especially now, when the cost of living continues to rise.

Cutting this payment is not just bad social policy, it is bad economics. Internal Government documents, now public thanks to media reporting, show that cutting the payment could actually cost the State millions of euro more. If even 10% fewer people were to take part in the scheme, this reduction could push an extra 100 people per month into emergency accommodation such as hotels, bed and breakfast accommodation and guesthouses at a potential additional cost of €7 million by the year's end.

This measure is not just penny wise and pound foolish; it is self-defeating. There is an aura of cruelty being built into it. The Department of integration has offered no clear business case to justify this cut. It is my understanding that the Department of public expenditure has asked for one and simply has not received it yet. The Department had to model the cost itself and those models showed what many of us already know, namely, that this is a functioning scheme that is no doubt under pressure and cutting supports risks breaking it. The rationale given is that the change will help us to wind down the scheme in advance of the end of the EU's temporary protection directive in March 2026. That is a full nine months away and there is no guarantee that at that point this war we all recognise to be cruel and unjust will have ended. We all stand in the House on every anniversary of Russia's cruel and unjust invasion and express solidarity with the Ukrainian community but none of us were told that solidarity comes with a clock ticking.

The war in Ukraine has not ended and the needs have not changed. People are still seeking refuge and communities across Ireland are still stepping up, not only to provide solidarity, although that is there in abundance, but being enhanced by it. We also should not forget what happens when we try to cut costs haphazardly. Only recently, more than 200 Ukrainian refugees living in Dublin 1 were told out of the blue that they would be uprooted. Some would be sent to County Kildare, others to Bray and, astonishingly, children were to be separated from their parents and sent to Swords, all with 48 hours' notice. That is not how a compassionate or competent government acts. That is chaotic. It is cruel and, at its very essence, retraumatising of a people who have to actively flee from a war.

We cannot separate policy decisions like these and propose they be cut from the human consequences that follow. If we reduce this payment, we reduce the capacity of communities to host and if we reduce capacity, more people will end up in emergency accommodation. That means more rushed evictions and more upheavals. Without a shadow of a doubt, we should improve the scheme where necessary. Let us tighten it and provide oversight if there is evidence of abuses but let us not destroy something that works just to tick a budget box.

What we need right now is certainty. We need clarity for host families. We need stability for those still fleeing the war and we need compassion to remain the cornerstone of our refugee response. We will not support the cut and we will not support Sinn Féin's amendment. We think we should protect what works and maintain sensible schemes that encourage integration rather than isolation.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I also do not support the change to this scheme or the amendment proposed. Let us put this in context. Some 91% of the people who are participating in hosting refugees under this scheme have never been landlords before. It is not true that this scheme will interfere or has interfered with the housing market because nine out of ten of hosts never would have been landlords. I do not understand why this argument is being made consistently other than to potentially lean in to some of the anti-refugee or racist sentiment that is building up in society.

The second issue is that two thirds of those surveyed might also be open to hosting other refugees. Given that we know this scheme is costing the State a lot less than housing refugees in State accommodation would, it is important to note that it is being cut off as an option. Also, we know there will be opposition. If all of these people are turfed out of their accommodation, there will be opposition to building large-scale facilities as we have seen in every single town and county. It is irresponsible to cut the scheme and then propose it be ditched altogether.

Most people have had a positive experience. The scheme is far from perfect; I am not saying it is perfect. There is a lack of oversight and there are issues such as people being asked for top-up payments, which obviously happens in the private sector as well. According to the Irish Red Cross, people have been participating out of a sense of benevolence and wanting to help people who are fleeing war. The scheme could be extended to other groups in the future, rather than the State having to seek accommodation for them. By the way, it is surely better for integrating people into society to have them living in a community or on a street alongside other people rather than stuck in one building with maybe hundreds of other people. It is much better as a form of integration.

In one of the scenarios, the Minister of State found that even if 10% of people were to stop using the scheme because of this reduction, it would cost €7 million more to house the people affected in private accommodation than the State would have had to pay otherwise. I see this as being a part of a general trend of cruelty and hostility towards people seeking international protection and migrants in general. It adds to the message that goes out of "Don't come here", and it sends a message to Ukrainians to go back to their country. It is a mistake for Sinn Féin to lean into this racist sentiment in society. It will not win Sinn Féin any votes. All it does is give grounds and arguments to the far right. It will not work.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Fine Gael's manifesto for the previous general election stated it would "Stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes." It would, it said, "unequivocally support Ukraine". That promise, like all the other promises of this Government, lasted approximately

100 days. It was not worth the paper it was written on. One of the first things the Government is doing is slashing supports to Ukrainian people who have fled to Ireland, by cutting the ARP from €800 to €600 per month. The Government started kicking Ukrainian refugees out of hotels ahead of the elections last year in an attempt to appease the far right. As a result, since last May, the percentage of Ukrainian refugees relying on the ARP has risen from 27% to 46%. One in two Ukrainian refugees is now reliant on this payment. This cut will have an immediate impact on nearly half of all Ukrainian refugees living in this State.

Currently, 37,500 people rely on the ARP to keep a roof over the heads. The Government knows that many of the hosts would not be hosting if they were not getting the €800 payment. In one survey, three quarters of hosts said they would not be able to continue to accommodate Ukrainians if the payment was cut. An even higher percentage - 86% - told the Irish Red Cross that the payment is important to them continuing to host. The Government knows that cutting this payment will mean families being evicted onto the streets, forced to return to an active war zone, or - in circumstances where they can - going into the private rental market and adding to the pressures there.

The point has been made repeatedly that this makes no financial sense. I do not think this is an example of petty penny-pinching by the Government. I think the Government knows it will cost more money than it will save but it is willing to spend money on performative, expensive cruelty. It is like the chartered deportation flights. They make no sense in economic terms and are an extraordinarily expensive way of deporting people but it is about the theatre. Similarly, this is about saying to people, "Don't worry, we are dealing with these Ukrainians. Look, we have cut the payment from €800 to €600." This Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Lowry lackey Government is so right wing it is more interested in pandering to anti-immigration sentiment and the far right than in preventing even more families becoming homeless, while Fine Gael champions the idea of supporting and standing with Ukraine.

It is disgraceful that Sinn Féin's amendment urges the Government to go even further in its attacks on refugees. This is part of a failed tactic where Sinn Féin chases after the far right for votes. It did not work during the previous two elections last year. In fact, it backfired disastrously by centring and problematising the issue of immigration and taking pressure off the Government that has been responsible for the housing crisis, cost-of-living crisis and everything else because it suggests the problem is actually immigrants, which is wrong. All it means is that Sinn Féin ends up participating in attacks on refugee families and making those attacks even worse. It does not even gain anything politically. It just cedes more and more ground to the far right and honest, ordinary people see it as being dishonest and flip-flopping. Rather than dividing the working class by attacking particular groups and pitting people against each other, we should be fighting for universal, non-means tested payments, higher wages and universal public housing for all. We should be trying to lift the level of how we treat refugees, not drag it down. That is how we fight the far right, by addressing the poverty and inequality it exploits, not by making poverty and inequality even worse.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: This is one of the areas where there is a large chasm between where the people of Ireland are and where the political establishment in Leinster House sits. Most people want to be able to provide shelter for those who are fleeing war and violence and to be able to help people, especially from Ukraine, given the horrendous war happening there. However, most people want a level of fairness in the system. They want that two people living on the same street will not have a difference between them that gives one family an advantage in accommodation over another. They also want a situation where resources are given to those

who need them, rather than to people because of the colour of their skin or their nationality.

Here we have a payment which is given to individuals irrespective of the level of income they earn. There is no threshold for the income that is earned by a person under which they can achieve this income. It is incredibly wrong that we have a situation where people in one house could earn €100,000 and gain this particular support and next door those on €30,000 do not gain this particular support.

A tenant came into my office recently. She is a woman who has two children with autism and a baby on the way. She lives in a two-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a block of apartments. It is difficult for her to manage her family in that situation. She was in tears because she has another child on the way and cannot gain access to another house with better accommodation due to the housing crisis. A father came in recently who recently separated and is living in emergency accommodation. He cannot bring his children into the emergency accommodation because there are ten other men living in it and he cannot gain access to a house which would properly accommodate his family. Many people are living in difficult situations and find themselves in competition with individuals who are given a higher level of support than they are to gain accommodation. Most people outside this House, the majority who are not worn down by ideology and just have a common-sense practicality to them, recognise that is absolutely wrong.

Aontú has said from the start that we need to give shelter to those who need it, but we need to make sure the supports we provide do not provide a pull factor for people to come to this country or give someone an advantage over an individual in this country. No one from outside the country should get any more than anyone in the country as regards the supports they get to live. That has not been the case and it has been a significant ingredient, if we are honest, in a lot of the anger and frustration that has built and bubbled up in communities. The Government's approach to this whole process has been one of chaos and it has damaged the cohesion that existed, unfortunately, in the past.

I welcome that Sinn Féin has moved onto this ground as regards the common-sense element. It is important that we start to get mainstream political parties talking about the need for equality in the supports families get for accommodation. It is absolutely necessary that we have a means test in the system. It is mind-boggling to most people that it is not properly means tested. Perhaps the Minister of State will ask whether that can be done in future.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I take a slightly different approach from that of Deputy Tóibín. We have to remember what the ARP is for. It is part of our contribution to help war-torn Ukraine which has been aggressively attacked by Putin's regime. As we are not a military country - we are militarily neutral and not participating in any transfer of weaponry - we have made a contribution as part of the effort to help Ukraine. That includes taking in displaced people from Ukraine and giving them the comfort and safety of living in a democratic area while the war effort continues at home where people cannot live in many cities. There have been a lot of tropes about apartments for rent here, there and everywhere. Ukraine is not able to function and we should continue to help Ukrainians as long as this is part of an overall EU arrangement.

People raise issues about the pressure on housing. The Government's failure to build houses has added to that. It is also the case, as I referenced in the Dáil, that while people welcome those who are genuinely fleeing persecution, be they from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan or other countries, they do not like people abusing the asylum system who claim asylum but are found not to

have leave to remain. Many people in that category are still in the country and putting pressure on our housing and accommodation services. In that context, there is a balance to be struck. As I said in my midnight plane to Georgia speech, many of the economic migrants abusing the asylum process are very nice people, but we do not have the capacity. A Ukrainian fleeing a war cannot be equated with an economic migrant. It is a different thing. Ukrainians, Syrians, Afghans and Sudanese, people who are actually fleeing persecution, need to be treated differently.

When people are granted full refugee status, they go on the list like everyone else, which is fair enough. For Ukrainians, however, it is not like that. They might end up going back to Ukraine, but they have built a life here, sent their children to school. In many instances, people have got in touch with me because they have had to move to another area and the child was taken out of school. It is hugely disheartening. Friendships and any stability they have are broken up. While many Ukrainians have expressed a desire to go back to Ukraine when the war is over to help to rebuild their country, some will stay in Ireland and the onus is on us to make sure they are well trained, well integrated and net contributors to Irish society. We have done a lot for the Ukrainians and they have expressed gratitude, but that does not mean that because there is pressure from extremist groups, which paint anyone with a different accent or skin colour as part of some great replacement, the Ukrainians should be targeted by a Government trying to appear to get tough. There are areas to get tough on. Do not pick on the Ukrainians or those who are genuinely fleeing persecution.

The ARP reduction will not encourage anyone to rent out commercially. It is a different scheme. Many people who have given properties under this scheme do not want to become accidental or HAP landlords and be tied in. That is the reality. Therefore, let us keep the ARP scheme going for as long as it takes.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputies for their contributions and for taking the time to consider the motion to reduce the amount of the monthly contribution under the ARP scheme for people hosting beneficiaries of temporary protection. As provided by the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022, the draft order laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas cannot be made law until a resolution approving that order has been passed by each House. Therefore, approval of the motion in Dáil Éireann is essential to ensure the monthly contribution is reduced from €800 to €600. This will allow for a more standardised and sustainable response and address the possible impacts, as I said earlier, on the rental market. It is also for reasons of equity. The reduction will also allow for an orderly wind-down of the scheme as we advance towards the end of the temporary protection directive in March next year.

While the impact of the reduced contribution is impossible to predict, I believe many hosts are involved in the ARP scheme for humanitarian reasons. This has been borne out by Irish Red Cross research. As I mentioned, beneficiaries whose hosts wish to end their involvement in the scheme for whatever reason and who may require support will be provided with that support. Clearly, and in recognition of significant integration efforts, there will be many others who will make their own way in communities into which they have become integrated. My Department will continue to track the scheme activity levels with assistance from the Department of Social Protection.

I acknowledge the concerns raised by Deputies, particularly in respect of the possible displacement effect the scheme has on the private rental market which is under extreme pressure.

21 May 2025

I note the proposed amendment put forward by Deputy Carthy, which seeks to limit the extension of the scheme to beneficiaries of temporary protection covered by the scheme who satisfy a means test. It is also proposed to restrict the scheme to applicants intending to host beneficiaries in their own residence and who have not availed of the rent-a-room scheme in the previous 12 months so as not to affect the private rental sector. Finally, it was proposed to extend the scheme to applicants not in receipt of any additional or top-up payments from the beneficiary. I oppose the amendment to the motion. I note that a similar amendment was tabled in the Dáil in March this year when the matter of the scheme's extension was being considered. As the Minister, Deputy Foley, indicated at the time and as acknowledged in the amendment itself, the matters raised in the proposed amendment to the ARP scheme would require an amendment to primary legislation that established the scheme in the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022. They are therefore not matters that have a bearing on the motion under discussion here, which is simply to reduce the financial contribution.

On the issue of means testing for beneficiaries, it is important to note that the ARP is actually a goodwill payment to recognise the contribution of those who opened their homes to people fleeing the war in Ukraine. As I said in my earlier contribution, the payment is not intended to substitute for rent. It is not available where there has been a rental agreement in place. The legislation is very clear in this regard.

With regard to top-ups, the ARP does not create an obligation for beneficiaries such as payment of rent or the provision of services. However, a beneficiary may agree to make a contribution towards costs such as utilities. That is a matter for the parties themselves.

Deputy Carthy's amendment to limit the scheme to those hosting in their primary residence would result, I believe, in reduced availability of accommodation for beneficiaries in need of shelter. It would preclude unoccupied homes offered through the offer-a-home scheme such as holiday homes which have been a valuable source of accommodation. It is clear that the scheme has been responsible for introducing an accommodation stream that would not have been otherwise available and which has been a vital element to the State's response to the Ukrainian crisis in providing shelter to families in need.

The ARP is acknowledged as an effective instrument of public policy and an extension to next March was recently approved by the Oireachtas. We now need to fine-tune the scheme in a balanced way to respond to concerns raised. I hope Members will support the motion. As the Minister, Deputy Foley, confirmed when consideration was being given to extending the scheme, its operation will be subject to monitoring by relevant Departments.

I thank those in our communities who welcomed Ukrainians into their homes and provided them with a safe space, support and stability. I also record my appreciation for the Irish Red Cross. I confirm that I am not in a position to accept the amendments to the motion as proposed by Deputy Carthy. The draft order being considered cannot be law until a resolution approving the order has been passed by each House. Therefore, approval of the motion by the Dáil today is essential to ensure the level of monetary contribution under the ARP scheme is set at what is considered to be a more equitable rate and to better serve the public interest.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the voting block later tonight.

Dáil Éireann
Estimates for Public Services 2025

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I move the following Revised Estimates:

Vote 25 — Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Revised Estimate).

That a sum not exceeding €9,709,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 40— Children, Disability and Equality (Further Revised Estimate).

That a sum not exceeding €6,101,872,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, for certain services administered by that Office and for the payment of grants.

I welcome the opportunity to present the Further Revised Estimates and the Revised Estimates for the children, disability and equality Vote group for 2025. The Vote group encompasses Vote 40, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, which has an overall financial allocation for 2025 of €6.028 billion for current expenditure and €100 million for capital expenditure. The 2025 allocation supports a range of key services in respect of children and young people, such as Tusla, the Child and Family Agency; early learning and care and school-age childcare; and youth participation services. The allocation also covers funding for disability services. In addition, it provides for the Government's response to the legacy of mother and baby institutions where so many people had difficult, challenging, distressing and awful experiences. The allocation also contains funding for the areas of equality and inclusion, encompassing human rights, gender equality, LGBTQI+, Traveller and Roma and disability policy.

The Vote group also includes Vote 25, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC. IHREC is an independent public body that accounts to the Oireachtas with a mandate established under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, for which I, as Minister, have responsibility. The 2025 gross allocation for IHREC is €9.81 million.

Following the formation of the new Government, the Department has been the subject of two transfer of functions orders in 2025. Migration functions have been transferred to the Department of Justice and youth affairs functions have been transferred to the Department of Education.

The Further Revised Estimate of Expenditure for Vote 40, which is before the House today, provides for the transfer of the corresponding financial allocations. Accordingly, it reflects the fact that €2.046 billion associated with migration functions is transferring to the Department of Justice. A further €90.4 million associated with youth affairs functions is transferring to the Department of Education.

The allocation of €6.128 billion set out in the Further Revised Estimate of Expenditure for Vote 40 relates to all of the functions which remain with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. On a like-for-like comparison, this 2025 allocation is 9%, or €528.5 million, higher than the corresponding 2024 allocation. In terms of the composition of the allocation in

2025, over 97% of the Department's funding is concentrated in four areas of the Vote. These four areas include specialist community based disability services which accounts for 53% of the total allocation; early learning and childcare which accounts for 23%; Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which accounts for 20%; and the response to the legacy of mother and baby Institutions, including the mother and baby institutions payment scheme which stands at 2%.

I will now briefly address these areas in turn. This year my Department has secured more than €3.2 billion for disability services. This represents an increase of €171.4 million over the 2024 Supplementary Estimate allocation. This funding will allow us to support service providers to continue to do their crucial work in what is a challenging economic environment while also supporting the progressive roll-out of the action plan for disability services and the roadmap for children's disability services. The funding will support improvement and expansion of services in areas including residential care services to respond to demand for priority placements; adult day services for new school leavers; respite, which can play a crucial role in delaying or preventing a move into full-time residential care, with 65,000 day respite sessions and 161,000 overnight respite delivered in 2024; and additional personal assistance and home supports providing for approximately 95,000 personal assistance hours and 40,000 home support hours.

Early learning and care and school-age childcare funding for 2025 stands at €1.385 billion and accounts for 23% of the Vote's allocation. This represents an increase of €218 million, or 19%, over the 2024 Supplementary Estimate allocation. The increase in funding will support the full-year cost of the 2024 national childcare scheme rate increase. In 2025, the families of more than 200,000 children will benefit from the changes to the minimum hourly subsidy rate, from €1.40 to €2.14. It also reflects an increase in core funding for the 2025-26 programme year from September 2025 and an increased capital allocation of €26.4 million. This 2025 allocation provides for the continuation of the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme, the free universal two-year pre-school programme which will benefit more than 100,000 children this year.

9 o'clock

It provides additional funding for an increasing cohort of children with a disability availing of targeted access and inclusion model supports, numbering more than 7,000 in 2025; as well as additional funding for the extension of these supports beyond time spent in the ECCE programme, both in term and out of term.

In 2025, I will also deliver on other key commitments, including continued roll-out of the equal participation model; the delivery of the building blocks capacity grant, which was announced this week, to provide 15,000 early learning and childcare places; and a range of regulatory and quality measures. The allocation under this area is, I believe, a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to continuing to grow investment in early learning and childcare given the benefits it confers on children and their families, society and the economy.

My Department's Estimate contains provision of approximately €1.2 billion for Tusla, which represents an increase of €63.3 million, or 6%, over the 2024 Supplementary Estimate levels. This funding will allow Tusla to continue to provide support for foster carers, with provision made for the full year costs of the increases in the weekly foster care allowances brought in part way through last year, as well as additional funding for support to foster families during the initial placement of a new foster child.

The funding will allow for expenditure on special care and residential care as well as providing for expected increases in the numbers of separated children seeking international protection.

Funding is also being provided to maintain and grow family support services and early intervention and preventative programmes across Ireland, including an expansion to the network of family resource centres. I recently opened the application process to increase the number of family resource centres.

In responding to the final report of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation, the Government approved an action plan with measures designed to respond to the priority needs and concerns of survivors. Many of these key measures are now in place and the programme for Government reaffirms the Government's commitment to continued delivery of the plan. To support implementation of the action plan, funding of €125 million is being made available in 2025. This allocation has been provided to fund a range of measures which respond to the harrowing legacy of mother and baby institutions, including the mother and baby institutions payment scheme, the complex and sensitive excavation of the former mother and baby home institution at Tuam in County Galway, the special advocate for survivors and the national centre for research and remembrance. The mother and baby institutions payments opened to applicants on 20 March last year. To date, 6,500 applications had been received and 5,700 decisions have been made.

In relation to the rest of the Vote, there are other important policy areas that will be progressed in 2025. The 2025 Estimate sees increased funding which will allow the Department to progress new national strategies on Travellers and Roma, LGBTQI+ inclusion, and women and girls. These will aim to address key equality issues and improve opportunities for diverse groups at risk of discrimination.

While the youth affairs area has transferred to the Department of Education, I would like the House to note that my Department retains important child and youth participation functions. These include a grant scheme to enable city and county councils to create and upgrade playgrounds, making them more accessible, inclusive and enjoyable for everyone. The provision of playgrounds for young children has improved in recent years, with around 960 playgrounds available in 31 councils around the country. I was pleased earlier this month to announce €500,000 in grants for 28 playgrounds and play areas around the country.

The significant resources under the Department's Vote for 2025 allow for the continuation of vital services and supports to children, young people, families, people with disabilities, survivors and those facing disadvantage or discrimination. They also provide some important opportunities for targeted development and improvement of services. Deputies may be assured that I will continue to work closely with all sectors and stakeholders as we strive to maximise positive outcomes from the resources being considered today.

I appreciate Deputies' attendance and I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister for her statement and the documentation we have been provided with that details the elements of both Votes. I will focus my contribution on Vote 40 and raise some issues with what has been outlined and what the Minister outlined, much of which is welcome, particularly the increased budget for disability which we must acknowledge. It has been rising and that is welcome.

That said, one of the key measures here is to progress the action plan for disability services, which is very important, but very much to focus on the supports and services to ensure they are person centred and enable those who rely on them. I recently met representatives of the Brothers of Charity in Roscommon town. Their overall budget this year is down by €8 million. They have seen a drop in funding for County Galway of €2 million and it impacts Roscommon by a loss of about €500,000. When I met the Brothers of Charity, both the manager of the Roscommon area and of Galway, there was a list of parents seeking respite. The manager had, I think, about €10,000 and was trying to work out how to divvy it up between parents, some of whom had children with additional needs aged 18 years and who had never had respite. It is frightening to think how in this day and age, with a surplus of more than €8 billion this year and when we are one of the richest and most successful economies in Europe, somebody is in a position where they are trying to work out if they can give a few hours' respite here or there and who is going to lose out or who will get respite. It is frightening to think that is the position we are in when we are such a rich country. These are our most vulnerable citizens. Therefore, while we talk about disability funding, and I acknowledge that it has increased, we must make sure the funding is getting to those who need it most. I cannot understand how those like the Brothers of Charity are down €8 million of funding and are scrimping and scraping, especially when it comes to desperately needed respite. The representatives told me they have about 35 people on the list for long-term residential care and there is nowhere for them. They also spoke about the huge difficulties they have with transport and transport costs. This is particularly acute, as the Minister will know, in rural areas especially.

On the assessment of needs and the continuation of the waitlist initiative, I want to press the Minister again on Cara's fund and additional funding for that as well as the long overdue need for a workforce plan. Yesterday, I spoke of the issue with CORU recognition. While I appreciate it is not under the Minister's Department specifically, I would ask that she speak to the Minister for Health on that. A pathway has been found for occupational therapists where they train in England for their masters there and come home. The same pathway should be there for speech and language therapy but it is not. Will the Minister please engage on that? I am dealing with someone who has been ten months home, who is a fully qualified speech and language therapist and who cannot work. We are crying out for them. Her training was in England. It was not in the Third World. We need to look at that.

I welcome that there has been movement on pay for the section 39 workers but we need to go much further. I would like to see additional funding and a commitment to that, especially as we approach the budget, to give certainty to those in our community and voluntary organisations who, when it comes to assessment of needs and various therapies, do exactly what they do in the HSE but are not paid anything like what they are paid in the HSE. We need to look at that, especially when waiting lists are as they are.

I welcome the additional funding that has been made available to family resource centres. Unfortunately, I understand only a very small number of family resource centres will have the opportunity to come in under the national programme for funding which is so important to them. The Minister will have huge demand with the family resource centres wanting to come in. There are two which I engage with a lot in my constituency. One is Ballinasloe, a town in County Galway that is identified by Pobal, particularly in the town area, as extremely disadvantaged. It should have had a family resource centre two decades ago but there is one there now. It is fantastic in the services and supports it provides but it will be hamstrung if it cannot get sustainable funding as it starts off. Similarly, South Roscommon Family Resource centre,

based in Roscommon town, also provides wonderful services and supports to its community. It very much relies and will depend on this funding from the Department. Of course, not everyone will be able to get in, but everyone in this House recognises the work of family resource centres. We need to look at opening that up to many more of them.

On the expenditure allowance for special care, there is an allocation of €1.2 billion and a list that includes special care. The Minister will be well aware of the external report published yesterday on behalf of Tusla. It makes very concerning reading, particularly in respect of the severe recruitment and retention crisis. We are seeing departure rates exceeding recruitment. In fairness, it seems a lot has been done to try to recruit but due in particular to the violence, harassment and aggression that is being seen, people are really struggling. There is a high level of absenteeism as well. That needs to be looked at in the context of funding. Again, it is not just about funding. The report is very clear on that. It reads like a cry for help in terms of the need for other Departments and State agencies to be at the table and to play their part, which, from the look of the report, they are not doing.

Additional funding is going into early years. Nobody can deny that, but the reality is we still have huge waiting lists, significant capacity issues and parents are still paying far too much for childcare. Many families are really struggling.

I welcome the building blocks capital programme, which provides a great opportunity for an awful lot of communities. I raised the matter of Ballinasloe Community Childcare Group in my constituency with the Minister. Demand there far exceeds capacity. It looked to that capital programme but because it does not own the land, it cannot access the funding. I appreciate that it is taxpayers' money but this is a genuine case. This group has an existing childcare building it is looking to extend. The owner of the land is willing to develop that. This group will then buy the land, as it did for the building it is in today. Given the capacity issues, I ask that we try to find ways, in genuine cases, where the benefit of where the money is going can be very clearly shown, to possibly look at that as an avenue.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House. I also thank her for the briefing note. As Deputy Kerrane said, it has been very helpful to us in preparing our few words tonight.

I want us all to go back to the previous debate and our discussion of the accommodation recognition payment. I again put on record our thanks for that payment and state how helpful it has been to the Ukrainian community in helping them integrate into the many communities they are in. I look forward to working with the Minister and the Department of Justice on that. The payment has been extended to 2026.

I again raise the matter of the national childcare scheme website. I previously raised it as a priority question. As the Minister knows, the website does not list fees for childcare providers for 2021, which is a key year in which fees are benchmarked against core funding. We spoke about this previously, when the Minister informed me that an update of the website was coming. If the Minister has an update on that, I hope she can share it with us because that information is so important to parents and those working in the sector.

I agree with my colleague on assessments of need. We had a long debate on that yesterday. There is obviously a need to fund Cara's fund and to get that workplace schedule in place as quickly as possible. I gave some examples yesterday of those on the assessments of need waiting list. I will not go back there again, but safe to say it is a huge issue for so many people in

public life, as I am sure it is for the Minister and her office.

I note and welcome the increase in childcare expenditure, which is now combined for early learning and care. The school-age childcare division in the Department has €1.39 billion. However, UNICEF has proposed an investment of 1% of GNI, which equates to an investment of €2.7 billion. That is something the Government has to seriously look at in the context of the childcare proposals. Every political party spoke about a public childcare model during their election campaigns. We also spoke about the €200 per month cost. The Minister referenced that over the lifetime of the Government she hopes to bring in cover for this €200 cost for parents. This is a huge issue for areas such as Newbridge, in my area. It is a second mortgage, as I described previously, for so many parents. We need to look at this again. We also need to bring in that childcare measure of €200 per month as quickly as possible. It is to be hoped, as the Minister works through the budget, she will look at getting that cost down for so many parents as quickly as possible.

I will also mention many of the rural and smaller childcare providers who are suffering. I have spoken with so many of them. They need help. Many of those providers are in areas where others may not provide childcare. They are doing such a great job that they need to be protected, encouraged and developed. I hope the Minister can take that on board because these small and medium childcare providers are in and for communities. They are allowing so many people to get to work and to have children minded as well.

On page 4 of the briefing note, the disability budget is referenced. The increase in that is very much welcome. As is stated on that page, the Government is committed to supporting and empowering people with disabilities and to providing funding in the area of specialist community-based disability services. I take this opportunity to thank all those working in this area, especially section 39 workers. I note that this Vote will pay the public sector pay deal and the WRC section 39 deal. That is to be welcomed. I thank all those section 39 workers who go above and beyond, day in day out, with disability services. The one area I will ask about, and the Minister's Department may not be directly involved in it, is that of empowering people to gain employment. It is a major issue for the disability community and many of those I deal with. I hope that through the additional money we have we can investigate that, work with section 39 organisations and, more importantly, employees, to try to identify ways we can get more people with a disability into employment. It is one of the biggest areas that is raised with me on a weekly basis by people who are asking for assistance in that area. Hopefully, it is something we can work on together into the future.

I welcome the fact the Minister plans to extend family resource centres. There is a number of them in south Kildare that do great work, including one in the town of Athy, which does great work, day in and day out. I met with a number of them recently in north Kildare - my colleague, Deputy Farrelly, may take this up a little more - where there is a desire, given the population, that we increase the number of family resource centres there. It is something they will be contacting the Minister about. I welcome the fact that applications have been opened.

I am always interested when a Minister states she is getting more money, in this case, for playgrounds. It is a huge area for so many people. I welcome the fact she mentioned inclusivity and specialist playground equipment because that is huge in so many playgrounds. Many of the playgrounds in Kildare and elsewhere are not, unfortunately, fit for purpose for those with a disability, but they are changing. I welcome that the Government is recognising that. I hope we can work with the Minister to continue rolling out specialist equipment for them and

for everybody, and to have inclusive communities so everybody, and all children, can enjoy the playgrounds that are available to them.

As I said, I thank the Minister for tonight's briefing note. I look forward to working with her through this brief. It is a very important one for so many people, including those in our childcare services, who have looked for proper funding for years. I have campaigned for a long time, along with a number of people, for a public childcare model. It is something the Minister will hear me speaking about a great deal in the coming weeks and months. It is time that we took this seriously. It is time that we paid staff in childcare services, who have long campaigned for proper pay and conditions. Those smaller and medium-sized childcare providers need to be protected. These are the issues on which I look forward to dealing with the Minister in the coming weeks and months. I thank her for her engagement tonight.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for the opportunity to speak and to echo the comments made so far by my colleagues Deputies Kerrane and Wall on the eve of our first committee meeting that will take place tomorrow. The brief the Minister has before her is one that is ripe with optimism about impact and outcomes for children, young people and those affected by issues of equality in our society.

I wish the Minister continued success in her brief over the next couple of years. Having had the honour of becoming spokesperson for children for the Social Democrats, over the last couple of months I embarked on a series of engagements with stakeholders involved in childcare and early years services, as I am sure the Minister has done in her brief. I have met unions, private providers and parents. Notwithstanding the very impressive sum the Government is committing to the sector, I appeal to the Minister to question, over the term of this Dáil, the way in which we are spending money. I am aware that I probably sound like a broken record here, and I apologise to colleagues for that, but our expenditure really does remind us of the way in which we used to speak about healthcare. Reference was made to record budget after record budget but, for so many, the outcomes associated with how they interacted with the sector did not change or improve. The Minister does not need me to tell her about the position of so many who are trying to access childcare and early years services, certainly where populations are growing at very unsustainable rates on foot of housing development and growth. Deputy Wall and I have both experienced this in Kildare. We must question the way we distribute funding through early years services and whether our childcare model represents the right way to do things.

I have raised the issue of páistecare in this House before. It is something I hope to raise with the committee. I appeal to the Minister to consider a special committee on this in the Oireachtas. We should do for childcare and early years education what we did for health through Sláintecare. This would mean working with key stakeholders to spell out a vision for the future of our early years and childcare sectors. Deputy Wall has already referred to the recruitment and retention issue facing the phenomenal staff who are working for our children, families and communities, and to the ability to access services and the way in which we are delivering capital projects. A key to success in this regard for the Government would be to really ramp up the community childcare facilities.

I used to work in the LHD in Newbridge as a youth worker and I saw at first hand the incredible work being done there. It was a really positive example of what community childcare can look like. The outcomes for the children involved were remarkable. I appeal to the Minister to genuinely consider this model alongside considering a vision for the future of childcare and

early years services that entails a public model that would complement the private model. As we did with the healthcare system, let us consider it together. We have a genuine opportunity to do that.

I echo Deputy Wall's comments on family resource centres. I worked in some and worked in collaboration with many as a youth worker over the years. If you want bang for your buck in terms of investment, you will not find much better than the family resource centre in your community. We believe every community should have one. Their cost is minuscule considering their impact on children, young people, adults and communities. They are hubs, supportive places, spaces for information-sharing and ultimately places where children, young people and their families can be, learn and develop together. I encourage the Minister to continue to prioritise investment in family resource centres to get to a place where we might be considering a universal approach to family resource centre delivery in terms of capital projects.

Specifically on disability, I have experience of working as a social care worker in the St. John of God services in Celbridge, County Kildare, and Walkinstown, Dublin, and I have worked with the Ability programme in Kildare. All of these programmes are doing phenomenal work but, as the Minister will be very much aware, they are doing it on a bit of a shoestring. I really meant it when I said the Minister will not find better bang for her buck than in the brief she holds. Any euro spent in the sector under her brief will be returned to the State and society tenfold.

I really welcome our speaking so positively this evening about increased budgets and I wish the Minister and those working with her in her Department continued success. However, with regard to childcare and early years services, we will have to press pause at some point and question the way in which we are distributing the funding. Is it being spent in the right way to yield the maximum output for children, staff and families?

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I had something prepared but I will do my best to run through some of the points that were raised.

Deputy Kerrane should note that on the challenges regarding respite, residential services and others, it is positive that we can say there is a €3.2 billion budget for disabilities. This has been raised by other speakers as well. It has led to considerable improvements in some areas but, without doubt, there are challenges. It is our ambition, as we will be looking towards a new budget, to do more and more in this space.

On assessments of need, which have been raised by others also, and specifically the issue of additional funding, I want to be really clear: €10 million has been made available to access private assessments this year. However, as I have said previously, I want to be 100% clear that if there is an opportunity to make additional private capacity available and if it takes more money to achieve it, money will not be the barrier. We are aware that there is a limit to private capacity but the Government has given an absolute commitment that if more can be done, money in excess of the €10 million will be found and put in place.

The workforce plan will be done in 2025. On the accelerated pathway for speech and language therapy, which I acknowledge Deputy Kerrane has raised time and again and on which matter she has given a very good personal example, I will take the matter up with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

On the section 39 organisations, which I know others have referenced, we have made a lot

of progress. I am not at all suggesting it is a finished journey. I welcome the fact that a pay deal of around 9.25% was almost overwhelmingly accepted by the workforce. Critical was the fact that there will be a link to all future pay deals. Therefore, we have made some progress on this journey. I welcome the fact that everybody sat around the table with the absolute intention to come to a solution. Indeed, one of the first things I did as Minister was ask for a return to sitting around the table to find a solution. I recognise the work of everybody who made that possible.

Family resource centres, which others have raised as well, do extraordinary work. They are absolutely invaluable to us and are hubs for so many. They are open to all, which is probably the most important aspect of them. There has been an increase in funding for family resource centres. There is, as Members will be aware, a plan to have additional family resource centres. Everybody is keen to have one in his or her own area. There is a limited number this year but I hope we will be in a better position going forward. This is an ambition of mine. I recognise the great work the centres do.

On special care, significant funding of €1.2 billion has gone to Tusla this year. Without doubt, there are challenges over personnel but there is great work being done by Tusla by way of recruiting from abroad and bringing in a new category around special care. There is extraordinary work being done by the individuals on the ground and we will continue to do all we can to support them.

Early learning and childcare actually represent 23% of the Vote. It is a substantial investment. Points have been raised over the need to do more. I am aware that Deputy Farrelly raised access and the need to have an opportunity to avail of the services. There are three aspects to what we intend. The first is that there should be affordability for parents. We have walked quite a distance of the journey in this regard. Deputy Wall has referred to the €200. The Government commitment is absolute. Affordability for parents must be matched by the availability of a workforce. That is really important. Those in the workforce must be rewarded and compensated for the work they do as expert professionals in the field. We have made progress in this regard. It is a case of recognising where there are gaps in provision. There is a commitment to move towards the public model. I acknowledge that private providers are doing great work. For the first time, the State has invested just short of €1 billion in what is now called core funding to facilitate providers to ensure fees are kept down for families.

The building blocks scheme has resulted in an additional 1,500 places. Deputy Wall referred to the fund, early learning and childcare and the providers who are under duress. I absolutely accept that they are but, as I said, we have invested quite heavily there. The Deputy referred to section 39 organisations and to playgrounds. A small amount of funding makes a huge amount of difference. The €500,000 was very well spent.

I will finish with Deputy Farrelly. He referred to the new committee. It will be an honour for me to work with it. I recognise the great integrity of everybody who is here and who wants to work towards solutions. I look forward to working with them. The Deputy referred to the family resource centres, disability and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: You are way over your time, Minister.

Deputy Norma Foley: I know, but there were very few speakers so I took the opportunity. I thank all of them.

Votes put and agreed to.

21 May 2025

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move the following Further Revised Estimate:

Vote 24 - Department of Justice (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,590,495,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st Day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Justice, Probation Service staff and of certain other services including payments under cash-limited schemes administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants.

As Deputies will be aware, the programme for Government commits to the transfer of certain functions between Departments. On 1 May, following approval by the Government, a number of functions were transferred to the Department of Justice from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The main body associated with the transfer was the International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS, which offers accommodation and related services to persons seeking international protection. The co-ordination of Government policy relating to anti-racism and migrant integration, the operation and implementation of integration programmes for migrants, and the provision of access to suitable accommodation for persons enjoying temporary protection were also transferred. Those are the individuals who emanate from Ukraine and who are beneficiaries of temporary protection. We also transferred the management of the resettlement in the State of refugees admitted as part of the UN resettlement programme. The final part we transferred was development and provision of policy advice to the Government on those related matters.

This is the largest transfer of functions in the programme for Government. It involves transferring approximately 330 staff and 150 contractors and a budget allocation of more than €2 billion. The sum of €2.59 billion mentioned in the resolution reflects the addition of €2 billion from the Department of children Vote to the existing 2025 allocation in the Department of Justice Vote.

Deputies will recall that the Revised Estimate for the Department of Justice was approved by this House on 1 April, in advance of the commencement of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 and the establishment of the Votes for two new statutory agencies, the Policing and Community Safety Authority and Fiosrú and, therefore, I seek the approval of the House this evening to a Further Revised Estimate for the Justice Vote. The Revised Estimate as approved by this House on 1 April is unchanged other than to provide for the transfer into the Justice Vote of funding relating to international protection and Ukraine accommodation and associated services.

The budget allocated for international protection accommodation in 2025 is €1.2 billion. That is an eye-watering amount. It is driven by the number of individuals coming to Ireland seeking international protection. We need to recognise that the drivers of the IPAS budget is the numbers of individuals arriving into Ireland seeking international protection. It is therefore appropriate that the accommodation service is linked again within the Department of Justice, which has responsibility for the appraisal of applications for international protection. As Deputies will know, back in 2024, the number of people seeking international protection in Ireland was 18,500. That is a very significant increase on previous years. As a result of that, there was very considerable pressure and a very significant increase in the budget in order to deal with international accommodation as required by it.

Ireland and other EU member states have responded to a very significant increase in the number of people seeking international protection. As a result, the number of people being accommodated has increased significantly. Back in 2022, we were accommodating approximately 7,000 people. At present, we are accommodating more than 32,000 people. The Government is taking further steps to try to speed up the process. I am unambiguous about the fact that I want to reduce the numbers of people coming here seeking international protection. I need to do that to ensure the system operates efficiently and effectively. I also need to do it to ensure we can get the growing budget associated with international protection accommodation reduced. However, I am justified in doing it as well, as I have said before because according to the numbers of persons who have had their applications processed for international protection this year, more than 80% have been refused or determined to be inadmissible. We need to recognise that to reduce the amount of accommodation we need and the cost of the accommodation and we need to take the legitimate steps of trying to expedite the international protection process and to reduce the numbers correspondingly.

As regards accommodation itself, it is Government policy to increase the proportion of State-owned beds and reduce the degree of reliance on commercially-provided accommodation. That is part of this reform. Deputies will be aware that I recently brought before the Government the general scheme of an international protection Bill, which was approved. It is in the process of being drafted. That legislation must be in place by June of next year and we intend to ensure that it is in place. That legislation will strengthen border security and it will provide an EU approach to asylum and streamline asylum procedures. The legislation will provide for faster processing, including having all decisions and appeals concluded within three months for certain categories of applicant.

Placing responsibility for international protection, including the accommodation of applicants and integration policy, under one Minister and Department creates a cohesiveness to the management of all aspects of international protection and builds on what was, up to 1 May, a close working relationship between officials in international protection in my Department and those with responsibility for accommodation then located within the Department of Children. I welcome all those civil servants back into the Department of Justice.

We are also dealing in this resolution with accommodation being provided for beneficiaries of temporary protection. In that context, we are talking about people from Ukraine who have come to Ireland seeking protection as a result of the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Once again, the Irish people deserve to be commended on their generosity not just in respect of their response to people coming from Ukraine, but their response to all people coming to Ireland, whether they are seeking international protection or whether they are entitled to temporary protection. That is something that, as politicians, we should always acknowledge.

We know, however, that when it comes to temporary protection, since February 2022 more than 89,600 beneficiaries were provided with accommodation by the Department of integration. More than 24,000 of those are currently in State-supported accommodation, with a further 38,600 hosted in accommodation supported by the accommodation recognition payment, ARP. Colleagues debated the reduction in that payment a few moments ago from €800 to €600. The ARP was introduced to recognise the generosity of people who have opened their homes to provide accommodation to those fleeing Ukraine, and the House will be aware of the reduction. I wish to make people aware - I am sure Deputy Carthy is aware of this already from the previous resolution - that the reduction will take effect from 1 June but in reality will be noted by the recipients of those ARP payments only when they receive their payment in July.

The Department of integration also delivered the first phase of ten sites of the rapid build homes project, with 2,312 residents having moved into their new homes. Works are nearing completion at the final development at a HSE-owned site in Haywood, Clonmel, which will provide a final 82 units to accommodate 328 Ukrainian people who are the beneficiaries of temporary protection.

The Vote I put before the House this evening is very much a technical one. Notwithstanding the technicality, when one looks at the purpose behind it, one can see it makes a lot of sense that the whole area of accommodation for international protection applicants and persons who have the benefit of temporary protection should be dealt with by the same Department that deals with international protection assessments. It is a worthwhile transfer of functions.

We need to recognise there is a big challenge in the budget for international protection accommodation. I want to see that budget reduced. An eye-watering amount of money has been spent on the fulfilment of our international obligations. If we adopt a more effective, expedient and efficient system for the assessment of international protection applications, we will reduce the number arriving in Ireland claiming international protection and there will be a consequent saving on the cost of accommodation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As the Minister said, the motion regarding the further Revised Estimates for public services, Vote 24, just relates to the transfer of functions to the Department of Justice. Had committees been established in a more timely manner, as they should have been, this motion would have been properly dealt with by the justice committee. Ach buíochas le Dia tá an coiste dlí agus cirt bunaithe anois agus ba mhór an onóir dom a bheith ceaptha mar Chathaoirleach. Bhí ár gcéad cruinniú againn inné agus táimid réidh le dul i mbun oibre.

On 1 May, responsibility for integration, international protection and Ukrainian accommodation transferred from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to the Department of Justice. I welcome this transfer. I hope it will improve accountability for migration issues. The Minister will agree that, for months, there was a sort of dichotomy where one Minister answered questions on migration-related issues while another took the political lead. As an Opposition spokesperson, it was hard to get clarity on things like the accommodation recognition payment and, particularly, the impact on the private rental sector. I hope this Minister will be more forthcoming.

As the Minister said, the whole area of accommodation in respect of international protection and the temporary protective directive has reached huge levels - I believe the Minister cited €1.2 billion as the anticipated spend for this year. Even from a purely financial point of view, it is imperative that we ensure we get better at dealing with things. Decisions are still taking too long, particularly when appeals are involved. I believe it takes 2.5 years on average for non-accelerated procedures.

I hope the Minister will indicate this at some point, but we need a plan for the end of the temporary directive in respect of Ukrainians. It is called “temporary” for a reason. A plan is needed for when that directive ends in March that moves beyond emergency measures for a medium-term and long-term approach that recognises all of the realities.

There is also a need to rethink how information about IPAS accommodation is provided. I thank the Department for answering panicky emails from me and other elected representatives over the past couple of days. Every time a workperson shows up at a vacant site, somebody is

on social media saying it is an IPAS centre and then we have to run to departmental officials to seek clarification. I urge the Minister to turn it on its head and inform local elected representatives as soon as negotiations or conversations take place in respect of these sites. Otherwise, it will get to the point where virtually every empty building in the State will be subject to a query to the Department. Let us be upfront with elected representatives and, just as important, communities.

As we are dealing with Revised Estimates for the Department, I also raise with the Minister an urgent matter related to budget allocations. I raised this issue with him during questions last week. As we speak, domestic violence survivors are being denied access to justice because of problems in accessing civil legal aid. Those seeking to secure a barring order who have a civil legal aid certificate are not able to secure legal representation because of the fees paid to solicitors. There are simply not enough solicitors who will take on the work because of how the fees are currently structured. From responses to parliamentary questions I received this week, it is clear that the number of practitioners on the District Court family law solicitors panel has fallen significantly in most counties over the past year. The overall number of solicitors on the panel went from 528 in January 2024 to 377 in January this year. In Dublin, the number fell from 115 to 85, from 44 to 31 in Galway, from 78 to 60 in Kildare and from 62 to 50 in Wicklow. People working in this area tell me the system just does not work for victims of domestic violence. They have to be rejected by three solicitors before they can go back to the Legal Aid Board. This is a crazy barrier for those seeking to break free of domestic violence. There is worrying anecdotal evidence that many are giving up and returning to abusive and sometimes very dangerous situations. From the Minister's response last week, I am concerned that there is not an acknowledgement of the urgency of the issue for those who need legal aid to secure barring orders. There is no use in the House talking about zero tolerance on the one hand and, on the other, referring to a review of civil legal aid that was established in 2022 when we ask for immediate action on the problem. The kind of response we have been receiving shows no understanding of how big a step it is for someone to seek a barring order. It is not something that can be put off while everything moves at a snail's pace in the Department. The Minister told me recently that he had received the report of the review group of civil legal aid chaired by former Chief Justice Mr. Frank Clarke and that it was being examined. It is three years since this review was initiated. We need urgency. The specific issue I raised needs to be addressed regardless of the wider recommendations of the report. As we are discussing the budgetary allocation for the Department under this motion, it would be appropriate if the Minister addressed this issue and, in particular, whether he will make additional funds available to address this very real problem impacting the safety of victims of domestic violence, whether he will increase the fees to solicitors on the District Court family law solicitors panel to address the crisis and whether he will look at District Court case fees for private family law proceedings and introduce an additional payment for each subsequent adjournment. I am told the absence of an additional payment in these cases for subsequent court appearances is part of the problem in terms of why solicitors are not taking up this work. I would welcome some impetus in the Minister's response.

An Ceann Comhairle: I take it it is all relevant, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Absolutely.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister will tell us, I am sure.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is all financial- and budget-related.

An Ceann Comhairle: As we do not have the requisite speakers, we move to Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome the transfer of some powers and funding away from the Department of children to the Department of Justice. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth had a lot on its plate with Tusla, childcare, mother and baby homes, Green Party leadership and failed Government referendums in the previous Government. There is no doubt about that. There were huge problems in that Department in terms of funding for early childhood education providers, the massive budget to Tusla yet no real direction on how it was spent, and the disgraceful way survivors of mother and baby homes were treated in that time and stopped from getting redress.

I wish to touch on a number of issues concerning the powers now vested in the Department. There is chaos in the country over the location of IPAS centres. The whole space is now rife with speculation and rumour. There is no doubt in my mind that certain investors are putting in applications for IPAS centres on properties they do not own. There are also applications for planning exemptions in respect of those properties. It is rumoured that one of the reasons this is being done is because it has the effect of knocking down the price of a site they may wish to buy. The owner of a site may feel pressured into selling if he or she thinks the property may be damaged as a result of speculation about its use. There is chaos in this regard at present. The situation must be rectified.

A total of €1.2 billion will be spent on IPAS this year according to the reply to a parliamentary question I received from the Minister's Department. That equates to €35,000 per person for the year, which is an incredibly high figure for what is permanent accommodation. The whole system, which makes a small number of people extremely wealthy in certain parts of the country, is damaging for local communities and the taxpayer. The Minister needs to get a grip on the cost of this process.

I have submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister on the number of people whose applications under the IPAS system are failing. The Minister indicated that up to 80% of applications so far this year have failed. This means one of two things. Either the application process was not being implemented strictly or properly in the past two to four years - in 2022 only a quarter of first applications failed - or a new cohort of people are applying to IPAS. The latter may be the case, particularly as the message sent out from this country in the past four or five years was incredible. That message was that Ireland was a soft touch when it came to IPAS applications. People could come here and apply and it would take years for their applications to be processed. If someone's application failed, they could appeal and it would take years for the appeal to be processed. If that failed, they could get a judicial review that could take years to be processed. While people in this situation could be the subject of deportation orders, it was believed that these would more than likely never be enforced. For the past three or four years, the vast majority of deportation orders have not been enforced. A big problem within the system is that there are no exit checks at our borders. There are no exit checks at airports or ports. Unless gardaí actually walk with an individual to the plane and sit in the plane with them, the Government does not know whether that person has left the country. That is a big problem.

In the context of the management of immigration, the Border is a big weakness with which the Minister has to get to grips. That may be possible now because of the so-called relationship reset with Britain. There are approximately 270 roads that traverse the Border. The idea that spot checks are going to solve this is madness. If a person is stopped in Dundalk and brought

back to Newry, they can get the next bus or taxi or even walk back across the Border if they wants. The only way to manage this is with an Irish sea border. The principle of an Irish sea border has been accepted by the British when it comes to the movement of goods such as sausages and so forth. It is recognised that in order to maintain the integrity of European and British markets, an Irish sea border for certain goods is needed. We must ensure that an Irish sea border will cover the movement of people in the future. This would mean that people would apply for asylum at Belfast airport, Derry airport or wherever if they are coming to this island. It would suit the British because the flows of immigration go in both directions at different times.

If 80% of people are failing the asylum process, and the asylum process is costing €1.2 billion, it is fair to say that we are spending hundreds of millions of euro accommodating people who are not fleeing war and violence but who are, rather, moving to Ireland for economic reasons. While I believe we have a moral responsibility to try to protect people who are fleeing war and violence, it is clear from the Minister's figures that many, if not the vast majority of, people involved in that process are not fleeing war and violence. We must send a strong message internationally that only people who are fleeing war and violence will be considered under the process. We need to say that this process is extremely strict and protective of the Irish system.

Work visas are another important issue. There are many good people from other countries doing fantastic work and making a great contribution to this country. Indeed, many essential workers are keeping our hospitals and nursing homes in operation. However, we are giving out many working visas and student visas that are not essential. Given the pressure on the system, it is time the Government began to row back on the number of visas being handed out. We added 100,000 people to the population of this State last year. That is the equivalent of the population of Galway city. Galway has a university, a hospital, dozens of schools and tens of thousands of houses. That level of infrastructure is not being built in this country annually. Dan O'Brien, who is a well-respected economist, has been writing about this. It is important that we start to match the number of people coming into the country with the resources we have available. If we do not do that, it will put pressure on society and make people feel that they are in competition for those scarce resources. That leads to the breakdown of the cohesion within society.

I wish the Minister luck in his new role. We need to ensure we get to grips with this situation for the benefit of those who really need help and for the citizens of this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gannon has arrived. I propose, with the agreement of Members, to allow him to speak even though his slot has passed. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank An Ceann Comhairle and Members for the latitude. Similar to Deputy Carthy, I thank the staff in office of the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and the staff of IPAS for helping in recent weeks and months to dispel, where they arise, myths that are being spread purposely by far-right agitators. There was a particularly difficult situation in my locality in recent days. I am grateful to the Minister of State, his office and IPAS staff for their work in this regard. This goes right to the heart of what we are dealing with. This is a real and serious issue, which, if we continue to get wrong, will play into the hands of agitators. These agitators are using people who have, in many cases, come here for sanctuary as scapegoats for the systemic failures of the State in order to advance their own causes. While Ireland is not full, these agitators tell people in communities that are running on empty that other people are to blame when it comes to resources. I thank the Minister's Department for helping with this matter.

21 May 2025

The transfer of assets from another Department to the Minister's Department makes absolute sense and is very welcome. In the previous Dáil term, there was almost a pass-the-parcel approach when it came to taking responsibility for this serious issue. That did not reflect well on anyone. Taking it all under one Department certainly makes sense.

The Minister referred to expediting decision processes. I wish to touch on that for a moment. It is relevant because the Minister discussed it. Rushing decisions will endanger lives. The time that is required should be taken in respect of these decisions. While they absolutely should not have taken as long as they have in the past, imposing three-month deadlines for asylum decisions prioritises bureaucratic speed over human fairness. International protection claims often involve trauma, persecution and complex histories. Arbitrary deadlines will inevitably lead to rushed, wrongful refusals and the real risk of deporting someone back to the danger from which they fled. That requires resourcing, much of which is contained in what we are discussing now.

What is proposed attacks the right to appeal. As we transfer the allocation of budgets, we must acknowledge that the proposal to limit oral hearings strikes at the heart of fair process. Oral hearings are essential for many applicants who cannot fully tell their stories through paperwork, particularly for those facing trauma, language barriers or mistrust. Removing this safeguard will mean more unjust outcomes. It will also weaken political accountability. Handing direct deportation powers to the International Protection Office will remove a crucial layer of democratic oversight. Deportations should remain politically accountable decisions rather than being behind closed doors, which, of course, would require resourcing.

We are caving in to far-right narratives. We should acknowledge the 42% fall in international protection applications this year. The Government is still acting as if there is an asylum crisis when, in reality, this rush to be tough on migration plays directly to far-right talking points. It legitimises misinformation and fearmongering at a time when leadership should stand for truth and calm.

While the Minister may claim these changes align with the EU migration and asylum pact, the pact demands both efficiency and fairness, including the right to individual assessment and meaningful appeal.

10 o'clock

Ireland is choosing to interpret this pact harshly by cutting safeguards to protect basic human rights when what is necessary is humanity and not a race to the bottom.

Minister for Justice(Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputies for their contributions.

Deputy Carthy raised the issue of when temporary protection would be up. That is not an issue I can answer. What is apparent from the statistics is that after the war about 117,000 people from Ukraine came to Ireland and received temporary protection. The figure for Ukrainians in Ireland now is around 74,000 or 75,000, so clearly it is the case that many Ukrainians want to go back home. We all want to see an end to the war. We all want to see Ukraine survive as an independent country with its borders restored and intact. If the war ends, people will want to go back to Ukraine, which is their homeland. They fled because they were forced to by the illegal invasion.

Deputy Carthy also said he thought it would be a better idea for the Department to inform people in the locality when there were discussions in respect of an IPAS centre. I do not think that is a good idea. However, I take into account what Deputies Carthy and Tóibín said. There is a situation where if somebody sees an application under section 5 for an exemption for international emergency accommodation, they assume there is going to be an IPAS centre there. That is not the case. In the vast majority of circumstances an IPAS centre will not be going in there. There needs to be a recognition that the situation has changed since this time last year. The State was the entity in pursuit of sites then and now it is the case that sites are in pursuit of the State. That has changed the dynamic of the international protection accommodation issue.

Deputy Tóibín referred to the number of applications that were rejected. The way to deal with this matter is to speed up the process. Speeding up the process leads to a fairer situation. Deputy Gannon mentioned he thought rushing the process would result in an unfairness. I am not suggesting it will be rushed at all, but the process has to be sped up. Setting a timeline in which a person has a hearing and an appeal within three months is reasonable. We need to recognise what is involved in the application for international protection. You arrive, set out your narrative as to why you are being persecuted and why you are entitled to asylum. That does not have to be an exceptionally complicated process. People have to set out that narrative. They will be asked questions about it and they can provide evidence in respect of it.

I disagree with what Deputy Gannon said about oral hearings. There will still be oral hearings. However, they will take place at the first instance process. For the first instance hearing, an applicant will have a full oral hearing. What is going to change is there will not be automatic entitlement to have an oral hearing at the appeal stage. That is a change I have to implement. I am conscious as well that we will be able to have full engagement on this when the legislation comes before the justice committee, of which the Deputy is a member. There will be pre-legislative scrutiny and it will come before the Dáil. It is my view, allowing for an oral hearing during the appeal process when there has already been an oral hearing at the first stage is unnecessary. People will have an entitlement to an oral hearing at appeal stage if there is no transcript of what they said in the first instance and if there is no recording of what they said in the first instance. The person determining the appeal will be able to hear and read what was said in the first instance.

Deputy Tóibín mentioned having an Irish sea border. If he can achieve that, I will commend him. I do not think that is going to be achievable in the short term. What is useful is the continued co-operation between Ireland and Britain. We can see migration into Ireland, in terms of asylum applications, is very much affected by what is happening in Britain and the United Kingdom. We talk a lot about people coming down from Northern Ireland and claiming asylum in the Republic, but similarly people in Britain complain about the fact that many people arrive in Dublin, move up to Belfast and get into Britain that way.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yes. It is both ways.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I was very sorry to hear about the issues of concern Deputy Gannon raised and very pleased to hear the Department was of assistance to him. I want all Deputies to know the Department will always be of assistance in dealing with any issues like that. It is there to facilitate not just Deputies but the public.

Vote put and agreed to.

21 May 2025

Information on Repairability of Certain Products Bill 2024: Second Stage (Resumed) **[Private Members]**

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Information on Repairability of Certain Products Bill 2024, taken on Thursday, 15 May 2025. On the question, “That the Bill be now read a Second Time”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 64; Níl, 77; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Aird, William.</i>	
<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	
<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</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>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	<i>Cummins, John.</i>	
<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	
<i>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>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	

<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	
<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	
<i>Newsome Drennan, Natasha.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
<i>O'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 Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	
<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	
<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	
<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>	
<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>	
	<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Roche, Peter.</i>	
	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	

21 May 2025

	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Ward, Barry.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by Deputy Colm Brophy on Wednesday, 21 May 2025:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 14th May, 2025.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

to insert after “on 14th May, 2025”:

“provided that future financial contributions under Accommodation Recognition Payment (ARP) Scheme shall only be paid after the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 has been amended to provide for the following:

— existing recipients with respect to the beneficiaries of temporary protection currently benefitting from the scheme where those beneficiaries of temporary protection have satisfied a means test similar to those applicable for other housing assistance payments;

— new applications who propose to host a beneficiary of temporary protection in their property which is also their own primary residence and who have not availed of the Rent-a-Room Scheme in the previous 12 months; ensuring that the ARP does not further distort the rental sector; and

— recipients who are not in receipt of any additional or ‘top-up’ payments from a beneficiary of temporary protection.”.

- (Deputy Matt Carthy)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025. On Wednesday, 21 May 2025, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 41; Níl, 101; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Aird, William.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	
<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	
<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	
<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Connolly, John.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Newsome Drennan, Natasha.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	<i>Cummins, John.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	
<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	
<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	
<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	

21 May 2025

<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	
	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
	<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	
	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
	<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	
	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	
	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
	<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	
	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	
	<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	
	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
	<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	
	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	
	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
	<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
	<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
	<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>	
	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
	<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>	

Dáil Éireann

	<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>	
	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Roche, Peter.</i>	
	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
	<i>Ward, Barry.</i>	
	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Motion agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.28 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoín, an 22 Bealtaine 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.28 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 22 May 2025.